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# PEEL HR WHITEPAPER

## Building a Collaborative Workplace

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## Collaboration – What is it ?

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In Latin ‘collaboration’ is interpreted as “colaborare” which means “to labour together”. In Australian, we consider the definition of ‘collaboration’ to be “get it together as a team and collectively punch above your weight”.

Collaboration is more than just sharing information, it is a process by which people and organisations work together, efficiently and effectively, to develop better ideas through iterative teamwork.

Most of our jobs involve working with others, and even more, interacting with others effectively. According to a McKinsey report, in most developed economies today, four out of five nonagricultural jobs involve interacting with others. When it comes to improving interactions, the old strategies for efficiency improvements don't apply. Businesses can achieve improvements by developing and supporting employees to be better at what they do. Given the high level of interactions in our jobs, a key component of this is assisting employees to be better at interacting. An employee’s ability to interact is key to a businesses success. Similarly, a manager’s ability to ensure effectiveness of their team in interacting in and outside their team and across the business is a key to success. The businesses ability to foster connectivity, remove barriers, facilitate learning, ensure adaptability to change and promote shared values and innovation are all integral to a businesses competitive edge (McKinsey 2006).

Collaborative organisations are achieved through intentional efforts to create systems, capability and behaviours that reinforce the principles of collaboration.



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## Collaboration - What does it look like ?

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Collaborative workplaces can be identified by :

- interactions between employees where silos and hierarchies don't get in the way
- robust and healthy conversations that leverage difference in perspective, experience and knowledge to challenge and develop ideas
- conversations with your people that are open and honest
- a richer understanding of people's interests earlier thereby preventing unhealthy conflict
- alignment of values and behaviours
- manage for positive performance.

Central to collaboration are the notions of **TRUST, RESPECT, CHALLENGE** and **RESPONSIBILITY, ACCOUNTABILITY & TEAMWORK**. A collaborative workplace is characterized by –

- Trust & respect in everyday interactions
- Valuing and embracing diverse perspectives to identify a new solution
- Commitment to the success of the team and not just the individual
- People taking accountability and personal responsibility to organize themselves and the outcomes to be achieved.



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## What happens if we don't have collaboration ?

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The lack of collaboration paves the way for the formation of an unhealthy environment that breeds hostility, creates pessimism, drives away talent and prevents an organisation from reaching its potential.

The lack of collaborative skills and systems can result in high conflict within a workplace. Conflict costs businesses significantly. International studies show that conflict costs managers 20 – 30% of their time. If you have a conservative view and make the estimate 15% with a managers salary of \$100k per year, that equates to \$15k devoted to one manager managing conflict in a year. If you have 20 managers, you are loosing \$300k a year in conflict!

Did you know that more people die from a stroke or heart attack between 9am – 11am on Monday morning than any other time of the week ? This is due to work related psychological and physical factors which lead to a significant effect of stress during this time. Studies show that poor workplace culture is recognized as a key risk factor for cardiovascular disease, which is the leading cause of death for Australians, affecting over 3.2 million Australians. Further, obesity, alcoholism, depression and drug addiction stem, in part, from poor workplace culture. Workplace stress, conflict and other negative by-products of poor workplace culture are responsible for the proliferation of mental illness affecting 1 in 5 Australians. These are all statistics contained within the Gillard Report.

A business lacking collaboration might be experience –

- high staff turnover – as a marker, replacing an employee costs the business up to five times the employees annual remuneration
- exodus of talent in high performers or high potentials
- increasing grievances
- increasing absenteeism
- disengaged employees - Gallup estimate that it takes five fully engaged employees to cancel out the impact of one actively disengaged employee



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## What happens if we do have collaboration ?

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Collaboration puts an organisation into positive momentum to get stuff done – to achieve goals and strategic directions.

What could be achieved by a bunch of people working together who are appropriately assertive and cooperate effectively acknowledging the importance of the team ? People with these capabilities allow for the healthy and robust discussion of varying viewpoints to get the best solution. Enterprise productivity ranging from improved decision making, reduced re-work, a more robust innovation pipeline to fewer suboptimal decisions based on imperfect information if the outcome.

