

“Collaboration deserves the attention and rigorous thinking devoted to it. With all the urgency to collaborate—and the roadblocks to collaboration—what can OD practitioners do to create the conditions that foster greater collaboration and partnership?”

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## 4 Keys to Accelerating Collaboration

By Frederick A. Miller  
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Collaboration has been a watchword of organizations for decades—yet a variety of obstacles have prevented organizations from optimizing their collaborative capacity. In this article, which is based on our learning in organizations around the world, we describe how to accelerate collaboration via use of a common language for interactions, the essential choice that everyone must make in order to effectively collaborate, and how OD practitioners can help organizations incorporate this language into their day-to-day work, creating a new way of interacting that accelerates performance.

The focus on collaboration appears to be gaining momentum. Information technology leader Cisco is devoting more of its product development effort to collaborative solutions (Lundy, 2012). A study of global CEOs revealed a substantial shift away from command-and-control toward openness and collaboration (IBM, 2012). The need for greater collaboration has been noted in fields as diverse as life science (Department of Health, 2011) and space exploration (Hoffman, 2010).

The reason for this focus is quite simple: collaboration has become both more urgent and more challenging.

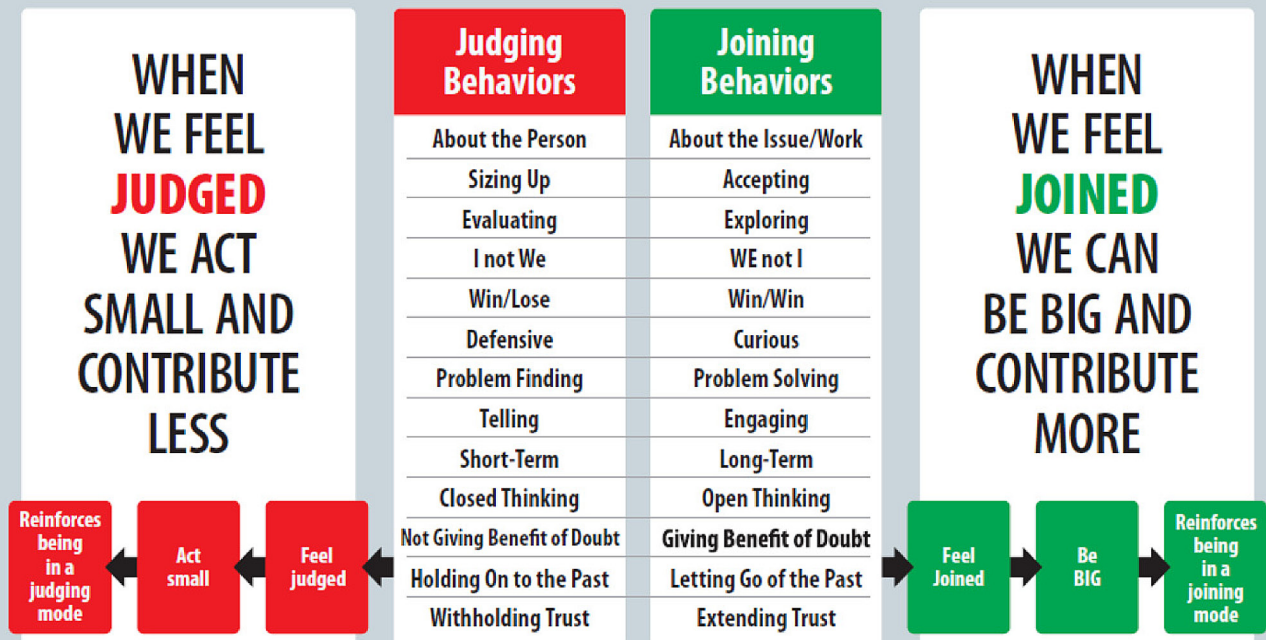
The urgency comes from the major trends that have overwhelmed the marketplace in the past few years. The increasingly global scale of the workplace has brought fresh needs for and complexities to communication, knowledge transfer, and decision making. The speed to market necessary for organizational success is ever accelerating, requiring faster and greater

innovation. The increasing number of unknowns and unknowables has outpaced the ability of any single small group of “go to” people to stay on top of all developments, let alone solve all problems and make all decisions. The drive to increase efficiencies has also intensified as organizations work to eliminate waste and remain competitive. In short, the marketplace is faster, more global, and more subject to rapid change.

