

THE COLLABORATION ILLUSION

Why Working Together Sucks—
and How to Fix It

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The Collaboration Illusion: Why Working Together Sucks—and How to Fix It

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*To anyone who has ever said,
“Collaboration shouldn’t be this hard...”*

We agree.

This book is for you.

CONTENTS

A Letter from the Authors	11
Tim's Story: Part 1	15

COLLABORATION SUCKS

A Brief History of Collaboration	21
Anca's story: Part 1—Falling for the Collaboration Illusion.....	30
The Collaboration Paradox: Where Social Pain and The Collaboration Illusion Collide	36
Tim's Story: Part 2	39

THE SOCIETAL AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES OF COLLABORATION

Collaboration is Necessary (Future Perspective)	44
Cary's story: To meet or not to meet?	50
So... What Does It Need to Be a Meeting?	51
Recommendations: Want to Go Deeper on Meetings?	54
Tim's Story: Part 3	55

SO, WHAT IS COLLABORATION?

From Projects to People to Pressure	62
Dimensions of Collaboration	63
The Quick Assessment	66
Our Story: Part 1—Low-Stakes Collaboration	69
Our Story: Part 2—High-Stakes Collaboration	71
The Need for Collaboration Process	73
The Positive Effects of High Stakes Collaboration Done Well.....	75
Anca's story: Part 2—The Faculty Meeting.....	81
The Need for a Facilitator or Process Guide	83
Tim's Story: Part 4	85
What is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)?	90

THE FACILITATOR AS PROCESS GUIDE

Tim's Story: Part 5.....	95
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PRINCIPLES OF COLLABORATION

Foundational Principles of Great Collaboration	98
Make the Abstract Clear	99
Stop Assuming	103
Just Say It	109
Slow down to Speed Up	119
Walk Away with Something Actionable.....	127
Plan to Pivot	135
Tim's Story: Part 6.....	147

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

From Learning to Leading.....	149
Tim's Story: Part 7.....	155

SUSTAINING LONG-TERM TEAM COLLABORATION

The Lifecycle of a Team.....	160
Tools to Help Teams Form	160
Forming Activity 1: Guide to Me	162
Forming Activity 2: Ways of Working	164
Forming Activity 3: Values in Action	167
Forming Activity 4: Planning for Conflict and Failure	173
Forming Activity 5: Build Your Space Makers	176
Forming Activity 6: Name Your Team	179
Forming Activity 7: Craft a Team Charter/Mission	181
Forming Activity 8: Map Your Team's Collaboration Rhythm ...	184

NAVIGATING CONFLICT IN COLLABORATION

What Makes Conflict So Hard?	190
Conflict through the Principles of Collaboration	192
The Power of Perspective	202
How to Support a Team Through Conflict	208
A Call to Collaborate	211

RESOURCES

WHY WE'RE HERE

A Letter from the Authors

Over the past several years, we've been invited into rooms—real and virtual—where people are trying to do something together. Sometimes that “something” is strategic. Sometimes it's urgent. And sometimes, it's just messy and human.

As independent consultants (and before that, as in-house intrapreneurs in higher education), we've facilitated hundreds of sessions and worked with thousands of people, including faculty, staff, executives, students, government teams, nonprofit leaders, engineers, scientists, creatives.

No matter the project, the sector, or the personalities in the room, one thing remains true:

Collaboration is hard.

It doesn't matter how brilliant the individuals are or how noble the mission is, teams still get stuck. We see the same challenges surface again and again: unclear communication, decision-making gridlock, personality clashes, conflict

avoidance (or explosion), broken trust, and the ever-present question of *how in the world do we move forward, together?*

Ironically, the more degrees, experience, or accolades someone has, the more difficult these collaborative basics can become. Intellect and experience can sometimes get in the way of connection.

After hearing, “Have you thought about writing a book?” for what felt like the umpteenth time, we put pen to paper.

