

# Fostering collaboration and innovation in today's modern work environment by embracing diversity and inclusion.

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## Abstract

Exploring the reasons and benefits of creating a diverse, inclusive and collaborative team. Investigating the impact a committed leadership team has on implementing cultural change in their organization and ensuring positive results.

## Introduction

Fostering collaboration and inclusion between diverse team members is central to running a successful, modern business. As we move towards a more global economy, business owners, executives and managers will want to embrace diversity to foster innovation and collaboration in order to attract top talent, and ensure long term scalability and sustainability for their operation. The traditional functions of a business such as marketing, sales, operations and product development haven't changed that much over the past decade but who fills those roles has changed and more importantly how those individuals prefer to communicate and work has dramatically changed.

Building a culture of collaboration needs enthusiastic, ongoing commitment from everyone in an organization. It is only when a "critical mass" of employees feel deeply involved that a company's culture can truly change for the better.

For this to happen, executives and senior managers must emphasize and demonstrate the importance of employee engagement and collaboration while embracing the power of diversity and inclusion. This comes through making culture and collaboration central to both corporate strategy and the way leaders and managers behave and communicate between themselves and throughout their business.

Evidence shows that effective internal collaboration between individuals, teams, and functions translates directly into happier, more productive employees, stronger customer relations, and increased profits.

## Lack of collaboration and engagement impacts the whole organization

Although many executives realize collaboration and employee engagement are vitally important, few know how to properly embed them throughout their own businesses. As a result, there is often a mismatch between the vision of leadership and issues with departments and teams working together effectively.

This is borne out by the statistics:



▶ **68%** of employees feel their company isn't creating a work culture where they have a meaningful impact (TalentCulture).

▶ Only 30% - 35% of US employees feel engaged at work (Gallup).

▶ Employee engagement is a priority for 80% of CHROs (IBM).

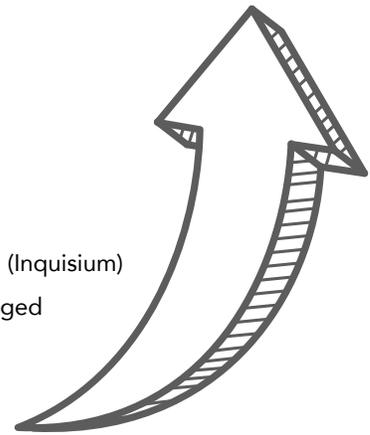
▶ 90% of business leaders believe an employee engagement and collaboration strategy will positively impact their business, but only **25%** of business leaders actually have one (Dale Carnegie).



## Effort put into building a culture of collaboration creates significant business benefits

Although implementing good employee engagement can be challenging, the results are impressive.

- ▶ Companies with happy, engaged employees outperform competitors by around 20% (Entrepreneur).
- ▶ Happy employees are 12% more productive, while unhappy employees are 10% less productive (Entrepreneur).
- ▶ Customer retention rates are 18% higher when employees are actively engaged. (Inquisium)
- ▶ Companies with highly-engaged employees outperform companies with unengaged employees by 22% in profitability and 21% in productivity. (Gallup).



## Using proven techniques and approaches to improve employee engagement and build a collaborative culture

There is no one solution or “silver bullet” to creating an effective, cross-functional, collaborative culture. This is why many organizations find culture change difficult to implement. Instead, positive culture and employee engagement is driven by the thoughts, actions, and behaviors of everyone in a business.

Rather than using a series of “workshops,” “team-building exercises,” or other traditional approaches, a leadership team is much better served by making a strong, embedded commitment to culture, and showing that through their communications, strategy, activities, and vision for the business.

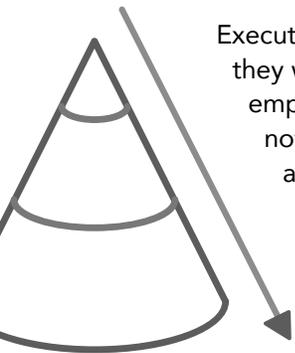
Employee engagement and building a collaborative culture is an ongoing process of continual improvement. Companies cannot rely on the traditional annual 360 feedback process and comments, as any attempt at piecemeal culture change will fail. Instead, culture change needs to be driven as a core initiative, across the business. It must engage executives, managers, and employees from all levels and functions.

Embracing diversity and inclusion within the corporate structure is not simply having equal pay for equal work. It means embracing all cultures, genders, ages, religions, lifestyles and personality types. For instance, Millennials on a whole prefer not to work in a classic Corporate World setting– bound by cubicles, 9-5 structured work days and a standard org chart. They prefer to have open workspaces where ideas can be shared, and projects can be worked on in a collaborative manner. Businesses who are struggling to attract young talent might be missing these key messages.