Inherent in collaboration is engaged employees. Engaged employees give organizations higher discretionary effort (Bauruk, 2006) to achieve goals and objectives. Higher engagement means increased productivity correlating with individual, team and organizational performance (Ronerston-Smith & Marwick 2009). Matt Church, Scott Stein, Michael Henderson and Peter Cook say that if you provide meaning to people’s work they will perform, that is, they are willing to do the extra mile, capture their ideas and share them across the company. This is collaboration.

An organisation’s growth to collaboration and the associated impact on a manager’s focus and time can be seen in this diagram :



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## How can we do it?

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To build collaboration within your workplace you need to develop the systems, supporting structures, skills and behaviours that align with collaborative principles.

How do we get people to move across businesses to work together, cooperate to innovate, improve operations and drive outcomes? The foundational factors are interconnected.

### Four Steps that Need to be in Place

**There are 4 interconnected steps that need to be in place when building a collaborative workplace**

They need to be introduced from the ground up commencing with systems specifically designed to support collaboration, then upskilling all employees in the capability particular to their needs and involvement in the workplace. The capability building should be followed with preventative steps to ensure the ongoing focus on collaboration and remedial interventions to redirect behaviours back into collaboration when they diverge.

#### 1. Systems Designed to Promote Collaboration

System design is at the base level and is the root of building a collaborative workplace. Designing solid people systems to anchor collaboration is a foundation of the collaborative organisation. Systems are the most direct way to foster collaboration. Flexible organisation structures, values, competencies, and underpinning behaviours are the roots that support the growth of collaboration. Systems should be consciously designed and actively managed to support collaborative activity.

Establishing systems designed to promote collaboration allow interactions to emerge and ensure the most mileage is achieved out of them. The systems are designed to create an environment where the number and quality of interactions between employees and beyond the company are boosted to cultivate the likelihood of innovation.



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## How can we do it?

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Systems should be developed that promote healthy and robust conversations, direct conversations, sharing of information, teamwork and incentive that promote these elements.

A reward system that is based on group outcomes and highly values relationships and information sharing is one system that will promote collaboration. Similarly, dispute resolution systems that promote direct communication and healthy and robust conversation also develops a focus on employee ownership and autonomy in problem solving and the criticality of communication. Pathways to performance systems will need to allow for the evaluation of peer and project based performance and incorporate behavioural measures to ensure alignment with values.

Systems should be developed that allow infiltration across the organisation, that is, a break down of silos and hierarchies that allow people to interact laterally or in any other direction across the organization. Such interactions should be promoted and facilitated as they are needed, that is, interactions should occur laterally and quickly irrespective of reporting lines and protocols. What is paramount is people interacting, not organization structure. What is required to cultivate collaboration is flexible and fluid structures that allow for the formation of project teams or groups in a transient manner to respond to the needs at hand and develop solutions which may result in multiple reporting lines, rather than rigid hierarchies.

Position description should also reflect the desired behaviours for collaboration. The behavioural focus should be supported by the recruitment and selection system that allows for the recruitment of people based on behavioural alignment as opposed to the predominance of qualifications and experience.



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## How can we do it?

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### 2. Build capability across the business

Collaborative organisations capitalise on the ability of their people at all levels of the organisation. Talented people who have the experience, judgment, creativity, facts and problem solve skills are going to drive the achievement of desired results.

Building capability for collaboration also involves the ability to navigate through the collaborative systems instilled within the organization. Training programs for employees should be tailored to the businesses specifically designed systems and should also promoted the underpinning values of collaboration, that is, trust, respect, challenge, responsibility, accountability and teamwork.

Professional development could include focus areas such as healthy conversations, collaborative skills, coaching, managing workplace concerns. Learning outcomes to build collaborative skills should respond to the following questions -

Are your leaders able to....

- Clarify what is important?
- Set expectations?
- Give honest feedback?
- Hold people accountable?
- Promote teamwork, information sharing and innovation ?
- Diffuse conflict early?

