overview of effective collaboration

It is said that Jonas Salk (inventor of the first polio vaccine) once asked Gregory Bateson (an anthropologist, psychologist, and pioneer in systems thinking), "Where does thinking occur?" After a moment of reflection, Bateson gestured to the space between them and said, "I think it occurs right here."

WHAT COLLABORATION IS AND IS NOT

Collaboration means working together to solve problems, invent, create, build models, and produce results. Why is collaboration important? When people collaborate they learn more, work harder, support one another, and commit to cumulative efforts and effects.

Just as swimming requires more than just waving one's arms in the water, collaboration is not achieved just by working in groups. For collaboration to happen, participants must see the different resources (information, cognitive styles, cultures, decision making authority, etc.) each has and know that they come together as equals to complete a task. Group work qualifies as collaboration only if it produces results.

THE NORMS OF COLLABORATION

Like any new skill or behavior that has to be learned, these seven norms require practice and conscious attention. Individuals using them for the first time may find them awkward until they become more automatic behaviors.

1. **Presume positive intentions**
   Simply put, this is the assumption that other members of the team are acting from positive and constructive intentions (however much you may disagree with their ideas). Of all the seven norms of collaboration, this may be the most fundamental, for without it, the rest are meaningless. Presuming positive intentions is not a passive state but a necessary underpinning to all of one's responses in team work. The assumption of positive intentions permits the creation of such sophisticated concepts as a "loyal opposition" and it allows one member of a group to play "the devil's advocate." It builds trust, allows for healthy cognitive disagreement, and reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding and affective/emotional conflict.

2. **Pause**
   Pausing actually slows down the "to and fro" of discussion. There are fewer 'frames per second' to deal with. It provides for the precious "wait time" which has been shown in classrooms to dramatically improve student critical thinking. Pausing and the acceptance of moments of silence creates a relaxed and yet purposeful atmosphere. Silence, however uncomfortable initially, can be an excellent indicator of productive collaboration. Pausing also signals to others that their ideas and comments are worth thinking about. It dignifies their contribution and implicitly encourages future participation. Pausing enhances discussion and greatly increases the quality of decision making.

3. **Paraphrase**
   To paraphrase is to re-cast or translate into one's own words, to summarize or to provide an example of what has just been said. The paraphrase maintains the meaning and intention of what has been said while using different words and phrases. Paraphrasing helps members of a team hear and understand each other as they evaluate data and formulate decisions. It can be extremely effective when reducing group tension and individual frustration. The paraphrase is a powerful non-judgmental verbal response; it communicates that "I am attempting to understand you."

4. **Probe for specificity**
   Ask for clarification of vague nouns and pronouns (*e.g.,* they), action words (*e.g.,* improve), comparative terms (*e.g.,* best), rule words (*e.g.,* shouldn't), and universal quantifiers (*e.g.,* everyone).

5. **Put ideas on the table without attaching yourself to them**
   When individuals claim ideas as their own, other group members are more likely to consider the idea primarily in light of their feeling for and relationship to the speaker. To have an idea be received in the spirit in which you share it, label your intentions: "This is one idea…" or "Here is a thought." Pull idea off the table if you believe it is blocking progress.

6. **Pay attention to self and others**
   Collaborative work is facilitated when each team member is explicitly conscious of interaction – not only aware of what she or he is saying, but also how it perceived and how others are responding to it. Attention to your behavior in relation to others' approaches can help you to accept that others' points of view can be different without being wrong. Teams are most productive when participants are curious about their collaborators' impressions and understandings – not judgmental. The more we understand about how someone else processes information, the better we can communicate with them and, by extension, with others.

7. **Pursue a balance between advocacy and inquiry**
   Both inquiry and advocacy are necessary components of collaborative work. Highly effective teams are aware of this and self-consciously attempt to balance them. Inquiry provides for greater understanding. Advocacy leads to decision making. One of the common mistakes that collaborative teams may make is to bring premature closure to problem identification (inquiry for understanding) and rush into problem resolution (advocacy for a specific remedy or solution). Maintaining a balance between advocating for a position and inquiring about the positions held by others further inculcates the ethos of a genuine learning community.

Some traits of good collaborators:
- good listener
- on topic
- respectful
- honest
- trusting
- open-minded
- engaged
- able to see different perspectives
- flexible
- strong problem solver
- sense of humor
- not defensive
- comfortable with eye contact
- aware of body language
- self-reflective
- positive
- willing to let go and move on
- able to share responsibility
- able to recognize needs of individuals and the group
- sees positive potential in others
- able to accept feedback
- validating