

4 Keys to Accelerating Collaboration

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“Collaboration deserves the attention and rigorous thinking devoted to it. With all the urgency to collaborate – and the roadblocks to collaboration – what do organizations need to do to create the conditions that foster greater collaboration and partnership?”

Collaboration has been a watchword of organizations for decades—yet a variety of obstacles have prevented organizations from optimizing their collaborative capacity. In this article, which is based on our learning in organizations around the world, we describe how to accelerate collaboration via use of a common language for interactions, and how organizations and teams can incorporate this language into their day-to-day work, creating ways of interacting that enhances interactions, increases performance and accelerates bottom-line results.

The urgency for greater collaboration comes from the increasingly global scale of the workplace that has brought the need for and complexities to communication, knowledge transfer, and decision making. The speed to market necessary for organizational success is ever accelerating, requiring faster and greater innovation. The increasing number of unknowns and unknowables has outpaced the ability of any single small group of “go to” people to stay on top of all developments, let alone solve all problems and make all decisions. The drive to increase efficiencies has also intensified as organizations work to eliminate waste in order to remain and enhance their competitiveness. In short, the marketplace is faster, more global, and more subject to rapid change.

Collaboration is indispensable. Collaboration brings all relevant people together to address a situation; their combined perspectives have the potential to yield a 360-degree view that, when utilized skillfully, leads to smarter solutions and faster decisions. When collaboration is at its best, the resulting Right First Time interactions eliminate waste as the right people are doing the right work at the right time with the right tools. Collaboration is enhanced as people from different disciplines, functions, divisions, backgrounds, and experiences bring greater diversity of perspectives into each conversation and problem-solving situation. The trust required for successful collaboration enables people to share

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But in many organizations, successful collaboration is far from easy. One reason for this is that many people are simply not skilled in to communicating and collaborating fluently across geographies, cultures, divisions,

or departments. This lack of skill often results in misunderstandings and rework, as well as the need for many follow-up conversations all of which contribute to waste.

Second, the traditional structures and practices in many organizations have encouraged individuals and teams to stay within their own silos, developing their own language and preferred ways of interacting. Without interaction across silos, mistrust becomes endemic. People may be wary of individuals from another department or team, wondering whether it is safe to engage them, to trust them and to share information with them. As a result, they may be less willing to respond to information requests

or share the latest project update, let alone actively collaborate.

Collaboration deserves organization attention and rigorous thinking regarding how to make it an organization, team and individual competency. With the need to solve problems often utilizing cross-organization teams

there is greater urgency to remove the roadblocks to collaboration—and create the conditions that foster greater collaboration and partnership.

Setting a Common Language and Practice

People are often trying to collaborate using their own language and their preferred ways of working. Rarely do teams take the time to establish

common elements that are critical for collaboration. Nor do they create the mechanisms to enable people to leverage their different perspectives and experiences to solve problems or come up with innovative solutions. This lack of ground rules and common language slows down the process and creates barriers to truly understanding one another. In contrast, by using a common language to describe their interactions, individuals

avoid the need to explain (and often re-explain) themselves at every turn; interactions are accelerated, misunderstandings decrease, and second guessing becomes unnecessary. Free of all this waste, collaboration can proceed with higher speed and better results.

In our work, we have identified four behaviors that provide the common language for greater collaboration and teamwork. By using the 4 Keys individuals and teams across the globe have been able to join one another in collaboration quickly, simply, and seamlessly, accelerating results and achieving higher performance.

Figure 1. 4 Keys that Change EVERYTHING

4 Keys that Change *EVERYTHING*

- **Lean into Discomfort:**
Be willing to challenge self and others. Speak Up—bring your voice and street corner.
- **Listen as an Ally:**
Listen, listen, listen and engage. Be a partner.
- **State Your Intent and Intensity:**
Clarify intent at outset: State Notions, Stakes, Boulders, and Tombstones. Say what you mean and how much you mean it.
- **Share Street Corners:**
Accept others' thoughts and experiences as true for them. Hear others differences as additive.

