



Is your team a superflock?

A team of the best and the brightest doesn't always result in collaboration

I recently learned of a surprising experiment. Researcher William Muir of Purdue University wanted to study the production of eggs,¹ so he created two groups of chickens. One group was the test group of normal chickens, with natural selection occurring over six chicken generations. The second group was a group of chickens that over the course of six generations were selected because they produced more eggs. These birds naturally laid more eggs, and by separating and breeding the best egg layers, Dr. Muir created a flock of "superchickens."

The findings from this experiment were surprising. At the end of the test period, the test flock was doing fine and production had even risen somewhat, but the superchickens had failed and only three survived. What happened? The superflock, which had been chosen because they were superstar chickens, had actually become so aggressive that they pecked one another to death. The result of this deadly competition was disastrous.

Today, in the corporate world and many dental offices, there is an obsession to hire superstar employees, those who are the brightest and cleverest.² These chosen few are given attention and touted as the next best thing since sliced bread. Yet a study by MIT reveals that the higher achieving groups are not those with the shining stars (superchickens), nor with the highest aggregate IQ. It was found that collaboration and cooperation are key to producing the mix that leads to the highest productivity. Work is social, and when talent contests pit us against one another, the entire fabric of a healthy workplace unravels.

Isn't that interesting? It would appear that inclusive, respectful, and consensus-building behavior not only makes for a better working environment, but also is more productive and therefore profitable. What factors influenced this positive outcome?³

This study revealed three factors that enhanced this collaborative environment. First, there was a high degree of social sensitivity to one another. In other words, members of these successful teams had the ability to put themselves

in another's shoes and understand other people from their perspective. This is called empathy.

Second, the MIT researchers found that the workers were equally generous in giving time to one another's challenges. There was no imbalance of priorities on the job, and everyone showed they valued the input from their teammates and balanced their input in kind.

Last, the researchers found that the best collaborative



work environments had more women on the team. Some of us definitely like that finding! However, perhaps this shouldn't be a surprise, given that in the male-dominated corporate environment, women offer a different perspective. In addition, women are generally more empathetic than men.

This leads to the question, what about dentistry, where there is a high concentration of women? Are we one of the chosen professions that have mastered the collaborative model? Unfortunately, this isn't always true. I've seen dental offices where a more male-based perspective would have been more productive than the female pettiness I witnessed.

If the culture of the office is one of a scarcity mentality, competition, or exclusion, then the environment is eroding to the demise of everyone in the office. I have seen this behavior firsthand in some dental offices, and it is a toxic environment. Unfortunately, women can have the uncanny

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ability to backstab, claim credit for work they didn't do, ostracize team members, and spread rumors. Nothing is as toxic as an office full of women whose modus operandi is like the superchickens.

On the other hand, I've also seen dental offices with a culture of collaboration. In these well-functioning teams, cooperation and consensus building are apparent. Collaboration is encouraged and supported. No longer does one plus one equal two, but one plus one can equal 20. Like a well-oiled handpiece, these offices operate smoothly, efficiently, and effectively. Cooperation and collaboration can lead to greater results and success on an ongoing basis by encouraging ideas to flow and grow. This culture of helpfulness is at the core of successful teams.

Many dental offices want to build teamwork, but they don't know how to encourage collaborative behavior. Some helpful tips on how to boost this environment are:²

1. **Request the behaviors that you want modeled**—Invite the team to share ideas, and ask them to help one another improve systems in the office.
2. **Show people what to do**—Exemplify what a good comment is and encourage more high quality commenting. For example, a good comment can help improve an idea by constructively questioning a weak point. Experts can be invited to comment on a specific aspect of the idea.
3. **Engineer networking**—Foster a community of people who can offer insights on content, and even step outside of the dental community for input. Learn to ask questions that mill down to the core challenge.
4. **Organize ideas**—A large mass of uncategorized ideas makes it very difficult for others to find content. Encourage idea tagging.
5. **Recognize those who add value**—When moving an idea forward, be sure to recognize and thank all those who helped get it to its current position. Make that recognition public when appropriate so that others see it's a team game.
6. **Encourage peer-to-peer idea referral**—Encourage those who submit ideas to actively seek comments from their peers before an idea moves forward. This will

enlist others in the idea and help develop the idea.

Collaboration is not about chumminess. It's about open-minded professional behavior and mutual respect for team members' opinions and contributions. Collaboration is also not about homeostasis. There may be conflicts in such a workplace, but the safe environment allows for exploring in order to find powerful solutions. These teams recognize that it is only by questioning that good ideas become great ideas. These great ideas contribute to the entire team.

Charles Darwin said, "In the long history of humankind (and animalkind, too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed."

It is the progressive collaborator who recognizes that by bringing out the best in others, they will find the best in themselves. Everyone matters and has the ability to help liberate ideas, energy, and imagination to create a tomorrow that is successful for both leaders and their teams. How much more everyone can give to the team if they stop trying to be the superchickens! **RDH**

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