

“Inter-departmental Collaboration” – An Organizational Oxymoron -

By Russ Linden and Scott Simmerman

Most people in most organizations could choose to collaborate. But often and instead, they choose to compete. The reasons are based less on organizational impact and more on personal choice. Lots of observations and studies support the reality that almost every organization can benefit significantly from more collaboration.

So, why are people so competitive and why do they see competition as a good thing in so many organizations? Is competition an illusion, a paradox, a fundamental aspect of human behavior or a simple lack of leadership? And what can be done to improve teamwork, generate better choices and capitalize on these opportunities? We'll share some thoughts and ideas about leadership and leading high performance.

Collaboration drives optimized overall results and performance.

It's up to an organization's leaders to create a culture that fosters collaboration and has people working toward common goals. A sense of shared vision and organizational objectives, such as FedEx's focus on its overall percentage of on-time deliveries, can help drive collaboration across organizational boundaries. But, more often, departmental boundaries exist and individual departments are measured individually. This is sometimes so obvious that managers call their divisions, “silos,” referring to the metal grain containers that serve one purpose and one purpose only – storing grain.

Consider the following: The long-running feud between the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) was examined in Jerry Markon's May 10, 2008 Washington Post article. It described truly astonishing turf battles between these two agencies. The US Attorney General ordered the agencies to merge and share certain databases but the FBI refused. Among other things, the agencies refused to share data at crime scenes, hampering efforts to

apprehend criminals. The FBI also created its own program to train bomb-sniffing dogs even though the ATF had run high-quality dog training programs for many years. At crime scenes, FBI and ATF agents have threatened to arrest one another and battled over jurisdiction and key evidence. And, perhaps most astounding — at the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, when 30 ATF agents arrived to do whatever was needed — the FBI commander threw them off the site, inferring that they would only impede the investigation!

As the New Orleans Mayor pleaded on national TV for firefighters and other trained personnel immediately after Katrina -- his own being exhausted after working around the clock for a week -- a thousand highly trained men and women sat in a Sheraton Hotel conference room in Atlanta. Assembled from as far away as Utah by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, they thought they were going to be deployed as emergency workers. What they received was 8 hours of training to be FEMA community-relations officers disseminating flyers around the Gulf Coast region. One wonders if inter-agency conflicts within Homeland Security might have been the cause of these highly-trained people not contributing their much-needed expertise to solve real problems and have real impacts post-Katrina.

"There are all of these guys with all of this training and we're sending them out to hand out a phone number," an Oregon firefighter said. "They [the hurricane victims] are screaming for help and this day [of FEMA training] was a waste." These firefighters were ready to give emergency help and medical care. And, as specific orders began arriving for the firefighters, the first team of 50 was ushered onto a flight headed for Louisiana with their first assignment: *to stand beside President Bush for pictures as he toured devastated areas.*

When you learn of such behavior and misalignment, questions cry out for answers:

- *"Why don't these people grow up and act like adults?"*
- *"How can this really happen?"*
- *"Aren't we supposed to be in this together?"*
- *"Shouldn't we be focused on results and effectiveness?"*

Indeed.

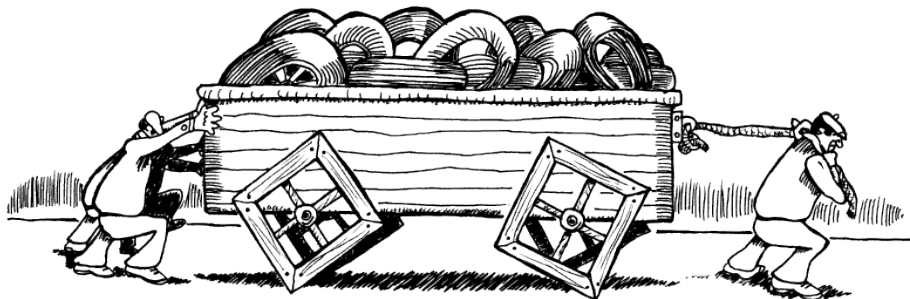
So, what do you do when adults act so irrationally? Why do they do these things and make these bad choices? What is driving these behaviors? And what can we do about it?

When we ask managers in classes and seminars what they make of such behavior, the most frequent replies are:

- It's a control issue.
- It is a lack of perspective and simply represents bad choices.
- It's about narrow-minded people who only know how to follow the rules they are given.
- It's how these folks were trained (or not-trained).
- It is about how these people are measured in their performance.
- It's about the reward and punishments people experience at work or how they have been rewarded in the past.
- It is about competition and the need to succeed and not come in less than first.
- It's about turf.