## C-Suite level buy-in is essential to improving company culture

Although culture changes can be spurred by new additions to the team – forcing fellow members to go outside their comfort zone, long term change that becomes part of an organization’s culture must be driven from and embraced by those at the top.

Executives should take care that they don’t speak and behave counter to the cultural change they want to introduce. Any failure to effectively collaborate at a leadership level will be seen by employees and will undermine efforts to convince them of the need for change. “Do as I say, not as I do”, simply does not work in today’s business world. Successful business leaders such as Richard Branson of Virgin, learned early on that employees are the biggest asset of any organization. In order to protect that asset, leadership needs to embrace their ideas and their diversity, while treating them with respect and paying them a fair wage. Concurrently, whatever message is being sold as the vision of the company must also be practiced by the executives and management of the organization. **Only then will you breed loyalty and create a collaborative and happy team.**



Culture change is a gradual and incremental process, especially if employees adopt a wait and see attitude, so executives shouldn't expect overnight change, it's a long-term effort.



Most forward thinking organizations utilize business coaches to facilitate the process and work with individual team members. The first step is identifying what leadership wants the end result to look like, then identifying the internal stakeholders and finally creating the overall strategy to get to the final destination. There are always obstacles and road blocks. Many times internal leaders are “too close” to their teams to identify true strengths and weakness, therefore missing opportunities. Working with a third party team gives an outside view of the big picture.

To achieve a “Branson-like” environment, leadership will want to take a hard look at all the stakeholders – including themselves. The process is typically defined as follows:

- 1** **Defining a vision, strategy, and plan**  
To implement truly effective changes, a leadership team needs to define their vision of what they want their company to be like in 1 year, 5 years, and beyond. Who will be the leadership? What kind of growth are you looking for? What human capital will you need to achieve those goals? Beginning with a strong outline will help facilitators create a clear path for the future. It's difficult to accurately articulate a cultural vision, so an independent expert can provide key insights and methods for firming up a strong strategy as well as sharing strategies and practices that have worked in other companies.
- 2** **Culture change starts with personal change, and that means the leadership team**  
Before any work is done with the team as it pertains to moving your company culture to a different level the executive leadership team will want to work on a cohesive message and agree on how the strategy will be implemented. A culture is a collection of individuals and it's the collective behavior of those individuals that creates a common, positive good.
- 3** **Make collaboration part of the recruiting and training process**  
Collaboration, diversity, and inclusion need to be baked into the way a business functions. This means making it an essential part of the recruitment, interview, and selection process. When choosing good candidates for executive and senior management positions, collaboration should be considered an essential skill. Are they outside the box thinkers? Are they open to new ideas? Are they leaders, not followers?  
  
Best in class organizations embrace ongoing training for their teams. Training will encourage current employees to collaborate with each other and will also be a venue to introduce new team members into the “group”. A focus on inter-function working, combined with practical examples of how it enhances employee satisfaction and company results can be extremely useful. Often, using third-party facilitators and trainers will help give an outsider's view to the interdepartmental communication and effectiveness of your team.

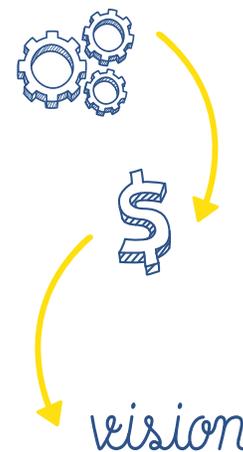
Position teams to work across functions to implement culture change projects. This starts with the CHRO working with their C-Suite peers such as:

**CIO** — To implement technology that drives employee engagement such as shared cloud workspaces and real time communication software.

**CFO** — To understand the financial benefits of employee engagement and communicate business successes back to employees. Being more transparent with financials and tying innovation and collaborative success back to company growth and therefor employee salary growth.

**CMO** – Create marketing collateral and vision that aligns with the new diverse, inclusive and collaborative vision. Such as Richard Branson at Virgin – his personal social feeds all give you the sense of the culture at Virgin as does the company’s marketing.

**CEO** — Articulating the overall vision, strategy, and employee benefits to the business. Being transparent and ensuring all team members see leadership is “walking the walk, and talking the talk.”



**4** Multi-discipline, cross-function initiatives are a great way to lead by example

One of the main challenges of creating cultural change is getting the different areas of a business to work together effectively. Due to history, geographic location, traditional reward systems and the rise of virtual and homebased employees, teams tend to work in silos. This limits communication and consequently impairs employee engagement. We don’t see this trend growing as more and more companies are giving up brick and mortars for more cost efficient work environments. Yet, it is not impossible to have a thriving collaborative culture with team members spread across multiple time zones – it just takes focus and effort.

