Even when change is clearly necessary, there's a toll in navigating it. Leaders can help reset the narrative.
The Emotional Disruption of Change

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How to Reduce the Risk of Colliding Change Initiatives

Quy Nguyen Huy, Rouven Kanitz, Julia Backmann, and Martin Hoegl

Where should leaders focus when managing multiple change initiatives simultaneously?

Most prescriptions for organizational change have focused on how to launch a single change initiative. This made sense in a stable world in which undertakings were planned and executed gradually and sequentially — like controllers directing airplanes taking off on a single runway, one at a time and well distanced from one another. However, the challenges of coping with dynamic markets, global crises, and advancing technologies are forcing organizations to transform quickly, which can require multiple, simultaneous efforts on several fronts. When time-pressured controllers launch many airplanes in close succession, the risk of collision increases significantly. Yet change managers have a very limited understanding of how such “collisions” happen or how to reduce those risks.

Failure to manage interrelationships between change initiatives can generate poor overall performance in three ways. First, it can lead to a large number of seemingly discrete initiatives with unclear prioritization and insufficient resources allocated for implementation. Second, it creates misaligned incentives for managers whose concern for their own key performance indicators inhibits cooperation across departmental siloes, when cooperation could better generate the desired benefits. Third, it prevents managers from perceiving connections between their own initiatives and those occurring elsewhere in the organization, creating unexpected conflicts about resource allocation or the timing of implementation. These conflicts undermine each change initiative and decrease overall corporate performance.

Competing Change Initiatives at TechCorp

Launching multiple, simultaneous change initiatives clearly raises the stakes for managers. But with so many moving parts and pieces, where should their primary focus be?

To answer that question, our recent paper in Academy of Management Journal explores the experiences of a leading global technology company we’ll call TechCorp that attempted two large-scale change initiatives in tandem. The first initiative, Foundation, was a strategic project designed to instill a culture of innovation into the hierarchy-heavy organization by inculcating principles such as lean management, listening, and risk-taking. The second, Rebranding, introduced a year later, was intended to
comprehensively reposition TechCorp in the marketplace and to be more customer driven, led by a separate team of senior managers along with the marketing department.

During both change initiatives, we conducted 94 interviews with 65 TechCorp staff members, including top managers, middle managers, and front-line employees. We also conducted employee surveys, analyzed corporate documents, and sat in on key meetings and workshops.

It became readily apparent to us as observing researchers — but less so to change managers until it was too late — that the Foundation and Rebranding initiatives interfered with each other in ways that undermined the success of both initiatives and overall strategic change. As one leader put it, “There are change initiatives here at various levels, which has led to extreme instability of the entire organization. I probably would describe this organization as traumatized.”

**Challenges of Competing Change Initiatives**

Amid the wealth of information we collected, inconsistency as perceived by employees stood out as the pivotal factor. In other words, multitasking per se wasn’t the problem. Rather, employees felt that the two change initiatives they were expected to execute had no overarching rhyme or reason. Employees perceived inconsistency on multiple levels: content (“What are we changing exactly, and why?”), procedure (“How will we integrate the various initiatives?”), and normative expectations (“Do these initiatives in aggregate convey a legitimate and coherent direction?”).

First, employees perceived content inconsistencies in terms of overlap between the stated change goals of the two initiatives. Both Foundation and Rebranding seemed to have the same core purpose: transforming TechCorp’s culture in a broad sense. Yet each initiative employed different symbols, used inconsistent labels for similar themes, and formulated seemingly divergent values. Middle managers could not understand why there were two change initiatives that focused on the same thing — in this case, the organization’s cultural values.

Second, employees perceived little to no procedural clarity about implementation and integration — the “how” of organizational change as opposed to the “what.” HR leaders, for example, had barely formed their game plan for onboarding the Foundation principles when the Rebranding team hit them with a new set of objectives. Middle managers and their teams felt as though the two initiatives were the proverbial square peg and round hole, with no problem-solving tools forthcoming from senior management — not even a mallet to help pound the two together. Many teams gave up on integration completely, forming associations with either one initiative or the other that predictably led to internal squabbles over resources.

Finally, Foundation and Rebranding seemed to imply starkly contrasting norms and values. TechCorp’s efforts to bolster its cutting-edge credentials, as represented by Foundation, were undermined in many employees’ eyes by the stilted corporate video marking the launch of Rebranding. “This was done as a huge, over-the-top party with a song — yes, seriously, a song,” said one interviewee. Another observed that the rebranding ceremony’s “gigantic” scale and production cost violated the core Foundation principle of lean management.

After three years, both of TechCorp’s change initiatives were significantly behind schedule. Planned training programs and performance management interventions had not yet reached several important manufacturing sites. A number of critical activities were abandoned due to intractable logistical problems or a lack of resources.

These disappointing results should not be surprising. As humans, we crave consistency, especially in our working lives. Inconsistency, which TechCorp’s managers inadvertently created in spades, causes psychological distress and negative emotions. In the change management context, such emotional responses create undercurrents of resistance that are almost impossible to settle once they get going.

In TechCorp’s case, the C-suite came to realize the problems of the colliding initiatives late in the process. These problems stemmed from strong resistance from middle managers. Yet they were not willing to admit initial mistakes and halt the programs, for fear of appearing weak. They felt it was too late to reset and restart the change initiatives. Instead, top executives tried trimming the change management
supervisory teams, pouring money into brand education for employees and internal communication, and slicing the initiatives into smaller subprojects (which only compounded the complexity).