CHANGE THE INTERACTION CHANGE THE EXPERIENCE CHANGE THE RESULT

The 4 Keys

Creating a common language not only eliminates wasteful interactions (think about the need to have a meeting before the meeting and the meeting after the meeting) but also increases trust, collaboration, understanding and breakthroughs. Just as there is a common language and understanding for business processes (ROI, EBIT, etc) we need to create a common language to foster greater collaboration, trust and inclusion. Organizations can introduce these 4 Keys as a way to accelerate engagement and create common language across the organization (*Figure 1*).

1 **Lean into Discomfort**

Trust is fundamental for our most productive collaborations. Without trust, our collaboration is flawed at best, destructive at worst, and uncomfortable at all times. Unfortunately, trust among people and teams generally takes time to develop— and most

of today's organizations cannot afford that time.

Hence the value of leaning into discomfort: it creates an environment in which trust can grow quickly. By making the conscious choice to move out of our comfort zones, we inspire others to respond in kind. An environment of interaction safety evolves in which we begin to trust that others have our back instead of stabbing us in the back. We feel safe enough to speak up, offer new ideas, take worthwhile risks, raise difficult issues, co-create solutions, and in general collaborate freely.

In a high-volume manufacturing plant, a work team was meeting to address critical processes that related directly to quality and productivity. One team member prefaced her remarks with "I need to lean into discomfort," then proceeded to raise several difficult issues that many people knew about but never felt they had enough interaction safety to address. Her honesty and courage invited the other team members to speak up as well; the ensuing collaboration removed the blocks to effectiveness and, once the recommendations were implemented, created a breakthrough in productivity metrics.

If the team had waited to build sufficient trust to address the issues, it might have taken months to do so—if it ever happened at all.

By speaking up and leaning into discomfort, this team member accelerated the trust-building cycle and therefore the result.

Even the act of using the specific language can accelerate this process. Saying "I'm going to lean into discomfort" signals to others that we are reaching out, making ourselves vulnerable, and extending an

invitation to reciprocate in the spirit of collaboration. When the team member in our example initially used those words, the team leader replied, "You don't need to say that. It's safe to raise any issue here." To which she responded, "Oh yes, I do need to say it. I need to use those words because they help me be brave."

When is the right time to lean into discomfort? Usually as soon as we begin to sense the discomfort—to feel that something is not quite right. That is the time to say, "I am going to be courageous and lean into discomfort to address this issue now."

Tips for Leaning into Discomfort

- » Use the language—"I am going to lean into discomfort"—to signal that you are moving out of your comfort zone and inviting others to join you.
- » Lean in by taking small steps: sitting up front when you normally sit in the back, for instance, or speaking up when you ordinarily would be silent.
- » Discuss what you need in order to feel safe enough to speak up. Invite others to do the same.

2 Listen as an Ally

Many organizations operate with a narrow definition of "we"—with no sense that we are all in this together. Collaboration, by definition, requires a "we" that encompasses all relevant perspectives to enhance solutions and decisions. Expanding our sense of "we" involves building cooperative, collaborative, mutual working relationships by linking our ideas together to create something better than any of

us could have done individually. In a word, expanding our "we" involves becoming an ally to those around us—and the first step toward becoming an ally is to listen as an ally.

In listening as an ally, we listen deeply and with full attention, viewing others as partners on the same side of the table. We look for value in the speakers' perspectives and build on what they say. We engage with others in the conviction that we are all in this together. We open the door for collaboration to take place and for breakthroughs to arise.

To understand the impact, imagine a senior leadership meeting in an organization with no history of listening as an ally. Many participants view the meeting as "painful." During presentations, most people pay little attention on the grounds that "it's not my project" or "it doesn't affect my primary work group." Others listen impatiently while formulating their response. As each presentation concludes, leaders highlight possible shortcomings and flaws: "Are you sure you talked to the right people?" "I don't understand how you could see things this way." "I have worked here many years, and this has never been true." "I don't want to hear any more of this." "Your point about the market potential is wrong." With comments and questions like these, the presenters often leave the meeting feeling small and determined to try to avoid presenting again.

Compare this with the same meeting in a team that features a "we" sense among the group and a practice of listening as allies. The meetings are lively and engaging; everyone wants to contribute and understands that their unique perspective can add value to the conversation. With each presentation, people contribute ideas and experiences from their own work

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groups, expanding and enhancing the presenter's original ideas. Individuals link to and build on one another's insight.

