Human connection and purpose:
the missing links in creative collaboration

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What is the aim of this article?

Creative Collaboration is often positioned as a means to help increase team or organisational performance. But it this enough? In this article I want to explore the question "Why Creative Collaboration isn't enough to increase team performance, and what is missing?". Here I will specifically focus on issues of Human Connection and having a sense of Purpose, and I demonstrate that these are key for any form of team performance improvement. I believe that without these, any concept or model that is supposed to help improve team performance is bound to fail in the long run. I begin by exploring briefly the meaning of creative collaboration, then I illustrate my argument by sharing two short case studies and a few personal examples, as well as referring to some publicly available literature on the subject.

Where does my passion for this perspective come from?

I always find this question very interesting, because passion has its origins in many surprising sources. Our upbringing and family play a big role. Hillman says in his book The Soul's Code (2017) that it is not so much the events in our childhood that shape us but more so the memories we have about these events. I grew up in Amsterdam, where I never felt I really belonged to my family. Yes, it was my family, and no big dramas played out, but I always felt I didn't fit in.

There was no talk about or sharing of emotions. You were not supposed to stand out or do something different. Something was missing for me that I could not express back then. I remember the mother of my first girlfriend once saying "You are so different compared to the rest of your family". I guess that is when my strong desire for connection and belonging really took off.

During my career, first as a change consultant at one of the top three international consultancy firms in the Netherlands, and later as a team coach, I developed a sixth sense when it comes to belonging and having a sense of purpose, or the lack of it. But this was still unconscious. When I was thriving and in flow, both of them were present. Usually, this was when I was working closely with people with similar intentions and values.

I know now that things like innovation, creativity, quality and open communication were present in those situations. When these are present, I feel a sense of belonging and that I am in the right place with the right people. For you, the reader, these aspects might be different. When I felt I wasn't too happy, it was usually because I felt left on my own, singled out, or at least that is what I believed to be true back then.

For example, situations when I felt on my own or singled out, my loyalty was questioned, I was denied participation in something that I believed was important or every team member was just doing their own thing. It wasn't until I started to develop my skills as an executive and team coach that I began to understand the power of connection and purpose. Over the years of my coaching, training and facilitation career, I have used these two concepts a lot in order to build foundations to improve team performance.

Creative collaboration – a brief exploration

Every now and then you see new ways popping up to look at team performance. We've seen for example Design Thinking, Team Dynamics, Systems Thinking and now we see Creative Collaboration. When you browse the internet, you will see a lot of articles diving into the benefits of creativity in the workplace and how you can do this together. Most of these articles just stay at a superficial level and talk about work formats or the business benefits.

For this article, I did a little bit of research, and I'd like to invite you to do the same. In one of the change workshops I have led, I asked 20 managers three questions. These managers ranged in gender (60% male, 50% female), age (26-37) and nationality (North America, Europe and Asia). They all worked in an international fast changing environment. It would be great if you would answer them too for yourself. In the following table, I summarise the most common words these managers used in their answers. You might like to compare your responses with theirs.

Table 1: Survey results

> Question 1: When you read the word 'creativity', what does it mean to you, and what is the first word that comes to your mind?
>
> Here the most common answers were about: Out-of-the-box thinking, creative work formats, art, doing things differently, lateral thinking, colourful, diversity, drawing.
>
> Question 2: When you read the word 'collaboration', what does it mean to you and what is the first word that comes to your mind?
>
> Here the managers answered: Together, results-oriented, goals, communication, complementary strengths, team, efficiency.
>
> Question 3: What is the essence of a high performing team?

The answers given to this question contained words like: Focus, aligned goal, respect, trust, continuous improvement, understanding, acting as one, success, happy. When you read these answers, you can see that there are preconceived ideas about what creativity and collaboration means when you don't look below the surface. Therefore, as a team leader, coach or facilitator, you run the risk of limiting yourself when you yourself are trying to facilitate creative collaboration within your team, or when you're being forced into a dictated meaning of creative collaboration by an external facilitator. Now, this might be a quick conclusion to draw, but think about it. If this is the perception managers have about creativity and collaboration, what do you think they will ask for when they need help, or what they will do themselves? Unless we look beneath the surface of terms/concept of creative collaboration we run the risk of limiting our range of our interventions as leaders and facilitators of creative collaboration

I am curious what your answers to these questions are and how it colours your perspective and possibly the types of team interventions you are thinking about when facilitating or encouraging Creative Collaboration.

So, what is missing?

Awareness of connections

In her book, Creative Collaboration, Vera John-Steiner (2006) asserts that:

> 'the mind – rather than thriving on solitude – is clearly dependent upon reflection, renewal and trust inherent in sustained human relationships.'

