

Thomas Edison's Keys to Managing Team Collaboration

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Some six hours into a 12-hour flight (with transfers!) to Chile, I realize I left my Kindle on the last plane. Not all bad news, actually, since in my bag is a bound copy of the galley of Sarah Miller Caldicott's soon-to-be released book *Midnight Lunch* [2] (Wiley, 2012). As in her other books, Caldicott balances inspiration with hard research. In *Midnight Lunch*, she writes of Thomas Edison and surprises us with a simple, powerful framework to excel in what is becoming the most critical workplace skill: collaboration. With lots of time on a long flight to absorb this work, here is my CliffsNotes version of Caldicott's collaboration framework. You can immediately put her method into practice--but I highly encourage you to read the whole book.

Collaboration has always been important. All of history's most impactful entrepreneurs--from Thomas Edison to Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, or Richard Branson--were able to shape our world not only by their inventions, but by their ability to pull in bright people, to become a sort of collaboration machine, to invent together. The genius was in creating the context and culture for a collaborative process that moved their inventions forward, faster.

But now, it is critical. Throughout history, collaboration has followed the same pattern: Someone speaks, others listen, then someone else speaks, and so forth. From the nobles of ancient Greece to the boardrooms of today, this pattern is repeated. But it can change, and it should. Rather than this system where information trickles one-by-one, we can now use technology to put collaboration on the acceleration track.

Take Twitter, for example. One short message, with a hashtag, can engage thousands of people, often simultaneously, to discuss a topic. Dialogues are upgraded to "metalogues" [3], in which thousands (even millions) of people engage together to learn and create.

We know that virtual teams of thinkers and doers are already part of today's workplace. According to Forrester Research, 40% of employees are already involved in some type of virtual team, and their research shows that number will grow to 56% in just three years. Looking ahead, we know that by the year 2025, Generation Y workers will make up 75% of the workforce. Because they've grown up with technology and are comfortable using it, supporting it, creating it, and improving it, they will demand a

workplace with mobile connectivity and rapid virtual collaboration. They will continue to demand more freedom over their time, activities, and budgets. Workplaces and companies take heed--those that are slow to respond to this demand will falter. Today, only 7% of Gen Y-ers polled on Facebook report working for a Fortune 500 company, since historically those companies do not provide collaboration freedom.

Thus, Caldicott writes, a new form of collaboration is emerging: "Like a giant pulsing brain, a new kind of collective intelligence will become possible by the end of the decade, redefining how knowledge networks operate and how microcosms of people drive value-creating activity across vast geographies as well as entire organizations."

Edison: the master collaborator

Caldicott, a descendant of Thomas Edison, is an international expert on the inventor. But, she writes, the image of a white-coated Edison, alone in his lab, is a fantasy. Edison was a collaborator.

From the start, he sought collaborators to attain materials to create his prototype and commercialize it. In his lifetime, he founded General Electric and more than 200 domestic and international companies, essentially to bring together investors, engineers, salespeople--collaborators--with a common mission. Reading about Edison makes me feel a bit less crazy knowing I started four separate corporations to commercialize my IP.

And Edison kept his ear tuned to other inventors--when he learned that Alexander Graham Bell would launch a phonograph and cylindrical records that would make Edison's technology outmoded, Edison quickly gathered dozens of people for a three-day work session with the express goal of creating a technology that would leapfrog the competition. Edison's collaborators dropped everything else they were working on and focused on that one collective goal. And it worked.

Imagine Thomas Edison with today's technology, using Twitter to help him collaborate on inventions. Caldicott packages Edison's collaboration approach into a well-thought-through process for managing team collaboration:

Four keys to managing team collaboration

Step 1: Establish Capacity

First, assemble the capacity to innovate. Identify a small group (2-8 people) that brings together a diversity of experiences and perspectives. When I set up strategy efforts with clients, we aim for 5-10 collaborators that represent key areas of the company (marketing, operations, HR, etc.).

Step 2: Set Context

This is a two-step approach: First, run what Caldicott calls a "solo-meld" in which each member individually reads broadly about the collaboration topic, questions assumptions,

and conducts initial analyses to create insights, without reaching conclusions. My work at McKinsey started every project this way, with members individually reading, conducting interviews, and assembling a fact-pack of insights.

Follow this with a “group-meld,” in which members come together to share their insights, experiment with broad range of potential solutions, and develop prototypes (often today these are narrative prototypes, stories of potential solutions). I learned this firsthand when I was having a tough time showing potential investors and clients what my “Outthinker Digital Tool” could become. Then, I built a simple mock-up and story and that got people excited.

Step 3: Maintain Coherence

It’s not unusual for any team to get distracted and lose momentum. The key is to inspire the team with the shared purpose, while measuring the progress toward that shared vision. Give the team feedback to keep them engaged. For example, I am preparing a report next week summarizing the progress we have made in building a private equity fund; we are not yet where we wanted to be and I sense the team is losing momentum. To overcome that, I’ve looked back and summarized what we’ve already achieved--it is amazing, and I know it will help keep the team engaged when they see it as well.

Step 4: Manage Complexity

Innovative ideas are always inconsistent with prevailing logic and beliefs, so your challenge now is to manage the complexity of converting your idea into reality. This means starting to influence beyond your team so the idea catches on, networking in the broader organization to get people on board, and doing what Caldicott calls “footprinting”--building a collection of notebooks, documents, data, videos, pictures, and sound recordings that will serve as a record of your team’s work. I always build a “leave behind” PowerPoint for my consulting clients, but thanks to Caldicott, I will now incorporate pictures, audio, and video into a stimulating track of our journey.

Do yourself a favor and read *Midnight Lunch* through to the end to fully understand Caldicott’s synopsis of Edison’s four-step approach. Caldicott does a masterful job of offering practical tools and exercises and leveraging the latest technologies to arm you with what you need to unleash the collaborative brain of your team and solve problems that really matter.