The outcome is inevitably greater than any individual's contribution. Listening as an ally has resulted in the very epitome of collaboration.

Tips for Listening as an Ally

- » Give your full attention to others when they are speaking. Don't multitask.
- » Restate what you have heard to check that you are receiving the intended message.
- » Accept that what others are saying is true for them: their thinking may be different from yours but no less valid.
- » Express your appreciation for what was shared ("give energy back").

3 State Your Intent and Intensity

When we clearly state what we mean and how committed we are to the idea, it enables others to act quickly, decisively, and correctly. The clarity of stating intent and intensity eliminates second guessing, miscommunication, and the waste in interactions that

results from them. As a result, this key both accelerates and enhances the quality of collaboration.

One method for stating intent and intensity—Notions, Stakes, Boulders, and Tombstones (see Figure 2, next page)—gives people a common language by which to explain intensity:

- » Notions are statements that require no action from others: they are offered simply as an invitation for further discussion, if the receiver thinks it is worth pursuing. By positioning a statement as a Notion, we open the door to exploring the idea and seeing where it will take the group, if others find it of value.
- » Stakes, like tent stakes, establish a firm place for a discussion to start, but that place can be moved. When we put our Stake in the ground and demonstrate that we are willing, eager, and able to move it, we are saying that others may have insights and information that might reveal a better position for that Stake. The Stake concept is grounded in the belief that none of us is as smart as all of us.
- » Boulders offer little latitude. They imply a strong investment in seeing the idea addressed in the way we have framed it. A Boulder is not an invitation to discussion, though requests for clarification and suggestions for implementation



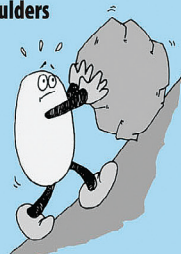

might be welcome. A substantial amount of energy and information will be required to change the Boulder.

- » Tombstones leave no room for negotiation. When we label a statement as a Tombstone, it indicates total commitment to the idea or issue—so much so that we may be willing to leave our jobs over it. Often, Tombstones are about core values or beliefs. Tombstone statements should be made only in the most critical situations, when personal or organizational integrity is at issue or it is an "order" that cannot be changed, i.e., a law, an edict, a safety principle.

To illustrate how this might work, imagine a planning meeting in which the senior leader announces, "We should open a new distribution center in the Southwest and build it in Albuquerque." That could be interpreted as a demand, and the people in the meeting would likely begin taking steps to implementation.

Now consider the scenario if the leader said, "I have a Tombstone around doubling our distribution in the Southwest. My Stake is to build a new distribution center in Albuquerque." Suddenly the direction of the ensuing conversation is obvious. There is no need to discuss whether to address Southwest distribution; the Tombstone designation identifies it as a "go do." On the other hand, naming the location of the distribution center as a Stake opens the door to a conversation on locations. This common language of Notions, Stakes, Boulders, and Tombstones has eliminated the waste of discussing what was not open to discussion—and moving to action too quickly on location when the leader's statement was merely a starting point.

Guide to Notions, Stakes, Boulders, & Tombstones

Initiator has:	Intent	Intensity of Commitment	Desired Response
Notions 	Discussion Possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low investment • Testing if idea makes sense to others and/or hoping others will build upon the idea • Individual is willing to let go of the idea • Totally open to influence 	Discuss if interested/ willing to explore; Action optional
Stakes 	Discussion Initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some investment • State a position • Wants to hear others' Street Corners • Willing to be influenced 	Discuss, to be considered or explored in depth; Acted upon if parties agree after discussion
Boulders 	Discussion for Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong investment • Firmly entrenched in position • Wants it to happen • Difficult to influence <p>This level of acting on an idea or making a decision should not be used frequently.</p>	Action expected; Substantive objections somewhat OK
Tombstones 	Discussion, if any, under Duress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total investment • Worth quitting over • No ability to influence <p>This level should not be used more than twice a year, if that frequently.</p>	Act now, or else

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Figure 2. Guide to Notions, Stakes, Boulders, & Tombstones

Tips for Stating Your Intent and Intensity

- » Make Notions, Stakes, Boulders, Tombstones common language for how the team will engage.
- » Clarify that your passion on a topic does not mean you are closed to hearing other perspectives.
- » Actively seek feedback from team members on how often you use the range of Intent and Intensity.

