Why Collaboration Is An Individual Effort
Emily Eldridge at TED Talks

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Emily Eldridge:
So when we think about collaboration, it’s something that’s really been ingrained in our culture and it’s becoming more and more prominent but when you think about where you learned collaboration when you were younger if you will, think about team work; you build something in the sandbox and you’ve got multiple kids there and somebody has the imagination to start building the sand castle and somebody has the dexterity to build one of the turrets and figure out where the moats going to go, and then you go to preschool and then you go to elementary school and you have group projects and thinks that you’re supposed to do as a group, and everything’s described as a team effort – make a group effort. If you make a group effort, it will go well. That was really frustrating me – ah, I hated working with other people, absolutely hated it ...ah, I would go to my teacher and say, “I would rather work alone,” and my teacher would say: “Make a group effort, it will go really well, just make a group effort”.

And for me, that wasn’t natural. I as an individual am not naturally inclined to want to collaborate with other people. I didn’t find it constructive. I didn’t get anything out of it...in fact, I really felt like it slowed the process down. I wanted to get it done, and I think what our society has done is said that collaboration is a natural ability, that we all have the ability to collaborate, it’s just how hard you’re going to work. I think we need to take a step back and consider the individual: how do they know how to collaborate? When you have a student walking up and saying: “I would rather work alone”. The teacher should say, “Why is that? What’s going on that you don’t feel like collaborating with other students?” There is some sort of disconnect about how individually we should be approaching collaboration, and it shouldn’t be assumed that it’s a natural inclination for everyone. So the “I in Team” is critically important, and that individual effort, individual approach to what we do, for everything in life is really at its base core, a three-part process: so it’s life experience, it’s your personality and your contextual knowledge. But when we talk about students, we’re talking about people who have limited life experience. They haven’t been around as long. So the predominate factor for them is their personality, and this is the same time they’re making a lot of opinions that they’re going to have for the rest of their life, and so when you’re working off of your personality, you’re working off what you’re naturally inclined to do. And like I said, naturally no interest in collaboration for me! So that personality becomes that more important, and in forming those opinions that last for a really long time, so when I would go to the teacher and say: “I’m really frustrated, I really don’t want to work with other people!” They made me that more frustrated by saying: “Just make the group effort – it’ll be fine” – and that’s when I learnt to hate collaboration.

F Works well with others.

If you know me, ah... and several of you do, I’m a perfectionist in a lot of areas in my life, and in everything besides domesticity. So when it came to my academics, I had to get good grades. It wasn’t an option, and it was for my own personal benefit. But you know in elementary school where they have that space where they talk about character development...apart from my grades in math, I didn’t do so well in ‘works well with others’. It was a personal decision: I really again felt like it was not a good use of my time and energy to work well with other people. I would rather work with books, talk to adults who had life experience, and really just come up with the idea on my own. It
was faster. I really felt like other kids were really slow, and so, people didn’t like me. You can be glad you weren’t my mother – my mother had lots of questions about why I didn’t have as many friends as I should have, and they all said it was ‘me’ – and it was me because this is my personality type.

So there are a bunch of personality types out there and they’re all generally flawed because they’re generalising groups of people and everybody’s an individual.

But Myers Briggs, I think, does a good job for me in explaining who I am, and it says I am an INTJ.

There’s been a couple of people quoted here today, uh... Thomas Jefferson with an INTJ; Isaac Newton was an INTJ, but not only them, there are some really brilliant people in that category – uh... way more brilliant than I am.

But this is who I am, and for me, being this way means this:

“INTJs apply (often ruthlessly) the criterion, “Does it work?”... This in turn produces an unusual independence of mind, freeing the INTJ from the constraints of authority, convention, or sentiment for its own sake... they possess the unusual trait combination of imagination and reliability... both perfectionism and disregard for authority may come into play.... INTJs do not readily grasp the social rituals... Perhaps the most fundamental problem, however, is that INTJs really want people to make sense.”