None of these responses solved TechCorp’s core problem, which ran much deeper than any on-the-fly adjustment could address. From the beginning, Foundation and Rebranding should have been treated as two halves of one holistic change initiative rather than two projects running in isolation. This error is hardly unique to TechCorp; viewing initiatives as stand-alone projects is common management practice.

Lessons for Leaders

What should organizations launching multiple change programs do differently? First and foremost, they should take the holistic view. The top management team (TMT) orchestrating change management should draw up a map of all the initiatives, planned or ongoing, occurring within the organization. This map should incorporate all of the vantage points that matter: not only the perspectives of top management, but also those of middle management and front-line employees. Middle managers and employees may perceive inconsistencies among these change initiatives more clearly than TMTs can, and they may well offer practical ideas about how to address inconsistencies upfront.

Once the organization has mapped out all employees’ perceptions of inconsistency in various initiatives, it should consider how to address these inconsistencies from the start. TMTs can stay ahead of the game by preparing a clear, consistent communication narrative explaining the necessity for multiple initiatives as opposed to one, detailing exactly how they fit together. Such a narrative can preempt the perception of inconsistency on all three levels: content, procedure, and normative expectations.

The timing and pacing of each initiative are additional key considerations. TMTs should have a clear idea of which initiatives can be wrapped up quickly and which may take years — and when to launch or stop each one. With a clearer time frame, they can ward off inconsistency by ensuring, for example, that one team isn’t assigned two conflicting tasks at the same time or that teams aren’t saddled with a storm of changes that could overwhelm their capacity.

TMTs should also monitor whether each key initiative has been allocated adequate resources. Remember that strategic change is exhausting, and periods of high activity should be followed by intervals of rest or less-intense work. The alternative to careful timing may well be burnout, which is an even greater threat to change performance than inconsistency.

Ultimately, successful change managers shift their focus from single initiatives to the dynamics among multiple initiatives. A successful transformation typically does not rely on any single change initiative but emerges from the careful management of multiple, integrated initiatives that interact and reinforce one another over time. One key success factor is to be alert to emerging inconsistencies among various initiatives regarding content, procedures, and normative expectations. These emerging inconsistencies can cause initial supporters to resist change, ultimately undermining the initiatives. Instead, taking the deliberate, comprehensive approach described here can drive your success in leading change.

About The Authors

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Changing How We Think About Change

B. Tom Hunsaker, Richard Ettenson, and Jonathan Knowles

Innovation is not in itself a strategy but the mechanism for achieving a change in either magnitude, activity, or direction.

A major challenge for business leaders is knowing when to stay the course and when to change direction. There is conflicting advice. Thousands of articles have been published on the topic of change management in leadership, but just as many have focused on the key roles of persistence, grit, and commitment — that is, not changing — in overcoming challenges.

As former U.S. Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki famously remarked, “If you dislike change, you’re going to dislike irrelevance even more.” Change may be inevitable, but it can be hard for business leaders to identify the nature, scale, and timing of the change that is appropriate for their company’s specific context. As operating environments become more dynamic, both the benefits and risks of change become amplified.

Just as the word ride can describe both a white-knuckle experience on a rollercoaster and a leisurely excursion on a bicycle, change is used to describe a wide variety of contexts. We assert that a fundamental source of confusion among managers and executives is the use of that single term to refer to three very different strategic responses to business challenges.

Change can involve magnitude, activity, or direction, and the first step toward a clearer vision for change is to clarify what form of change should be considered:

- **Magnitude**: “We need to enhance our execution of the current path.”
- **Activity**: “We need to adopt new ways of pursuing the current path.”
- **Direction**: “We need to take a different path.”

Companies that have doubled down on flawed or outdated business strategies, for example, Kodak, Nokia, Xerox, BlackBerry, Blockbuster, Tower Records, and J.C. Penney are guilty of believing that a change of magnitude was sufficient instead of either a change of activity, such as adopting new technologies or distribution channels, or a change of direction, such as exiting certain businesses altogether.

Contrast these examples with companies whose ambitions led to risky changes in direction when their context called instead for changes of activity or magnitude: GE’s attempts
to be a first mover in green energy and the industrial internet of things through Ecomagination and Predix; Sony’s move into entertainment content; or Deutsche Bank’s efforts to become a global investment bank.

Many of the most impressive and successful corporate pivots of the past decade have taken the form of changes of activity — continuing with the same strategic path but fundamentally changing the activities used to pursue it. Think Netflix transitioning from a DVD-by-mail business to a streaming service; Adobe and Microsoft moving from software sales models to monthly subscription businesses; Walmart evolving from physical retail to omnichannel retail; and Amazon expanding into physical retailing with its Whole Foods acquisition and launch of Amazon Go.

Further confusing the situation for decision makers is the ill-defined relationship between innovation and change. Most media commentary focuses on one specific form of innovation: disruptive innovation, in which the functioning of an entire industry is changed through the use of next-generation technologies or a new combination of existing technologies. (For example, the integration of GPS, smartphones, and electronic payment systems — all established technologies — made the sharing economy possible.) In reality, the most common form of innovation announced by public companies is digital transformation initiatives designed to enhance execution of the existing strategy by replacing manual and analog processes with digital ones. At best, these are changes of magnitude.

In fact, it’s rare that an enterprise successfully uses digitalization as the opportunity for a fundamental reinvention of its business. But this is exactly what Shenzhen-based Ping An has done by transforming itself from a traditional provider of insurance products into the provider of five technology-enabled ecosystems, including China’s largest health care platform.

To address the ambiguity around the word change, and to better understand how innovation supports each form of change, let’s parse the distinctions between magnitude, activity, and direction and examine when each is the appropriate course of action.