This makes collaboration indispensable. Collaboration brings all relevant people together to address a situation; their combined perspectives have the potential to yield a 360-degree view that, when utilized skillfully, leads to smarter solutions and faster decisions. When collaboration is at its best, the resulting Right First Time interactions eliminate waste as the right people are doing the right work at the right time. Collaboration is enhanced as people from different disciplines, functions, divisions, backgrounds, and experiences bring greater (and needed) diversity of perspectives into each conversation. The trust built through interaction and collaboration enables people to share knowledge and work together with greater speed.

But in many organizations collaboration is far from easy. One reason for this is that many people are simply not equipped to communicate and collaborate fluently across geographies, cultures, divisions, or departments. The potential for misunderstanding and rework, as well as the need for many follow-up conversations—all of which contribute to waste—are very high.

# Judging versus Joining



Prepared in collaboration with Merck Manufacturing Division. Adapted from Judith H. Katz and Frederick A. Miller, *Opening Doors to Teamwork and Collaboration: 4 Keys that Change Everything*; copyright 2012, published 2013, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco. All rights reserved.

Figure 1. Aspects of Judging versus Joining

Second, the traditional structures and practices in many organizations have encouraged individuals and teams to stay within their own silos, developing their own language and preferred ways of interacting. Without interaction across silos, mistrust becomes endemic. People may be wary of individuals from another department or team, wondering whether it is safe to engage them. As a result, they may be less willing to respond to information requests or share the latest project update, let alone actively collaborate.

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## Setting a Common Language and Practice

Note the common element in the challenges described above: people are trying to collaborate with their own language and preferred ways of interacting. Rarely are

there mechanisms in place to enable them to leverage their different perspectives and experiences to solve problems rapidly or come up with innovative solutions. This slows down the process and creates barriers to truly understanding one another. In contrast, by using a common language to describe their interactions, individuals avoid the need to explain themselves at every turn; interactions are accelerated, misunderstandings decrease, and second guessing becomes unnecessary. Free of all this waste, collaboration can proceed with higher speed and result in greater productivity.

In our work, we have identified four simple behaviors that provide this common language and practice. By using the 4 Keys (Katz & Miller, 2013), individuals and teams across the globe have been able to join one another in collaboration quickly, simply, and seamlessly, accelerating results and achieving higher performance. To discuss these 4 Keys meaningfully, however, we must first turn our attention to a fundamental choice that precedes every interaction.

## To Judge or to Join?

Most of us have learned to approach new interactions and unfamiliar people from a standpoint of *judging* (see Figure 1). In judging mode, we size people up, compare them with others and ourselves, see them as competitors, find fault, and engage with them cautiously if at all. We might underestimate their ability to contribute based on their ideas, differences, or traits. Judging places distance between us and others, and it puts a limit on the people being judged—we put them in a box. Once this happens, we tend not to give them the benefit of the doubt. And when we feel judged by others, we often become guarded and mistrustful; we may act small and tend to judge them back, creating a lose-lose situation.

Particularly in today's market conditions, organizations cannot afford to have people operate in judging mode. By placing distance between people—rendering them unable to collaborate in the most effective ways—judging blocks productivity, the ability to solve problems quickly, and progress toward the organization's

goals and objectives. Moreover, a judging mode creates waste in two ways: we waste substantial time and energy in the process of evaluating and mistrusting others, and because judging places limits on the person being judged, we lose the ability to draw fully on her or his contributions.

Fortunately, rather than judge, we can choose to start each interaction by *joining* (Katz & Miller, 2013). In joining mode, we approach others from a stance of openness and support rather than caution and defensiveness. We begin with the assumption that we are going to connect—that each of us has something to offer the other. The goal is not to evaluate, but to learn. In joining, we let go of the past, extend trust, give people the benefit of the doubt, and invest in relationships for the long term. Joining is a win-win mode that focuses on a being a WE, creating a partnership.

This makes a marked difference in interactions. In joining, people seek out areas of agreement, find ways to link to the perspective of others, and foster collaboration. People in a joining mode listen carefully, extend trust, value honesty, and challenge as an ally where they differ. When people feel joined, they act bigger and in return are likely to be more open and willing to join.

