The Psychology of Workplace Collaboration

4 Secrets to Employee Motivation

When was the last time you went more than a few hours into your workday without interacting with someone at your company? If you're like the majority of the workforce, limited interactions are a rarity and collaboration is ongoing.

The way your team communicates greatly impacts the performance of your employees and your organization. However, less commonly understood is the psychology behind how we collaborate.

The psychology behind workplace collaboration can be tied back to the day-to-day interactions that take place at virtually any organization. How your employees interpret the work they do and the way they collaborate with others ultimately determines their success, investment, and engagement in the company. And when your employees are engaged, your company wins.

71% of respondents rank employee engagement as very important to achieving overall organizational success.[1]

We all want to know how to best collaborate with colleagues, managers, and business partners in the workplace. Here are 4 psychology-based insights about the way we think about collaboration, and what you can do as a business leader to further improve how your employees are impacted by the work they do.
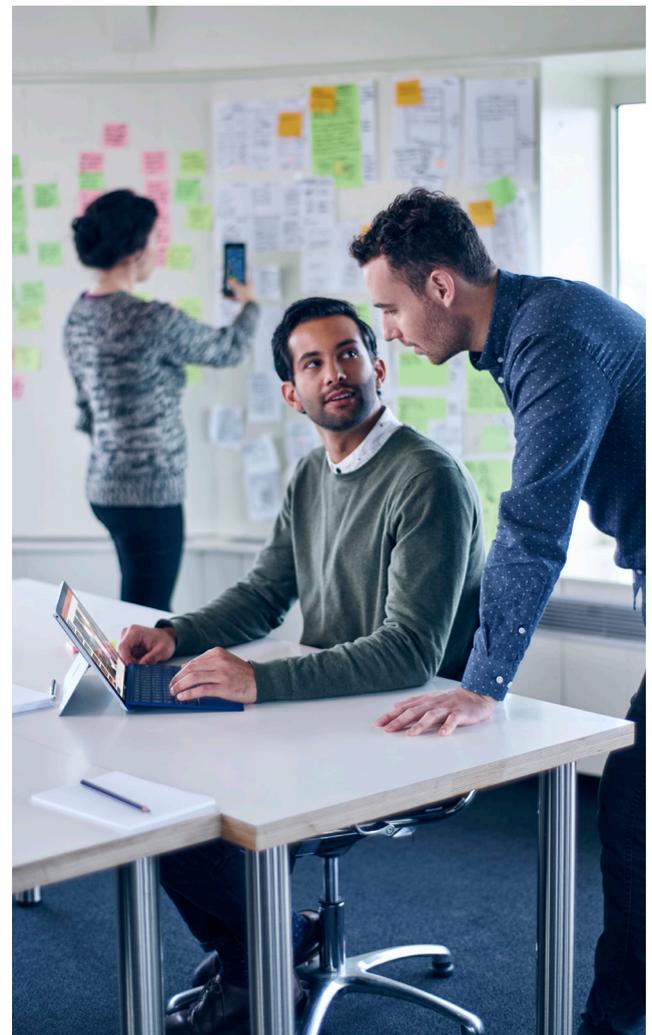
[1] "The Impact of Employee Engagement on Performance," 2013, Harvard Business Review

Promote "good" stress for better collaboration

In the workplace, and in life, there is both good and bad stress. When managed properly, good stress (also known as eu-stressors or challenge stressors) can help boost creativity. *Hindrance stressors* (or bad stress) hinder creativity and engagement altogether.[2]

Hindrance stressors to avoid in the workplace:

- **A sense of job insecurity**

- **Job confusion and unknown responsibilities among employees**

- **Red tape and policies that hinder productivity**

WHAT YOU CAN DO

By limiting hindrance stressors, your workplace can develop a more autonomous environment where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas and collaborating. This is more often known as an *organizational innovation climate*. In innovative workplace environments, teams have freedom to make decisions laterally. Individuals on teams "manage up" by providing input and recommendations to managers, and discuss ideas without worrying about being limited by processes or team hierarchy.

