

Collaboration & the Dance of the 7 Veils

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When I was a young man, my dad took me outside by the chicken coup and stopped dead in his tracks. He said, "Listen Val." I tried, but it's hard when you don't know what you're listening for. The chickens were making their usual noise, and in the background I remember hearing some cardinals and red winged black birds. I just couldn't hear what he wanted me to. I finally gave up, and said, "What is it, I don't hear anything?" He smiled and said, "That's what city folk call collaboration." I couldn't help myself, we both laughed. I'd made it a rule not to laugh at the expense of others, and I'm sure there are plenty of 'others' in this case, I just plain couldn't help myself.

You see, we'd been talking about collaboration lately, and I this was his object lesson. He always taught that way. As a team sport, product management needs collaboration. It's fundamental to all product management: collaboration between team members; collaboration between stakeholders; collaboration with your customers and target markets. Instead of 'location' as it is in real estate, in product management its collaboration, collaboration, collaboration!

The way I learned it, collaboration is communication with a purpose. Wikipedia defines it as 'working together to achieve a goal'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as 'united in labor, working in conjunction with another'. Perhaps the Dance of the Seven Veils will be more revealing!

1. EQUAL STANDARDS FOR PERFORMANCE

For collaboration to be real, members of your product management team should all be held to the same standard of performance. This doesn't mean everyone is the same, or that they're doing the same thing. It means that there are standard processes, and each process has a set

of standard work products that it produces. Everyone on the team can expect a certain level of quality from a specific work product, regardless of who did it.

2. SPECIFIC & UNDERSTOOD TASKS, ROLES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Real collaboration requires that each member of the product management team has a well defined role, and everyone else on the team knows what to expect from that role. Can you imagine what would happen when people working together aren't united by a common process, where no one is sure of what the other is doing? Well, maybe you can. Maybe you're in an environment like that right now. If so, I'm sorry. This is the noise my father had me listen to coming from the chicken coup. Fix it, or get out.

3. EQUAL ACCESS TO POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

Collaboration requires equal access to power. That doesn't mean everyone has the same power. It means that everyone can get it the same way, and has an equal method of gaining that power. It also means that team members enable one another by sharing information with everyone, by creating autonomy through boundaries, and by the teams themselves becoming the hierarchy of decision making.

4. EQUAL UNDERSTANDING OF INTENT AND PURPOSE

Collaboration goes beyond just working together, but working together in united purpose. This means that as members on the product management team, we need to know why we're doing the things we do. We need to know the strategic intent, not only of the product and product-line we're working on, but the strategic intent of the entire organization. What are the goals and objectives of the product your working on? What are the success criteria of the product management team? How do you know when you're done?

5. WELL-DEFINED COMPLETION CRITERIA

People quit working when there's no end in sight. When people quit working, collaboration is finished. As people quit working, collaboration fades away. Of course your team knows when the release and launch are; but when do you stop gathering market evidence? When is enough, enough? The biggest problem in communication, is caused by inaccurate abridgment of information. This creates misleading and deceptive communication. Not only does collaboration require the team to know when to quit working, but also when to stop talking. Too soon, and we are being deceptive, not soon enough and we're being disruptive.

6. MESSAGES ARE BEING SENT & RECEIVED WITH FEEDBACK TO THE SENDER

Mailing an email message out to everyone on the product management team isn't collaboration. If that were all it took, then those chickens were the most collaborating birds on the planet. We need to send the message, team members need to receive the message, and respond to the message in some form of feedback. Even though this might be good communication, it's not sufficient for collaboration. For collaboration, the sender needs to observe the intended behavior of the receiver. Some may say that's just feedback, yes, but of a special kind. The kind that says the work is relevant to moving the purpose of the collaboration effort forward.

7. ACTION ACCOUNTABILITY

While working in conjunction with one each member of the product management team, there needs to be a sense of accountability for the work performed. Think about a test for a minute. Yes, the test is supposed to indicate to the testers what you're capable of, but just as important, a test shows you what you're capable of. With each test, your confidence grows. But wait, what about the confidence of the rest of your team? Without equal accountability, confidence dwindles into nothing and no work is performed as a team. To maintain unified work, accountability must be part of collaboration.

If your product management Team is looking to become more effective, a focus on the Dance of the Seven Veils could help, but true improvement will come from developing strong collaboration capabilities. The team will be able to more positively influence the product release. A focus on these seven principles of collaboration will help breakdown silos and create an energetic product management team.

Learn the lesson of the chicken coup, unless these seven principles of collaboration are being followed, it's not collaboration. It's just barnyard noise, everyone clucking and no work being done.

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