She explores this proposition in a wide range of communities who view learning and thinking as a social process. In other words, human connection is key for them.

For me connection is all about relationships in a broad sense. Connection to self, others, ideas and concepts etc. The concept of connection is not only important when it comes to collaboration, but also when it comes to creativity. Thomas M. Disch (1974) says:

> "Creativeness is the ability to see relationships where none exist."

In other words, seeing connections (relationships) is key to creativity. Building on this creativity for me is the ability to take different perspectives on problems, solutions, concepts in order to find hidden patterns and to make connections between seemingly unrelated things.

And yet, so many times connection is overlooked or hidden between the lines, as is the case with many other concepts. When you look at Lenionci's work on the Five Dysfunctions of Teams (2002), explicit reference to "connection" is missing. Yes, he mentions 'trust', but connection goes deeper and precedes trust. What I mean is that in order to trust (or not) someone you need to experience if there is a connection (i.e. we 'click'). Think about it, when do you start trusting someone? The same absence is found in Tuckman's (1965) work on team development stages. In order to create a high performing team, you need to understand how connection works.

Sense of purpose

It is not only connection that is needed to create a high performing team, there also needs to be a sense of purpose. The sense that there is a bigger driving force, a bigger WHY? and a reason why a company or team exists at all. More on this later.

In the next section, I illustrate my argument with two case studies.

Case study 1

I recently coached a management team who "wanted to inject some creativity" in their team. This team led a global market research company and was spread across the world in order to lead their respective regions. They needed to look for different ways of working to cope with the ever-increasing workload, and find ways for their own direct reports to work together in a better way. The MD had read some articles about Creative Collaboration and thought that would help them a lot. Although I started to help them learn more creative ways to work together, I also introduced a fair share of "connecting", getting to know each other at deeper and different levels. Some examples of what they did are:

- Exploring personal values

- Exploring their personal history and how it shaped who they are today as individuals and leaders

- Exploring unconscious bias and fears

They found this a bit uncomfortable at the beginning, but followed along quickly. When we evaluated the coaching, the team mentioned that this "connecting" had made the biggest difference and had enabled them to find different ways to work together in a quicker and easier manner, and mostly on their own. They had expected some personal conflict along the way. This did not happen because they were able to connect to each other in a different way than before. They had found a deeper understanding about each other, and had avoided damaging personal conflict without shying away from heated discussions on content.

This is a simple case study showing the importance of human connections. I think a *lack* of connection can have an even more dramatic impact. Research presented by Susan Pinker (2017) concludes that the two most important predictors to a long life are close relationships and social integration. Therefore, not looking to create healthy connections is at the very least a missed opportunity.

Two different perspectives on connection

I want to start to illustrate two different perspectives by sharing a quote from Esther Perel (2018). She works in a different space, but expresses the fundamental power of connection in the following way:

> "I live with one perennial truth: the quality of your relationships is what determines the quality of your life. The bonds and the connections we establish with other people give us a greater sense of meaning, happiness and wellbeing than any other human experience.

> This is what the best cultures encode. Human connection remains non-negotiable, across the spheres of our lives, for meaning. It's no different for organisation and team health—and for performance."

I want to point out two things that I understand she is highlighting. These are:

- Bonds and connections: For me this translates to personal (human) connections

- Greater sense of meaning: For me, this translates as meaning a greater sense of purpose

Knowing this, plotted onto teams, connection can be considered from the following two perspectives:

1. Psychological safety (connecting to people)
2. Purpose (connecting to business)

Psychological safety sits at the level of individual connections, and Purpose is important in how we connect to a specific context, in this case a particular business. Let me explain what I mean by this in a little more detail.

Psychological safety

Research done by Google (2015) shows that psychological safety (evident when team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other) is the number one element to high performing teams. Research done by Dr Paul Zack, University of Claremont (2017), shows that psychological safety triggers the production of the natural hormone oxytocin. Quite apart from its medical properties, oxytocin signals to our

brain that it is safe to collaborate with a person. It also influences our sense of trust by strengthening our emotional connection with others. Oxytocin helps us to increase levels of trust and empathy, to create more and deeper personal connections, to take risks and to be more creative. When feeling safe, we show more of ourselves, we experience more freedom to express ourselves, and enables us to step outside our comfort zone. In a psychologically safe environment, both creativity and collaboration have a good chance to thrive.

Purpose

Purpose is all about the question "Why do we (as a business) exist?". If I, as an individual, can relate to the purpose of a business (or work team), I can connect with that business in a deeper and more meaningful way. A well-articulated purpose results in higher engagement and lower staff turnover. This principle also underpins successful innovative companies. Linda Hill says in her Ted Talk (2014):

"Innovation starts at creating a world where people want to belong to".