Understand Why, When, and How to Change

There are two diagnostic questions that business leaders and their executive teams should use to assess the nature, scale, and timing of the change required in their specific context:

1. **Is the strategy fit to purpose?** This question establishes whether the current or proposed strategy is valued by an attractive and accessible audience — measured by size of market, willingness to pay, and business model appropriateness — and the level of resource outlay required to scale the strategy.

2. **Can relative advantage be sustained?** This question assesses whether the current or proposed strategy delivers meaningful differentiation — that is, a “difference that makes a difference” to the attractive, accessible audience — and the durability of the competitive advantage created by that difference.

The graphic “Diagnosing Fit to Purpose and Relative Advantage” identifies criteria by which these key decision makers should evaluate the performance of their business on each of two criteria.

This analysis is then used to chart the company’s position on the MAD (Magnitude-Activity-Direction) Change Matrix (MCM) (see the graphic below), providing insight about whether change should take the form of magnitude, activity, or direction. For example, if the consensus reveals high fit to purpose and high relative advantage, this points toward change in the form of enhanced magnitude within the current course. Having low fit to purpose and low relative advantage, however, sounds the alarm for implementing a fundamental shift in direction, defining a new strategy on a new path. The remaining cells in the matrix help distinguish the appropriate response to more nuanced combinations of fit to purpose and relative advantage.

Leaders at 3M used the MCM framework to determine the company’s response to increasing competition in one of its key markets as new entrants launched cheaper products.
The instinct of senior leadership in 2018 was that a change of direction for a line in the company’s electrical products division was required, possibly one that involved exiting the market. The consulting team tasked with aiding 3M’s analysis came to a different conclusion after taking a closer look: 3M enjoyed a strong fit to purpose and relative advantage. Lower-cost entrants might undercut the company’s pricing, but their competitive offerings were clearly inferior.

The MCM framework thus revealed that the best response for 3M would be to increase the magnitude of the company’s existing actions. Accordingly, it refined promotional efforts to better articulate its product’s distinct advantages and to educate the market about the risks of using a lesser alternative. 3M also committed resources to bolster the product’s functional value without increasing the cost to customers. This combination of education and promotion significantly enhanced the value proposition perceived by 3M’s customers, leading to further increases in market share, revenues, and, ultimately, profits.

Contrast this with the situation faced by Fujifilm in 2005. Drawing on the strategic thinking that had enabled it to supplant Kodak as the leading provider of chemical film in the 1990s, Fujifilm was alert to signals emerging that its now core offering — digital cameras — was in turn becoming commoditized. Analysis revealed that the company had low relative advantage because cameras of sufficient quality were being incorporated into smartphones. In response, the company implemented a major reorganization to support its diversification into industries such as pharmaceuticals and cosmetics while leveraging its reputation as an imaging company to become a provider of high-fidelity imaging for medical applications.

A wide range of distinct business decisions are often conflated under the broad rubric of “change and transformation management.” Our work with executives around the world validates that the strategic choices facing business leaders can be clarified by distinguishing between the three dimensions of change: magnitude, activity, and direction.

Business leaders also must be mindful that innovation is not in itself a strategy. Innovation is instead the mechanism for achieving a change in either magnitude, activity, or the less common and more dramatic requirement of heading in a different direction.

The dynamic nature of modern business keeps business leaders constantly questioning how to adapt their strategy to maintain their competitiveness. With the clarity provided by the MAD change matrix, business leaders can identify which form of change is most appropriate to their company’s context. While any form of change can be described as “new” and “different,” only the right form of change qualifies as “better.”

About The Authors

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Diagnosing Fit to Purpose and Relative Advantage

Decision makers can use this graphic to determine how low or high they are on the fit-to-purpose and relative advantage scales.

**Fit to Purpose**

The current or proposed strategy is valued by an attractive and accessible audience — measured by size of market, willingness to pay, and business model appropriateness — and the level of resource outlay required to scale the strategy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOW</th>
<th>MEDIUM</th>
<th>HIGH</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Your core audiences want more for less, and/or their growth rate or purchase frequency is declining, and/or they are seeking capabilities well outside your core, and/or they’re disconnecting from your cause.</td>
<td>■ Your core audiences are asking for more for the same cost, and/or their growth rate or purchase frequency is slowing, and/or they are seeking capabilities beyond your core, and/or they’re becoming ambivalent to your cause.</td>
<td>■ Your offering is highly valued and demanded by an attractive, expanding, and accessible audience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ More resources are needed to produce similar or even diminishing results.</td>
<td>■ The same investment produces similar or diminishing results.</td>
<td>■ The returns earned on incremental investment are strong and growing.</td>
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**Relative Advantage**

The current or proposed strategy delivers meaningful differentiation — a “difference that makes a difference” to the attractive, accessible audience — and the durability of the competitive advantage created by that difference.

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<th>MEDIUM</th>
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<tr>
<td>■ Others can replicate, improve upon, or offer a viable substitute for what you do.</td>
<td>■ What you do best is becoming more common.</td>
<td>■ Few competitors can deliver and sustain what you do well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■ Customers view you as undifferentiated.</td>
<td>■ Customers view you as somewhat differentiated.</td>
<td>■ Customers view you as highly differentiated.</td>
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The MAD Change Matrix

A company's change decision is informed by its performance on fit-to-purpose and relative advantage criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relative Advantage</th>
<th>Fit to Purpose</th>
<th>Reimagine Activity</th>
<th>Enhance Magnitude</th>
<th>Enhance Magnitude</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>Shift Direction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>Shift Direction</td>
<td>Reimagine Activity</td>
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<td>HIGH</td>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reimagine Activity</td>
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When Collaboration Fails and How to Fix It

Leaders can diagnose team dysfunction by looking for six common patterns.

