

Too Much Collaboration

I am working with a client for past 9-10 months. As soon as I started, I noticed knowledge and information silos and utter lack of team spirit in multiple teams. Even within a team under the same manager, members did not know what the other member did. With the team that I started working with, my first instinct was to get the team to create a product backlog. With each member working on 20 different things, everyone was pulled in multiple directions at the same time and subsequently time-swamped. The team had little interest in coming up with a product backlog, even if called the product backlog a ""To Do List." So I wore the hat of a product owner and started creating a product backlog myself. But there too I faced immense resistance from the team as well as the manager. There was very little autonomy, a lot of fear and hardly any team-work.

My lucky break came when the SVP of the organization put me on a brand new initiative, with a cross-functional team formed with members from many different silos. I started with a product backlog, and gradually introduced 2-week Sprints, with planning and review meetings. I then introduced retrospectives and daily stand-ups as well. I did all this without using "Scrum" terminology. The project was a huge success - everyone knew what was happening, everyone was aligned on the priorities and the customer was very happy. Team collaboration was something that each member equivocally accepted and appreciated and the word reached the manager of the first team I worked with.

In a conversation with him, team collaboration came up as a topic. Down in my heart I was hoping to hear a positive comment, as well as a desire to have a similar collaborative approach on his team as well. It is important to know that he was a first time manager in a bureaucratic organization at all levels of management, except the SVP who was sold on my proposal of using Scrum. This how the conversation entailed:

"Punita, I have heard all good things about the success of Project A. Good job."

"What have you been hearing?", I asked.

"Everyone is saying that the project would not have been successful without your help."

"It was a team effort. I was simply there to serve the team."

"Yes, all the team members have a unified voice that it was a team effort and very good collaboration."

My eyes twinkled with joy, "Collaboration was at the heart of it. The team came together really well and it was a wonderful experience working with the team."



"Collaboration is good, but I believe in getting the work done," was his next comment. I have to admit I was taken aback.

- What will it take for him to recognize the value of collaboration in getting the work done?
- What will it take for him to recognize that most of the problems and impediments his team faced were due to lack of collaboration and were fed intensely by the silos, hoarding of information and personal insecurity?
- What will it take for him to recognize that his team members play against each other and finger-pointing is built-in every meeting and conversation, without any effort to actually solve the underlying systemic problem?

The conversation with that manager ended with a my note, "Collaboration is the a catalyst in getting the work done. Let me know if you need my help in making your team high performing through collaboration."

However, it got me thinking, "Can collaboration really get in the way of making progress?" Back in my early days of Scrum, there was an off-shore team that worked extremely well together. There were some cultural improvements that the hierarchical management needed to make to embrace Agile mind-set. However, since those changes were not made, there was a lot of resentment in the team towards the management. As a result, though the team had started worked well together, it was not motivated enough. Team formed a pattern of under-committing and stopped improving every Sprint, or came up with very easy improvements - things that it had already mastered, but added as action items just to show that it was doing something to improve. Team chose to become collaboratively complacent, than to become collaboratively excited and happy, in order to fight un-supportive management and political culture. However, this was a one-off experience and teams resort to these kind of options only in extreme cases.

In another experience, management had a concern that collaboration became crippling for the team, and there was too much emphasis on consensus building over actually getting the work done. When I worked closely with that team, I realized that the problem was stemming from the fact that no one wanted to make a decision and therefore no decision was made unless everyone agreed. There was a fear of reprimand and even loss of job if someone made a bad decision. At the end of the day, it was not collaboration that was getting in the way, but fear of decision making that was getting in the way.

In my experience in most cases, collaboration is the key to success of the team.

Thoughts?

