

Enterprise Collaboration: Save Your Red Shirts

By Rob Zell

Of the many television shows that have left a lasting impression on American culture, Star Trek led the way by bringing a vision of a bright future of exploration and (mostly) peaceful interactions. It has also left us with a collection of memes that exist some 47 years after its debut. From the chief engineer's miraculous, last-minute solutions to the halting speech pattern of its dashing captain, few shows have made an impact like Star Trek.

One of the most lasting memories of the series was the fate of the lone, red-shirted crewman. Often these crewmen and women were extras, added to the cast to fill out the scene or insert dialogue. On more than one occasion this poor crewperson was sent on an "away team"; a group of individuals sent to explore an abandoned ship or newly discovered planet. Sent on the mission as added security for the leading characters, the poor red-shirted crewperson would wander off to explore and meet a grisly fate: alien predator, foreign infection or precipitous geological collapse. Their demise introduced the conflict, advanced the story and created the drama.

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Red-shirts exist in your organization as well. They are new hires, employees assuming new roles, and people adapting to rapidly changing environments. Hopefully in your organization they exist for more than plot advancement; they should be contributing to the strategic objectives of the business and delivering on company goals. Making sure they do not wander off should be a cultural priority, but too often they get lost in the daily grind. Enterprise collaboration tools can be the vehicle to help these people stay on mission and learn from the best practices of the rest of the crew.

What Is Enterprise Collaboration?

Like the name implies, enterprise collaboration engages the entire organization in collaboration on topics and areas of interest. What are the topics of interest? The value of this kind of collaboration is that the topics can be driven from the top of the organization or from the bottom. The senior leadership can get feedback from the frontlines of the business on topics of interest. The frontline can discuss issues of importance: challenges, best practices, business trends and any other topics that they feel will drive business performance.

Much like its space-faring television namesake, the enterprise must navigate obstacles and new territory regularly and must develop strategies to deal with whatever it faces. Much like a military unit, the collective is no stronger than its weakest link. Having a method of engaging the entire business helps strengthen all members through sharing of information. Consider also that this current workforce consists of a blend of four generations. The very youngest of the workforce, the millennials, are eager to learn from the elder statesmen of the craft. Any vehicle that facilitates the transfer of knowledge preserves the wisdom of the tenured employees into the future of the business.

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Enterprise collaboration at its most basic level is a virtual water cooler: a place at which members of the collective can gather to share, discuss, pontificate, opine, and debate the current events of the business environment and the general state of affairs. In an increasingly virtual world, in which the working populace is not co-located, these electronic tools can facilitate information sharing and foster relationships between employees.

What Tools Are Available?

[The tools themselves are plentiful.](#) Software like Yammer, Sharepoint, WebEx and Blogtronix offer collaborative solutions that allow users to share information, comment on documents, discuss issues and plan meetings. Online, cloud-based tools exist that can be hosted externally or internally and serve to connect users digitally in order to enhance business productivity. For some organizations, these tools are second nature. For others, a more personal, high-touch solution might be preferable. Simple solutions like lunch-and-learns or discussion groups serve a similar function. Interested parties gather at common locations to discuss issues and learn processes that support business performance.

Regardless of the vehicle for sharing, certain cultural norms must be supported to make enterprise collaboration successful:

- Trust that ideas will be respected and can be discussed fairly. Not all ideas will be implemented, and that is okay. Everyone must be encouraged to participate and all ideas must be accepted and discussed logically. This cannot be the stereotypical forum that devolves into opinionated drivel; rather, ideas must be evaluated and discussed on merit. Posters must realize that not every idea is adopted and that there may be issues they did not consider.
- **Sharing is not boasting.** Sharing is a way of helping others with a nugget of an idea that may, at some point, be beneficial to others. When people share they do not necessarily have all the answers; they have answer that works in their own particular situation. The expectation is that others take that knowledge and apply it to their own situation to be successful.
- **There must be organization.** Whatever vehicle is used for enterprise collaboration, the content must be organized so that users are able to mine for the stored value. If the tool is an online forum, then the content must be tagged to facilitate searches. If the discussion occurs in live sessions, then there must be video record that can be searched and viewed based on the needs of future users. The knowledge gained by sharing is only as valuable as the ability of others to find that content so that mistakes are not repeated. To have organization you need the next requirement.
- **Collaboration tools must be managed.** It is not enough to say that your organization engages in enterprise collaboration because you put up a website for people to chat. There must be actively engaged people who seek out information, who reinforce sharing behavior, who cross-link ideas and knowledge items and who generally maintain and act as caretakers of the accumulated wisdom gathered through your collaboration vehicle. This leads us to the final and possibly most important requirement.
- **Leaders must be engaged in the process.** If senior leaders do not engage in the process it sends a clear signal that the dialogue is not of value. Leaders that support enterprise collaboration post reflections, support ideas, question respectfully (from curiosity, not control) and encourage conversation. They see the value of the tool and the accumulated resources of the enterprise and seek to foster it.

