TEAM PERFORMANCE

The Six Dysfunctions of Collaborative Work

How High-Performing Leaders Diagnose
and Remedy Collaborative Failures

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A Case Study in Collaborative Breakdown

Beth was excited when the CEO asked her to take over a high-profile commercialization project that had been struggling. The leader in charge of the effort—one expected to double the technology firm's revenues in the coming decade—had recently accepted another job. Beth accepted the job on the spot.

In her first week, Beth dug in. She found the project fully funded and staffed by 64 carefully selected people from departments across the company, including engineering, marketing, finance, and quality assurance. The three-day, offsite visioning session held to launch the project had been attended by the entire team and was, by all accounts, a resounding success. Three concurrent work-streams—focusing on research, product development, and marketing and sales—were identified and a well-respected leader was appointed for each one.

Yet, ten months later, the project was badly behind schedule and bogged down. Everyone with whom Beth spoke was frustrated with the slow pace of progress. They were all pointing fingers, but in different directions. The CEO believed the problem was a failure of leadership. The departing project leader blamed team members for not devoting enough time to the project. One team member said the problem was poor meeting management; another said key decisions weren't being made in a timely manner.

What should Beth do? Appoint new workstream leaders? Relaunch the project? Restructure the group or the work? Add more people to the project team? Schedule more meetings or provide an online work platform?

The best answer at this juncture is none of the above. All Beth really knows is that the project is a collaborative effort critical to the success of the organization and that the effort is failing.

Collaborative failures can stem from a variety of conditions. Sometimes they are woven into the fabric of groups when they are formed, perhaps because the incentives of team members are misaligned or decision rights haven't been defined. Sometimes they develop as groups evolve and their members interact, as when a group expands beyond the limits of its structure or gets bombarded with too many priorities.

In either case, collaborative dysfunction is a pernicious problem that is sure to become more prevalent and problematic. Work is increasingly collaborative. Research conducted by the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that 40 percent of high-performance organizations are shifting from traditional functions to more cross-functional project/team-based work to a "high or very high degree." In addition, trends that support and drive more collaboration, such as the rising use of agile methodologies, the de-layering of hierarchies, and the adoption of digital tools and technologies, are gaining momentum.

Meanwhile, more and more leaders are facing challenges like the one Beth is experiencing without a thorough understanding of the nature of collaborative dysfunction or a toolkit for addressing it. In Deloitte's 2019 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 65 percent of the nearly 10,000 respondents identified the shift from functional hierarchies to team-centric and network-based organizational models as "important" or "very important." Yet only 7 percent of the respondents believed their organizations were "very ready" to execute the shift to network-based models, and only 6 percent rated themselves "very effective" at managing cross-functional teams.

Our research underscores this conundrum and sheds light on why leaders are struggling with collaborative dysfunction. By and large, they are not managing collaboration per se. Instead, they are unleashing their teams without establishing the conditions needed to support collaboration. Moreover, when collaborative efforts break down, leaders are relying on conventional interventions which may or may not address the true nature of their problems. For instance, a technology fix, like a new online work platform, won't cure a collaborative failure caused by a leader who won't delegate decisions, or bring together team members split along functional lines. In fact, online platforms often cause more harm than good by increasing the volume and pacing of work and creating a state of collaborative overload.

The consequences of the inability to address collaboration breakdowns are wide ranging. Collaborative dysfunction hinders organizational and employee *performance* and *productivity*. It creates obstacles to *innovation*, impeding both ideation efforts and the implementation of sound ideas.

It erodes employee *engagement*—contributing to stress, overload, and burnout.

But before leaders like Beth can mitigate the consequences of collaborative failure, they must pinpoint its causes. Until then, any solution will be hit or miss at best. Or worse, it could exacerbate the problem.

Beth took a step back and used organizational network analysis (ONA) to gain a more granular understanding of the project team and the collaborative failure she was charged with correcting. She discovered three things that fueled her success in turning the team around (*see Exhibit 1*).

First, a 10-minute online survey of the project team members was used to create a network map showing the flow of information within the team. It revealed that the workstreams were severely misaligned: the people from marketing and sales were operating in a silo with very few links to the people from research and product development. A project re-launch, which senior leaders were advocating, wouldn't have resolved this condition. In fact, it may have added to the overload and bred cynicism.

Second, interviews with the people whom team members relied on most heavily in their work revealed that a good deal of the advice Beth had received on taking the helm was misinformed. The CEO, for example, was sure that a team member he held in high regard should be appointed to lead one of the workstreams. But it turned out that person was already so overwhelmed by interactions with team members that he was not only slowing work down, but burned-out to the point that he was contemplating quitting.

Finally, the network map of the departing project leader, Cristal, revealed that her lack of connectivity was part of the problem (*see Exhibit 2*). Her direct connections, the dark lines on the second map, were very insular and mainly restricted to team members from the research workstream.

Using ONA, Beth realized that the commercialization project was bogged down because the team members from different workstreams were not properly connected and working together—and that many of the interventions she was considering, such as replacing leaders, relaunching the project, and more meetings, would not improve the team's effectiveness.