Are your employees able to...

- Take responsibility and participate in resolving conflict?
- Model the behaviours expected of them?
- Have open and honest conversations with each other?

Establishing core competencies in managing workplace conflict across your organisation is not a strategic issue but rapidly becoming a business imperative. With increasing numbers of workplace bullying complaints and litigation, the key is to build a self sustaining body of collaborative competencies thereby incorporating



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## How can we do it?

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conflict management skills within a businesses skills base. These skills will ensure routine prevention and early resolution of workplace conflict while leverage capability to allow for robust and dynamic conversations around work detail to leverage innovative outcomes involving your employees pushing the boundaries of your service delivery.

Skill development for all employees and leaders is critical. The whole team needs to be singing the same song in order to shift culture.

How do we give employees the capability for direct conversations that allow for the early resolution of conflict before it sets in and escalates. Avoiding conflict has been ingrained in many of us from a young age – addressing conflict has been seen as impolite, much less productive, appropriate and healthy! Most people would prefer to have a limb removed without anesthetic rather than have a healthy conversation about conflict they are experiencing with others involved. Being provided with basic techniques and a clear framework for such conversations, and feeling comfort in the knowledge that it is accepted and in fact expected in your organization, gives people the confidence to address conflicts directly and early.



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## How can we do it?

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### 3. Ongoing Preventative Support

The ongoing support to foster a collaborative workplace involves the constant reminder and focus for collaboration. A collaborative culture grows above the specifically designed systems and moves as capability builds. Core values and underpinning behaviours are critical to growing a collaborative culture. Underpinning behaviours that reflect collaboration should be designed specific to the organization and teams. Articulated behaviours provide a consistent approach and ensure the cohesion necessary for productive collaborative effort. These behaviours should be further broken down and particularised for teams. Teams that work together to determine their shared goals, values and underpinning behaviours are in the best position possible to achieve collaboration and see their performance hum.

Collaborative behaviours for employees might include :

- Team members spend time with each other supporting achieving each others goals, that is, they have a commitment to the success of the team and not just themselves individually
- Team members initiate healthy conflict and robust discussion that is topic based
- They respectfully and constructively question whether there is another way
- Team members constructively explore their differing opinions and approaches and search for solutions beyond their own
- Team members have a priority for learning from within and across teams and so provide honest constructive feedback
- Team members make efforts towards inclusion such as sharing experiences, knowledge and techniques, not hoard it
- Team members seek out and build strong and sustainable relationships outside their team
- Team members have knowledge of each other's work, communication and learning styles
- Team members call each other on their behaviours when they are un-collaborative
- Team members take accountability and personal responsibility



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## How can we do it?

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Collaborative behaviours for leaders should build on the employee behaviours to promote and ensure alignment within their teams and beyond as well as reflect the flexible structure, for example, driving results when there is no formal direct control or authority over resources, that is, matrix influencing. Leader behaviours should also be those that support collaboration such as taking a coaching role, influence, relationship building, interpersonal understanding and emotional self-awareness.

Opportunities for the reiteration of collaboration are ever present, for example, through Team Effectiveness reviews to determine opportunities to leverage a team, Team Planning programs and specifically designed collaborative workshops.

#### **4. Remedial Intervention**

An organization should be ready and equipped to respond should an employee or team fall off the road on the journey to collaboration. Having the skills within the organization to respond allows for a quick and efficient response. Ensuring frontline leaders are equipped with mediation and investigation skills allows for a quick response to re-adjust behaviours. Further, the ready access to a provider list or panel of external independent and impartial experts in the area also allows for the expeditious response to quickly re-align values and behaviours.

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## How can PEEL HR help ?

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PEEL HR has worked with both small and large, public and private sector organisations. We have worked directly with HR Teams and at the Executive and Operational level and we draw on our substantial experience when developing systems, individuals, teams and organizations.

We develop collaborative workplaces through :

- System design
- Capability building
- Review
- Preventative support
- Remedial intervention.

We would love to talk with you more about what we can do –

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