To create an organizational innovation climate, promote eu-stressors at your organization, including:

- **Sizable, challenging workloads**

- **Varied responsibilities for each employee**

- **Clear job descriptions at the start of every project**

- **Fluid conversations through various communication tools**

[2] "How 'Good Stress' Helps Creativity in the Workplace," 2016, **Psychology Today**

Bridge the introvert-extrovert gap

It is believed that 50–74% of the population are extroverts and the other 16–50% are introverts.[3] And while it's known that introverts and extroverts have different work styles, catering to both is difficult as they often work with each other to complete tasks.

According to psychologist Herman Miller, introverts prefer different meeting styles and room aesthetics than extroverts. Everything from room color to noise levels can increase or decrease productivity in these personality types. And when it comes to meetings, introverts prefer one-to-one interactions to large meetings, and would rather have time to think things through on their own before sharing them publicly.[4]

[3] "Are Extroverts Happier Than Introverts?" 2012, Psychology Today

[4] "The Psychology of Collaboration Space," 2012, Herman Miller and Nigel Oseland, Ph.D.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

It's unlikely you are able to provide every introvert with his or her own office for a secluded workspace, but you can promote flexible working options. With cloud-based tools and the promoted use of working together via laptops, mobile devices, and tablets, your employees will be able to work in environments where they're the most comfortable.

Allow introverts to work from home or video conference into large group meetings that may seem overwhelming in person. If a group of extroverted coworkers want to collaborate, technology that enables them to work in places other than their desks means they can sync in a conference room, coffee shop, or where they'll be stimulated by the energy around them.

Change how we think about feedback

Annual performance reviews are often a dreaded task for both employees and managers. While a year may seem like a good benchmark to assess an employee's progress, it is in fact far too long to wait to give or receive formal feedback in the workplace. When a year has gone by, managers may forget where praise is due to an employee, or miss opportunities to provide constructive feedback that would have allowed employees to course correct their mistakes early on, all of which can be damaging to an employee's morale.

77% of HR executives believe performance reviews don't accurately reflect employee contributions.[5]

WHAT YOU CAN DO

It's not just about increasing the number of review cycles in a year—we need to change the way we give and receive feedback. While it's important to schedule periods of time to talk through successes and failures, open lines of communication allowing for real-time, consistent feedback will change the way employees and managers collaborate and think about work. These fluid communication channels won't leave you waiting to give additional feedback or cause an employee to feel confused and wondering what went wrong. Problems can be fixed quickly, and colleagues will form better, more open relationships.

Implementing multiple communication tools, like instant messaging apps and video conferencing, will allow managers and employees to connect for real-time feedback from both parties, not just from management.

[5] "Is the Annual Performance Review Dead?" 2015, Society for Human Resource Management

Sometimes, let employees' minds wander

An organized schedule and a set list of tasks can undoubtedly lead to a productive work environment, but there are benefits to taking a completely opposite approach. There are significant productivity and creativity benefits from what is known as our brain's default network.[6] This state occurs in wakeful periods of time when the mind is wandering and not focused on a particular task. The brain stays fully engaged and fired up, processing existing information instead of taking things in from the five senses.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

In sum, activating this default network can help your employees unintentionally discover new ideas and solutions based on nothing more than their existing knowledge. However, this means giving them hours during the workday to gain this unfocused time. Many organizations find it hard to commit to offering free time to employees, but an option to boost collaboration and jumpstart the default network can come from planned, offsite days. Dedicating one day each month or quarter to shut down the office and build something together can boost wakeful processing and team morale.

[6] "Your Brain at Work," 2013, Harvard Business Review

There is no denying that good employees and managers are emotionally invested in the work they do. Different workplace factors and events can impact the way your employees collaborate and how they feel about their work. By understanding how employees are psychologically impacted by workplace events and how you can make a positive change, your business and your employee satisfaction will benefit.

It's not just psychological blockers that employees and managers face, there are also technological blockers that can prohibit collaboration. If spotty conference call connections or difficulty sharing files sound like challenges your organization is up against, check out our new eBook to learn how to break down these barriers and get your teams working better, together.

Download the free eBook:

Unblocking workplace collaboration: 5 tools and strategies

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