The Practices of Collaboration

For use in Augment™ training:
To learn and build successful teamwork habits.
To avoid acquiring, by accident, failure-prone teamwork habits

I have a friend who likes debate. He used to pose complex questions and take whichever side I didn't. As one less skilled in rhetoric, it seemed that each conversation ended once I grew too frustrated to continue. One day, when I was fumbling and fuming through one of these discussions – the subject of which I can't remember – my friend gave me the best advice for passionate discourse I've ever heard:

"You have to remove the idea from yourself," he said. He touched his chest with his fingertips then pulled out "the idea," opening his hand into a grip that held an invisible dodgeball.

You must set the idea in front of you and turn it around and upside down, he said as he rotated the ball in his hand. You have to stop taking it personally and start examining it from all angles. When you look at it that way, questions and counterpoints become resources that lead to new ideas and better understanding.

Discourse is probably an unconventional illustration for collaboration in a software company but my friend's advice impacted a lot more than my debating skills. He taught me a valuable lesson in collaborating with other people to develop new ideas and solve problems I wouldn't see on my own.

The benefits of collaboration are numerous, but that doesn't make it easy. Collaboration challenges you to interact with people whose knowledge and experiences are different than yours. They might be more developed or less developed, depending on the subject. Your instinct might be to take offense or become defensive – to fumble and fume. You may be tempted to exit when the questions reach beyond the boundaries of your current skills or intellect.

To work collaboratively, each person must practice certain collaborative behaviors. In my first few weeks of investigating collaboration, I've encountered several attempts to define those behaviors and I think the best way to explain them is to break them down into three categories: **sharing knowledge**, **learning**, and **building consensus**.

As I learned about the art of discourse, ideas are best discussed when they are removed from yourself and examined from all angles. The best discussions occur between multiple people with different perspectives, experiences, and skills who are all convinced that they alone do not hold the answer. In a collaborative environment, the goal isn't to see who wins the debate – it's

to examine and evolve the idea. Agreeing to behave in ways that promote collaboration will lead to the results we're looking for.

These behaviors are not all-encompassing. They are the start of a framework I'm developing to teach collaboration to people who are used to working alone. We are operating on the understanding that collaborative endeavors *require* insight from multiple people (as seen in the Tanner article). For an introduction to the different levels of group work (the most complex of which is the kind of collaboration we're aiming for), I recommend this blog post by Michael Sampson, a collaborative work consultant and prolific keynote speaker on collaboration. His writing helped me organize the categories.

Collaborative Behaviors

I've included the "categories" as anchors. These behaviors are presented in a logical order but I'm not putting this out there as a step-by-step how-to. Again, it's not comprehensive. It's a start.

Sharing Knowledge — **Contributing generously** — The development of an idea requires input from multiple people who are willing to generously provide the insight and experiences they've acquired. This may seem like basic knowledge sharing. Since that's the category, why is it included here? I think generosity takes it a step deeper. It's about volunteering information that group members may not know you have but is useful in the development of an idea. The most effective collaborative endeavors involve members ready and eager to apply their experiences to the process.

Sharing Knowledge — **Giving feedback** — It's the only way to improve. Collaborative teamwork depends on people working toward an evolving outcome. In order for the outcome to evolve – to keep moving along the process of creating – we must share knowledge that builds toward a consensus and helps others learn. This requires constant feedback to ensure that we detect and correct comprehension failures. Note: Not all feedback is negative!

Learning — **Asking open-ended questions** — In group work settings, there are those with the bad habit of only posing questions to which they already know the answer. In contrast, posing open-ended, unanswered questions can help improve collaborative culture by inviting vulnerability and inviting the sharing of knowledge and work toward building a consensus. Questions do not have to be limited to the existing knowledge of the group. Rather, questions will lead to lines of inquiry and investigation that could be assigned and reported back on (think: Tanner's jigsaw groups).

Learning — **Following curiosity** — It follows that curiosity is a necessary ingredient. Only people willing (and, more so, *eager*) to follow questions with inquiry and investigation will further the collaborative process. By introducing new information that aligns with group purposes and shares knowledge, we can build consensus.

Learning — **Individual evaluation, processing** — Taking time as an individual to evaluate and weigh information presented in a group setting can lead to new and better insight and better open-ended questions, particularly if the individual processes information internally.

Building Consensus — **Active listening** — There is a behavior that makes receiving feedback and responding to open-ended questions possible. I will build on this premise by starting with the phrase "active listening" to suggest that a person's openness to criticism benefits the goal of learning, sharing knowledge, and building consensus will aid in the effort. This is the hardest part of removing the idea from yourself and looking at all the angles. Active listening takes the place of taking offense or becoming defensive. Active listening is asking the question, What can I learn from this feedback?

Building Consensus — **Creative problem-solving** — This is key to the process. Call it innovation or creativity, a true collaborative environment requires that all actors regularly employ find novel solutions to problems. This phrase is used often, especially in discussion of the soft skills employers are looking for in the modern worker. I will build on this buzz-phrase in the future. For now, it stands as a collaborative behavior because it is likely that the problems encountered by a group whose solution isn't obvious will require creative input from multiple sources.