This book is our attempt to distill the most useful, human, and field-tested insights we’ve learned about what makes collaboration work...and what gets in the way. We’ve written it for anyone who’s ever left a meeting thinking, *there has to be a better way.*

Whether you’re launching a new project, navigating a tough team dynamic, or just trying to get unstuck, our hope is that when you finish this book, you’ll feel equipped, empowered, and prepared to engage in high-stakes collaboration. More than anything, we hope it helps you create interactions that are positive, productive, and maybe even inspiring.

Let’s get to work.

—Anca & Cary

TIM'S STORY: PART 1

Meet Tim—The Collapse Before the Call

Standing at the front of the conference room, Tim wondered—for the third time that week—why on earth he had taken this job.

He could feel the tension in the air long before anyone said a word. On his left, the veteran engineers were bracing for another battle: arms folded, faces tight, eye contact avoidant. On his right, the newer team members looked restless and irritated by the team's inertia. Somewhere in the middle was Tim, hands in his pockets, mentally calculating how long he could stand there before someone exploded. Or walked out. Again.

Collaboration was part of his job. It said so right there in the job description. But no one warned him it would look like this. Like standing in a room where ten brilliant people couldn't agree on anything except how much they disliked working together.

Tim wasn't new to leadership. As the Director of Product Design at a large, respected organization, he knew how to run a team, deliver on deadlines, and push projects across the finish line. He loved seeing things launch. He loved impact. He loved pressure, even. He was good at his job.

But this part honestly just sucked. Collaboration.

He didn't like it. Didn't trust it. Didn't look forward to it. And if he was being honest, he kind of resented how often it showed up on his calendar.

The thing is, people liked Tim. He was personable, kind—the type of leader who remembered birthdays, brought cupcakes, and asked about your weekend. He cracked jokes. He showed up to potlucks. People thought he was an extrovert. But underneath it all, Tim was an introvert who preferred clarity over chaos, execution over discussion, and solo work over endless debate. When collaboration entered the room, joy exited.

And still, here he was.

He tried to refocus on the meeting in front of him. But instead, his mind drifted way back.

Before collaboration became a curse word in his world, there was a time when working with others was something he loved.

The Good Old Days (aka Baseball and Battle Bots)

Tim grew up with a baseball in his hand. His childhood was filled with dust, gloves, dugouts, and the unmistakable sound of a ball hitting a bat. His first team was Little League. His first coach? Coach Jefferson.

Coach Jefferson was like an egg: hard on the outside, soft on the inside. He was strict, no-nonsense, and the kind of man who could silence a team with a single look. He was also the first adult who ever told Tim it was okay to cry.

Tim had tried to slide into first base and rolled his ankle. He was eight years old and holding back tears with all the strength his body could muster. Coach Jefferson pulled him aside and said, “That was a brave move, Tim. I’m proud of you for trying. And hey, it’s okay to cry. Don’t ever be ashamed of

having emotions. Especially when they mean something.”

That moment stuck with Tim. So did the feeling of being part of a team. On the field, he knew what was expected of him. As a pitcher, he had a role, and he knew how his role fit into the bigger picture. Every player did. Drama? Handled by Coach. Confusion? Squashed with clarity. The team had structure, direction, and someone always leading the way.

When they won the championship that season, Coach Jefferson gathered the team, tears in his eyes, and said, “This happened because you worked together. You did your jobs. You showed up. You made it happen.”

Tim never forgot that. He carried it with him into everything: Battle of the Books, student government, Habitat for Humanity, Battle Bots. He was the guy people wanted on their team: dependable, organized, enthusiastic. He loved the rhythm of a group working in sync.

But that all changed when the group Biology project happened.

The First Time Collaboration Sucked

It was freshman year of high school. Biology class. Mr. Roland was a rather grumpy older teacher who wore sweater vests and made way too many noises when he moved, like his body was protesting the idea of standing in front of unruly students and would rather be at home laying down on the couch. He stood at the front of the classroom with his usual clipboard and dry-erase marker and said, “Alright, your first project of the year will be a group collaboration project. You’ll work in teams to build a model of a cell, with all of its parts, and present it to the class.”