BY ROB CROSS AND INGA CARBONI
Beth was excited when her CEO asked if she would take over a high-profile commercialization project — one expected to double the audiovisual technology company’s revenues in the coming decade and diversify its offerings. She would be replacing a valued leader who was leaving the organization. The project had been struggling, but it was still early days, and the potential upside was amazing. Beth accepted the assignment on the spot.

In her first week, Beth dug in. She found the project fully funded and staffed by 64 carefully selected people from departments across the company, including engineering, marketing, finance, and quality assurance. Three concurrent work streams — focusing on research, product development, and marketing and sales — had been established and a well-respected leader appointed for each.

Yet, 10 months later, the project was badly behind schedule and bogged down. Everyone with whom Beth spoke was frustrated with the slow pace of progress. They were all pointing fingers, but in different directions. The CEO believed the problem was a failure of leadership in the three work streams. The departing project leader blamed team members for not devoting enough time to the project. One team member said the problem was poor meeting management; another said key decisions weren’t being made in a timely manner.

What should Beth do? Appoint new work stream leaders? Relaunch the project? Restructure the group or the work? Add more people to the project team? Schedule more meetings or provide an online work platform?

It’s too soon to say. At this juncture, all Beth really knows is that the project is a collaborative effort critical to the success of the organization and that the effort is failing.

Collaborative failures can stem from a variety of conditions. Sometimes they are woven into the fabric of groups when they are formed, perhaps because team members’ incentives are misaligned or decision rights haven’t been defined. Sometimes they develop as groups evolve and their members interact, as when a group expands beyond the limits of its structure or gets bombarded with too many priorities.

Such problems are pernicious and prevalent. Work, after all, is increasingly collaborative. Research conducted by the Institute for Corporate Productivity found that 40% of high-performance organizations (that is, those that excel in revenue growth, profitability, and market share compared with their competition over a five-year time horizon) are shifting to a “high or very high degree” from traditional functions to more cross-functional project- and team-based work. In addition, trends that support and drive more collaboration are gaining momentum, including the rising use of Agile methodologies, the de-layering of hierarchies, the adoption of digital tools and technologies, and the dramatic transition to remote work in response to COVID-19.

Meanwhile, more and more leaders are facing challenges like Beth’s without a thorough understanding of the underlying causes or a toolkit for addressing them. In Deloitte’s 2019 Global Human Capital Trends survey, 65% of the nearly 10,000 respondents identified the shift from functional hierarchies to team-centric and network-based organizational models as “important” or “very important.” Yet only 7% of the respondents believed that their organizations were “very ready” to execute the shift to network-based models, and only 6% rated themselves “very effective” at managing cross-functional teams.

Our research sheds light on why groups are struggling. By and large, leaders are unleashing their teams without establishing the conditions needed to support collaboration. Moreover, when collaborative efforts break down, leaders are relying on conventional interventions that may not address the true nature of their problems.

The consequences are wide ranging. Collaborative failure hinders organizational and employee performance and productivity. It creates obstacles to
innovation, impeding both idea generation and implementation. It erodes employee engagement — contributing to stress, overload, and burnout.

But before leaders like Beth can mitigate the consequences, they must pinpoint the causes. Until then, any solution will be hit or miss — or, worse, it could exacerbate the problem.

Using organizational network analysis (ONA) to study groups across industries and geographies, we’ve identified the patterns of network connectivity and collaborative practices associated with high-performing teams and units. This research also revealed six patterns of collaborative dysfunction that have a negative impact on performance.

The six dysfunctional archetypes undermined performance in 88% of the 66 organizations we studied in both phases of this research. To better understand the patterns, we interviewed 100 leaders of collaborative efforts in 20 major companies. In this article, we share what we’ve learned about the types of dysfunction, a number of the drivers that create them, and a select set of remedies for addressing them.

**DYSFUNCTION #1: Hub-and-Spoke Networks**

Groups need formal and informal leaders, but sometimes they become the primary cause of collaborative breakdowns. ONA maps that show a preponderance of connections flowing through a group’s leaders or experts reveal a dysfunctional pattern that we call hub-and-spoke networks.

In this pattern, hubs tend to throttle down a group’s performance. They may hinder innovation by constraining the flow of information and resources through the spokes or by creating echo chambers in which ideas that penetrate the hub get an unwarranted degree of positive consideration. Overloaded leader-hubs can also become bottlenecks, slowing the pace of work because they can’t make timely decisions and eventually shift from proactive to reactive management.

Hub-and-spoke patterns often emerge when new groups are formed to address strategic initiatives or in times of change, such as mergers and reorganizations. One of our interviewees, a vice president in an insurance company, found herself in this situation when she became the leader of a new 80-member group in the finance department. The group was pulled together quickly by combining several preexisting, geographically disparate teams. It was immediately under pressure to deliver services at scale across the organization. But no time was taken to integrate the teams, nor were their structures and processes altered to accommodate their new combined scale. The VP became the central hub in the new group’s network by default.

“Everybody was operating in siloed work teams, and every team was operating in different ways — some successfully, some not. There was no ‘we’ and no interest in changing the various ways the teams were working, because each team believed that it was already operating in a perfect manner,” she recalls. “Meanwhile, everyone was relying on me for all of the coordination and decision-making. So my days were filled with one-on-one meetings. It was tough.”

