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## **Collaborative Working—People Issues in Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The accelerating growth in the construction and usage of collaborative environments designed to ensure that the oil and gas industry can have immediate access to scarce support and expertise has meant people in remote geographical locations have had to forge new relationships, acquire new intervention skills, and accept new ways of working.

This has raised many people issues, ranging from how to engage people in the necessary management of change programmes, the development of necessary behavioral protocols, through to acquiring appropriate leadership skills and installing appropriate recognition schemes, as well as the fundamental issue of how this new connectivity capability impinges upon existing communication processes.

Nowhere is this more acute, relevant and critical than in connecting the offshore operations community with their onshore support colleagues.

Drawing on real life examples the author surfaces, tackles and deals with these issues, showing how collaborative environments can be used to produce a high performance one-team culture.

### **People In Perspective**

The construction and use of collaborative environments to connect geographically dispersed teams by its very definition involves the integration of people.

In turn, this integration necessitates the formation of new acquaintances and associations. Whilst bringing people closer together might be perceived as naturally advantageous, it can raise personal, emotional and relationship issues that create confusion and misunderstandings leading to personal friction and disharmony which, if left unattended, can result in at the very least the new connectivity capability potential not being recognized, and at worst reductions in performance efficiencies emanating from this personal dysfunctionality.

Interestingly in my experience it is the more technologically based companies, whilst appreciating and evangelizing the need to pay heed and attention to “people issues” relating to the introduction of technology and systems that increase interpersonal connectivity, are the very ones that in practice pay lip service to them.

All too often these companies preach the need to expend equal time and resources on people, plant and processes in the pursuit of performance excellent, but in practice

- Concentrate almost totally on plant and process issues
- Marginalize people issues by putting them as the last agenda item
- Subcontract them to external consulting groups
- Deal with them inappropriately quickly, leaving problems unsolved which resurface later with even more detrimental effects

The reason for this seeming reluctance to deal with the people issues associated with collaboration is clearly not intentional, but could emanate from

- A discomfort in talking about and dealing with personal emotions, feelings and thoughts
- A lack of experience in understanding what drives individual behaviors, group dynamics or interpersonal relationships
- An inability to articulate, explain and debate people issues deriving from a lack of associated language, nomenclature or concepts

It would be difficult in the confines of this paper to deal adequately with all of the people issues that can arise when creating a collaborative environment. What I have therefore attempted to do is to raise and discuss those issues which in my own experience it has been necessary to pay attention to.

They are in no particular order of importance as in the implementation programme associated with designing, creating and using this new capability the impact and hence input resource requirements will vary depending upon the culture, attitudes and personalities of the groups being connected.

### Collaboration – A Capability Change

Clearly everyone who has been associated with the design, construction and use of collaborative environments recognizes that they are significant “change programmes”.

It is useful to broadly look at different types of change programmes to begin to understand the types of issues that might arise and need to be tackled when designing and delivering programmes connected with any form of integration or collaboration project.

In essence there are three main categories of change programme, viz a viz –

- Process
- Technology
- Capability

The important distinction and difference between the process/technology driven programmes compared to the capability ones is that the former are “non-negotiable”, and for their successful implementation normally rely on the successful delivery of a capital project and associated training, whilst the latter are “optional” and their success is more dependent on the attitude and desire of users and practitioners to want to utilize the new “capability”.

A simple example of a process orientated change programme would be the introduction of a new accounts payable system which has to be used to raise invoices and pay suppliers and is non-negotiable (it might even extend to individuals having to understand how to manipulate new methods of data entry as they may not be able to have their own personal expenses processed!).

Or in the case of installing a new telephone system ( a technologically based change programme) whether to use it is again not optional, and its concept will be more dependent on how it is designed, installed and commissioned.

However, creating a collaborative environment is a capability based change programme. The environment itself provides a new “connectivity capability” in say enabling 24/7 visual, data and audio capability with a whole host of new groups, individuals and teams. But using this new capability is a choice. Someone who feels there is no advantage in using the real time connectivity capability might simply just not use it, and rely on the more traditional and familiar methods of communicating.