Collaboration – in a group – in elementary school: people don’t make sense, and so for me it was always frustrating. I don’t readily grasp the social rituals, am introverted. I think independently and I don’t want to have small talk. And it’s really hard for me to understand exactly how to collaborate with other people naturally. But the good thing is that we have life experiences. We get older, we hopefully get wiser, and we hope we have great mentors. I have been very fortunate to have a great academic career followed by a young but still pretty awesome professional career so far, and over the course of that time, I’ve met some really powerful people: heads of major motion picture studios, directors, people who make multi million dollar investments, and one of the things that happened is they took the time to listen to me. They took the time to hear my opinions and take them into account on what they were developing, and when that happens, you start to realize that even if it’s not natural, you want to be heard and you should probably learn to listen to other people as well. And that for me, those life experiences taught me that collaboration, whether or not I’m naturally inclined to do it, is a powerful tool in our professional careers and in our academic careers. It’s something that I wish I had learned much earlier on so that I could have gotten to know students in my class a lot better, but I think it’s something that if we all took a step back, we could do a better job of regardless of our personality type. So as I began to realize the power of collaboration, I had to figure out how to do it – not natural! So for me there are four things:

• The first one, understand and articulate your perspective. You have to be confident. You have to know what you bring to the table. That’s number one. Once you know that then you
have to tell other people that because they do not know who you are and when you sit down at the table you have to explain what it is that you’re bringing.

- **And then you have to explain your quirks.** I did not, or I did not, like people who sat there and didn’t say anything, and didn’t have anything to contribute to the group. I decided they were not willing to contribute and that they were a waste of a group member… uh, but as several people that I’ve worked with in the past have taught me… uh, they need time to go back and consider ideas independently, and take time to consider them, and then bring them back to the table. They’re not quick on their feet, and that’s OK, but you do have to explain it because otherwise to someone like me, I’m going to cast you off as somebody who doesn’t have anything to contribute. So explaining those parts is essential.

- **Value the collaborative process and encourage others to do so as well.** If you walk into the room thinking it’s going to be a waste of your time, it will be a waste of your time and it will be a waste of everyone else’s. And you walking in and saying: “Well I know what collaboration is now and as long as you all bring it too, we’re going to be fine, isn’t enough. You have to encourage the others in the group to make that same individual effort and to articulate who they are and how they operate because that’s going to be a part of the cumulative effort. The team effort is what matters in the end but you have to be willing to encourage the others to make their individual effort as well to get to that solution.

- **Finally, know the goal. Work hard.** It seems obvious, but everyone has their own way of how that works. You don’t necessarily have to be the loudest speaker in the group. That person may be a great contributor but there may be someone else who is not that loud but has something that they will provide that will ultimately contribute to the solution. So in your own way, figure out what working hard is for you, don’t judge other people and just make sure that everyone, that you’re encouraging everyone to make their individual effort.

I work for an entrepreneurial company now and I’ve had to learn those four things, and uh… it’s been really tough for me. So getting people together and coming up with the concepts, and one of the things we’re working on now will hopefully revolutionise the way that advertising agencies partner with mixed sources in the communication space. It will totally change the way the industry works. I wouldn’t have developed that on my own; I can’t implement it on my own, but if it works, we can change an industry and make it that much better and that much more effective in the marketplace. That’s what it is: it’s great minds collaborating,

...and I had to learn the hard lesson that that’s what I had to go through in order to do it.

So my takeaway for all of you is to take some time, be introspective, figure out where you fall on the collaborative spectrum. If you are already good at it, continue to encourage others. If you are not so good at it, consider how you can be: be confident, spend the time learning about yourself. On top of that I would encourage you to find a young person that you know and sit down with them and ask for their input on something that you think that you could collaborate on. Collaboration doesn’t necessarily have to build something. It’s considering an idea from
multiple perspectives. Even if you just ask them a question and consider their idea, that’s a collaborative process and you’ve given them a life experience that will hopefully teach them the power of collaboration as well.

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