Leading an Effective Collaborative Problem-Solving Process
Provided by Marsha Clark
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In our organizations today, collaboration is more important than ever. Major projects, problems, and decisions impact multiple parts of the organization, customers, and even the market. It requires a leadership style that engages the hearts, the minds, and the efforts of various people, functions, and departments. Collaborating is not always the best answer. It is most useful and effective when used in the right situations. Examples of these situations would include:

Learning – Think about this in terms of, "We've never done this before." Maybe you're creating a new policy or process, developing a new product or service, or expanding into a new geography or industry sector. Whatever the case, hearing from everyone will pay dividends in helping you see the big picture and understanding the broader implications of your solution, proposal, or decision.

Merging Perspectives/Integrating Ideas – The very definition of collaboration is about merging perspectives and valuing and embracing diversity of thought and experience. No one person has the whole answer or perspective. You need to ensure that a more comprehensive set of perspectives are taken into consideration so that you don't have significant rework or breakdowns. Once perspectives and ideas are out on the table, you can begin to integrate them into a coherent new solution or possibility.

Gaining Commitment – There are three things to consider with this scenario:
- You need the team's or department's psychological buy-in.
- You need the team or department to make it work.
- You want the team or department to have some skin in the game. Anyone who has led a team or been a team member knows that if you get to contribute to the solution, you are much more committed to seeing it through to completion. Collaborating gives everyone that chance to contribute.

There is a nuance or distinction I would like to make. Sometimes, you will choose the collaboration approach to determine 'what' it is you want to accomplish. And sometimes the 'what' has already been decided and you are collaborating about 'how' to best achieve the 'what.' It's critical that you be clear and that everyone who is contributing is also clear on whether it is a 'what' or 'how' solution you're trying to develop. For example, your organization has described a strategy of twenty percent growth over three years. This is the 'what.' There are many different ways to get to that twenty percent. You can acquire other companies, introduce new products or services, or expand into new geographies. This is the 'how.' I further suggest that you determine the 'what' before you even begin to think about the 'how.' You have to know what you're trying to achieve.

I have outlined a process below that will help you be more efficient, effective, and inclusive in arriving at a decision, solving a problem, or proposing something new.

Step 1: Frame the problem you are trying to solve. Clarify if it is a 'what' or 'how' or both problem. Solve for 'what' before moving to the 'how.'

Step 2: Invite appropriate parties to the conversation. State that it is a collaborative meeting in the meeting invite. Describe what you mean by a collaborative meeting. Ask them to be prepared to share their perspectives.

As a guide, you might send out a note to meeting participants prior to your gathering and tell them you will run the meeting as a collaborative meeting. You would declare your expectations including:

- Here is the decision we need to make or the problem we need to solve.
- Come prepared with your experience, research, ideas, and functional expertise, *and* (and this is really important) . . . Be prepared for others to bring their experience, research, ideas, and functional expertise.
- We will respectfully listen to each other and give serious weight and consideration to what everyone has to say.
- We will be creating the answer together. We will ask probing and clarifying questions.
- We will build on each other's ideas, taking the best that each of us has to offer.

The collaborating approach respects the diversity of experience and ideas reflected in the people contributing in useful ways. Giving weight and consideration to everyone's thoughts and ideas is an act of inclusion.

Step 3: Move from sharing perspectives about the problem to brainstorming. Hear from everyone. Set a time limit on this brainstorming or ideating part of the process. Make sure the conversation doesn't devolve into a moan and whine session, creating more of a victim stance than a leadership stance. It doesn't take brilliance to complain about a problem. It takes courage and accountability to work through the hard process of solving problems.

Step 4: Determine your decision criteria for choosing a solution, e.g., cost, time to implement, complexity, impact. You may decide this ahead of time and share it with the group; you may also engage the group in determining the decision criteria. If you engage the group, tell them you're going to do that ahead of time.

Step 5: Determine your decision-making process. Possible options are outlined below. <u>Source</u> **-** *Power Up: Transforming Organizations through Shared Leadership by* David L. Bradford and Allan R. Cohen and adapted by: Marsha Clark, Marsha Clark & Associates.

Autonomous: *Decision is made by leader alone.*
- Leader has sufficient experience
- Leader has private information that can't be shared
- Time emergency
- Leader has made up his/her mind and won't be moved
- Problem is trivial

Delegated: *Decision, within specified parameters, is made by one individual or the group.*
- There is one clear expert
- Problem is not that important
- Would be a development task
- Leader/Team can live with the solution

Consultative: *Decision is made by the leader after receiving advice from the team members.*
- It is within one person's area to implement
- Problem is of intermediate importance
- Want to avoid major errors
- Team is not (yet) working well

Joint: *Decision is made by members and leader together, through consensus. (Decision is not made until the leader and the members can actively support it even if it was not their first choice.)*

- Problem is important or complex
- There is no one expert; members together have the needed expertise
- Members have the relevant information needed
- The team is working well together, uses sound decision-making processes, and is aligned with the team's overall goals and objectives
- The members are capable of both representing their respective areas and considering the overall needs of the team

Step 6: Solve for the 'what' and communicate to all parties involved and impacted.

Step 7: Move to 'how' and repeat the collaborative process. This may be different people. Be thoughtful and inclusive.