It is this inability to recognize the fundamental difference between the process/technology and capability change programmes that is the reason why many companies have installed expensive systems to connect remote groups together only to find the new systems are rarely used, and

*This misunderstanding of a capability change initiative was highlighted during a conversation I had recently with an OIM who was clearly not convinced of the need for any additional connectivity with the beach, and evidently saw the creation of a collaborative environment as unnecessary.*

*During a rather heated debate when I tried to convince him of the benefits of wider collaboration he asked me to list the advantages the environment would bring. My response was to explain the concept of a capability change programme by drawing an analogy with car performance by saying that if he drove from A to B in a car that took 5 hours and he was then provided with another car with a greater speed capability and he made the journey in 3 hours it was not up to the car supplier to tell him what advantage he could make from the extra 2 hours at his disposal.*

*Similarly, in his own work offshore it was not up to me, and not possible for me, to list what advantages he could take from the additional connectivity capability. That was up to him – all I could do was*

- Facilitate his thinking on possible uses
- Provide the necessary training in the use of the technology
- Advise on ensuing relationship issues

collaborative environments simply revert to “rooms” where people sit surrounded by redundant technology and a disregarded capability.

## Joining Cultures Together

The aim, intention and purpose of any collaboration and integration programme is to join discrete and geographically remote groups together. This inevitably means you are connecting two or more cultures together which risks the problem of “cultural clash”.

Cultural clash can be defined as the personal dysfunctionality that occurs when you join two or more distinct group together that have different

- Values
- Belief systems
- Attitudes
- Behaviors
- Prejudices
- Opinions

*Integrating groups together which have different accepted ways of behaving, acting and thinking can produce confusion and sometimes conflict.*

*Once when linking a European support function with an African based production facility the collective decision-making preference of the latter was interpreted by the former as indecision.*

And can manifest itself as

- Oppositional behaviour
- Interpersonal friction
- Misunderstanding
- Misinterpretation of intent
- Loss of motivation and morale

From my own personal experience of joining groups together – be they from different countries, companies or functions (e.g. onshore and offshore) – for integration to be successful it is necessary for the joining parties to

*How two groups who are apparently on the same side can view each other somewhat differently was vividly highlighted for me when in conversation with a Mechanical Technician offshore to whom I was explaining the company's plans to join him closer with his onshore support teams pointed out to me that the reason he had elected to work offshore was to “get away from parasites on the beach”!!*

- Respect each other as people
- Understand the contribution each person makes
- Have common objectives
- Talk a common language
- Have similar personal values
- Agree accepted codes of conduct/behaviour
- Have a process for raising and dealing with relationship issues

## The Engagement Process

As in any programme of change it is essential to plan and deliver an engagement process that not only encourages everyone connected with the initiative to support and become actively involved with the programme, but also is sufficiently educationally persuasive that it wins hearts and minds, and convinces everyone that they are becoming involved not just in another change programme, but are becoming associated with an initiative that is genuinely organizationally progressive, and personally stimulating, energizing and interesting.

It is therefore necessary to design an engagement process that

- Explains the concepts and principles behind collaboration
- Enables people to realize that wider collaboration is a natural communication progression and not a “new fad”
- Encourages open, frank and wide-ranging discussion and debate to surface and deal with any concerns
- Balances education with instruction

Some of the issues which will need to be considered during the engagement process are discussed further below.

## Pace

One of the main reasons any engagement process falters, stutters or fails is because of pace of delivery. Although it could be a case of moving too slowly, when people become bored, disinterested and disengaged with the envisaged changes, all too often

failure is caused by the sponsors/designers and implementers simply moving too fast, giving people insufficient time to understand and accept the need for the changes, become genuinely involved and develop a sense of shared ownership, or simply aren't afforded the time to have their queries, questions or concerns dealt with and hence become oppositional, defensive or negative to what is being proposed.

I have often witnessed a senior management team work for many months considering potential changes in great detail, studying the need, reviewing the various options, working up proposals which quantify the corporate benefits, and then after all their research, reflection and consideration expect the workforce to agree with their plans following a one hour roll out session! They are then somewhat surprised, if not a little baffled, to find many people raising queries and objections. What is required during the early stages of an engagement process is more opportunity for people to candidly air their views, raise concerns and issues, and debate options themselves.

It has to be remembered that it is quite healthy and expected that when confronted with a potential transformation people will be negative. This is a natural defense mechanism to any change. Only when people have evaluated the downsides and perceive them as containable or insignificant can they move on to considering the advantages and benefits.