The hub-and-spoke archetype can also stem from hard-to-break habits and behaviors. Ego and a strict command-and-control mindset can prompt leaders to create this pattern by micromanaging, interjecting when they do not have true expertise, or hoarding information and making too many decisions themselves. Team members can be overly dependent on leaders, too. We frequently see this when employees have been conditioned not to take risks, or to ask for approval on the smallest of decisions. Paradoxically, it can also happen when servant-minded leaders “save the day” too often and team members fall into the habit of not delivering on commitments. These behaviors are especially damaging if they become embedded in the organizational culture. Cultural mores that exaggerate the power differential between leaders and group members can heighten fears of failure, drive people to continually seek out validation from leaders, and stymie collaboration as a result.

The knee-jerk response to repairing hub-and-spoke networks is often restructuring the group or adopting a new technology to facilitate
communication. But if behaviors are driving the dysfunction, behavioral change is required. When an incoming leader took over a new product development group in a life sciences company, she bumped into a fear-driven culture created by her predecessor and soon noticed that a hub-and-spoke pattern had emerged: Small teams within the group ran everything by her — they were afraid to make any sort of move without her input. So she conducted a series of workshops for the entire group and held targeted one-on-one discussions with influential employees within the various subteams. These sessions and conversations examined fear-producing behaviors such as criticizing ideas in ways that demoralized teammates (“That is a bad idea”) and the unproductive patterns these behaviors had created (for instance, not reaching out to teammates proactively to solve problems). The one-on-ones encouraged individuals to take risks and assured them that the new leader operated differently and “had their backs.” The whole group discussed ways to hold one another accountable for constructive problem-solving norms and assuming positive intent, and the leader encouraged even the most junior employee to hold her accountable every step of the way.

Further, the group focused on a specific set of behaviors that generate energy in teams and agreed to collectively engage in these positive interactions.8

The structural elements of teams and organizations — the ways in which roles, decision rights, and work processes are defined — frequently create or aggravate the behavioral and cultural problems described above, resulting in hubs that obstruct collaboration. Supporting systems, especially rating systems and compensation plans, can further encourage excessive reliance on leader-hubs.

Often, the leaders of new groups are given strong decision rights and rely on strategic mandates and performance management processes to motivate followers to align with their objectives. These mechanisms help ensure that the group becomes properly established. But once group members get their footing, and particularly when groups begin to grow larger, such measures can unnecessarily slow networks down. To promote collaboration, leaders should scale back their involvement as soon as they see evidence that team members are capable of solving problems more independently. One partner in a financial advisory firm, which reorganized more than 50 offices into 11 territories, started off personally reviewing and approving all new business and hiring decisions in his territory. But as soon as the offices began consistently making business development and hiring decisions that reflected the needs of the entire organization, not just of their territory, he altered the decision rights — giving them to office managers — and stepped out of the process wherever his direct input wasn’t adding value.

**DYSFUNCTION #2: Disenfranchised Nodes**

Often, we see ONA maps in which some of the connections between nodes are stunted or missing altogether. The people who occupy the poorly connected nodes are isolated from the group: They may not receive the resources they need to do their work or the same opportunities to contribute to the group as their better-connected colleagues. As a result, work is not completed as efficiently as it should be, and the expertise of isolated team members is not fully utilized. We’ve named this archetype of collaborative dysfunction *disenfranchised nodes*.

Group members can become disenfranchised for various reasons. Sometimes their leaders or their colleagues cast them as outsiders because they are new to the group or because they are unlike other group members. Sometimes, as we have often seen with remote workers and contract employees, they are disconnected by virtue of their status within the group or their physical location.

A senior manager in the financial practice of a global strategic and operational effectiveness consulting company experienced this dysfunction firsthand when he joined a team that had recently expanded from a single group of 40 colocated team members to 140 members spread over four locations. Initially, the leaders of the group made a concerted effort to create connections among the team members...
and involve them in decisions by bringing everyone together for bimonthly meetings and social gatherings. Eventually, however, the cost and the time needed to meet regularly in person proved onerous, and the meetings were replaced with conference calls. And then the calls dwindled down to a half-hour before being eliminated altogether. “Quite a lot of the team, because we were working for individual clients and on client sites, began to feel more like individual contractors than part of the practice,” recalls the manager. “I put myself in the ‘disenfranchised’ camp.”

In this case, physical and temporal distance were the primary drivers of the dysfunction. The leaders of the financial practice addressed it by first reaching out to team members to understand why they were feeling disenfranchised. Then they

### WHY IS YOUR ORGANIZATION STRUGGLING TO COLLABORATE?

Understanding the six types of collaborative dysfunction is critical to effective problem resolution.

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<tr>
<th>DYFUNCTION</th>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>DRIVERS</th>
<th>SOLUTIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HUB-AND-SPOKE NETWORKS</td>
<td>Excessive reliance on formal and informal leaders slows decision-making, blocks innovation, alienates team members, and overloads leaders.</td>
<td>Hierarchical or overly controlling leadership behaviors.</td>
<td>Boost engagement in work by coaching people to assume an appropriate level of authority, and focus on what, not how.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISENFRANCHISED NODES</td>
<td>Marginalized team members lack access to resources and struggle to contribute, negatively affecting group performance and the disenfranchised members’ engagement and retention.</td>
<td>Leaders who elevate some group members above others.</td>
<td>Create a process or role for recognizing and reintegrating the disenfranchised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MISALIGNED NODES</td>
<td>Factions that don’t relate to one another slow down work, erode cohesion, and undermine project success.</td>
<td>Agreeing on integrated objectives but then pursuing work in a way that optimizes functional or business unit goals.</td>
<td>Co-create shared goals and priorities, and reinforce them with metrics and accountability.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Drivers**: Hierarchical or overly controlling leadership behaviors.
- **Drivers**: Dominance of experts.
- **Drivers**: Flaws in roles, decision rights, or incentives.
- **Drivers**: A fear-driven culture that promotes approval-seeking and validation.
- **Drivers**: Leaders who elevate some group members above others.
- **Drivers**: Onerous processes that cause some members to become disillusioned and withdraw.
- **Drivers**: A lack of trust in peers outside the function and/or an over-reliance on familiar faces.
- **Drivers**: Disconnection by virtue of status or physical location.
- **Drivers**: Agreeing on integrated objectives but then pursuing work in a way that optimizes functional or business unit goals.
- **Drivers**: Problems and solutions viewed only from one discipline’s perspective.
- **Drivers**: Clusters of like-minded teammates.
- **Drivers**: Distrust or competition among the team members.

- **Solutions**: Boost engagement in work by coaching people to assume an appropriate level of authority, and focus on what, not how.
- **Solutions**: Create a process or role for recognizing and reintegrating the disenfranchised.
- **Solutions**: Embed inclusion as a group value.
- **Solutions**: Add process touchpoints to give individuals a greater voice or more opportunities to participate.
- **Solutions**: Use technology to overcome geographic disconnection.
- **Solutions**: Co-create shared goals and priorities, and reinforce them with metrics and accountability.
- **Solutions**: Seek forums that build competence and interpersonal trust and that establish the value of group goals.
- **Solutions**: Create processes to identify and address misalignments.
- **Solutions**: Conduct exercises that enable members to connect outside the group and reset relationships.
began devoting more time to interacting with individual team members — checking in by phone more regularly and soliciting their opinions — and resumed a regular, albeit less frequent, schedule of in-person team meetings. “It wasn’t like people needed a fundamental change in their day-to-day work,” explains the manager. “Thinking back, it’s surprising how much of a difference this made, because they were relatively small changes.”

Leader behaviors, as well as other conditions, such as onerous demands and value conflicts, can compel team members to opt out of collaboration — a sort of voluntary disenfranchisement. In such cases, interventions should be aimed at team members. For instance, to ensure that everyone is regularly heard, leaders can hold daily scrums, where all team

### OVERWHELMED NODES

- Group growth that surpasses the limits of team and work design.
- Ineffective meeting and communication norms.
- Lack of effective collaborative workload metrics.
- Fear of making independent decisions or of being left out.
- A culture of overinclusion — both within the team and within the larger organization.

### ISOLATED NETWORKS

- Mandated separation of the group (à la Skunk Works or Agile initiatives).
- Hyperfocus on optimizing the outcome based on the group’s expertise or values rather than the end need.
- Echo chamber created by amplified input from a select few stakeholders.

### PRIORITY OVERLOAD

- Overemphasis on agility.
- Lack of North Star clarity/agreement among project leaders with competing demands.
- Personal and cultural values that lead to overcommitment.

- Redesign the group’s structure and work.
- Define and respect roles and responsibilities.
- Determine the impact-to-effort ratio of new activities, and empower team members to say no.
- Adopt and practice meeting and communication discipline.

- Systematically engage relevant stakeholders/influencers, including both positive and negative opinion leaders.
- Build in time for iteration with stakeholders.
- Focus on outcomes from the stakeholder perspective.
- Provide the group with greater visibility into broader organizational goals and initiatives.

- Map activities with external stakeholders.
- Review demands based on the task and collaborative footprint.
- Force decision makers to make trade-offs in the content and timing of demands.
- Adopt a priority definition process and mechanism/coordinator to screen incoming requests.
- Be transparent about workload and competing demands, and reset group priorities collectively.
members briefly say how their work is going, whether they are blocked on anything, and where they need help. One leader in a manufacturing company told us that he took this approach to give disenfranchised people more of a voice. “People connect both on and off work topics in ways that help them trust each other and also see ways that they should be working together. The structure really helped pull people that were drifting back in,” he says.

In addition to building participation into processes and roles, leaders should give team members multiple opportunities to provide feedback. The head of a development group in a biopharmaceutical company uses a variety of venues to obtain feedback, including semiannual meetings, one-on-one lunches with emerging leaders, and biweekly meetings with small groups of team members. “I get all kinds of feedback,” she explains, “and I always look for an idea or a fix that I can implement within 24 hours. This makes a huge difference.”

DY SF UNCTIO N #3: Misaligned Nodes

When individuals and factions within a network don’t cohere, it’s often because team members struggle to create value at the intersection of different technical skills or functional interests. Worse, they may seem to agree on goals and targets when they are together (either sitting in silent disagreement or unknowingly viewing objectives from conflicting perspectives) and then go off to work in disparate ways.

ONA maps of networks that are experiencing these kinds of problems can resemble a high school in which the student body is broken up into cliques that don’t relate to one another. Often, they show nodes within cliques that are well connected to one another but are poorly connected to or entirely disconnected from other cliques.

We call this archetype misaligned nodes. A vice president in a software company told us that he “struggled mightily” with misaligned technical teams within the engineering function. “We would have different teams in different countries working on almost the exact same problems with the same missions, but they would be reporting to different organizations in the company,” he explains. “We were automatically — and unintentionally — setting them up as competitors.”

Unsurprisingly, competitive tensions emerged, creating a structural misalignment that undermined collaboration. The VP tried to solve the problem by inserting a manager between the teams, but that only added to the tension; it created a hub-and-spoke dysfunction, and team members chafed at having to submit every decision to a parental authority figure. The VP also tried reorganizing the teams, but ownership issues across business and geographic units stymied this solution — it was a premature fix.