There is some reality to all of these explanations, but one of the most important factors is missing. When adults act like children, chances are good that they are working in an environment that allows (maybe even reinforces) such competitive and exclusionary behavior between departments and agencies. And, who is responsible for that environment? Simple: The organization's leadership – they are allowing and even promoting this oppositional behavior.

Over the past 15 years, Scott has been using his series of **Square Wheels®** illustrations to discuss issues of motivation, organizational behavior and change. These use a theme of a wagon rolling on wooden wheels with a cargo of round ones, (below).



The paradox is that the **Square Wheels** work but not smoothly with the reality that Round Wheels (unimplemented, better ideas) already exist. It takes collaboration between the puller and the pushers to get things done differently. And there is often more than one wagon so there are lots of organizational issues.

Below is a cartoon showing how the above organizations might *really* be working together without alignment and shared purpose:



Individuals of both organizations are pushing hard, but their organizations are not sharing a common direction nor do they have common goals and objectives. And you may be able to see some other metaphors of leadership and vision that also might apply, like the missing leadership.

Many state and local law enforcement agencies have great difficulties working with the FBI. When pushed to explain, they will often note that while many FBI agents are great to work with on an individual basis, things change when they are surrounded by other FBI agents — they're happy to take information from other agencies but don't easily share anything with others. However, they are quick to take all the credit when the bad guys are found. While the FBI culture has long roots in the almost 50-year leadership from J. Edgar Hoover, and while that culture remains a powerful influence on people's behavior, the FBI is no different from any other organization: **its culture can be changed, but only if its leaders make collaboration a priority.**

In many organizations, managers will talk about collaboration but will focus on attaining their personal goals first and foremost. When something comes along to cause them pause, they will naturally look at what's in it for them and for any possible downside. An IT department, for example, often has its own goals, budgets and

agendas. External requests for immediate help are often channeled through systems and processes simply to allow IT managers to account for and prioritize their people's activities, which is good. The reality of this, however, can be significant negative impacts on the customer service or product development if those are not built in.

Commonly, two sales divisions are often in direct financial competition for individual rewards and recognition, which will directly reduce the sharing of best practices and marketing ideas between them that would benefit the entire operation. And we are intentionally creating a few winners and many more losers.

Here is an example: Scott's primary business is team building and developing training games. One of his simulations, called "*The Search for The Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine*," was run in a workshop with 60 participants of Leadership South Carolina, a statewide leadership development initiative. The exercise focuses on optimizing overall *group* results through alignment to shared goals and collaboration rather than individual team results through competition.

In the debriefing, the state president of a national bank tried to explain why his team competed rather than collaborated. He used the point that his SC banking operation was in direct competition with the other states for incentive rewards for his management team. Thus, state banking organizations did NOT share ideas that had financial impacts on profitability or which improved customer or employee retention with the other units. Logical.

But when he was asked if this made good sense, since a couple of people in the room were stockholders of his *corporation* and therefore impacted for the results of the *overall* organization, everyone got the key learning point: These units' choices to not to share best practices and innovations were negatively impacting the corporation's stock price! Yet, his behavior made perfect sense in light of what the corporation desired – the bank drove inter-organizational competition intentionally, generating a real mix of positive as well as unintended negative results.

Here is another situation of similar perspective: A southeast textile manufacturer has 30 mills, all somewhat similar, with the management teams competing for financial rewards based on comparative operational results. The company also sponsors best

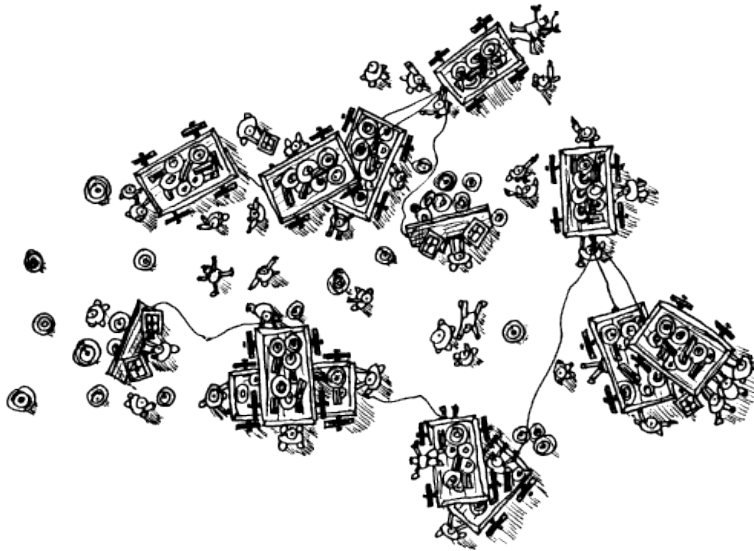
practice competitions, where teams from each plant travel to headquarters and showcase their best projects and results to other teams and a winning team is selected. Can one logically expect one team to truly support a team in another plant trying to implement that best practice when their managers are actually in competition for incentives? What do these managers really do? And if plant closing and layoffs are anticipated, wouldn't one expect even a low level of collaboration to decrease, negatively impacting innovation and cost reduction initiatives?