- » Question your own intensity around Boulders and Tombstones. Make sure you are open to input and change where you can be.

4 Share Your Street Corners

One of the great benefits of collaboration is that it enables organizations to bring together people with many

different perspectives, or “street corners” (as in “the view from my street corner”). Ensuring that all street corners are represented—and that people share them—yields as close to a 360-degree view as possible, which in turn leads to more effective solutions and better decisions.

One senior leader discovered the power of sharing street corners with his executive team. He started using this common language—“I want to share my street corner with you”—as a framework for contributing his

unique experiences to any conversation without requiring that his view be regarded as the only correct view. He also solicited honest opinions and feedback from his team by saying, “I need to hear your street corner on this,” with the assumption, and maybe even the hope, that their street corners would be different from his.

Because of the senior leader’s emphasis on street corners, the team members participated at a very high level. The quality of their interactions—and the multitude of street corners that they yielded—enabled the team to create numerous breakthroughs. By sharing and hearing one another’s street corners, team members could address challenges together that no one person on the team could resolve just from her or his initial view of the situation.

Tips on Sharing Street Corners

- » Invite others to share their street corners, thus opening the door for them to feel safe to fully and openly contribute.
- » Treat others as experts in their own experience.
- » Find ways to build on what others shared, and see if together you can find a new solution that you could not have done alone.

Results from the Field

Over the years, thousands of people at dozens of organizations have incorporated the 4 Keys into their collaborations. Following is a selection of examples:

- » A flaw in the design of a production process put the future of a promising new product at risk. In a collaborative effort to resolve the flaw, the production

team created an ad hoc team of shop floor operators, product development specialists, quality assurance experts, and others to gain a 360-degree view of the situation. Then, by listening as allies, the members of this ad hoc team together developed a solution that enabled production to move forward.

- » Stringent quality standards in one country presented long-standing barriers to entry for a global firm. By drawing in various street corners from experts in quality, design, production, and regulatory issues, a broadly cross functional team was able to collaborate on several quality breakthroughs, paving the way for entry into the new market and a substantial rise in revenue.
- » At one meeting, a team member who practiced the 4 Keys elected to lean into discomfort by pointing out that a popular new business proposal would actually add little return on investment. As people considered her objection and began to build on her ideas, they arrived at a major improvement on the original proposal.
- » The absence of key people in a critical meeting led the team leader to postpone the meeting, avoiding the waste of participants’ time and ensuring that, when the meeting did occur, all essential street corners were represented. Not only were hours of work time saved, but the rescheduled meeting, with full attendance, and yielded quick results.
- » In their regular staff meeting, a team of supervisors regularly skipped over a critical but uncomfortable issue. After they had started practicing the 4 Keys, one supervisor chose to lean into discomfort and raise the

issue. This leaning in encouraged his colleagues to do the same; by offering their street corners honestly, listening to one another as allies, then building on one another’s ideas, they quickly worked out an effective solution to a problem that had plagued the team for years.

In order to succeed, today’s organizations need the wisdom of everyone, leveraged in collaboration. The profusion of technology for enhancing collaboration, however, can only be optimized if we learn enhanced ways of interacting—and a common language to express what takes place in those interactions. The 4 Keys provide a framework for creating that common language, accelerating collaboration, and thus positioning organizations for higher performance.

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As Executive Vice President (emerita) and CEO (respectively) for The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc.—one of *Consulting* magazine’s Seven Small Jewels in 2010—they have partnered with Fortune 50 companies to elevate the quality of interactions, leverage people’s differences, and transform workplaces. Their latest book is *Safe Enough to Soar: Accelerating Trust, Inclusion & Collaboration in the Workplace*, introducing the concept of Interaction Safety (Berrett-Koehler, 2018). Judith can be reached at judithkatz@kjcg.com and Fred can be reached at fred411@kjcg.com.