Initiating and Sustaining Collaboration in Technology: Critical Elements

Paula Nichols and Stephenie Yearwood
Department of Educational Leadership, Lamar University
pnichols@tenet.edu; yearwoodso@hal.lamar.edu

Abstract: Collaborative technology projects require new types of relationships and distinctive management strategies. This paper outlines three critical elements in creating and continuing such partnerships: common vision, a reward system, and consensus.

Technology ventures often demand collaborative efforts which bring together personnel, financial resources, needs and solutions from diverse entities. Older models of cooperation worked within top-down power structures; new structures of collaboration are complex and require long-term thinking and conflict management. Furthermore, sustaining collaboration is critical because the payoffs of such efforts are often long-term. We identify here three elements critical to building and sustaining collaboration: common vision, a reward system, and consensus operations.

Common Vision

Diverse groups who collaborate in technology ventures always face semantic difficulties, terms are defined differently and goals are stated in language only the originators understand. As a result, common definitions of terms and in-depth discussion about problems, solutions, and common issues are essential (Winer 1994). In this initial establishment of common understanding, group members must adopt a posture of tentative knowing, a non-judgmental stance which reserves value judgments and allows for continuing conversation. Although individuals may be experts in their domains, they need to drop their "know it all" perspective when they work collaboratively. Rarely does any entity get all it wants, but group members must be honest about what
they are willing to put into a collaborative effort as well as what they wish to get out of the collaboration.

A Reward System

Different entities have different currencies and rewards. Rewards must come to group members in the currency valuable to them in their system, be it promotion, tenure, credit hours, test scores, or bonuses. Furthermore, different stakeholders define accountability differently, as staying within budget or positive publicity (Report 1997). As specific rewards are discussed, entities must spell out to whom and how they are accountable and how that will affect their participation.

Consensus

In diverse collaborative groups, absolute agreement is rare. Thus it is essential to establish that the group will operate by consensus and to establish a process for achieving consensus and resolving conflicts. Even when members do not agree on an outcome, if they have subscribed to a specified process which has been followed consistently, they will be able to accept the result (Winer 1994). Once established, conflict resolution needs to be called into play quickly when problems arise. Difficulties which drag on are much harder to deal with.

Clearly collaborative ventures in technology are neither simple nor easy. However, the power of successful collaboration is synergistic. Collaborative groups which are able to sustain their efforts can achieve a whole which is indeed greater than the sum of the parts.

References