Exhibit 1: The network map of the commercialization team showed disconnection between team members in the different workstreams.
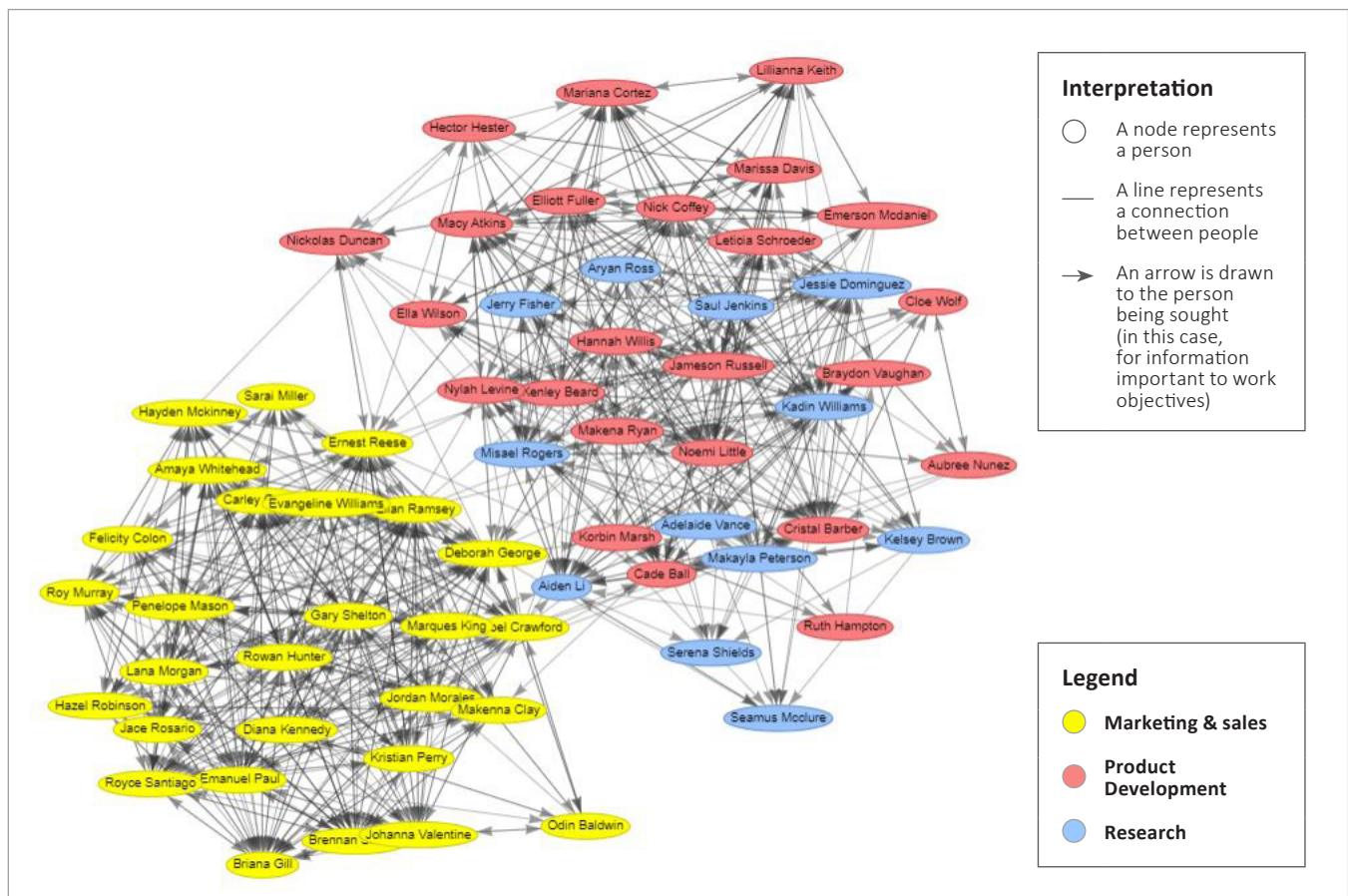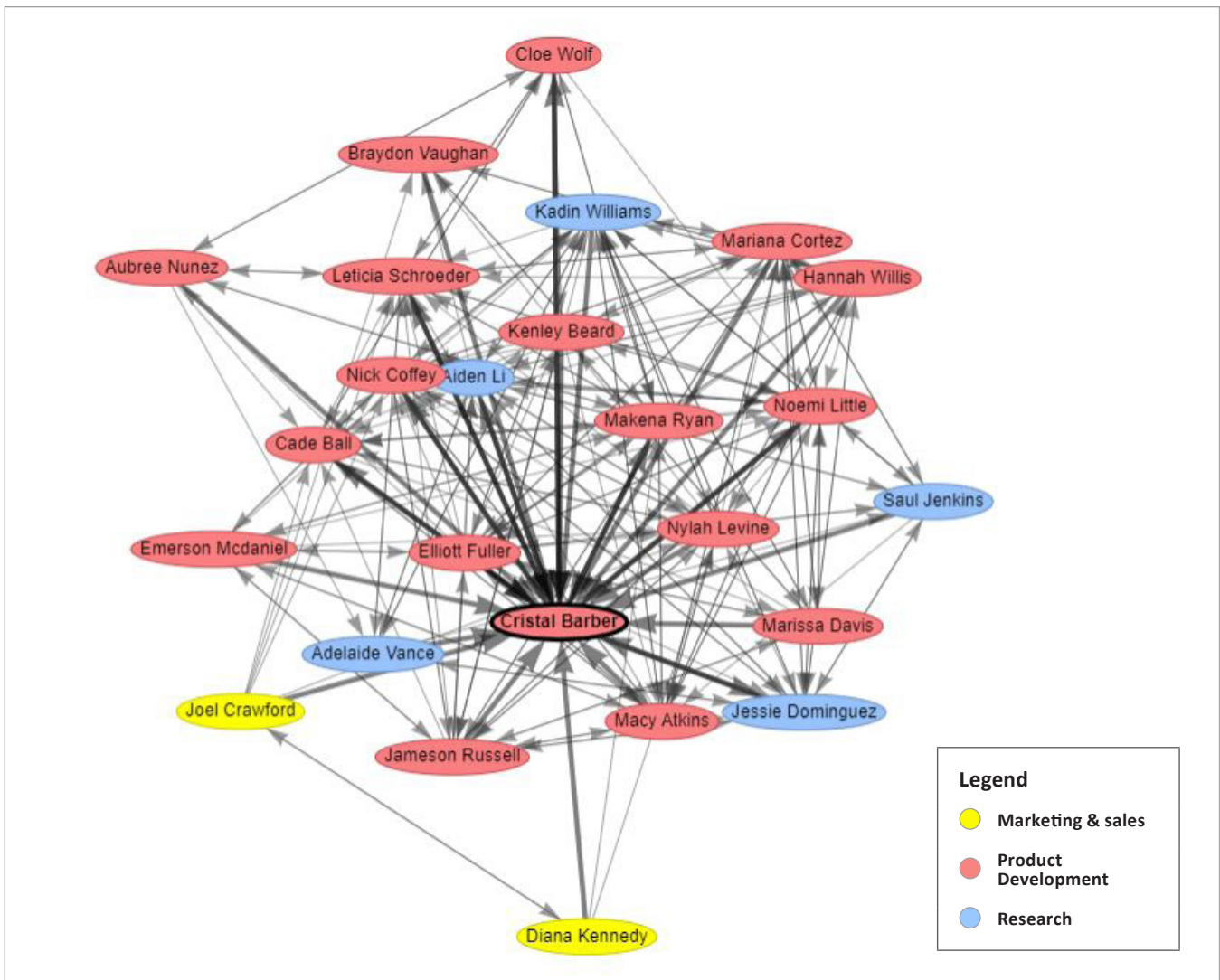
Exhibit 2: The map of the departing team leader's network revealed that she was part of the problem.