Perspective:

Organizations should be working together with a shared goal and destination. They should appear like a wagon train, using all the good ideas and resources that are available to them.



The reality generally looks quite different, however.



Organizations need to recognize that competition is a natural motivator and that as individuals progress up the organizational charts in most organizations, the better and more effective competitors will rise to the top. Senior managers in most organizations tend to be highly competitive, since that is often how they get to the top. Many of them are also collaborative and have benefited from the many positive impacts of collaboration on results. Collaboration, when supported by leadership, can be a very rewarding activity for individuals who feel that ideas for improvement can be supportive. People tend to be naturally collaborative in human societies.

Organizations create Divisions, and then expect collaboration.

We need to be very careful when we intentionally structure competition between groups within organizations to generate higher performance, since the competition between groups can sometimes sub-optimize results. We need to have balanced measurement, feedback and reward systems to drive a level of competition but also allow collaboration.

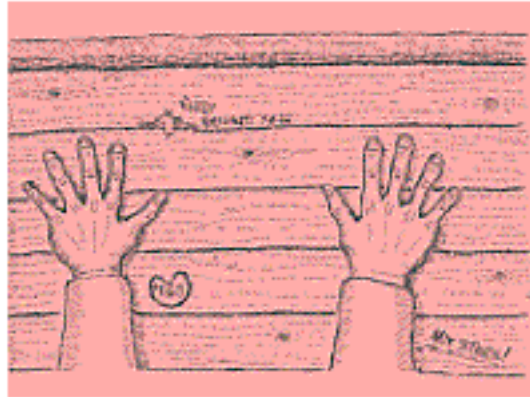
As budgets get tighter and become allocated to specific operations, a manager's flexibility and ability to respond to unique opportunities is decreased. Chains of Command simply become chains.

The issue of engaging shared Missions and Visions is also important. Sometimes, however, the overall vision becomes compartmentalized and thus unclear to the people doing the job. Alignment to goals becomes confused. As Scott Adams said in, "The Dilbert Principles:"

A Mission Statement is defined as *"a long awkward sentence that demonstrates management's inability to think clearly."*

All good companies have one.

Clarity of purpose is essential to drive organizational alignment. Leadership tends to have a better view from the front, as indicated by the illustration below on the left, while the support personnel tend to see the view from the back, as seen on the right.



What is needed is alignment and collaboration, which can be gained by sharing the goals and expectations throughout the organization. That goal should support inter-departmental and inter-organizational collaboration. Those two words should not be oxymorons!

Every person in the organization should understand the overall goal and see measures and feedback driving the behaviors that contribute to it. Take a good look at what you expect, how you measure, and what you say and do regarding alignment and collaboration in your organization. Collaboration has a variety of positive impacts on the results of any organization, with little downside and lots of possibilities for improvements.

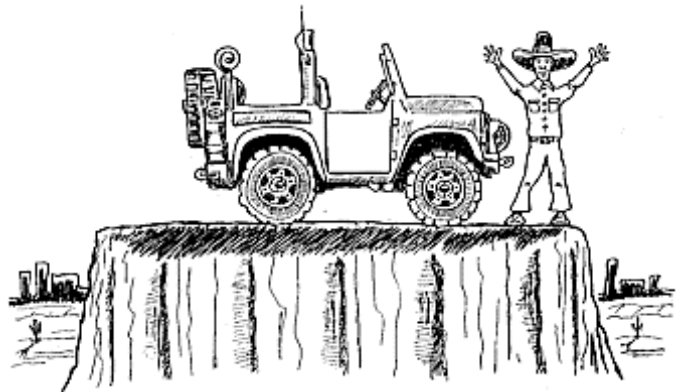
As Deming said,

“Competition is wrong because we go places by cooperation, not by competition”

