

SHIFTING TOWARD COLLABORATION

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ABSTRACT

A paradigm shift toward a more collaborative milieu is emerging. Groupware provides computer support for this shift, however, structural support is also needed. Structural support can be provided through revised education, evaluation, and reward systems that teach, recognize, and reinforce collaboration.

PARADIGM SHIFT

Many organizations have discovered that the rigid steep hierarchies of bureaucratic control that served them so well in the past, now hinder their ability to react to changing economic and market conditions. Three particularly interesting adaptive trends have emerged. First, the elimination of levels of hierarchy has transformed spire-shaped mountainous structures into gently rolling hills that are more easily traversed by win-win solutions to difficult problems. Second, the empowerment of employees has unshackled them from a stifling hierarchical chain-of-command. Empowerment emancipates employees to engage in collaborative cross-functional self-managed teamwork. Third, the formation of alliances with suppliers, customers, and competitors has signaled an openness toward collaborative teamwork across corporate entities. Each of these three trends indicates a shift toward a more collaborative milieu.

TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

New collaboration-prone information technologies have also emerged to meet the needs of these trends. Referred to as groupware [Ellis et. al 1991] these information technologies support cooperation, coordination, and collaboration within and between groups under various conditions of task, time, and space. Groupware tools foster the development of electronic level playing fields of interpersonal networks that bridge functional divisions without the overhead of hierarchical mountain climbing expeditions. These electronic social fields meet many of the criteria said to be conducive to innovation and productivity in bureaucracies [Perin 1991].

CULTURE CLASH

The collaborative social norms of autonomous self-managed invisible electronic social fields, run counter to the competitive social norms of bureaucracies. This culture clash inhibits the adoption of groupware tools by managers who see social fields as being anti-structural [Perin 1991]. Indeed, competitive cultures tend to be slower to adopt groupware than collaborative cultures [Cheek 1993].

SOCIAL NORMS

Social norms that perpetuate hierarchy through competition are distinctly different from those that foster collaboration. For example, interpersonal interactions in hierarchical social structures tend to employ one-up-one-down strategies that benefit the individual at the expense of the group. Hierarchical transactions tend to be parent-child; behavior tends to be either aggressive (one-up) or passive (one-down) or passive/aggressive (pretending to be one-down while engaging in guerilla warfare sabotage against the competition); and conflict resolution tends to produce win-lose outcomes. In contrast, interpersonal interactions in egalitarian social structures tend to employ strategies that benefit the group to the mutual benefit of all. Egalitarian transactions tend to be adult-adult; behavior tends to be assertive (i.e. neither aggressive nor passive); and conflict resolution tends to produce win-win outcomes.

NEEDED STRUCTURAL SUPPORT

Changing from the competitive milieu of a mountainous hierarchy to the collaborative milieu of an egalitarian (all-equals) level playing field requires much relearning of interaction patterns and social norms. In highly competitive cultures, such as the United States [Kohn 1986], many individuals have little, if any, life experience of a collaborative culture. The education system (public, private, and corporate) can provide structural support for collaboration by including collaborative learning experiences in their curriculums. The performance evaluation system can provide structural support by replacing "boss" evaluation with peer evaluation. The reward system can provide structural support by rewarding groups rather than individuals. These and other structural revisions are needed to support the transition to a more collaborative milieu.

SUMMARY

Collaborative cooperation is a productive alternative to the inherent destructiveness of competition [Kohn 1986]. The shift toward collaboration that groupware supports must be matched by shifts within individuals, within organizations, within the universe. Our mutual survival depends on it.

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

The author's current research addresses structural support revisions needed for the shift toward collaboration.

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