Note: This analysis drawn from an actual case processed using the Agility Accelerator, a collaboration analytics platform developed by the Connected Commons. This platform includes a built-in survey, and upon closing, provides immediate actionable results with accompanying recommendations. It provides a simple, low-effort way to manage the end-to-end process in less than a week. Click here for a short overview.
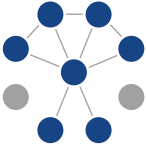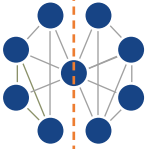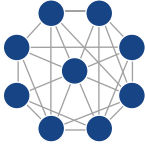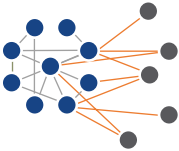
The Six Dysfunctions of Collaborative Work

For roughly two decades, we've been using ONA to map collaboration in groups of up to 45,000 employees across industries and geographies. We've identified the patterns of network connectivity and collaborative practices associated with high performing teams and units. But just as importantly and more surprisingly, this research also revealed six patterns of *collaborative dysfunction*—like the ones uncovered in the network maps of Beth's project team—that have a negative impact on performance (**see Exhibit 3**). These dysfunctional archetypes undermined performance in 88 percent of the organizations we've studied. Moreover, one of the six

archetypes turned out to be the primary source of failure in 36 percent of significant collaborative efforts and 24 percent of leadership failures.

To better understand the six dysfunctional archetypes and create a playbook for diagnosing and curing them, we interviewed 100 leaders of collaborative efforts in 20 corporate members of Connected Commons, a consortium of more than 100 major companies and organizations which provided access for our research. In this report, we share what we learned from them about the archetypes, their drivers, and their remedies.

Exhibit 3 The Six Archetypes of Collaborative Dysfunction: Drivers and Solutions

DYSFUNCTION	ISSUE	DRIVERS	SOLUTIONS
Hub and Spoke	Excessive reliance on formal and informal leaders slows decision-making, blocks innovation, alienates team members, and overloads leaders.	• Leadership behaviors; dominance of experts • Flaws in roles/decision rights/ processes or incentives • "Invisible fence" and fear-driven cultures that drive excessive approval-seeking and validation	• Leadership coaching; focus on what, not how • Distribute knowledge—methodology and tools, database, training • Integrate expertise through joint work • Revise decision-right allocations, roles, and/or incentives • Shift work away from hubs
Disenfranchised Nodes	Team members are marginalized and their ability to access resources and contribute to the team is stunted, negatively affecting group success and the disenfranchised members' engagement and retention.	• Leaders elevate some group members and marginalize others • Overload or onerous/risk-laden process and design decisions cause some members to become disillusioned and withdraw • A lack of trust in lateral relations and/or an over-reliance on familiar faces • Disconnected by virtue of status or physical location	• Create process or role for recognizing and re-integrating the disenfranchised • Embed inclusion as a group value • Add process touchpoints to give individuals a greater voice or more opportunity to participate in the group • Use technology support to overcome geographic disconnection (i.e. video)
Misaligned Nodes	Individuals and factions within a group don't cohere, creating silos that slow down work, create toxic environments, and undermine project success	• Distrust, disagreements, or competition among leaders, functions, or business units • The inability to sublimate functional or business unit goals external to the group • A cognitive over-focus on one's expertise or an emotional adherence to personal/ occupational values.	• Co-creation of shared goals and priorities, reinforced by metrics and accountability • Forums to build competence and benevolence-based trust and establish value of group goals • Processes to identify and address misalignments • Exercises that enable members to connect outside the group context and re-set relationships

DYSFUNCTION	ISSUE	DRIVERS	SOLUTIONS
Overwhelmed Nodes	Team members cannot keep up with the collaborative demands placed upon them, leading to insufficient time for work, inefficient decision making, excessive compromise, lower engagement, and ultimately burnout.	• The growth of the group surpasses the limits of its design • Ineffective meeting and email norms that overwhelm group members • Lack of effective collaborative workload metrics • Fear of making unilateral decisions or of being left out • Over-inclusion – within the team and back to the organization	• Redesign the structure and work of group • Map impact-to-effort of new activities; empower members to say "no" • Reduce low-value activities; rebalance work thru reassignment • Adopt and practice meeting and communication discipline • Define and respect roles and responsibilities
Isolated Networks	Impermeable group borders block stakeholder input and external resources/expertise resulting in flawed decisions, innovation failures, and misalignment with the organization.	• Leaders or project management/ staffing practices mandate separation of the group (ala skunkworks or agile initiatives) • Group becomes too focused on optimizing the outcome based on its expertise or values, and not the end need • Isolation from stakeholders creates echo chamber; context shifts create disconnect	• Systematic inclusion of relevant stakeholder/influencers, including both positive and negative opinion leaders. • Build in time for iteration with stakeholders • Focus on the outcomes from the stakeholder perspective, not just execution of project • Provide group with greater visibility into organizational goals and outcomes
Priority Overload	External demands cause group members to lose sight of their mission and highest priorities resulting in work over-load that hurts quality of execution, delays delivery, and creates employee burnout.	• External leaders demand too much or too many goals at once • Over-emphasis on agility or "one firm" culture • Lack of North Star clarity/ agreement among project leaders • Personal and cultural values lead to overcommitment	• Map activities for external stakeholders • Review demands based on task and collaborative footprint • Force decision makers to make tradeoffs in content of demands and timing • Adopt priority definition process and mechanism/coordinator to screen incoming requests for help • Be transparent about workload and competing demands; re-set group priorities collectively

❶ Archetype 1: Hub-and-Spoke
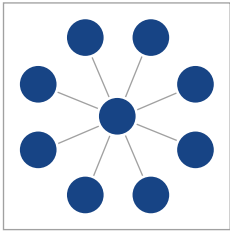
Groups need leaders. Leaders serve as information and resource gateways, and they make major decisions, arbitrate conflicts, and coordinate efforts. But sometimes leaders become the primary cause of collaborative breakdowns. ONA maps that show a preponderance of connections flowing through a group's leaders can be indicative of this type of collaborative dysfunction, an archetypal pattern that we call *hub-and-spoke*.

The leaders who occupy the hubs in this archetype are not limited to those who are formally appointed. Informal leaders, such as subject matter experts and other influential group members, can also serve as hubs. As a result, there may be several hubs within a given network—any of which can create collaborative drag.

Hub-and-spoke dysfunction occurs when formal and informal leaders become bottlenecks that throttle down a group's performance. These leader-hubs may hinder innovation by constraining the flow of information and resources through the spokes. They can also become echo chambers, where the ideas flowing through the spokes never penetrate the inner circle and make it into the chamber, and those that do get through receive an overly positive reception and an unwarranted degree of consideration. Often leaders slow the pace of work in the hub-and-spoke archetype because they are overloaded. They are bombarded with demand and can't make decisions in a timely manner, eventually shifting from proactive to reactive management. This, in turn, spawns disengagement among group members who feel increasingly powerless and disconnected. Ironically, the leaders themselves can also become disengaged—burning out in the struggle to meet demands on time and deliver results.