In other words, this requires connecting to a (higher) purpose. The consultancy firm EY backs this up with research (2018), and argues that companies with a strong purpose and where people feel connected to that purpose outperform their market by 42% financially. In the same research they also mention that: "companies with a purpose boast a stronger culture than those without and also report greater levels of psychological safety."

Case study 2

Two years ago, I coached another management team that was looking for ways to operate more as a team in order to help grow the business. This management team was leading the European part of an event management agency. Gender diversity was 50/50, with people from the UK, France and the Netherlands. As a part of my preparation, I interviewed the managers individually. Some of them, 25%, were just in it for the money. Others were afraid to resign because of they thought they would not find another similar job, since they worked in a niche market. In essence, half of the team did not feel a sense of belonging, either to each other and to the business. Beside this, there were no clear agreements on ways of working or ways of communicating. Above all, they did not feel safe. I gave them this feedback as a team. They ignored the feedback, and still wanted to carry on with the coaching. The result was that every intervention stayed at surface level, addressing ways of working and some basic communication techniques. They didn't finish the coaching, and I recently learned that a couple of the team members had left, and that the business is stagnant.

Looking at this short case study, apart from no clear ways of working, for me the most important things that were missing were purpose and psychological safety. People didn't even feel comfortable enough to dive deeper and more creatively into their team problems.

When connection and purpose are in place, you might even discover that creative collaboration comes as a side effect, and you might run the risk to have a lot of fun implementing creative collaboration. People might even tell you what is truly lacking, and even come up with good solutions to increase team performance.

The success of '10 ways to ruin your business'

One great example of this was that of a team who learned to create a safe environment with human connection and a sense of purpose at the heart of it. When developing new ideas for their business, we used an exercise called "10 ways to ruin your business". People would find 10 ideas to ruin their business, then flip the ideas and end up with ideas to help their business thrive. They took control of this working format themselves. They created two teams, one being the villains whose sole purpose was to ruin the business, and the other team were the superheroes whose purpose was twofold. One was to counter the villains and the other purpose was to generate new ideas that were not affected by the villains. You can imagine the fun they had. All the ingredients for a good Hollywood movie production were present. This is how creative collaboration can naturally unfold when you put human connection and sense of purpose first.

Conclusion

When I was growing up no trip to a highly entertaining theme park or pancakes everyday could make up for the sense of belonging and safety that I was missing. Maybe it would have helped in the short term but certainly not in the long term. The same with creative collaboration. It will not solve your problem. *People* do. And in order for these people to feel relatively comfortable with, for them, concepts like creative collaboration, they need to feel a sense of belonging, connecting with each other and with the business purpose. If this is not in place, you can pick any method or concept and it will fail in the long run.

My final message. When you consider looking into creative collaboration in your team or business, please stop and reflect. Why do you think you need this? What is the angle you are taking? What is the core issue that you haven't thought of? Why not start with facilitating the creation of healthy connections between people and how people connect with the business purpose? Take it one step at a time, and you'll be surprised at the creative collaborations that emerge.

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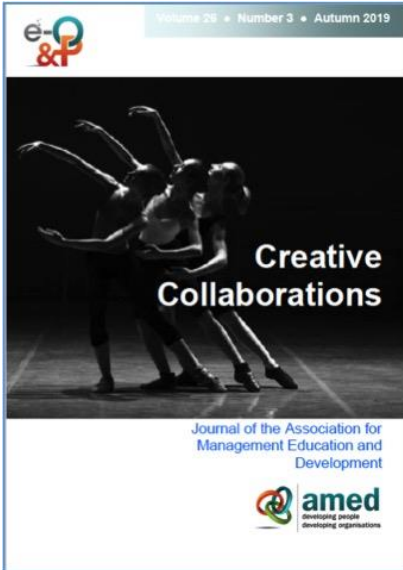
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About the author

Raymond is an international team coach who believes in the power of human connections in teams. When healthy human relations exist within a team it can be a great force for successful change. In his approach, Raymond combines a creative approach with a practical approach with long lasting result and teams who are able to face future challenges themselves without the need of team coach. Having more than 15 years of experience as a change consultant combined with his 10 years of experience as a team coach, Raymond knows what it is like to face a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world that is rapidly changing and how to navigate it. Raymond holds international certifications in the areas of Organisational Constellations, Team Performance Coaching, ORSC, NLP Trainer and Cultivating Creative Collaboration. Raymond owns two businesses (Seemotion BV and Kick Organisatiegroei BV) with which he hopes to make a difference in the world for multiple international clients.

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