This cross-functional work can model the behavior for the rest of the organization and should form the core of any employee engagement activities. Such activities will help people build habits of reaching out and effectively communicating with others across different disciplines and departments. Strong communication between department management teams creates a cohesive culture and will start breaking down the silos.

Executive coaching teams can help organizations create SMART goals around their new found collaborative processes and help internal teams clearly see the steps needed without making it an overwhelming process. This is especially important with LEAN organizations where employees wear many hats and have pretty full plates – adding additional “work” to their day will not only diminish the excitement for culture change but will reduce the quality of their job performance due to job dissatisfaction.

**5** Make it a part of everyday life within your organization.

Conversations around culture change should not be limited to culture change initiatives or company presentations. Managers should make culture change a theme of staff meetings, feedback sessions, projects, and daily operations. Reminding people of cultural expectations normalizes culture change and will make it a natural part of the way a business functions. This is often easily achieved by the leadership and management “walking the walk” day after day. Employees who don’t want to be a part of the new culture will leave – as you can’t change everyone – but this will open the door to embrace a new addition who will embrace the current culture vision.

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### Aligning performance reviews with cultural collaboration gets all employees into the right mind sets

Give employees a reason to embrace the cultural change as 'their' change and find ways to make them own it. Incentivizing employees is an excellent way to encourage cultural change. Embedding collaboration measures and rewards into performance reviews gives employees the right impetus. Existing reward systems should not conflict with collaboration and team-based activities. Individual performance can still be rewarded but should be made part of an overarching teamwork reward system.

Tie financial and other rewards to collaboration initiatives and link those initiatives back to overall business success. This encourages personal accountability for cultural change and also supports the overall business strategy. In other words, embed in everyone's daily life the old adage – treat others like you want to be treated. We all want to count on people doing what they promise. We all want people to operate honestly. We don't want to watch over our shoulder because we are afraid of what is said when we leave the room. We want the feedback in the moment not at performance review time. Think of what you want in your personal culture – how you want to be treated. And, how you want to be rewarded. Then, it's very simple – think of others in the same way. Create a team. People create culture, and those who are ambassadors of cultural change should be appropriately rewarded.

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### Embedding open communication and positive feedback into the business empowers everyone

Collaborative cultures happen because communication lines are open. This means employees, managers, and peers can openly discuss their ideas, questions, problems, and work without judgement or criticism. One of the best ways to start implementing this is through an employee's relationship with their immediate manager.

Weekly or monthly "one to one" meetings are a great way for managers to help employees feel engaged. When an employee gets relevant, structured, timely, and constructive ideas and feedback, it helps to create a culture of trust between individuals and bosses. Asking for and providing direct, honest, and constructive feedback to teams, peers, managers, and direct reports will encourage better communications and engagement.

This means encouraging direct reports to understand the importance of culture change and engagement, and to cascade these behaviors downwards, throughout the business.

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### Fostering a culture of flexibility and trust will make employees happy

Businesses will each have a unique approach to encouraging collaboration and engagement, but the emotion at the heart of it all is trust. When employees feel trusted, their behavior improves, leading to a better culture, which creates more trust — A "virtuous circle." There are lots of techniques for creating more flexibility and trust, including:

- ▶ Providing useful, effective training to encourage people to progress in the business.
- ▶ Giving employees more autonomy to decide their work, schedules, and goals.
- ▶ Making the connection between performance, goals, and rewards very clear.
- ▶ Creating open plan offices with collaborative environments and break-out areas.
- ▶ Adding flexibility so people can work from home or unusual hours.
- ▶ Using technology to make collaboration easier
- ▶ Letting employees have "personal time" at work to foster connections, relationships, and friendships.



## Conclusion

Building a culture of diversity, inclusion, and collaboration begins at the top. When a leadership team is fully engaged, they can create powerful change which results in more productive employees, better communications, higher engagement, and improved profits.

To accomplish this, executives need to take both personal and business responsibility for change and make an ongoing commitment to getting it implemented. By developing a vision and strategy, they can create cross-function initiatives, improve communication, empower employees, and build trust.

## About the Authors:

**Vanessa Williams , MS, PCC is the and CEO** of Leading Edge Consulting a firm specializing in Executive Coaching, Organizational Assessment, Leadership Assessment & Development, Change Management Planning, Implementation & Evaluation, and Talent Acquisition Needs Analysis, Execution & Onboarding. Vanessa's corporate career of over 30 years included executive roles at leading large global operations, during which time she not only lived the world of Corporate America, but learned how to navigate, advance, grow, and to succeed in it. Vanessa understands the challenges leaders face and what the C-suite looks for in candidates for succession planning and accelerated development. Most executives don't have a thinking partner, someone who can help them see the possibilities and hold them accountable when they do. Vanessa is that thinking partner.

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