Joining is the essence of collaboration. And if collaboration is the essence of success for today’s organizations, then a joining mode is an absolute must for those organizations to thrive.

### The 4 Keys

The joining mode is necessary but not sufficient to enhance collaboration. To overcome the barriers discussed above, we can use the 4 Keys (presented here with composite examples) to engage from a joining

Table 1. *Four Keys for Collaboration*

KEY #1	LEAN INTO DISCOMFORT
KEY #2	LISTEN AS AN ALLY
KEY #3	STATE INTENT AND INTENSITY
KEY #4	SHARE YOUR STREET CORNER

mode and achieve higher individual, team, and organizational performance (Table 1). OD practitioners can introduce these 4 Keys as a way to accelerate engagement and create a common language across the organization.

### 1. Lean into Discomfort

Trust is fundamental for our most productive collaborations. Without trust, our collaboration is flawed at best, destructive at worst, and uncomfortable at all times. Unfortunately, trust among people and teams generally takes time to develop—and most of today’s organizations cannot afford that time.

Hence the value of leaning into discomfort: it creates an environment in which trust can grow quickly. By making the conscious choice to move out of our comfort zones, we inspire others to respond in kind. An environment of safety evolves in which we begin to trust that others have our back instead of stabbing us in the back. We feel safe enough to speak up, offer new ideas, take worthwhile risks, raise difficult issues, co-create solutions, and in general collaborate freely.

In a high-volume manufacturing plant, a work team was meeting to address critical processes that related directly to quality and productivity. One team member prefaced her remarks with “I need to lean into discomfort,” then proceeded to raise several difficult issues that many people knew about but never felt safe enough to address. Her honesty and courage invited the other team members to speak up as well; the ensuing collaboration removed the blocks to effectiveness and, once the recommendations were implemented, created a breakthrough in productivity metrics.

If the team had waited to build sufficient trust to address the issues, it might have taken months to do so—if it ever happened at all. By speaking up and leaning into discomfort, this team member accelerated the trust-building cycle and therefore the result.

Even the act of using the specific language can accelerate this process. Saying “I’m going to lean

into discomfort” signals to others that we are reaching out, making ourselves vulnerable, and extending an invitation to reciprocate in the spirit of collaboration. When the team member in our example initially used those words, the team leader replied, “You don’t need to say that. It’s safe to raise any issue here.” To which she responded, “Oh yes, I do need to say it. I need to use those words because they help me be brave.”

When is the right time to lean into discomfort? Usually as soon as we begin to sense the discomfort—to feel that something is not quite right. That is the time to say, “I am going to be courageous and lean into discomfort to address this issue now.”

#### Tips for Leaning into Discomfort

- » Use the language—“I am going to lean into discomfort”—to signal that you are moving out of your comfort zone and inviting others to join you.
- » Lean in by taking small steps: sitting up front when you normally sit in the back, for instance, or speaking up when you ordinarily would be silent.
- » Discuss what you need in order to feel safe enough to speak up. Invite others to do the same.

### 2. Listen as an Ally

Many organizations operate with a narrow definition of “we”—with no sense that “we are all in this together.” Collaboration, by definition, requires a “we” that encompasses all relevant perspectives to enhance solutions and decisions. Expanding our sense of “we” involves building cooperative, collaborative, mutual working relationships by linking our ideas together to create something better than any of us could have done individually. In a word, expanding our “we” involves becoming an ally to those around us—and the first step toward becoming an ally is to listen as an ally.

In listening as an ally, we listen deeply and with full attention, viewing others as partners on the same side of the table. We look for value in the speakers’ perspectives and build on what they say. We engage with others in the conviction that we are all in this together. We open the door for

collaboration to take place and for breakthroughs to arise.

To understand the impact, imagine a senior leadership meeting in an organization with no history of listening as an ally. Many participants view the meeting as “painful.” During presentations, most people pay little attention on the grounds that “it’s not my project” or “it doesn’t affect my work group.” Others listen impatiently while formulating their response. As each presentation concludes, leaders highlight possible shortcomings and flaws: “Are you sure you talked to the right people?” “I

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don’t understand how you could see things this way.” “I have worked here many years, and this has never been true.” “I don’t want to hear any more of this.” “Your point about the market potential is wrong.” With comments and questions like these, the presenters often leave the meeting feeling small and determined to try to avoid presenting again.