In this case, the misalignment was caused by structural drivers, such as role design, decision-rights allocation, and incentives. Fortunately, the VP didn’t give up. He shepherded his group through a collective process of mission, mandate, and goal definition, with help from an external consultant. “We decided what we were all about, what we should care about — and why — and what our group should look like,” he says. “After we’d gotten the basic engineering done, we turned to mapping people into roles and teams. This was pretty simple conceptually, but it was transformational because it allowed us to break through the obstacles that were keeping us apart.”

Misalignment can also be driven by a lack of awareness of the capabilities that other people provide and the value that can be produced by working together. The head of HR in a global food products business promotes that awareness in his functional teams in several ways. For example, at the start of each week, he and his direct reports pass around a “win jar” that contains sticky notes recording the past week’s successes without assigning individual credit. Each team member takes a turn reading one of the notes. This weekly exercise underscores how the team’s collaborative efforts benefit the organization, shines a light on the collective expertise the group is delivering, and provides positive reinforcement for collaboration through acknowledgment of shared successes. This executive also periodically convenes whole-team “away days” that mix educational and team-building activities with fun activities aimed at building connections.
DYSFUNCTION #4: Overwhelmed Nodes

The default belief among many leaders is “the more collaboration, the better,” but too much collaboration can gridlock projects just as surely as too little. Excessive demands on team members can lead to an inability to complete work, inefficient decision-making, and high levels of compromise. Obviously, all of this creates a drag on productivity. But it also produces disengagement and burnout, with ensuing harm to employee well-being and health. Excessive collaboration was revealed as a significant predictor of voluntary turnover in a number of the organizations we studied in other research.9 This archetype of collaborative dysfunction is called *overwhelmed nodes*.

A channel management executive in a global aerospace company confronted this issue when meeting overload began to bog down her team. “Everybody got pulled into a lot of things, and we got to a point where there were excessive numbers of people in multiple meetings,” she recalls. Eventually, a workshop conducted to analyze the team’s meeting load revealed that 30% to 40% of the time that team members were spending in meetings was unnecessary.

In this case, the problem was driven by poorly defined role and accountability parameters. The manufacturing executive reduced the collaborative demands on her team members by streamlining meeting attendance. “We identified the meetings that our team members needed to attend to move toward our goals. We decided who needed to be in which meetings and why they needed to be there,” she says.

Another common cause of overwhelmed nodes is growth. When groups are successful, they often expand. Eventually, however, they outgrow their structures and processes. Our interviews suggest that this begins to happen when group membership exceeds the single digits and becomes truly problematic when groups reach 20 people or more.

“In the past, I’ve had some special project teams that started with four or five people. When a team is that small, you tend to act in a very collaborative decision-making mode,” explains the engineering general manager of a manufacturing equipment company. “But when you try to scale that group to 120 people in 18 months, you discover that it’s impossible to get a unanimous opinion from them on virtually any topic. You find that collaborative decision-making gets very inefficient, and you start to see people disconnect. You can try to switch to a priority-based model in which leaders are setting priorities, communicating deliverables, and measuring key performance indicators, but then you get a lot of hurt feelings because people are left out.”

To make the transitions necessary to manage growth more palatable, the general manager now includes team members in reorganization initiatives. He selects a representative group of team members and works with them to determine what is going wrong with the team and how its problems should be addressed.

The overwhelmed-nodes pattern can also stem from leaders overestimating the capacity of team members or underestimating the time required for collaborative work — even as 85% or more of most people’s time is spent in collaborative activities.10 Team members, too, may contribute to this dysfunction by trying to take on more than they can handle for reasons of their own — such as a deep desire to help or a need for accomplishment, status, or control. A fear of saying no to leaders and can-do workplace mores are common drivers as well.

In many cases, effective workload analytics and metrics can remedy the dysfunction by giving leaders a clearer view of everyone’s capacity. Without them, the demands of tasks are often invisible to leaders. Task A and task B may appear to be similar in heft on a sticky note or a project plan. But task A may require coordination across four functions, three time zones, and two leaders who have different priorities, while task B involves only a few people who are colocated and have a strong working relationship.

One leader in a Silicon Valley tech company developed a four-point taxonomy to describe the level of collaborative effort that a task takes. “To define the level, we ask, ‘What’s the level of effort to build the content? What’s the level of effort then to share it, socialize it, get decisions?’” she explains. She uses the taxonomy to ensure that everyone on her team can quickly understand what their peers are doing and has an accurate view of workload.
DYSFUNCTION #5: Isolated Networks

Networks don’t exist in a vacuum, but too often we find teams operating without full awareness and consideration of their larger context. They may be poorly connected to their key stakeholders or customers or disconnected altogether, lacking the insight, resources, and external expertise needed to properly define and deliver needed results. Accordingly, we’ve named this archetype isolated networks.

The well-known silo effect is a major consequence of this collaborative dysfunction and one with which many large companies struggle. Several executives at a major carmaker told us that isolated groups within the company were creating obstacles to innovation acceptance and slowing decision-making in new product development programs.

In this case, sequestering teams in spaces designed for ideation and putting them on short sprint deadlines resulted in members not reaching out to the broader organization for information and expertise critical to ensuring that innovation efforts succeed globally. In addition, excessively formal (and ultimately costly) stage-gate approval processes slowed decisions about new product development efforts, which left teams toiling without input for extended periods.

To address the collaborative dysfunction, the carmaker’s executives redesigned processes to ensure that relevant external expertise was sought in a timely fashion. Rather than overstaffing these teams with experts — a solution that would have led to other problems — senior leaders brought capabilities into and out of teams as needed. One group even used a “human library,” where experts were quite literally checked out on loan. In addition, high-level decision makers stepped in earlier, engaging with prototypes rather than with traditional voluminous engineering and market studies that would delay decisions for months on end. And they staffed teams with an array of network influencers — not just the same experts called upon over and over again — to include truly passionate employees who “knew deeply what the product line stood for.”

