

Chapter 12

Role Negotiation in Collaborative Projects

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the traditional approaches to collaborative group projects can often be characterized by hierarchy, clarity of roles, and assignment of tasks to participants. Digital-age collaborative projects are often characterized by impromptu and ill-defined organization, spontaneity, democratic decision-making, and continual morphing of roles. These two approaches are grounded in fundamentally different cultural frameworks. This chapter describes and analyzes an innovative collaborative process of role description, negotiation, adoption, and ongoing evolution through routine metacognitive processes which provides a structure by which to integrate positive aspects of traditional hierarchical approaches to collaborative projects and positive aspects of digital-age communication culture. This role negotiation process can clarify responsibilities and processes while nurturing the sense of personal agency and self-determination crucial to intrinsic motivation and engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Digital tools have opened an incredible range of possibilities for collaboration no longer bound by space and time. Along with these tools and possibilities comes a new ethos of communication, aspects of which produce novel challenges and opportunities for effective collaboration. In the space where traditional approaches to collaboration collide with digital-age approaches lies a bounty of innovative ideas ripe for the harvest. This chapter explores this area of collision between the way we have traditionally gone about setting up collaborative projects and the features of digital-age collaborations. This exploration will delve into these issues through the lens of a focal point on the narrowly-defined aspect of role negotiation in digitally-mediated collaborative projects.

This chapter explores academic research, theory, a case study, and the author's experience toward identifying some principles of digital-age collaborative projects, with a focus on role negotiation in technology-mediated collaborative projects in the digital age—principles which may provide insight into methods of weaving together aspects of “traditional” and “digital-age” approaches to collaboration.

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BACKGROUND

To situate ourselves intellectually, we shall begin with two mental pictures. In our first picture, we find ourselves in a pre-internet office environment in the late twentieth century where we are observing a collaborative project involving a team of twenty people. The first thing that commands our attention is that one person is going from cubicle to cubicle checking in on the progress of individuals. Our intuition that this must be the team leader is confirmed as the team gathers in a conference room for a meeting. The team leader briefly overviews the meeting agenda and then leads the team through an overview of a recent setback. The floor is opened to discussion for fifteen minutes, after which the team leader summarizes the ideas brought forward and lays out a series of next steps. One team member volunteers to take on one of the action items, but seeing no further volunteers, the team leader assigns the remaining tasks to individuals and sets completion deadlines. The meeting is dismissed and people head back to their cubicles. The team leader then heads for the airport to catch a flight to another city to meet a potential vendor and discuss their proposal.

In our second picture, we find ourselves in a current-day coffee shop looking over the shoulder of someone working on tablet computer. She replies to an email, sends a few instant messages, and then opens a collaboration app where she reads a chain of posts in a discussion thread exploring the information gathered from potential vendors who responded to a recent request for information. Several themes have emerged in the thread and the consensus seems to be that they proceed with the writing of a formal Request for Proposals (RFP). She opens another app and creates a collaborative document in which to draft the RFP, creates a rough outline, invites her team-mates, and posts a note in the collaboration app suggesting they start drafting in the collaborative document and use the comments feature to suggest edits. She then searches the internet and identifies several similar institutions which recently contracted with vendors for similar solutions. After finding the email addresses of people involved in the process, she sends five of them emails explaining her team's current situation and asking for any advice they may be able to offer. Her smartphone vibrates and she sees that a reminder from her calendar indicates it is time to start her video conference with a team-mate who recently asked her for help.

In our first scenario we see certain recognizable features. The collaboration is bound by space and time, as evidenced by the need physical meetings and face-to-face interactions. Time is also a limitation. Team members need to be at a particular place at a particular time. The team leader is physically moving from person to person to coordinate, receive updates, and set goals. Such a situation lends itself to a hierarchy in which ultimate decision-making rests with one individual who is responsible for seeing the big picture and coordinating the work done by each team member.

In the second scenario we see the limitations of time and space have been eliminated, replaced with a completely new set of issues. Less authority resides in any one individual, but each participant is expected to multitask, be involved in a wider range of decision-making, and master the use of many different digital tools for communication and collaboration. The freedom gained by being unshackled from a nine-to-five day in the cubicle has been offset by a twenty-four-hour day of rapidly shifting attention from application to application. This is exacerbated by increased uncertainty about our own responsibilities given the ever-changing nature of projects where we can never be sure who has done what, who is currently working on what, and who is planning to do what.

If we were to observe a wider range of collaborative projects we would find aspects of both scenarios. However, it could be reasonably be expected that we would tend to find collaborative projects structured like our first scenario with features of the second scenario superimposed upon it. We would not

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