Compare this with the same meeting in a team that features a “we” sense among the group and a practice of listening as allies. The meetings are lively and engaging; everyone wants to contribute and understands that their unique perspective can add value to the conversation. With each presentation, people contribute ideas and experiences from their own work groups, expanding and enhancing the presenter’s original ideas. Individuals link to and build on one another’s insights. The outcome is inevitably greater than any individual’s contribution. Listening as an ally has resulted in the very epitome of collaboration.

#### *Tips for Listening as an Ally*

- » Give your full attention to others when they are speaking. Don’t multitask.

- » Restate what you have heard to check that you are receiving the intended message.
- » Accept that what others are saying is true for them: their thinking may be different from yours but no less valid.
- » Express your appreciation for what was shared (“give energy back”).

### **3. State Intent and Intensity**

When we clearly state what we mean and how committed we are to the idea, it enables others to act quickly, decisively, and

correctly. The clarity of stating intent and intensity eliminates second guessing, miscommunication, and the waste in interactions that results from them. As a result, this key both accelerates and enhances the quality of collaboration.

One model for stating intent and intensity—Notions, Stakes, Boulders, and Tombstones (see *Table 2*, next page)—gives people a common language by which to explain intensity:

- » Notions are statements that require no action from others: they are offered simply as an invitation for further discussion. By positioning a statement as a Notion, we open the door to exploring the idea and seeing where it will take the group, if others find it of value.
- » Stakes, like tent stakes, establish a firm place for a discussion to start, but that place can be moved. When we put our Stake in the ground and demonstrate that we are willing, eager, and able to move it, we are saying that others may have insights and information that might reveal a better position for that Stake. The Stake concept is grounded in the belief that none of us is as smart as all of us.

- » Boulders offer little latitude. They imply a strong investment in seeing the idea addressed in the way we have framed it. A Boulder is not an invitation to discussion, though requests for clarification and suggestions for implementation might be welcome. A substantial amount of energy and information will be required to change the Boulder.
- » Tombstones leave no room for negotiation. When we label a statement as a Tombstone, it indicates total commitment to the idea or issue—so much so that we may be willing to leave our jobs over it. Often, Tombstones are about core values or beliefs. Tombstone statements should be made only in the most critical situations, when personal or organizational integrity is at issue.

To illustrate how this might work, imagine a planning meeting in which the senior leader announces, “We should open a new distribution center in the Southwest and build it in Albuquerque.” That could be interpreted as a demand, and the people in the meeting would likely begin taking steps to implementation.



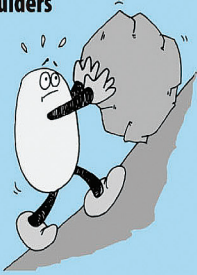

Now consider the scenario if the leader said, “I have a Tombstone around doubling our distribution in the Southwest. My Stake is to build a new distribution center in Albuquerque.” Suddenly the direction of the ensuing conversation is obvious. There is no need to discuss whether to address Southwest distribution; the Tombstone designation identifies it as a “go do.” On the other hand, naming the location of the distribution center as a Stake opens the door to a conversation on locations. This common language of Notions, Stakes, Boulders, and Tombstones has eliminated the waste of discussing what was not open to discussion—and moving to action too quickly on location when the leader’s statement was merely a starting point.

#### *Tips for Stating Intent and Intensity*

- » Make Notions, Stakes, Boulders, and Tombstones the common language for how the team will engage.
- » Clarify that your passion on a topic does not necessarily mean you are closed to hearing other perspectives.