Isolation is sometimes deliberate and not problematic per se. For instance, Skunk Works and Agile initiatives may be purposely cut off from their parent organizations and the outside world to protect them from external interference or to enhance their focus. But unless this isolation is carefully designed, it can backfire by producing outputs and insights that deliver localized utility while missing more valuable, global impacts. In essence, the strategic mandate of the group cuts it off from broader relevance and outside assistance.

Catering to leaders’ whims can lead to isolated network dysfunction as well. “Sometimes we see this … when ideas first surface,” explains the talent acquisition director at a major health insurer. “[Leaders] get an idea that they are excited about and think will work — a shiny, bright object, like a new technology. And we end up going after it without really talking to the right people to know if it works for our organization or our customers.”

The company’s executives remedied this problem with a more rigorous approach to idea development — one that incorporates some of the principles of design thinking. “Before we take off on an effort to improve our customer experience, we spend time talking about it with our customers,” she says. “We don’t undertake ideas until we’ve ensured that they will work across the different segments of our business.”

Another driver of isolated network dysfunction is an excessive focus on internal expertise or values. The head of a center of excellence at a different health insurer identified this problem in his organization: “We have one process-improvement team that is a model of one-team culture, but the strong value doesn’t extend to communication or collaboration with other areas of the organization. They think they’re doing a great job, but it’s very contained inside their own little group.” To remedy the situation, he has involved the team, and particularly its leader, in other process-improvement initiatives. “We are providing more visibility into what’s going on outside the team, so there is a better understanding of the external connection points with things that are happening within it,” he explains.
The challenge of avoiding priority overload is often compounded by personal aspirations and cultural values. Servant-based mindsets and the desire to “just say yes” can aggravate the problem. Putting all demand requests through a prioritization process creates a psychological distance and enables clear-eyed appraisals.

DYSFUNCTION #6: Priority Overload

In optimized networks, the boundaries between the group and the external world are permeable. Priorities are determined in consultation with external stakeholders and adopted according to the capacity of the network. This ensures not only that the group is properly aligned with the rest of the organization, but also that it can efficiently and effectively deliver on its goals.

There is a problem associated with permeable borders, however: The more open a group is to its stakeholders, the greater its vulnerability to excessive stakeholder demands. When groups attempt to be responsive to too many stakeholders with competing needs and time frames, they risk falling into a form of collaborative dysfunction we call priority overload. Once a group becomes overloaded in this way, team members lose sight of their mission and highest priorities — and as a result, their most important deliverables can be forgotten or ignored. As they find it increasingly difficult to juggle competing demands, their execution and performance falls off, and their engagement and well-being suffer.

The CIO of the food products company mentioned above told us that priority pressures are a constant reality in his functional arena. “We’ve got a very demanding set of stakeholders. They all think they’re more important than the next person,” he said. “Unfortunately, we can’t just say, ‘OK, we’ll throw all your demands up onto a project schedule and deliver against it.’ The fact is that all the money and time in the world can’t overcome the complexity involved in delivering on some of these requests.”

Priority overload often arises from a combination of issues: a lack of coordination among disparate stakeholders; an inability to understand the workload of requests (both the tasks and collaborative footprint); overwhelmed stakeholders who make ill-thought-out requests; and, of course, first-level leaders who agree to all requests, because being responsive has been critical to their success to date. “At the moment,” the CIO said when we first spoke, “it’s not actually the stakeholders that are my problem; it’s team leaders who don’t understand how to respond to the demand in a logical way.”

To help team leaders prioritize, the CIO started using one-on-one coaching sessions. “We identify their key stakeholders, discuss how to analyze demands, and consider the budget and resources needed to meet them,” he says. “Then we discuss how to explain it to stakeholders when they can’t meet a demand.”

To avoid priority overload in the first place, leaders should ask stakeholders to prioritize their requests before sharing them with the team; they should also explain both the level of demand involved in those requests and the capacity of the team to meet them. Some leaders do this by bringing stakeholders into a room and having them collectively shift tasks on sticky notes above and below a line that demarcates the team’s capacity. This process tends to rightsize the requests placed on the team. Even more important, it helps stakeholders see how they can combine “asks” to accomplish greater outcomes. Similar alignment can be rapidly attained through short virtual forums using polling software.

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desire to “just say yes” can aggravate the problem. Putting all demand requests through a prioritization process creates a psychological distance and enables clear-eyed appraisals.

Simple heuristics can help team members understand demand parameters and thus better assess requests. One example is a two-by-two matrix that plots requests by impact and effort. Another example comes from a software development company that established a common agreement on speed and functionality for each new release. “The idea is you can turn the volume knob up to 11 on one of these … but not both … when making requests,” one manager told us. “Just this language has totally changed what often was a combative issue with some stakeholders.”

INCREASINGLY, WORK IS TEAMWORK. But the structures, cultures, and practices in many companies make collaboration within and across teams difficult. The various drivers of collaborative dysfunction reveal the shortcomings of standard solutions such as formal redesigns (think “spans” and “layers”), collaborative tool deployments, and the current craze for Agile methodologies that often underperform because they assume a one-size-fits-all solution. By understanding how the six dysfunctions described above play out and identifying which ones exist at your company, you’ll be on your way to creating a truly collaborative workplace.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors received support and funding for the research behind this article from the Innovation Resource Center for Human Resources.

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Reprint 62207.
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