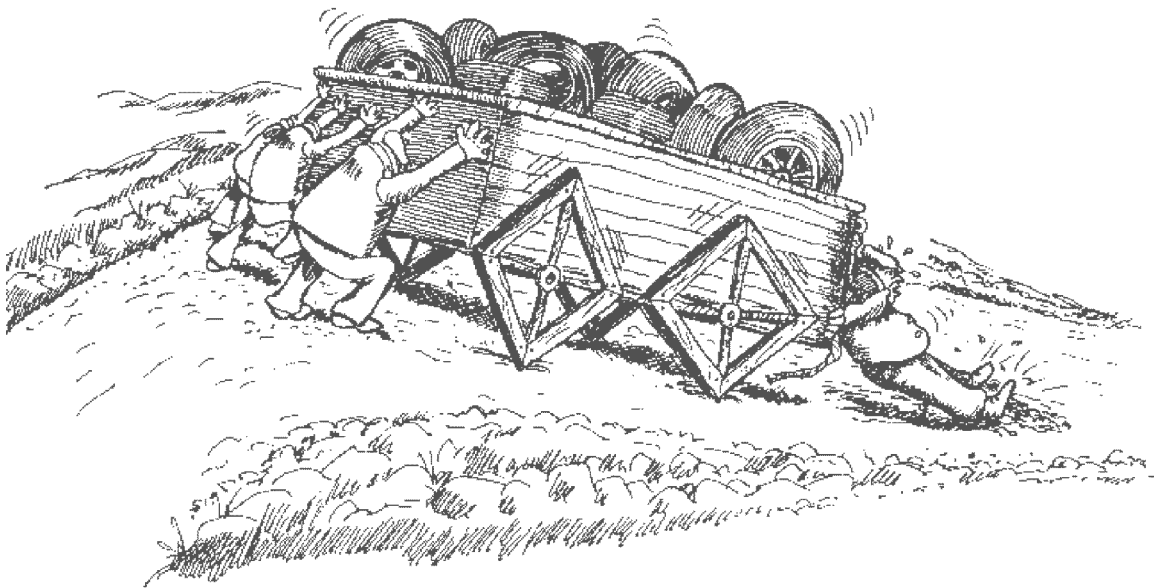
As the new Senior Vice President of Operations of a 126-store retail chain, Scott had a very difficult time getting store managers to share best ideas with each other, even though there was a minimal level of compensation based on store comparison. A big shift in behavior happened, however, after Scott got his managers focusing on the company's stock market price and targeting best performance practices in certain segments of the stores. Gradually, his District Managers became facilitators, rather than policy police, and a variety of initiatives began whereby managers trained other managers on performance improvement ideas. Stock was also awarded through a 401K stock ownership program to all employees. The result was a 10-fold stock price increase in just two years. A shared vision of organizational

performance, tied to collaborative improvements and ownership, helped drive significant cultural changes and impacted every important operational statistic.

Enabling people feel a stronger sense of ownership and having an active role in making things improve are both naturally rewarding and can help drive collaboration and optimization. People want to feel successful and work with others in getting things done. They want to get to The Top and feel good about their accomplishments.



Feeling involved, aligned and successful also includes the leadership and supervisors who direct the workgroups. On the other hand, those managers who are not involved in the improvement initiatives and collaborative endeavors can be expected to react in a different way. This is at the core of the kinds of organizational dysfunction that we have been discussing in our examples.



Remember, Nobody ever washes a rental car!

To generate collaboration, we need everyone, the wagon pushers and the wagon pullers, to be involved in collaborative initiatives and to share in a common goal of improvement.

What about you and your own leadership?
What can your organization do differently?

An extremely capable director of a large human-services agency was having a problem with his senior managers. *"They're strong, talented managers,"* he said, *"but they're also control freaks who love to guard their turf. I hate it, but what can you do? That's the cost of having strong people."* It was suggested that his assumption was part of the problem — that senior managers could change if they knew it was important to do so and why it was important.

The director tried direct conversations focused on improvement. He had one-on-one meetings with each manager, described the impact of their behavior on others, and told them it was unacceptable. He aligned their behavior toward a shared organizational vision and mission. He followed up, asking about activities, changes and impacts. After some observations and coaching, most of the managers made significant changes, and the agency's culture became much more open and positive. Collaboration increased.

Generating more teamwork and collaboration is not all that difficult and is not hard to accomplished if there is alignment in goals, measures and expectations. But people have to know that you are asking for it and that it is importantly linked to overall success.

Here is a starter list of steps that leaders are successfully using to create organizational cultures that foster collaboration and information sharing:

- **Provide joint training.** Police and firefighters in Charlottesville, Virginia, held a joint training session on how to deal with methamphetamine labs. Not long after, some firefighters responded to an alarm in a building in which they smelled an unusual odor. Because of that training, they recognized it and soon discovered a highly explosive meth lab in the building and were then able to respond appropriately and safely while also preserving the crime scene. When members of different organizational units train together, it's an opportunity to form

relationships, learn about others' jobs and share important information. Having the perspective of the other organization is highly beneficial.