Hub-and-spoke patterns often emerge when new groups are formed to address strategic initiatives or in times of change, for example during mergers or reorganizations. As group members seek their footing, they look to their leaders for directions and decisions. One of our interviewees, a vice president in an insurance company, found herself in this position when she became the leader of a new, 80-member group in the finance department.

The group was pulled together quickly by combining several pre-existing, geographically-disparate teams that were already supporting various functions and business units. It was immediately under pressure to deliver services at scale across the entire organization. But no time was taken to integrate the teams nor were their structures and processes altered to accommodate their new scale. Almost overnight, the VP become the central hub in the new group's network by default. This quickly became an obstacle to collaboration among the

group members and it produced an overwhelming workload for the VP.

"Everybody was operating in siloed work teams and every team was operating in different ways—some successfully, some not. There was no 'we' and no interest in changing the various ways the teams were working, because each team believed that it was already operating in a perfect manner," she recalls. "Meanwhile, everyone was relying on me for all of the coordination and decision-making. So, my days were filled with one-on-one meetings. It was tough."

Our research shows that the hub-and-spoke pattern arises from a variety of behavioral and structural drivers. Sometimes, we find these drivers manifesting individually, but they also act in concert to undermine collaboration.

Often the hub-and-spoke archetype stems from the ***behaviors of leaders and group members***. A strict adherence to a command-and-control mindset, ego needs, and fear of failure can drive leaders to behave in ways that create this pattern. Team members can be overly dependent on leaders, too. For example, people can be hesitant to act without the approval of a leader or the input of an expert or an influencer whom they trust based on past experience or whose go-ahead is needed to obtain downstream acceptance of their work or ideas.

These behaviors are especially damaging if they become embedded in the organizational culture. Cultural mores that exaggerate the power differential between leaders and group members can drive people to seek out approval and validation from leaders and stymie collaboration. Likewise, hub-and-spoke dysfunction can emerge in organizations where failure avoidance is a cultural trait.

Fear—of failure, ridicule, and/or punishment—has a particularly pernicious effect on collaboration. Interestingly, however, when we attempt to pinpoint the sources of fear using ONA, we often find it originates in a small set of people—3-5 percent of team members. These "fearmongers" can include leaders who are too controlling or toxic; experts who lack social skills and try to maintain their status by intimidating other group members; and passive-aggressive people who see fear where it does not exist and spread it through gossip.

The kneejerk response to repairing networks that have fallen into the hub-and-spoke archetype is often restructuring or a technology adoption, but when behaviors are driving the dysfunction, behavioral change is required. For instance, addressing fearmongers without stigmatizing them can require some sensitivity. When the leader of a new product development team in a life sciences company discovered that a handful of people were creating and propagating fear, she ran a series of workshop for the entire team. The sessions called out fear-producing behaviors, offered alternatives, and instilled

accountability for practicing them. As a result, new behaviors were put into practice without placing blame for past actions.

If the style of formal leaders is the primary source of hub-and-spoke, a coaching intervention may be needed to break the pattern. For instance, when micromanagement by an ambitious leader of a team in a biopharmaceutical business unit became an obstacle to collaboration, his boss worked with him to establish specific guidelines for delegating work and providing the proper level of oversight. They also scheduled a weekly meeting in which they discussed how he had handled—and might have better handled—specific incidents.

As with formal leaders, when informal leaders, such as experts, are holding back collaboration, it is important to get to root causes. Sometimes the dysfunction tracks back to the expert, who may feel driven to maintain his status; sometimes it tracks back to group members, who may turn to experts to shirk the responsibility for decisions. When a technical expert's caustic critiques of the work of team members in a machine software group made them increasingly reluctant to act, the team leader decided to eliminate the bottleneck by appointing a softer-spoken peer to deliver his feedback.

Sometimes the root causes of a hub-and-spoke pattern are located outside the group. When a newly-appointed R&D leader in a family-owned firm mapped the function's network, he was surprised to find that a small set of well-connected network influencers outside his function were tamping down its performance. It turned out that habits developed over decades, including excessive information seeking, consensus building, and approval checking on even mundane items, were causing team leaders to route their decisions through these few hubs located outside the function. To change their behaviors, he met with each team leader and promised to support and protect them if they would begin taking prudent risks, become more assertive in meetings, and serve as behavioral models for the members of their teams.

The **structural elements** of teams and organizations—the way in which roles, decision-rights, and work processes are

defined—frequently result in hubs that obstruct collaboration. Supporting systems, especially rating systems and compensation plans, can also encourage excessive reliance on leader hubs.

Often the leaders of new groups are purposely given strong decision rights in order to ensure that the group becomes properly established. But once group members get their footing, and particularly when groups begin to grow larger, out-sized decision rights can begin to slow networks down. One partner in a consulting firm, which reorganized more than 50 individual offices into 11 territories, personally reviewed and approved all new business and hiring decisions to ensure that the offices in his territory were operating in a strategically aligned manner. But as soon as the offices began consistently presenting sound decisions, he altered the decision rights—giving them to office managers—and stepped out of the process.

Decision rights can also be a good lever for addressing behavioral drivers of hub-and-spoke dysfunction. When a leader in an industrial manufacturing company took over a team whose members had become accustomed to the command-and-control style of its previous leader, she began by re-defining decision rights and refusing to make decisions that should have been made by the team members. In addition, she instituted a "buddy system" in which a team member who was unable to reach a decision could consult with one or two colleagues with relevant expertise, instead of turning to her.

Meetings are a common process-related driver of hub-and-spoke dysfunction. The leader of the oncology unit in one pharmaceutical company has used "meeting mapping" to combat this driver throughout his career. He and his team analyze the objectives, participants, and outcomes of all standing meetings. This approach ensures that these meetings don't become institutionalized time wasters – that their tempo, duration, and rosters are properly established. And when obstacles to collaboration, such as missing information or inefficient decision-making, are identified, they are addressed and resolved going forward.

❷ Archetype 2: Disenfranchised Nodes
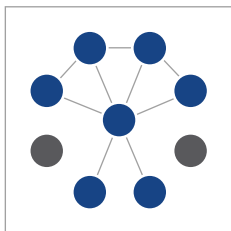
In optimized networks, every node is connected in a way that enables the unimpeded flow of information, resources, capabilities, and expertise that group members require to complete their work. This is a prerequisite of effective collaboration.

Often, however, we see ONA maps in which some of the connections between nodes are stunted or missing altogether. Some nodes are well connected to one another and to leader hubs, but others are poorly connected. The people who occupy the poorly connected nodes are isolated from the group at large: they may not receive the resources they need to do their work or have the same opportunity to contribute to the group as their better-connected colleagues. As a result, these individuals dis-engage and group performance suffers. Work is not completed as efficiently as it should be, and the expertise of isolated team members is not fully utilized. We've named this archetype of collaborative dysfunction, *disenfranchised nodes*.