If the engagement process is delivered at too fast a pace, whilst people might seem to agree, their agreement could be a form of malicious compliance provoked by either not wanting to appear oppositional, or simply not being afforded the time to raise objections. This compliance could well force people to publicly agree to changes that they have severe personal reservations about, and risk turning them into "change terrorists" who will possibly attempt to derail the process at a later date.

## Style

The style of engagement sessions should vary as the process progresses. At the outset it will be educational as people are provided with information regarding the need for change against a backdrop of increased competition, globalization, introduction of new technology or whatever.

In the case of the creation of a collaborative environment the educational period is likely to be longer than a more process or technologically based change programme. People need to be afforded the opportunity to understand the concepts behind collaboration so they can see it as a natural progression in the communication process.

The concepts associated with the potential for global connectivity and the sharing of data, visual and audio feeds are not difficult to get to grips with, but have serious implications regarding relationships and ways of working, and time is needed for individuals to work these issues through in their own minds before moving on to consider implementation plans.

An example of the transitional nature of an engagement process is shown below

Suspicion	Passive Compliance	Active Participation	Proactive Involvement	Innovation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Micromanagement"</li> <li>• "Surveillance"</li> <li>• Taped Camera</li> <li>• Management Spying</li> <li>• Non-display Of Video Feed Offshore</li> <li>• No Acknowledgement Of People On Either Side</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance Of Training</li> <li>• Tolerance Of Cameras/Video Feeds</li> <li>• Spasmodic Display</li> <li>• No Sharing Of Data</li> <li>• Some Occasional Social Conversation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand For Training</li> <li>• Design Of Presentation Template</li> <li>• Planning Meetings</li> <li>• OIM's Network</li> <li>• OOE Network</li> <li>• Sharing Drawings</li> <li>• Continual Displays</li> <li>• Request For More Licences</li> <li>• Feeling Of Being "One Team"</li> <li>• "Feel Good Seeing The Support Staff"</li> <li>• Some Engineering Data Shared</li> <li>• Increasing Acknowledgement Of People (Sharing Pleasantries, Jokes, Etc)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CRT Network</li> <li>• Vendor Connection</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Overhauls</li> <li>• Reduction In Email Traffic</li> <li>• Fewer Requests For Information From Offshore Staff</li> <li>• More Trend Analysis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connection With Other Locations</li> <li>• New Vendor Contracts</li> <li>• Multi-site Connectivity</li> </ul>

## Dealing with Resistance

As has been mentioned earlier, resistance is natural and to be expected in any change programme, and can be caused by a number of factors such as

- Fear of losing control/authority
- Perceived as a “job reduction” exercise
- Need to build new relationships
- Seen as more responsibility for no gain
- Disagreement on benefits claimed
- Seen as not necessary
- Personal disadvantages outweigh company benefits

Interestingly many if not all of these would apply to wider collaboration, and integration programmes by their very nature of increased personal connectivity raise some more specific issues centred around behaviour, group working and interpersonal relationships, and in particular a perception that collaborative environments will

- Be used to deepen micro-management
- Lead to more intrusions and interruptions
- Provide opportunity to second-guess decisions
- Be used for personal surveillance

### Use Of Cameras

In my experience the most powerful resistance emanates from the last of the issues listed above connected with the expectation or fear that collaboration offer the opportunity for managers to “spy” on team members.

This resistance to wider visual connectivity via the use of always-on cameras is, I believe, associated with negative connotations linked to the use of CCTV cameras which in everyday life are used

- To identify criminals
- To catch speeding motorists
- For entrapment

*One manager's reaction to the overt and deeply felt resistance to the use of cameras was to ask the question "What are some of our staff doing that is so bad they can't be watched, and what are people doing that they've got so much time to watch them anyway!"*

Indeed I have seen highly rational, educated and intelligent managers and technicians become extremely emotive and even negatively hostile towards the installation of cameras as part of collaboration programme.

One of the conclusions that could be drawn from the resistance to visual connectivity is that there is an underlying distrust between the parties being connected.