- **Look for opportunities to form relationships.** When emergency management officials rushed to the Pentagon on 9/11, most of them worked very well together (the FBI-ATF conflict was a huge exception). The major reason for the strong spirit of collaboration was that these leaders already knew each other. They had worked together on many task forces to write policies and engage in joint planning. Those relationships were critical during and long after the crisis.

Bring your managers together and demonstrate the benefits of collaboration between organizations. Hold meetings with outside vendors that directly impact your results. Measure things that directly relate to collaboration and that will build trust between different organizations.

Trust is simply the Residue of Promises Fulfilled.

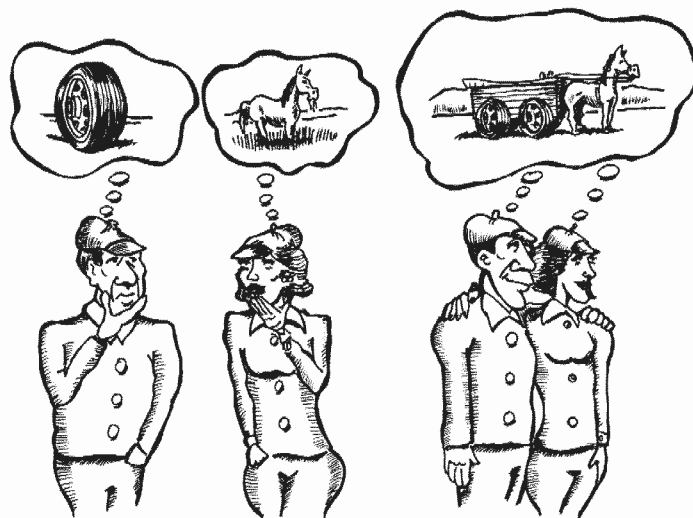
- **Use career incentives.** Many organizations have learned to emphasize collaboration for things such as:
 - Annual performance reviews,
 - Requiring demonstrated collaborative competencies for promotions,
 - Getting peer-level feedback from various managers,
 - Requiring job rotations through different departments
 - Senior management positions

All these things generate a broader perspective and better understanding of how the organization really works and important values. And don't miss opportunities to reward these managers based on overall organizational results.

- **Avoid overlapping responsibilities and direct competition.** One reason for the bitter feud between the ATF and the FBI was that their missions and operations do overlap in some important ways. The leadership at the Department of Justice had not dealt with this overlap, enabling the kind of childish behavior cited earlier. People are competing in turf-related ways. One would think, in this post 9/11 world that organizations such as NSA, FBI, CIA, DEA, INS, Homeland

Security, state and local law enforcement, the Air Force and other military intelligence groups and the like would be collaborating extensively and seamlessly. Let's simply say that things could be better and more efficient. And we are still hearing stories about bad relations between the NY Fire Department and the various law enforcement agencies in many areas of operations.

- **Personally model mature, collaborative behavior and expect it of others.** Jay Gregorius is a Drug Enforcement Administration veteran who has developed very positive relationships with local FBI offices wherever he's worked. How? He teaches by example, modeling the behavior by working hard at his relationship with his own FBI counterparts and he absolutely expects his DEA agents to do likewise. They learn he's serious, that he will not accept excuses, so they look for ways to reach out to the local FBI agents.



In summary, we hope that you have found one or two good ideas in here about what you can choose to do differently. Improvements are normally incremental in nature, a little here and a little there can add up over time to fundamentally impact how your organization works. Anything you can do differently that relates to increasing collaboration among people and organizations will have at least some positive impact on how things really work. There are very few downsides for making such improvements. *So, have some Fun out There!*

Russ Linden is a management educator and author who works primarily with public-sector and non-profit clients. His areas of expertise include collaboration, customer-focused organizations, strategic thinking, and major organizational change. He's written four books; the most recent is *Working Across Boundaries: Making Collaboration Work in Government and Nonprofit Organizations* (Jossey-Bass, 2002). This article is based on a previously published article of Mr. Linden's called "When Adults Act like Children" and appearing at http://www.governing.com/mgmt_insight.aspx?id=5516



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PMC offers a variety of tools for assessing and improving collaboration and productivity, including interactive cartoon toolkits and various team building exercises. You can find out more about **The Search for The Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine** and other team building exercises by clicking [here](#).

Dr. Simmerman offers keynote presentations workshops on change and teamwork using his Square Wheels® illustrations, as well as delivering team building programs of his own design. See: www.PerformanceManagementCompany.com

References

On FEMA and Firefighters (example):

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