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Want to Make it in This World? Better Learn to Collaborate

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Want to Make it in This World? Better Learn to Collaborate

By Michael Preston
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Is there any greater struggle between instructor and student than the dreaded “group assignment”?

From the day it is assigned, students begin the process of passive-aggressive resistance and instructors have the difficult task of grading an assignment they know was basically completed by one overachiever. However, we keep giving these assignments to our students because we realize the value of working together in a collaborative environment.

Virtually everything we know about group dynamics tells us as educators that the wisdom of crowds almost always gets a better result than the lone-wolf approach. The reason is simple: When people are working together on the same project they all tend to see the same problem with a different lens – and that results in added perspective.

But the vast majority of us resist collaboration. Why is that? The answer can be as simple as the American Spirit itself.

In her 2009 book, “Organizing Higher Education for Collaboration,” author Adrianna Kezar posits that “Western philosophies and values celebrate the individual and individual achievement.” She basically makes the case that generally individuals are rewarded and awarded for their hard work and we, as Americans, value that ethos.

Think of the great American cowboy, driving the herd across the plains, a sprinter hurling herself across the finish line for gold at the Olympics, or the inventor toiling away late at night in the lab, ready to make the next great discovery. But this is not the way these achievements usually work.

Cowboys had to work together to corral the herd and ensure its safe arrival at market. Before the gold-medal race the sprinter had a series of coaches, nutritionists and supporters creating the perfect environment for athletic glory, and even great inventors such as Thomas Edison were surrounded by dozens of talented people in his Menlo Park Laboratory.

More importantly for all of us, lone-wolf ethos of American legends is not what business leaders tend to value when looking for competent and career-ready college graduates. Each year the National Association of Colleges and Employers produces a list of the skills most desired by employers when it comes to hiring college graduates. Time and time again the most valued skill is the ability to work in teams.

Business leaders need students who can innovate and work with minimal supervision but understand that innovation is usually a group effort. Collaboration assists employees with innovation and learning.

By working together employees harness the power of multiple brains. Collaboration adds to the cognitive complexity of the group. Every person brings a different set of skills and experiences that can assist with critical thinking and problem solving. And the more diverse the group, the better the result.

Collaboration can also assist with cost effectiveness and efficiency as members of the group can continue working on a project even if one member is pulled away on another project.

Finally, while bad group projects can have a demotivating effect, a well-designed and executed collaboration can increase employee motivation and boost a sense of team and belonging.

Earlier this summer the IBM Institute for Business Value pointed the finger squarely at higher education in its report "[Pursuit of Relevance](#)." The authors made the case that the technological innovation and economic shifts in our changing world will demand a higher-education system that can change with it. That change begins with collaboration both in a student context and at the university level.

In the report, the authors summed up the changing role of higher education this way: "Technological innovation and industry demands are now moving too rapidly for higher education to adapt in its current form. The answer to the dilemma in higher education

will not be found in incremental improvement. Rather, the solution involves a systemic transformation that prioritizes more practical and applied curricula, exploits disruptive technologies, and strengthens and expands ecosystem partnerships.”

We know collaboration works from both a philosophical and a process standpoint. The drawback is we are not generally wired to be collaborative. Most humans prefer to socialize in groups but work in solitude, usually because the perception is they have more control over the finished product and will yield the benefits of a job well done.

But business does not value that independent spirit in the same way.

The jobs of the future will always contain group work, and the quicker that students embrace group assignments as a chance to develop personal leadership and collaborative skills then the more attractive they will be to employers.

So embrace that group assignment – it’s pretty much preparation for life.

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