Table 2. Language for Stating Intent and Intensity

## Guide to Notions, Stakes, Boulders, & Tombstones

Initiator has:	Intent	Intensity of Commitment	Desired Reponse
<b>Notions</b> 	Discussion Possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low investment</li> <li>• Testing if idea makes sense to others and/or hoping others will build upon the idea</li> <li>• Individual is willing to let go of the idea</li> <li>• Totally open to influence</li> </ul>	Discuss if interested/willing to explore; Action optional
<b>Stakes</b> 	Discussion Initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some investment</li> <li>• State a position</li> <li>• Wants to hear others' Street Corners</li> <li>• Willing to be influenced</li> </ul>	Discuss, to be considered or explored in depth; Acted upon if parties agree after discussion
<b>Boulders</b> 	Discussion for Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong investment</li> <li>• Firmly entrenched in position</li> <li>• Wants it to happen</li> <li>• Difficult to influence</li> </ul> <p>This level of acting on an idea or making a decision should not be used frequently.</p>	Action expected; Substantive objections somewhat OK
<b>Tombstones</b> 	Discussion, if any, under Duress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total investment</li> <li>• Worth quitting over</li> <li>• No ability to influence</li> </ul> <p>This level should not be used more than twice a year, if that frequently.</p>	Act now, or else

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Your Notions and Stakes, even when stated passionately, are still Notions and Stakes.

- » Actively seek feedback from team members on how often you use the various levels of intent and intensity. Too many Notions and Stakes can be distracting; too many Boulders or Tombstones can be dispiriting.

#### 4. Share Your Street Corner

One of the great benefits of collaboration is that it enables organizations to bring together people with many different

perspectives, or "street corners" (as in "the view from my street corner"). Ensuring that all street corners are represented—and that people share them—yields as close to a 360-degree view as possible, which in turn leads to more effective solutions and better decisions.

One senior leader discovered the power of sharing street corners with his executive team. He started using this common language—"I want to share my street corner with you"—as a framework for contributing his unique experiences to any conversation without requiring that his view be regarded as the only correct

view. He also solicited honest opinions and feedback from his team by saying, "I need to hear your street corner on this," with the assumption, and maybe even the hope, that their street corners would be different from his.

Because of the senior leader's emphasis on street corners, the team members participated at a very high level. The quality of their interactions—and the multitude of street corners that they yielded—enabled the team to create numerous breakthroughs. By sharing and hearing one another's street corners, team members could address challenges together that no

one person on the team could resolve just from her or his initial view of the situation.

### *Tips on Sharing Street Corners*

- » Invite others to share their street corners, thus opening the door for them to feel safe contributing.
- » Treat others as experts in their own experience.
- » Find ways to build on what another person shared, and see if together you can find a new solution that neither of you individually could have imagined.

### **Results from the Field**

Over the years, thousands of people at dozens of organizations have incorporated the 4 Keys into their collaborations. Following is a selection of examples:

- » A flaw in the design of a production process put the future of a promising new product at risk. In a collaborative effort to resolve the flaw, the production team created an ad hoc team of shop floor operators, product development specialists, quality assurance experts, and others to gain a 360-degree view of the situation. Then, by listening as allies, the members of this ad hoc team together developed a solution that enabled production to move forward.
- » Stringent quality standards in one country presented long-standing barriers to entry for a global firm. By drawing in various street corners from experts in quality, design, production, and regulatory issues, a broadly cross-functional team was able to collaborate on several quality breakthroughs, paving the way for entry into the new market and a substantial rise in revenue.
- » At one meeting, a team member who practiced the 4 Keys elected to lean into discomfort by pointing out that a popular new business proposal would actually add little return on investment. As people considered her objection and began to build on her ideas, they arrived at a major improvement on the original proposal.
- » The absence of key people in a critical meeting led the team leader to postpone the meeting, avoiding the waste

of participants' time and ensuring that, when the meeting did occur, all essential street corners were represented. Not only were seven hours of work time saved, but the rescheduled meeting, with full attendance, yielded quick results.

- » In their regular staff meeting, a team of supervisors regularly skipped over a critical but uncomfortable issue. After they had worked on the 4 Keys for a time, one supervisor chose to lean into discomfort and raise the issue. This leaning in encouraged his colleagues to do the same; by offering their street corners honestly, listening to one another as allies, then building on one another's ideas, they quickly worked out an effective solution to a problem that had plagued the team for years.

In order to succeed, today's organizations need the wisdom of everyone, leveraged in collaboration. The profusion of technology for enhancing collaboration, however, can only be optimized if we learn enhanced ways of interacting—and a common language to express what takes place in those interactions. The 4 Keys provide a framework for creating that common language, accelerating collaboration, and thus positioning organizations for higher performance.

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