

# 7 Ways Collaboration Builds **GREATER RESILIENCY**

BY DIANA RIVENBURGH

*The healthiest, most prosperous companies remain resilient in the face of change. Rather than leading solely from the top, they build coalitions for change.*

They thrive by tapping into internal talent at all levels and reaching beyond their borders for external collaboration. Remaining resilient requires designing organizations that harness today's social, economic and environmental forces in ways that serve all stakeholders by engaging employees, delighting customers, rewarding shareholders, serving communities and surpassing the competition. The following seven principles will serve you well in keeping all these constituents happy and achieving shared goals.

**1. Become vulnerable to build trust.** Let's face it, collaborating with others can sometimes be messy. All those differing opinions, personalities and agendas can sometimes make people feel they are in the middle of a congressional debate on healthcare reform. But when collaboration occurs on a foundation of trust and respect, ideas rise to new levels, bonds strengthen, learning occurs and work gets done. One of my colleagues lives by the rule "relationships first, then business."

Although it may sound counterintuitive to include vulnerability as an ingredient for resiliency, building trust requires that people open up to their peers and staffs. By doing so, they are in a position to receive feedback and opinions from others. Such openness also fosters respect. All too often, team members frantically work to fix problems and achieve targets without taking the time to get to know each other. Yet taking that time in the beginning and throughout a project will bring greater and longer lasting results.

Teams need to be built on a foundation of trust. During a leadership retreat with a group from a very successful technology company, I encouraged the participants to think of the senior leadership team as their "first" team. As with many leaders, they had traditionally viewed the functional areas for which they were responsible as their primary teams. Yet the operation could only be successful if all the functions worked smoothly together. Executives can't operate effectively if they are acting as middle managers. They must consider what's best for the entire enterprise. By considering the senior leadership team as a priority, they had to be willing to consult their peers when issues came up that might impact other parts of the operation and

consider different ideas on how to improve their own areas. Shifting their perspectives to have a stronger allegiance to the senior team helped break down functional barriers. Once they accomplished this, their staff members followed by forging stronger relationships with other departments.

**2. Engage employees at all levels at all times.** Implementing even the most brilliant strategy requires the involvement of employees throughout the organization. Leading-edge research consistently shows that employee engagement positively impacts business results, even in a down economy. A 2012 Aon Corporation “Trends in Global Employee Engagement” report revealed that in 2010, organizations with high levels of engagement outperformed the overall stock market index and brought in total shareholder returns 22% higher than average. On the other hand, companies with low engagement levels had total shareholder returns 28% below average.

A 2012 Gallup Employee Engagement Index report revealed that 70% of U.S. workers felt “not engaged”; one in five workers (18%) felt “actively disengaged” at work. Employees who lack engagement emotionally disconnect from their companies and generally fail to meet performance expectations. They lack energy and passion, put forth minimal effort and take more time off. In some cases, they disrupt the workplace, undermine coworkers, bad-mouth the company and even commit acts of sabotage.

Leaders in resilient organizations understand the need to have an engaged, productive, highly motivated, continuously learning and innovative workforce. The entire company wins when people go above and beyond their job descriptions to invest extra time, brainpower and energy into their work. Middle managers are especially critical to engage. The visionary CEO or engineering geniuses can’t make things happen throughout the entire company. Middle managers can. They convert strategic aspirations into successful operations.

**3. Seek cognitive diversity.** Resilient organizations view diversity as far more strategic than an exercise in percentages in gender and ethnic categories. These organizations bring together people with different thinking styles, backgrounds and levels of expertise. Those closest to the work will ask questions and have ideas that are very different from those of the “experts” and formal leaders. I once worked with a large healthcare system on an initiative to increase efficiency and achieve higher levels of operational excellence. Rather than present ideas from the headquarters’ ivory tower, we brought together regional directors, clinical managers, staff coordinators, sales representatives and nurses. With this combination, one team created a caregiver model that gave greater autonomy to nurses and lowered labor costs and staff turnover, while also raising the quality of patient care.

