

breakthrough

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the **chemistry**  
of  
**collaboration**

**MOST ORGANIZATIONS DON'T WORRY ABOUT COLLABORATION UNTIL IT'S A PROBLEM OR PEOPLE ARE IN CONFLICT. THERE IS AN ASSUMPTION AND AN EXPECTATION THAT PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO PLAY WELL TOGETHER IN THE SANDBOX.**

by **patrick o'neill**

STORY CONTINUED INSIDE...

## THE CHEMISTRY OF COLLABORATION (continued)



Patrick O'Neill

Unfortunately, that assumption ends up costing organizations billions of dollars every year in lost opportunities, inefficiencies, and organizational dysfunction.

What a shame.

As the work world evolves to more complex and indirect reporting relationships and teaming scenarios (matrix organizations, cross-functional teams, peer leadership), the need for more discipline and training for people working in collaborative environments has never been more pressing... and ignored.

It reminds me of the dream-team approach to elite athletic events like the Olympics. The country's best talent is assembled hastily, provided no time for preparation or team training, and is then expected to perform better than a far more experienced, although perhaps less talented, squad. The results are often disappointing. Consider the plight of the 2004 U.S. Olympic Basketball Team, the 2006 Canadian Olympic Hockey Team, and the U.S. entry to the 2006 World Baseball Classic, to name a few.

Why do we continue to make the same mistakes at work?

I am convinced that many of us fail to understand the chemistry of collaboration. Chemistry is the branch of science that deals with the structure, composition, properties and reactive characteristics of substances. Interestingly enough, the term is also used to describe relationships. A team or workgroup is said to have *good chemistry* when there is harmony, creativity, productivity and a healthy dynamic of give and take.

*Bad chemistry* is generally agreed to consist of personality clashes, power struggles, unhealthy competition, motivation and morale issues. These usually result in the failure to deliver work on time and on budget. But these are short-term consequences that are typically addressed by throwing more resources, people and money at the problem.

Bad solution.

The lingering effect is even more problematic. Bad collaboration produces results nobody wants to take responsibility for and the blame-game begins. There are winners and losers in these dynamics, and like most unresolved conflicts, isolated incidents become long-running feuds. Turf battles ensue. Tensions in the workplace result in wide spread inter-personal, inter-team and inter-organization mistrust.

The price?

Initiative, innovation, risk-taking and the will to pull together for the common good are sacrificed... sometimes permanently. A classic development problem becomes a chronic remedial problem.

How do we interrupt the pattern?

The old adage, "in the beginning is everything" is a useful place to start. As part of the forming stage of development, it is important for every organization and team to devote time to developing common vision, skills and language to support moving both tasks and relationships forward together.

This is one of the secrets of sustainable collaboration – we must be able to move tasks and relationships forward at the same time in order to ensure our interpersonal dynamics remain positive and healthy.

Nothing sabotages collective work like the failure to build strong bonds between colleagues. If our tasks are attended to well, but people get hurt in the process, tasks will ultimately fall prey to conflict. Nothing builds opposition and resentment faster than someone who does not care about their impact on others.

On the other hand, we must also ensure relationship work does not interfere or dominate time when we are supposed to be meeting our task obligations. An overly comfortable environment where tasks fall by the wayside undermines accountability and productivity.

Managing both tasks and relationships ensures that cohesion is maintained through times of change, challenges, conflict, and chaos. These are the conditions that break weak teams.

Lack of time is the usual excuse for poor or expedient "team forming" practices. Yes, building good chemistry can take some time, especially upfront. But consider the time that disorganization, confusion, poor inclusion, bad decision processes and conflict take when relationships are ignored or mishandled!

## There are six components to good chemistry.

### 1. Purpose

Clarity about shared purpose is vital to effective collaboration. A common direction, group and individual goals, and rules of engagement, seem like logical steps to ensure everyone understands how to contribute to the success of a project or enterprise.

You'd be surprised how often this initial step to collaboration is ignored, or mishandled.

Where there is no shared sense of purpose, people are lethargic, confused, reactive, and generally unengaged. Work becomes a meaningless series of disconnected activities. People muddle through displaying little initiative because of their uncertainty or confusion about what is required. The stage is set for power struggles that erupt from competing visions.

Vision, mission, values and goals provide a strategic and cohesive framework for collective action.

### 2. Accountability

Clarity about roles, responsibilities and authority (RRA's) build accountability. Without clarity, action is thwarted by confusion, hesitancy, and low initiative. People wait to be told what to do instead of running with the ball.

Those who do take initiative in these conditions often find themselves tripping over the assumptions of others about what is supposed to happen, who is supposed to do it and what the measure of success looks like. These misunderstandings usually start out as friendly disagreements but can easily escalate into turf wars if they are not attended to quickly.