Tim blinked. Collaboration? It was the first time he’d heard the word.

He didn’t raise his hand to ask what it meant; he didn’t

want to look dense. So, he assumed it probably just meant teamwork. He was good at teamwork. He loved teamwork. He looked over at his friends and started imagining how they'd crush this project together. Then Mr. Roland continued: "I've already assigned your groups."

Tim's heart sank.

He was placed in a group with four classmates he barely knew. They dragged their backpacks over to a table and sat down awkwardly. Tim tried to stay upbeat. He smiled and broke the ice.

"So... what kind of cell do we want to do?"

Silence.

Five long seconds passed, although to Tim, it felt like five minutes. No one responded.

"...Okay," he said, filling the space. "How about a plant cell?"

No words. Just nods.

Tim took that as a yes. Perfect, he thought. Now we have a goal. Now we can do this.

He assumed the next step was obvious: divide and conquer. So, he asked, "What parts do you all want to take on?"

Again, nothing.

So, he started pointing.

"Can you bring the poster materials? Awesome! Can you make a list of the cell parts? Perfect! Would you like to write the descriptions? Okay. I can draw them. And you"—he pointed to the final (and unknown to him) quietest kid at the table—"you can do the final presentation."

More nods. Still no words.

It wasn't until later that Tim realized: he had never even introduced himself. He didn't know their names. He had stepped in, set the goal, handed out assignments, and started

running the project, just like he always had during baseball or Battle Bots.

Only this time, it didn't work.

At their next group meeting in class, no one brought what they were supposed to. Everyone had forgotten.

Tim felt something he had never felt on a team before: alone.

He didn't know how to express his frustration. He didn't want to come off as mean. So instead, in a flat tone, he said, "That's fine. We'll just do it next week."

Next week came. Same result. Except this time, one kid had scribbled a quick list of cell parts on notebook paper. No one else had done anything. No one apologized. No one offered an explanation. They all just...sat there.

So, Tim did what he always did when something mattered: he took over.

He made the poster. He drew all the parts. He wrote the tiny labels. He memorized the script. He stood in front of the class and delivered the whole presentation like they'd all worked on it together.

They got an A.

And Tim hated every second of it.

I did all the work, he thought. And they get the same grade? That is NOT fair! This sucks!

Collaboration had left a bitter aftertaste that lingered long into adulthood.

After that, any time he heard the words "group project" or "collaboration," a part of him wanted to crawl under the table. He kept trying to recreate the structured, energized feel of his baseball team—but instead, he kept finding himself stuck in a dynamic where he did most of the work and everyone else got to coast.

And it didn't stop in high school. It followed him to college.

Then into meetings. Then boardrooms. Then every team-based project he ever led.

Collaboration, for Tim, had become a pattern he couldn't seem to break: one where he carried the weight, while others stood around, nodding along, saying nothing.

No wonder he hated it. He had never actually collaborated.

CHAPTER 1

Collaboration Sucks

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."
–Helen Keller

The fact of the matter is: collaboration is hard. Some might even go as far as to say that collaboration sucks. Like Tim, we might find ourselves dreading the word along with the activities and actions that follow it. We know that we have to do it. There is no shortage of research, inspirational quotes, and stories that highlight the power of collaboration and how it can help us move faster, think bigger, and do more. However, no matter how much experience, knowledge, or accolades we have, we struggle with it.

You might be reading this and thinking to yourself, *I am a great collaborator. It is other people who suck at it and make collaborating hard and painful.* While that may be true for you, you might be surprised to know that while you are thinking this, others might be thinking the SAME thing at the same time about YOU. It is always easier to think that we are doing things right and “others” are doing things wrong.

But what if we are ALL doing it wrong at the same time?

A Brief History of Collaboration

From ancient tribal councils to modern-day boardrooms, collaboration (mostly in the form of conversation) has played a vital role in forming the social world as we know it today. Research in evolutionary biology has found that collaboration is