Cultural norms that will make or break your enterprise collaboration initiative:

- *Trust (or lack of)*
- *Sharing is ok*
- *Organization of content*
- *Content management*
- *Leader engagement*

The Value of Enterprise Collaboration

Tools that enhance enterprise collaboration, and the infrastructure that must support it, must show ROI in the workplace. This is true for both non-profit and for-profit organizations. The investment into collaboration tools must show concrete benefit or be relegated to feel-good movements and passing fads. Fortunately, there is [research](#) that shows that enterprise

collaboration does, in fact, provide a concrete benefit to the organizations that actively manage and implement collaborative systems. I cannot think of too many leaders who would ignore a 131% increase in operational efficiency.

It is not a difficult mental exercise to imagine a workplace in which:

- Selling strategies, shared across the organization, improve overall income.
- Obstacles are more rapidly overcome because someone else found a solution.
- New product ideas are shared quickly with product developers directly from customer feedback.
- Cost savings are nationalized from local insights.
- Benefits are delivered to employees based on feedback, thereby improving morale and discretionary effort.
- Questions are answered in real time, rather than escalating via slower channels.

Consider also that we live in a time in which four generations of workers exist in the current workforce. Tenure in many organizations ranges from 40 years to four months. The older workforce is on the verge of retiring leading to the greatest demand on social security and the greatest loss of organizational knowledge seen in the last 20 years. The newcomers to the organizational landscape crave a system that delivers the knowledge held by the old guard. They desire this not to preserve the past but to learn from it and improve it.

Enterprise collaboration tools provide the vehicle for the highly tenured members of the organization to make a mark on the organization through their experience. They get to do so in a way that extends their legacy past the typical mentoring roles they currently occupy and into historic roles that allow them to influence future generations; something that they and their predecessors value as outcomes to their professional careers. Enterprise collaboration tools are not just vehicles for discussion of current topics; when well-managed they become vehicles for capturing the tribal knowledge of an organization.

Enterprise collaboration tools can become vehicles for capturing the tribal knowledge of an organization.

Tribal knowledge is the information that often goes unmeasured and undocumented. It may or may not be correct in practice and as such requires validation. The fact is that tribal knowledge often drives an organization and may support legacy thinking that may be hampering an organization or may be the underlying reason why the business operates as it does.

Enterprise collaboration, when well-managed, can capture tribal knowledge and provide validation or, due to contradictory evidence, disprove it based on the aggregate feedback provided by the inputs from the participants. Either way, the wisdom gained from the discussion is an invaluable resource for the members of the collective as they seek to improve business processes and reach organizational goals. A well-managed enterprise collaboration system

harnesses and shapes the information in such a way that the organization derives value from the discussion and is able to synthesize information into real-world applications.

Lead the Enterprise with Collaboration

One of the hallmarks of Star Trek, in both its early and later manifestations, was the way in which the leaders relied upon the expertise of technical experts to speak freely and share data with the entire team. When the crew came upon significant obstacles, the captain sought the insight and perspective of the leadership team, who in turn, queried their own teams to get the most salient data. This line of questioning made its way down to the most frontline personnel who operated at the heart of the ship's operation.

Today's leaders can learn from this fictional operation, rooted in common military practice. The data senior leaders use to make decisions is no better than what they hear from the frontlines; the operators and employees working in the trenches are eager to share their knowledge and innovations with anyone who will listen. The veteran employee seeks to inspire and leave a legacy for those who follow; the young, eager employee seeks to blaze new trails by extending the work of those who came before them.

Enterprise collaboration is a means to an end. Regardless of the vehicle, an infrastructure that supports knowledge sharing and discussion of topics will lead to improved performance, rapid adaptation and faster evolution to meet new challenges. Collaboration is a means to improve the operations and speed up learning so that no one is left behind as the organization adapts to new challenges. When the entire organization is aligned to the strategy, sharing best practices and achieving goals, then your enterprise will go where no one has gone before.

About Forward Momentum, LLC

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About the Author

Rob Zell has over 15 years of experience as an educator and trainer. During his career, he has designed, developed and delivered learning content for IT, field operations, support staff and trainers in the restaurant and retail industry as well as in schools. His primary focus has been on improving operational results by developing management and communication skills to help leaders get more done with the teams they have. He is currently a training professional and coach with a leading global retailer.