Group members can become disenfranchised for various reasons. Sometimes their leaders or their colleagues marginalize them because they are new to the group or otherwise perceived as unknown entities, or because they are unlike the rest of the group in terms of either expertise or occupational values (what they care about in their work) and so are cast as outsiders. Sometimes disenfranchised group members may choose to cut their connections with others because they feel mistreated or overworked. Sometimes, they are disconnected by virtue of a lack of status within the group or their physical location and are locked out of the creative opportunities that arise from collaboration. Remote workers often become disenfranchised because co-located group leaders and members purposely or inadvertently neglect to include them in side conversations or serendipitous group activities.

A senior manager in the financial practice of a global consulting firm experienced this archetype firsthand when he first joined a team that had recently expanded from a single group of 40 co-located team members to 140 members spread over four locations. Initially, the leaders of the group made a concerted effort to create connections among the team members and involve them in decisions by bringing everyone together for bi-monthly meetings and social gatherings.

Eventually, however, the cost and time needed to meet regularly in person proved onerous and the meetings were replaced with conference calls. And then, the calls dwindled down to a half-hour before being eliminated altogether. "Quite a lot of the team, because we were working for individual clients and on client sites, began to feel more like individual contractors than part of the practice," recalled the manager. "I put myself in the disenfranchised camp."

For instance, the team's leaders began to unilaterally establish new focal points and goals for the team and notify the team members in writing. "We'd get a message, saying, 'We all know that utilization is our most important objective, and we should be doing X, Y, and Z to support it.' I remember thinking, 'Do we know that? Nobody's talked to me about this. The last time I heard anything it was about profitability, not utilization,'" the manager told us. "After 18 months or so, there was a lot of muttering by people who didn't feel part of things. At that point, one or two members of the senior management team picked up on it and thought they needed to do something about it."

In this case, ***physical and temporal proximity*** became the primary drivers of collaborative dysfunction. This is commonplace: remote workers usually get the information they need through virtual technologies, but the lack of proximity often creates obstacles to other important aspects of collaborative work, such as career advice/mentoring and opportunities to collaborate in creative pursuits, that create a sense of purpose, engagement, and energy in people.

The leaders of the financial practice cured the dysfunction by first reaching out to team members to understand why they were feeling disenfranchised. Then, they began devoting more time to interacting with individual team members—checking in by phone more regularly and soliciting their opinions—and resumed a regular, albeit less frequent, schedule of in-person team meetings. "It wasn't like people needed a fundamental change in their day-to-day work," explains the manager. "It was more the acknowledgement that we were going to work together and knowing that we had a route to explore things we thought we should be doing as a team. Thinking back, it's surprising how much of a difference this made, because they were relatively small changes."

In other cases, team members become disenfranchised by ***leader behaviors,*** especially the tendency to elevate some members and marginalize others. This can occur when leaders lean on certain people because of their expertise, performance, or a pre-existing relationship, and then these favored team members begin to coordinate with each other and marginalize the disenfranchised.

"We've got that problem driving one situation right now," a vice president in a global science and technical publishing company told us. "The boss has favorites, who are getting all the support and resources, and everyone else is isolated." When leaders are behaving in ways that disenfranchise team members, interventions, such as 360-degree appraisals, are needed to make them aware of the behaviors, and formal or peer coaching can help them adopt and practice more inclusive behaviors. Teams, too, need help. "We bring teams

together and get them to articulate their business objectives and problems," says the VP. "We actually force the team to start to communicate."

Leader behaviors, as well as other conditions, such as onerous demands and value conflicts, can drive team members to opt out of collaboration—a sort of **voluntary disenfranchisement.** This driver requires interventions aimed at team members. One leader in a manufacturing company told us that he ensures that everyone on his team is heard by asking each member to speak in meetings. "We include a daily stand-up where everyone talks about how they are doing, what they are working on, and whether they are blocked on anything and need any help," he says. "That gives people a chance to speak up at least once a day."

In addition to building participative elements into processes and roles, team members should have multiple opportunities to provide feedback to their leaders. The head of a development group in a biopharmaceutical company uses a variety of venues to obtain feedback, including semi-annual meetings, one-on-one lunches with emerging leaders, and bi-weekly meetings with small groups of team members. "I get all kinds of feedback," she explained, "and I always look for an idea or a fix that I can implement within 24 hours. This makes a huge difference."

❸ Archetype 3: Misaligned Nodes
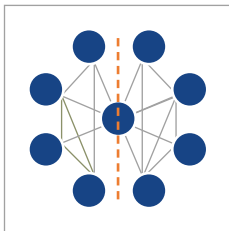
The nodes in effective networks work together toward common objectives. They cohere—aligning themselves in order to collaboratively achieve collective goals.

But when groups are formed, especially ad-hoc teams that do not require full-time participation, their members do not arrive with clean slates. In many instances, people come along with one or more colleagues and form factions within the group. And all group members arrive carrying their pre-existing affiliations, values, goals, priorities, and motivations with them. For instance, they may be influenced by invisible ties they have back to their function or boss.

When individuals and factions within a network don't cohere, they can create tears in the collaborative fabric of groups that slow down work, create toxic environments, and undermine project success. This typically keeps teams from finding ways to create value at the intersection of their different technical skills or functional interests. More insidiously, team members will often agree on outcomes when they are together (either in silent disagreement or unknowingly framing them from conflicting perspectives) and then go off to work in misaligned ways. In both cases, the quality of the group's solutions suffer, deadlines are missed, and frustration mounts among those who are doing their work on time. Quite often, projects either under-deliver for stakeholders or may be abandoned altogether.

ONA studies of networks that are experiencing these kinds of problems can resemble a high school in which the student body is broken up into individual students and cliques which don't interact with the larger group. Often, they show nodes within cliques that are well connected to one other, but are poorly connected or disconnected to other cliques and the network at large. This is an archetype of collaborative dysfunction that we call *misaligned nodes*.

The vice president in an enterprise software company told us that he "struggled mightily" with misaligned technical teams within the engineering function. "We would have different teams in different countries working on almost the exact same problems with the same missions, but they would be reporting to different organizations in the company," he explained. "We were automatically—and unintentionally—setting them up as competitors."

Unsurprisingly, competitive tensions emerged within the engineering function. The structural misalignment created friction between the teams and undermined their efforts to collaborate. The teams would disagree on approaches, but because they answered to different bosses, there was no adjudication process to settle issues and disputes. "No one wanted to be a complete jerk, but people were not getting along. The teams would try to hunker down and collaborate and push forward, but they would get to a place where they were frozen, because decisions couldn't be made," the VP says.

The VP tried to break the logjam in several ways. He inserted a manager between the teams, but that only added to the tension—creating a hub-and-spoke dysfunction by disempowering team members, who chafed at having to submit every decision to a parental authority figure. The VP also tried restructuring the teams, but ownership issues across business and geographic units stymied this solution.

"I was constantly in de-escalation conversations. I finally got so fed up that I was literally on the verge of leaving," the VP recalls. Instead, he instructed the teams to return to doing their work on their own, without collaborating. "That addressed the symptomatic tensions, but it didn't fix the underlying problem. The teams were still dysfunctional and not aligned properly," he says.

In this case, the collaborative dysfunction created by misaligned factions was caused by **structural drivers**, such as role design, decision right allocation, and incentives. Happily, the VP didn't give up. He tapped an external consultant who

shepherded his group through a collective process of mission, mandate, and goal definition. "We decided what we were all about, what we should care about—and why, and what our group should look like," he says. "After we'd gotten the basic engineering done, we turned to mapping people into roles and teams. This was pretty simple conceptually, but it was transformational because it allowed us to break through the obstacles that were keeping us apart. Today, people feel much more aligned, they are much happier, and what they are doing makes sense to them."

What the VP discovered is that the act of assigning people to temporary teams (such as new product development efforts), broader organizational initiatives (like centers of excellence), and matrixed teams (that layer new responsibilities on top of existing responsibilities) is not enough to produce collaboration. To avoid collaborative dysfunction, they also must be given the opportunity to align themselves with the group at large and with each other.

Misaligned nodes can also be driven by **conflicting incentives**. When people join collaborative groups, they may have to cede the power, control, or status that they have in their daily jobs. Sometimes they also may have to pursue outcomes that can negatively affect their performance evaluations, compensation, or their standing with their functional leaders. This can cause them to work at cross purposes with the group.

A distribution executive for a power products manufacturer encountered this driver of misalignment when she was tapped to lead a troubled group. She belatedly discovered that one manager was working with an upper-level executive outside the group to bypass her. As a result of this misaligned manager, the group was receiving conflicting directives that had dramatically slowed its progress and elevated tension levels among its members.

The executive solved the problem with a one-on-one intervention: "I told him, 'Look, we're not going to do this. We are not going to get this place fixed if we are constantly giving different directions. It was very uncomfortable for him because he needed to have control—he was doing this to be able to

claim that he was the one that fixed the problems in the group. So, I told him, 'That's not what's important to me. I just want to get it fixed and we can say we fixed it together.'" It worked.

Finally, misaligned factions can be driven by a **lack of awareness** around the importance of the capabilities that other factions provide and the value that can be produced by working together. The head of HR in a global food products business keeps his functional teams aligned by constantly reiterating the capabilities of the various HR functions through a cadenced architecture of meetings and events. This simultaneously serves several goals: It ensures that everyone understands the value and expertise that their colleagues deliver; it shows how their collaborative efforts provide a game changing impact for the organization; and it provides positive motivation.

This executive uses a stand-up meeting with his team of direct reports at the start of each week to discuss priorities and share needs that can be addressed in a collaborative way. It includes a "win jar" which contains sticky notes recording the past week's successes. The jar is passed around and each member of the team reads one of the notes, which describe the win without assigning individual credit.

He holds bi-weekly, one-on-one meetings with his direct reports. He spends half of each meeting "on task"—helping to prioritize the work of the direct reports and overcome any obstacles they may face. He spends the other half "off task"— seeking to better understand the aspirations of the direct reports and helping to shape their work in ways that align with their aspirations.

In addition, the HR head convenes monthly team reviews to help prioritize, schedule, and expedite work, and deliver consistent messaging as to the group's priorities. He holds day-long offsite meetings (either quarterly, semi-annually or annually, depending on the work cycle) to review past activities, surface lessons, and plan for the coming cycle, and periodic whole team "away days" that mix educational and teambuilding activities with fun activities aimed at building connections and alignment between team members.

❹ Archetype 4: Overwhelmed Nodes
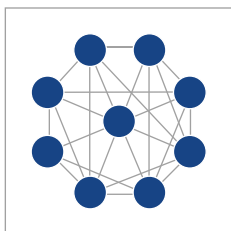
In optimized networks, individual nodes work together to efficiently produce results. They are able to contribute inside and outside the network as needed. They engage in collaborative activities without undue stress.

But in the real world, the capacity of the people who occupy network nodes is rarely optimized, and they are often overwhelmed by collaborative demands.

These demands frequently manifest as meeting overload, which occurs when the capacity of team members is burdened by meetings that are too frequent, too long, too unstructured, or overly inclusive. They can also manifest in high volumes of email and other forms of electronic collaboration that consume the working and non-working hours of team members. Demands like these create situations in which as much as 85 percent of team members' time is consumed with emails, phone calls, and virtual and in-person meetings.

It's ironic that too much collaboration can gridlock projects just as surely as too little collaboration, especially since the default belief among many leaders is 'the more collaboration, the better.' When excessive demands are placed on team members, it can lead to an inability to complete work, inefficient decision-making, and high levels of compromise. Obviously, this creates a drag on productivity. But more insidiously and less measured, it also produces disengagement and burnout, with ensuing harm to employee well-being and health. Excessive collaboration turned out to be a significant predictor of voluntary turnover in a number of the organizations we studied. This archetype of collaborative dysfunctional is named *overwhelmed nodes*.

A channel management executive in a global manufacturing company confronted this archetype when meeting overload began to bog down her team. "Everybody got pulled into a lot of things, and we got to a point where there were excessive numbers of people in multiple meetings," she recalls. Eventually, the time pressures this created for team members prompted the executive to engage an outside facilitator, who held a workshop to analyze the team's meeting load. It revealed that 30-40 percent of the time that team members were spending in meetings was unnecessary.

In this case, the archetype was driven by poorly defined **role and accountability** parameters. These drivers open the door to excessive collaboration, as evidenced by bloated meeting rosters, slow decision making, and gridlocked teams that can't get their work done.

The manufacturing executive helped reduce the collaborative demands on her team members by rationalizing their meeting attendance. "We identified the meetings that our team members needed to attend to move toward our goals. We decided who needed to be in which meetings and why they needed to be there," she recalls.

Interestingly, cutting back on meeting attendance drew some fire from other leaders who were concerned that if fewer team members from channel management attended their meetings, it would equate to less responsiveness and support. "They said, 'Well, now we have to take back some of the action items,'" the executive told us. "So, part of what we had to do was become more responsive. We decided that when team members needed to provide feedback on an agenda item, they would do so within 24 hours. That was the rule." Thus, parameters for accountability went hand in hand with role parameters.