There is nothing as de-motivating as a highly politicized and bureaucratic environment where "CYA" is the master rule of engagement. Taking the time necessary to clarify RRA's ultimately saves time and makes the flow of work easier, more efficient and effective.

### 3. Trust

I define trust as a firm belief in a person, team or organization's *reliability*. Reliability is achieved when we make a habit of keeping our promises and agreements. Do we do what we say we will do? When we keep our word to each other, dependability, consistency, and congruence support the flow of work and protect relationships.

If we cannot trust each other, collaboration becomes difficult or impossible. In low-trust environments, people do horrible things to each other often from a fear of being done to first, but "defensive attacks" are every bit as damaging as bullying.

Trust damaged is hard to restore. It is perhaps the single biggest contributor to *bad chemistry*.

Trust held allows remarkable breakthroughs in collective creativity and productivity to occur.

### 4. Proactivity

The ability to keep action moving forward is the mark of a collaborative team. People who know how to advance team initiatives and activities and help their colleagues excel are highly valued in any organization.

While many people are reliable in moving tasks forward, initiative levels in building strong relationships are less reliable. We often equate that ability with the leader's job, but it is something that everyone in the workplace should and must be doing to ensure collaboration is sustainable.

Initiative, a feature of proactivity, is the ability to be the source of something, to generate openings for tasks and relationships to flourish. A highly proactive, person, team or organization is consistently looking for ways to grow and improve. They are unsatisfied with the status quo and generate advances that lead to competitive advantages.

### 5. Dialogue

Teams with good chemistry have open and authentic dialogue about important business issues, creative problem solving, strategy, and new possibilities. These teams have a "present-future" time sensibility. That means they get together to examine how to invent the future rather than just reporting on things that have already happened.

Many teams fall prey to a reporting mentality, which basically kills any spark of interest, initiative or creativity that may reside in the team. Meetings become fragmented and boring with too much time devoted to bureaucratic housekeeping. You can learn from the past, but even that opportunity is lost to box-score accounts of activity.

Dialogue requires inquiry, reflection, reasoning, analysis, and the ability to explore different points of view. When teams practice skilled conversation with a view to creating a breakthrough, new possibilities emerge.

Bad chemistry features conversations that are defensive, unhealthily competitive, and overly aggressive. There are winners and losers.

Without authentic, timely dialogue, organizations cannot hope to keep ahead of their businesses. They will be relegated to playing catch-up in their category, marketplace, and industry.

### 6. Mutual Gain

The final practice of teams with good chemistry is mutual gain. Mutual gain is achieved through the practices of respect, inclusion and win/win thinking.

People thrive at work when they are valued, encouraged and seen as important contributors. Their gifts and talents are recognized and encouraged and diversity is not only respected, it is actually sought out. They feel included in the organization and team and are not afraid to bring forward suggestions, ideas and new perspectives. People recognize that in decision-making they *will have a say* – but perhaps *not their way*.

This is part of maturity – the ability to recognize decisions may not always conform to our viewpoint, and be big enough to accept that reality without resentment and withdrawal.

For good chemistry to happen, people must be committed to win/win solutions. Where people have a sense that there is a real commitment to collective success, and that collective efforts are valued as much as individual contributions, they will put the needs of the team ahead of individual performance. That is a winning strategy in sports and in business.

**Experiencing collaboration challenges at work? We can help you harness the power of collaboration in your team and throughout your organization. To learn more about our services, call us anytime at 416-361-3331.**

**We'd love to hear from you about BREAK-THROUGH. Your comments, questions and requests are always welcome! Like to add someone to the complimentary mailing list? Please email me at [patrick@extraordinary.on.ca](mailto:patrick@extraordinary.on.ca)**

## CORPORATE PROFILE

Extraordinary Conversations helps leaders generate breakthroughs in organizational, team and individual performance.

Since 1988, we have supported large, medium and small organizations to build environments where people can do their best work. Clear vision, commitment and responsibility, open communication, courage and the passion to accomplish meaningful goals lead to extraordinary results.

We have proven approaches that can assist you and your organization to create breakthroughs in:

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Extraordinary Conversations works with diverse industries including manufacturing, retail, financial institutions, entertainment and service companies. Our clients include Fortune 500 leaders, medium-sized national companies and small entrepreneurial enterprises. Our work has taken us to global corporations in North America, Europe, Asia and Australia, to the townships of South Africa and the peace process in the Middle East.

## LEARNING MATERIAL

### CHARACTER

1 CD, approximately 1 hour  
\$20 + shipping & applicable taxes

In this live recording, Patrick O'Neill explores:

- What is character and how we build it
- The 3 great temptations – money, sex and power
- The Arms of Character
- The 7 Defects of Character
- Our unique Character Traits

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