IMPROVING COLLABORATION

Improving collaboration

The purpose of this resource is to help you develop a clear action plan for improving this area.

Each resource follows a common structure:
- What we mean by this area
- Why it matters
- What good looks like
- Common traps to avoid
- Possible first steps
- Links to additional resources (where applicable).

What we mean by a culture of collaboration

"If you could get all the people in an organisation rowing in the same direction, you could dominate any industry in any market, against any competition, at any time."

Patrick Lencioni

This is a measure of how effectively people work together. Combining their efforts and strengths for the pursuit of shared objectives that could not be achieved alone. Working seamlessly together like a team that passes the ball well. Combining different perspectives to make better decisions. Looking out for who needs help, and offering it.

When thinking about the quality of collaboration in your culture, its useful to think about two types. The first and most obvious type is collaboration **within stable teams**, where people work together regularly and see themselves as part of the same group. This is what you generally see within a common function, or within a team of athletes.

The second and equally important type, is how effectively people collaborate **across boundaries** – between teams or areas of functional expertise, across different levels of the hierarchy, and even across organisations within a partnership. The second type is much more challenging. We tend to focus on and feel loyal to our immediate team. We're naturally less open to and interested in the work of other teams. Figuring out how to grow this collaboration across teams is a stand out feature of the most successful cultures.

Why it matters

"The quality of connections between people is more important than the quality of individual talents in determining how well we will perform."

David Jones, Sport Psychologist with Saracens Rugby and Mercedes F1

High performance is almost always a collective effort. As organisations we depend on different people and teams working together to get interdependent work done.

INTERNATIONAL SAFEGUARDS
FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT

Despite how much people talk about teamwork, genuine high performing teamwork is actually pretty rare.

People do tend to pull together in a crisis like COVID, but as soon as the pressure passes, the teamwork also disappears. This is as true in sport as it is in any sector. Yes, a good team of athletes can exemplify great teamwork. But how strong is the teamwork between athletes and coaches, between different age groups, between the male and female games, or between staff?

This means it's a massive area opportunity for improvement for most organisations. If you feel you can be a lot better, you're not alone. It is actually quite easy to make quick progress, and the resources that follow should help.

From the perspective of creating a safe environment for all, a culture of collaboration helps in 3 ways:

1. Safeguarding is a significant responsibility in sport. Even in an environment where people are taking that responsibility seriously, things can still get missed. A culture of collaboration creates a safety net. If one person forgets to do a key risk assessment, someone else will spot the need and do it. People cover for each other in much the same way as athletes do in a well performing team.
2. Many minds will improve the quality of thinking behind key decisions, and in learning from issues.
3. A culture of collaboration increases accountability with people being more willing to challenge each other and raise concerns directly.

What does good look like? Key features of strong collaboration

Read the following description, and make notes on where you most want to improve collaboration in your organisation.

1. **Focus on collective goals, which require teamwork to be achieved**. This provides the motivation to work as a team. This is why you tend to see the best teamwork in times of crisis. When there isn't an external urgency pulling people together, it's up to the organisation's leadership to provide it.
2. **A sense of belonging to something that is bigger than us as an individual.** Putting what's in the best interests of a cause we believe in before our own goals or ego. It also encourages people to take pride in and feel ownership for the standards that success depends on.
3. **Deep respect for the diversity of strengths different people and teams bring**. This is about everyone buying in to the value of diversity of perspectives to help us succeed.
4. **Culture of teaming up across functions and teams to solve problems together**.
5. **People spend time together.** Prioritising time to get to know each other and the strengths each person brings. Informally, and in more formal meeting structures.

INTERNATIONAL SAFEGUARDS
FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT

6. **People actively seek out challenge from each other.** Read about Pixar's Brains Trust [here](#) for insights on what best practice in this can look like.
7. **People speak up when they see issues or opportunities for improvement in another team**. They don't just focus on their own team.
8. **People are quick to ask each other for help, and the response is positive when they do.**
9. **Clarity of individual roles within the team.** People are clear on where they can best add value, and feel they have a chance to shine in service of the team. There efforts are recognised, and they feel valued.
10. **Clarity on where teamwork is most critical to performance.** I.e. on the critical interdependencies between certain roles.
11. **Confidence and belief.** The reality is that effective teamwork, particularly across functions, takes effort. One of the things we see that can get in the way of teamwork, is a lack of confidence in the strategy or the organisation.
12. **Effective meetings.** Making good use of the time you spend together as a team. Focusing on the right things, having high quality discussions with active debate and which close with clear alignment and actions.
13. **Seeing teamwork as a verb, not a noun.** I.e. not just waiting for it to turn up. Recognising it requires everyone to take responsibility for their collaborative behaviours. Building relationships, speaking up, listening up. Supporting each other.

Common traps to avoid

Again, read through these traps, noting which you recognise a need to work on.

- **Teams working in isolation**. Not thinking about what other teams need from us.
- **Ineffective meetings**. Poor use of time when we get together. One thing to watch out for is if people find meetings boring.
- **Unequal contribution in meetings**. Discussion is dominated by a few people.
- **People withholding their thinking** due to a lack of psychological safety
- **Fixed position**. A lack of openness and curiosity for different views. Most at risk in emotive discussions.
- **No time to think longer term**, or invest energy in initiatives that will add value tomorrow.
- **Not dealing with conflicts within a team**. Unresolved issues can lead to people giving up on the team.
- **Not comfortable holding each other to account.**
- **Trying to decide on everything by consensus.** High performing teams start discussions with clarity on who is best placed to make the final call if there isn't consensus.

INTERNATIONAL SAFEGUARDS
FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT

Possible actions to improve collaboration in your culture

1. Make 'improving collaboration' a priority. Have an honest conversation as a team about the biggest opportunities for improvement, and review progress.

2. Work out where teamwork is most important to the organisation's success.

3. Get people in the team to reflect on how effectively they're both 'speaking up' and 'listening up' in meetings. Ask people to reflect on and share which of these come more naturally, and which they recognise they need to work on.

4. Ask people to reflect on and score the strength of their relationship with each other member of the team on a scale of 1-10, to get people thinking about which relationships they need to invest more energy in.

5. Reflect on the lessons from examples of when teamwork has been at its best.

6. Have an honest discussion about the effectiveness of your current meetings, what people really value, and what they want more of and less of.

7. Encourage people to invite challenge from others in the team.

Additional Resources – insights from some of the world's leaders in this space

- Teaming. How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy. By Amy Edmundson. Ted talk. Brief explanation.
- Leadership lessons from the Chilean mine rescue. HBR Article
- Avoiding the trap of 'Super Chickens', 16-minute video by Margaret Heffernan https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udiTaS2wTAM
- Secrets of highly successful groups - 1 hour video by Daniel Coyle, who wrote the brilliant book 'Culture Code' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T9tRvkXtns
- 5 Dysfunctions of a team. Video overview. Longer talk.
- The ideal team player. How to recognise and cultivate the three essential virtues. Ted talk.
- Super teams. The Secrets of Stellar Performance from Seven Legendary Teams. By Khoi Tu. Video.
- Combining autonomy with alignment in Spotify. Article. Video
- Inside Pixar's Brains Trust. Where people invite challenge and feedback. Article

Please note – in order to see the Harvard Business Review (HBR) articles, you need to sign up on their website – you can then view 4 free articles each month.

INTERNATIONAL SAFEGUARDS
FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT