

Collaborative PR

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He was arguing for his point of view. He was opposed to a communications proposal on the table. The president of the PR firm tried to change his mind. His colleagues weighed in, but he was adamant. He said the idea wouldn't work, and it would jeopardize the agency's credibility. Then, one of his colleagues who had been silent spoke. What if, she said, we did it another way? She outlined an idea no one had discussed until that time. It was on the mark and solved the dilemma. The practitioner who had been arguing went quiet, then said, "That's the answer. Let's do it that way." This is a typical collaborative communications session. It is not for the faint-hearted. It is for those seeking the right answer who are willing to be wrong as often as they are right.

I like collaboration. In fact, I would not enjoy working in PR without it. I don't trust my brain to have all the insights one needs to handle client issues. I need someone to spark against. They need it too. However, collaboration is not easy. It requires an effort to avoid taking credit and to search for answers without ego. That doesn't mean one is ego-less because no one with a weak self-image would survive the barrage of argument that happens in collaborative decision-making. One has to be able to see when he or she is wrong and to leave a meeting feeling as good about oneself as he or she did going in. In team problem solving, one can't take oneself too seriously.

Top down. Bottom up.

Collaborative PR is best in bottom-up organizations but that doesn't mean it is the best way to provide client service. Communications can be driven from the top or the bottom successfully. If there is a brilliant communicator at the top of an organization, the staff can be implementers and perform well. On the other hand, a bottom-up leader lets ideas bubble from everywhere, including from administrative assistants and mailroom personnel. While one way is not better than the other, they both have constraints.

Entrepreneurial communicators have trouble surviving in top-down organizations. If one wants to be responsible for client service and to be recognized for handling accounts well, a top-down organization is not a place to be. Conversely, a bureaucratic communicator would have trouble surviving in a bottom-up organization. "Bureaucratic" is used in the best sense of someone who has a defined role and performs it. There is no effort to go outside the role because there is work enough in it. Many communications departments are top-down bureaucracies. They function well handling day-to-day communications needs.

Collaborative problem solving is a better fit for communications challenges out of mainstream daily activity. When a collaborative team works well together,

different insights and experiences focused on a challenge tend to find solutions more quickly. This doesn't mean a top-down communicator would be unlikely to come to the same solution, but it does mean the likelihood of an effective solution is higher when more minds consider the same problem.

Does this mean PR agencies that handle multiple clients are better as collaborative organizations and corporations better in a bureaucratic style? Not necessarily. They can be either depending on the work they do. An agency with a programmatic account that does much the same thing year after year can approach account service bureaucratically and be successful. A corporation that has an abundance of new products or frequent events requiring unusual action might be best with a collaborative communications function.

Management styles

Top-down managers are controllers. They want to know everything and to make the main decisions. When top-down managers are smart and work hard, they can anticipate most communications needs of a client. If they are creative, they can produce and execute compelling solutions. The pressure on them is higher, however, because they center decision-making in themselves.

Although bottom-up managers believe a mix of ideas and group decision-making will yield a better overall communications plan, that is not necessarily the case. Groups can tend to conservatism and the way things have always been done. Effective bottom-up managers prod their staffs to think differently, and when their staffs do, the communications organization has a power that builds on itself.

In top-down organizations, one answers to the leader. In bottom-up organizations, one answers to the group. The structured personality works better in the top-down, bureaucratic organization. The entrepreneurial personality thrives in the bottom-up, collaborative organization.

Trust

Organizations run on trust – trust that others will do what they say will do and that they are not gaming each other and the system. Political gamesmanship can destroy both top-down and bottom-up departments. Trust is fragile, and the ability to give another person the benefit of doubt is difficult. Paranoia is a human condition that can have truth at the base of suspicion. When one sees another going out of his way to look good at the expense of others, trust breaks down. This means a communicator, whether in a top-down or bottom-up organization, has to be willing to recognize others for the work they have done. The top-down communicator will focus on execution. Did the individual get assigned tasks done? The bottom-up communicator will evaluate overall contribution. Did the individual contribute to the solution then execute?

It is dangerous to put oneself ahead of anyone in a bottom-up organization. As soon as that happens, it becomes a politically oriented top-down organization. In the bottom-up organization, one should give credit where it is due and be public about it. "This happened because X had a great idea that she was able to pull off."