A human resource technology executive in the consumer foods industry used a low-tech, but effective way of visualizing collaborative demands. Her group had gone through an intensive period of work that included a multi-billion acquisition. The acquisition was complete, but everyone still felt overworked and burnt out, and she was puzzled as to why. Using a simple whiteboard, she and her team began to plot out their meetings.

"We had four product teams within just the HR space and each one had sprints with their business partners—that's a few hours

each week. We had a daily hour-long check-in meeting that was left over from the transformation meeting. Then, we had full-team meetings, my leadership team meeting, the broader team meetings of my boss, quarterly meetings, and then all the different project and client meetings," she laughed. Meetings were taking up almost all of the workday! By visualizing the collaborative demand, the team was able to be intentional about the objectives of meetings. The net result: Meeting time was cut *in half* without sacrificing the quality or timeliness of deliverables.

The most common driver of the overwhelmed node archetype is **growth**. When groups are successful, they often expand in scale. Eventually, however, they outgrow their structures and processes. Our interviews suggest that this begins to happen when group membership grows out of the single digits and reaches 20 people and more.

"In the past I've had some special project teams that started with four or five people. When a team is that small, you tend to act in a very collaborative decision-making mode," explained the engineering GM of a manufacturing equipment company. "But when you try to scale that group to 120 people in 18 months, you discover that it's impossible to get a unanimous opinion from them on virtually any topic. You find that collaborative decision-making gets very inefficient, and you start to see people disconnect. You can try to switch to a priority-based model in which leaders are setting priorities, communicating deliverables and measuring KPIs, but then you get a lot of hurt feelings because people are left out."

To make the transitions necessary to manage growth more palatable, the GM includes team members in re-organization initiatives. He selects a representative group of team members and works with them to determine what is going wrong with the team and how its problems should be addressed. "One time, this group voted to adopt an agile sprint approach," he recalls. "We appointed three scrum leaders and broke the team into sub-teams, which came back together at regular intervals and reported what they were doing, what they had accomplished, and what they were doing next."

The overwhelmed nodes archetype can also be driven by **ineffective or missing workload metrics and analytics.** Without them, the demands of tasks are often invisible to leaders. Task A and task B look the same on a sticky note or a project plan. But task A may require coordination across four functions, three time zones, and two leaders who have different priorities, while task B only involves a few people who are co-located and have a strong working relationship. Far too often, leaders tend to overestimate the capacity and current workloads of team members or underestimate the time required for collaborative work—even as 85 percent or more of most people's time is spent in collaborative activities. Team members, too, may contribute to this dysfunction by trying to take on more than they can handle for reasons of their own, such as an unwillingness to say "no" to leaders or "can do" workplace mores.

One leader in a Silicon Valley tech company developed a five-point taxonomy to describe the level of collaborative effort that a task takes. "To define the level, we ask, 'What's the level of effort to build the content? What's the level of effort then to share it, socialize it, get decisions?' So it bumps up to a medium, if there's a monthly call associated with it," she explained. The leader uses the taxonomy to ensure that everyone on her team can quickly understand what their peers are doing. "I think it helped for them to feel like they can look at somebody else's program of work and really quickly understand it," she added.

In many of these cases, a clear-eyed understanding of the capacity of team members and effective workload analytics and metrics can remedy the dysfunction. "I always say it is an issue of effort-to-impact," says a vice president in a publishing company. "Most team members aren't sitting around with nothing to do, so if you are adding something to their plates, you should be looking for high effort-low impact activities that you can eliminate or do some other way."

She finds that most of the work people are being asked to do, particularly repetitive reporting tasks, is low-impact work. "I would say it's 80/20," she says. "We can take 80 percent of what they are doing off their plates and nobody will even notice it."

❺ Archetype 5: Isolated Networks
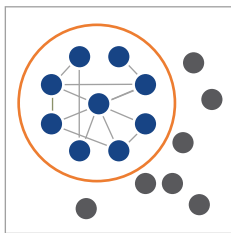
Networks don't operate in a vacuum. They serve external stakeholders—customers inside and outside of the organizations they serve. They also draw resources and expertise from external sources located inside and outside of these organizations. When networks are optimized, their connections to external stakeholders and resources are in place and unobstructed.

Often, however, we find teams operating without full awareness and consideration of their larger context. They may be disconnected or poorly connected to their key stakeholders or customers, or operating without the insight needed to properly define and deliver needed results. In addition, they are often too insular, operating without the connections to external resources and expertise that could help them achieve those missions. Accordingly, we've named this archetype of collaborative dysfunction *isolated networks*.

The well-known silo effect is a major consequence of this collaborative dysfunction and one with which many large companies struggle. Several executives at a major car maker told us that isolated groups within the company were creating obstacles to innovation, blocking alignment across functions, and slowing decision-making in new product development programs. "Helping promote efficiency of collaboration first is really important," said the global director of talent management. "At one level, when we can show people how to buy back large portions of their time by collaborating differently, it helps them engage in behaviors we need across silos. And at a second level, it helps from a health and well-being standpoint in this new world of work."

In this case, a *lack of integration* was the driver of the collaborative dysfunction. To address it, the car maker's executives studied its product groups. They found that the more successful groups had highly empowered teams with decision authority, a deeper customer intimacy and understanding, much greater employee continuity over time, and a franchise DNA where "customers and employees knew deeply what the product line stood for."

With this knowledge in hand, they undertook a series of interventions across the less successful groups, including developing a shared physical and cultural context that bridges group boundaries, linking the groups more directly to their customers and the marketplace, and establishing new connections between functional groups to improve collaboration. The latter intervention is one described by many of the interviewees in this project. They use workshops to determine the values and priorities that are shared by different teams. Then, they use this common ground as a platform to build stronger ties and greater integration between the teams.

Isolation is not problematic per se. Sometimes groups, such as skunkworks and agile initiatives, are purposely cut off from their parent organizations and the outside world to protect them from external interference or to enhance their focus. But unless this isolation is carefully designed, it can backfire by producing outputs and insights that deliver localized utility while missing more valuable, global impacts. In essence, the *strategic mandate* of the group cuts it off from relevance and assistance and becomes the driver of the archetype.

The talent acquisition director at a major insurer described how this driver often stems from group leaders. "Sometimes we see this at the leadership level when ideas first surface," she explained. "Maybe they were not listening to the people on the frontlines who were actually doing the work or were not listening to the customers in terms of the route they choose," she says. "I don't think it is ill intent. It is just that they get an idea that they are excited about and think will work – a shiny, bright object like a new technology. And we end up going after it without really talking to the right people to know if it works for our organization or our customers."