Additional Thoughts to Consider:
- Create a process map so people know where you are in the process.
- Declare victory on small successes to build momentum and confidence.
- Hear from everyone; use round robin facilitation approach. Round robin facilitation is going around the table and asking everyone for their thoughts. This ensures inclusion. Make sure everyone has the uninterrupted opportunity to share their perspectives, research, and experience.
- Set ground rules - e.g., everyone's perspective is contributed, valued, and taken into account; no in-meeting texting to other meeting participants during the meeting; talk *to* the group, not *about* the group; listen and probe to ensure understanding; use examples to clarify understanding and alignment.
- Use sound change management principles. If you are interested in learning more about this, please contact me at www.marshaclarkandassociates.com.
- Hold people accountable for (see *Oz Principle* material on following page):
  - Sharing their perspectives
  - Listening intently to the perspective of others
  - Taking responsibility for an effective solution (versus pushing their own agendas or only complaining)
  - Remember, there is no accountability without consequences. That doesn't just mean punitive consequences. Recognizing and rewarding people for being accountable is also a consequence.
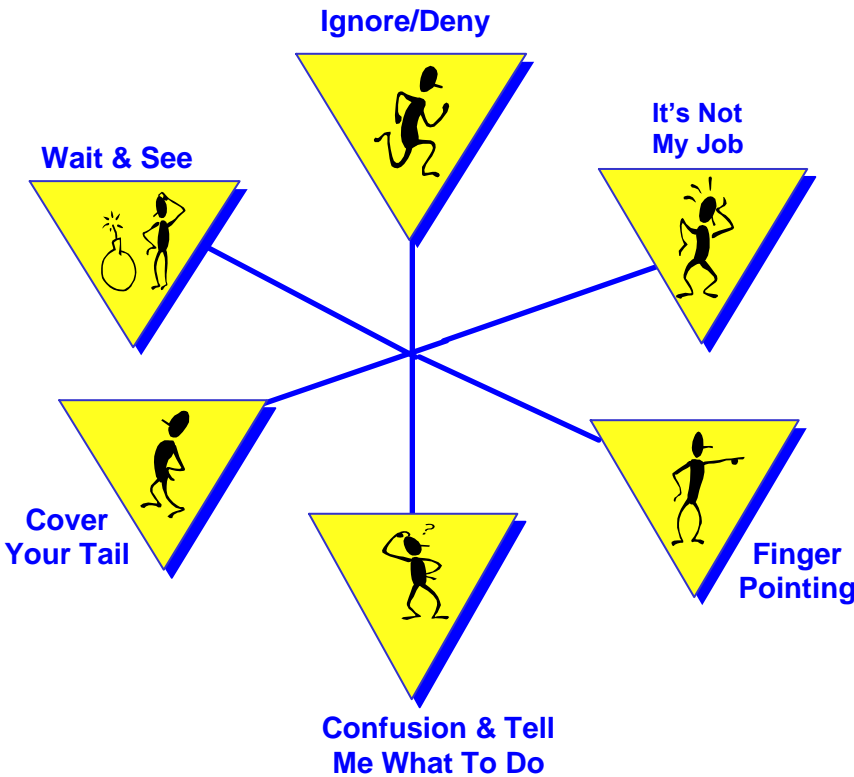
Above the Line
Steps to Accountability

SEE IT!

OWN IT!

SOLVE IT!

DO IT!
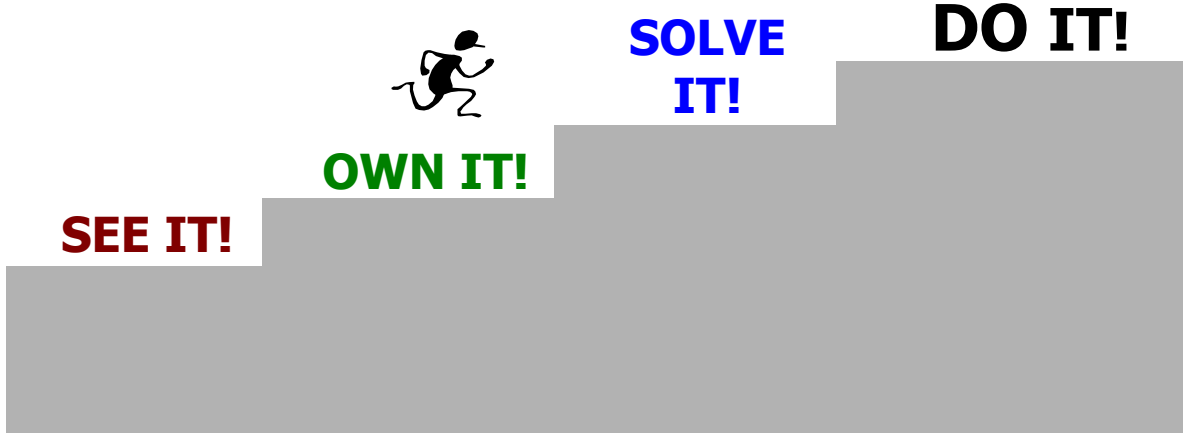
"What else can I do to achieve the result?"

THE LINE

Ignore/Deny

Wait & See

It's Not My Job

Below the Line
Victim Cycle

Cover Your Tail

Finger Pointing

From: The Oz Principle by Roger Connors, Tom Smith & Craig Hickman

Confusion & Tell Me What To Do