As a matter of practice, it is dangerous to raise one's head too high in a top-down organization. Credit for success and blame for failure go to the individual at the top of the organization. That individual knows it and must guard his or her reputation. Anyone who stands out subtracts from the image the top person has created. On the other hand, the unspoken bargain on the part of the top-down communicator is to protect those who report to the communicator. The top person should take the heat when things go wrong and kudos when they go right. Communicators below the top person have a shield to protect them. This may not be the case in the bottom up organization. If one fails, there may be less protection against unhappy clients. Poor managers hide behind staffs and deflect blame. They see themselves living to fight another day, and with political finesse, they do. A communicator serving under a poor manager would do well to leave because sooner or later, the communicator will be blamed for something he or she didn't do or had no responsibility for.

Collaborative or not

Before joining a firm, ask yourself a number of questions about your operating style because these will tell you whether you should be in a top-down, leader-driven organization or a bottom-up collaborative group.

- Do you need a heat shield? Are you the kind of person who dislikes intensely being blamed for failure? There are creative practitioners who work in lower-paid positions because they don't have to deal with clients. They can focus their energies on the work itself. This kind of personality is better in a top-down, leader-driven organization.
- Do you need to be one who is in charge of a program? Practitioners with an entrepreneurial inclination chafe under the tight control of a top-down leader. They want to do things their way and they feel that tight controls inhibit ideas and client service. These individuals are better in a bottom-up collaborative organization.
- Are you comfortable with the give-and-take of collaborating? Can you admit that you're wrong when challenged? Can you praise another for a better idea? Overly defensive individuals should not work in collaborative groups. If you see the workplace as warfare where you win at the expense of others, avoid collaboration.
- Do you like vigorous debate or are you one who wants to get on with execution? If you are unwilling to defend your ideas, you are not cut out

for collaboration. However, there is defense and stubbornness. If a point is not essential, willingness to compromise moves things along quickly. Argument requires picking the right principles and practices to defend. Arguing for the sake of it wastes time. There also is a benefit in silence, of letting others carry the argument until one has something to contribute. The more one is willing to defend one's ideas, the more one should be willing to stand back and listen to others. This seems contradictory, but it isn't. Through careful listening, one can understand and anticipate objections and modify an idea on the fly. The "shouter" who does not allow give and take is a top-down manager and doesn't belong in a collaborative group.

- Are you the kind of person who works better in a fluid environment or a structured one? Collaboration is inherently fluid because it takes up new challenges. If you are the kind of person who wants to do a well-structured job with a beginning, middle and end, collaboration is difficult. Meetings take away from time to do work. In some organizations, individuals are in meetings all day long and work late into the night on their regular job. This is collaboration run amok. A fluid environment still has to be execution-oriented. Otherwise, its only product is discussion. Collaboration is a balance between fluidity and execution. A collaborative manager needs to know when to cut off debate and to get the organization implementing.
- Are you the kind of person who cares more about your position than the answer to a problem? (This may vary by age and career. Sometimes one must care more about position in order to advance.) As a rule, when one cares about one's position more than the answer to a communications challenge, that person is not ready for a collaborative environment. There is too much distrust and ambition. Collaborative environments work best for those who are settled in their careers and enjoy the work itself. The work is not a means to an end but the end. They enjoy solving problems. They enjoy counseling clients. They like to stretch their skills. A young and ambitious practitioner who yearns for the top would find collaboration frustrating.

Discomfort

Never get too comfortable with a work style, no matter where you serve. Comfort leads to slips and slips to breaking of trust. If you should slip, be quick to admit it. Don't try to hide error, but don't take responsibility for errors you didn't make. There is no advantage in becoming a scapegoat in an organization. One can too easily be dismissed. How one handles one's own job will affect how one handles clients. Outsiders aren't fooled for long. They observe along with everyone else how a practitioner handles himself. Avoiding blame only makes them more suspicious of the individual and of the department. Accepting blame opens the door for finding solutions. It is best, of course, when accepting blame to have solutions in hand so an error doesn't blow out of proportion. When it comes to

handling mistakes, some practitioners blow their tops. Some remain calm. Some seethe and hold it in. Each person is different. The best is to remain calm and to correct a situation, but that isn't a pre-requisite. Managers can be dragons or lambs and still be successful.

Give and Take

Collaborative PR requires a great deal of give and take and suppression of instincts to attack and defend. There is little wonder that organizations find it difficult, especially large organizations where people are less acquainted. But where it works, there is a satisfying pleasure of going to the office every day because one can work with others that he or she respects.

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