Companies increasingly require people of different educational levels and backgrounds to work together to achieve their goals for sustainable growth. Thus, one organization funded a project to have universities and technical colleges develop programs in which student engineers

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and technicians would serve on project teams together. The goal was to better prepare them to work across functions and levels when they moved into the workplace.

**4. Engage the head and the heart.** There’s a widely held misconception that the business case provides the greatest fuel for change. While that’s necessary, presenting data, calculations and research won’t be enough to move people to action. Education and information won’t move people to change. They must also care about what they are doing. And people care most about what they help create. They will move mountains to achieve goals they personally connect with.

In 2008, just as the recession was taking hold, John Lyell Clarke III took action to redefine his family’s eponymous third-generation insecticide company. He knew there must be a better way to kill disease-carrying mosquitoes. First, his company’s scientists used green chemistry principles to create organic compounds that would destroy mosquitoes just as effectively as decades-old poisons. But he didn’t stop there. He called upon his employees to find ways to completely transform and rebrand the 60-year-old company from an insecticide maker to a public health company. His vision became their vision, and the results have exceeded his wildest expectations. He periodically brings company’s employees together for vision and strategy sessions. One of the ideas springing from the 2013 summit, “Clarke Plus: Accelerating Sustainability,” was to build the new corporate headquarters with a “green” design that included space to collaborate, walking paths and a healthy work environment. Ideas didn’t just come from inside the company. Of the people at Clarke’s 2013 summit, 20% were external stakeholders, such as customers, bankers, government representatives and other business leaders. A few naysayers believing “that will never happen” were proven wrong, as that new headquarters nears opening day. They greatly underestimated the power of combining the heart and the head.

**5. Build relationships across boundaries.** Some changes just can’t be accomplished alone. It’s simply too big for any one company or sector to achieve. Today’s leaders must reach deep and wide to develop alliances to accomplish the seemingly impossible. In their own companies, they need to rip down functional silos to bring people together to meet tough, complex challenges. They must also reach to outside expertise to address labor and resource issues in global supply chains, cultural challenges in emerging markets, public health threats and energy security risks. Resilient organizations engage internal and external stakeholders and build diverse coalitions for change, including sometimes with competitors.

In 2011, leading apparel and footwear companies Nike, Adidas, C&A, PUMA, H&M and Li Ning, joined forces to form a Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals (ZDHC) program to find ways to eliminate hazardous chemicals in the production of apparel and footwear by 2020. Other apparel companies, including Levi Strauss, Jack Wolfskin, Marks & Spencer and G-Star Raw, joined the quest. ZDHC members developed a Joint Roadmap, with higher industry standards and aggressive goals to eliminate certain chemicals from the manufacturing process, educate suppliers, improve supply-chain transparency, and monitor and report on results. As of June 2013, the ZDHC program had set up seven workstreams, including training,

assessment and auditing, and initiating a pilot for chemicals management best practices.

**6. Don't create everything yourself.** You can't be an expert in everything. Find resources and form alliances with people and organizations with the expertise, infrastructure and products you need. For example, large and small organizations around the world use UPS to manage their logistics, and companies such as SAP bring in world-class technology, thereby eliminating the need for in-house systems.

**7. Make collaboration part of the culture.** Years ago, I worked with a company where the CEO was frustrated with the lack of collaboration. So, he decided to take away formal titles, such as vice president and manager, and call everyone a team leader. There was a huge uproar from those losing their lofty titles, and lots of time was spent making the case to be called "Senior Team Leader" or "Team Leader III." I convinced the CEO that titles weren't the issue; it was the culture. We put together a plan to build collaboration across functions by having all major initiatives led by cross-functional teams. These teams engaged people at all levels of the organization for input and participation.

Team members trained and set individual development goals to go along with the business goals they were expected to achieve. Goals ranged from managing stress to being more open-minded to improving communication skills. It was no longer acceptable to get to the target at all costs. People also had to learn to work better together. As relationships grew on these project teams, people were more likely to keep other departments informed on a greater number of routine operational issues. They had a broader perspective on what happens across the organization instead of being buried in their own functional silos. MW

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