The company's leadership remedied this problem with a more targeted approach to idea development—one that incorporates some of the principles of design thinking. "Before we take off on an effort to improve our customer experience, we spend time talking about it with our customers," she says. "We don't undertake ideas until we've ensured that they will work across the different segments of our business. Over the last couple of years, we've moved from a tactical approach to a more consumer-focused approach."

A third driver of isolated network dysfunction is an excessive focus on *internal expertise or values* of the group. "We have one process improvement team that is a model of one-team culture, but the strong value doesn't extend to communication or collaboration with other areas of the organization. They think they're doing a great job, but it's very contained inside their own little group," said the head of a center of excellence for a health insurer. To remedy the situation, he has involved the team, and particularly its leader, in other process improvement initiatives. "We are providing more visibility into what's going on outside the team, so there is a better understanding of the external connection points with things that are happening within it," he explains. "We're doing more of that across the board because teams work in silos. Even though they may not be proactively engaged with the entire organization, sometimes they need to be pulled in."

❻ Archetype 6: Priority Overload
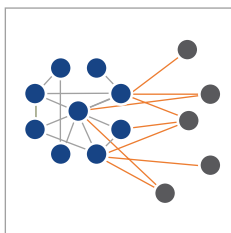
In optimized networks, the boundaries to the external world are permeable. The network's priorities are determined in consultation with external stakeholders and adopted according to capacity of the network. This ensures that the network is not only properly aligned with the rest of the organization, but also that it can efficiently and effectively deliver on its goals.

There is a problem associated with permeable borders, however: The more open a group is to its stakeholders, the greater its exposure to excessive stakeholder demands. When groups attempt to be responsive to too many external stakeholders with competing needs and timeframes, they risk falling into a form of collaborative dysfunction we call *priority overload*. The risk is high: priority overload is one of the most common dysfunctions we encountered in this study.

Once a group becomes overloaded in this way, a number of problems arise. Team members lose sight of their mission and highest priorities—and as a result, the team's most important deliverables can be forgotten and ignored. As team members find it increasingly difficult to juggle competing demands, their execution and performance levels fall off and their engagement and well-being suffers.

The CIO of a food products company told us that priority pressures are a constant reality in his functional arena. "We've got a very demanding set of stakeholders. They all think they're more important than the next person," he said. "Unfortunately, we can't just say, "Okay, we'll throw all your demands up onto a project schedule and deliver against it.' The fact is that all the money and time in the world can't overcome the complexity involved in delivering on some these requests."

In this case, the driver of the dysfunction is the *inability to manage demand.* "That's the challenge I'm facing at the moment," the CIO says. "It's not actually the stakeholders that are my problem; it's team leaders who don't understand how to respond to the demand in a logical way. If they can't respond to demands, they need to be able to explain to stakeholders why it's not possible to deliver. This can be quite challenging when team leaders are very action-orientated and results-driven, because the number of projects in their portfolios becomes a measure of their importance and drives them to overcommit."

To help team leaders manage external demands, the CIO uses one-on-one coaching sessions. "We discuss their key stakeholders, how to analyze demands, and consider the budget and resources needed to meet them," he says. "Then, we discuss how to explain it to stakeholders when they can't meet a demand."

To help teams avoid priority overload, teams should ask stakeholders to prioritize their requests. They also should ensure that stakeholders understand both the level of demand involved in their requests and the capacity of the team to meet them. Some leaders do this by bringing stakeholders into a room and having them collectively shift tasks on sticky notes above and below a line the demarcates the team's capacity. Universally this process right-sizes the requests placed on the team, but more importantly helps stakeholders to see how they can combine asks to accomplish greater outcomes. Similar alignment can be rapidly attained through short virtual forums using voting technologies.

The challenge of avoiding priority overload is often compounded by *personal aspirations and cultural values*. Servant-based mindsets and the desire to "just say yes" can drive teams into priority overload. Putting all demand requests through a prioritization process creates a psychological distance and enables the clear-eyed appraisals necessary to counter these drivers.

"This is an area where we're always trying to get better," explained a vice president of corporate communications at an enterprise software company. "We introduced OKRs—objectives and key results—as a way to really refine our prioritization process
and focus, particularly as we get bigger. The priority piece of it is a very clear process for understanding and sharing OKRs across the organization. At a company level, we are saying these are the most important objectives and these are the key results by which we are going to measure these objectives. Now at every other of the organization, we can localize that and make sure that everything we do is aimed at achieving them. And we're empowered to say 'no' to anything that's not contributing to that."

Simple heuristics can help team members appraise requests by understanding their demand parameters. One example is a two-by-two matrix that plots requests by impact and effort. Another example is provided by a software development firm that established a common agreement on basic workload drivers of speed and functionality for each new release. "The idea is you can turn the volume knob up to 11 on one of these...but not both...when making requests," a manager told

us. "Just this language has totally changed what often was a combative issue with some stakeholders."

Priority overload is always driven in part by a **lack of clarity and agreement** around goals. The remedy to these drivers is often a collective one. When priority overload began to impact operations in his group, one health insurance executive called a time-out. "We were all running too hard at a lot of different things. We had our own priorities that were built into our performance goals and all these other external demands keep coming in. It was getting very schizophrenic," he recalls. "So, we pulled together the leadership team and we listed all the activities going on. Then, we collectively questioned them by asking leaders, 'Do you have the capacity and bandwidth to do this? Do you feel you're not going to be able to accomplish this? If not, why?'"

Interestingly, in this case, only a few of the activities were eliminated from the list. "When it really came down to it and we asked hard questions around the struggles associated with activities, we found ways to solve them together," says the executive. "It felt like the problem wasn't overload as much as we needed a chance to review our activities and reprioritize them."

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Conclusion

Today, more than ever, organizational success is dependent on the outcomes produced by teams. Ever increasingly, work *is* teamwork. Moreover, the success of teams of all types and sizes is dependent on the ability of people to collaborate.

While the inclination to collaborate may be instinctive to us humans, our ability to collaborate effectively is not. Many people do not work well with others, and the structures, cultures, and practices of many companies block, rather than support collaboration.

Perhaps the biggest lesson we learned in this study is this: One solution doesn't fit all collaborative failures. The many drivers of collaborative dysfunction described above demonstrate the shortcomings of the standard approaches to collaborative failure on which too many companies depend. This paper offers leaders and groups a more nuanced guide to the diagnosis and resolution of six common patterns of collaborative dysfunction. If you can eliminate these dysfunctions in your company, you will be well on the way to creating a truly collaborative workplace.

Acknowledgements

Interested in learning more about these ideas or the Agility Accelerator?

Contact the Connected Commons at info@network-toolkit.com

End Notes

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