The best way to introduce the use of cameras to provide visual connectivity is

*One example of a visual feed being used for the wrong reason was when I was offshore on one of the installations of a multi-platform facility and the OIM received a call from his Operations Manager on the beach who had visual feeds of all the flare stacks, and he demanded to know "Why are you flaring" to which the OIM replied "We're not – you're probably looking at the wrong camera!"*

- Explain that all the cameras are doing is creating an open plan office environment where people can see who is in the office and available for a conversation.
- Always have the cameras on mute so that to have a conversation the person has to agree to the connection
- Ensure the first people to be “on camera” are the managers themselves

In general, resistance can be dealt with by real, genuine and timely engagement to surface and listen to concerns, show personal empathy (not sympathy!), see their point of view (their resistance might even be legitimate), modify decisions if appropriate, and above all only move forward once people understand and accept the needs and benefits of the changes envisaged.

### Real vs. Espoused Resistance

One point that is worth dwelling on is that of real vs. espoused resistance.

It is often the case that people will offer reasons to resist the change only because they feel these “espoused” resistors will be accepted by the managing sponsors, whilst they feel that their real reasons might be ignored, attacked or marginalized.

So for example a Control Room Technician (CRT) might object to wider collaboration on the grounds he/she will receive too many disruptive interventions – an espoused reason which he/she could deem acceptable. The real reason might however be more about not wanting the beach to have the potential for 24/7 surveillance which he/she feels might necessitate behaviour/language modifications to “fit in” with his/her expectations of what is deemed acceptable by the manager on the beach.

The danger in introducing collaboration is that change implementers spend most time and effort dealing with espoused resisters and ignore the real ones.

### **Personal and Corporate Benefits**

As in any programme of major change collaboration/integration will provide a combination of both personal advantages and wider corporate benefits.

The risk is that the sponsors of the process try to gain support for the transformation by concentrating on corporate rather than personal benefits, be they greater operational efficiencies, lower production costs, reduced outages or whatever. Whilst these are advantages, necessary and laudable as in any change process, they must be accompanied by potential personal gains or individuals might overtly and publicly support the programme, but covertly offer some resistance to delay or avoid the onset of envisaged disadvantages, which in the case of collaboration might be additional surveillance, more disturbances or simply additional work.

Early on in the process it is therefore imperative that people are provided with information and communications that identify and highlight potential and real personal gains such as

- The opportunity to learn new skills which could increase career opportunities
- Extending collaborative networks to include family and friends
- Chance to be involved with and influence a major programme of change
- Possibility of relocation to one of the joining groups

As well as these more tangible benefits there is also the rather more esoteric advantage, yet powerful motivator, of simply being involved with progress, something that everyone wants but often feels embarrassed to voice in public!

### **Involvement**

Because collaboration is about joining people together, involving individuals forming new relationships, any programme must take every possible opportunity to provide everyone involved with or affected by collaboration with the opportunity to be involved as much as practicable. This personal involvement could range from input into the design of the physical environment itself, through to deciding what new business processes to install, or indeed the creation of a jointly accepted “Code of conduct” to ensure people behave in a way that promotes supportive and harmonious working.

Failure to involve people will lead to feelings of isolation and victimization, resulting in oppositional, negative and even disruptive behaviour.

### **Getting The Technology Right**

Whilst this paper is primarily concerned with the softer issues of people interactions and individual behaviors, it is worth just mentioning the impact that the introduction of any technology associated with the creation of a collaborative environment has on motivation and personal resistance.

What often seems to be left out is the provision of sufficient training in the use of newly installed technology, with the result that people get so frustrated with simply trying to switch the equipment on and get connected that they either use it as an excuse, or genuinely fail and resort back to using the original connectivity process. The result is that the new capability falls into disrepute, gradually becomes “collectively marginalized”, and ends up never being used.

What is required is the provision of close-in technical training support that not only fires up the new communications technology and is on-hand to deal with any issues as they arise, but also transfers the capability to end users so that once the support is withdrawn the new systems can be supported internally.

## Organizational Issues

Again, outside the main scope of this paper, but worth highlighting as it can affect people's attitudes and behaviour and that surrounds "organization".

Clearly any process of radical and transformational change will impact the harder HR issues, and each of these needs to be considered and dealt with. Some examples raised by the formation of a collaborative environment might be

- If some people are seconded to onshore positions do they retain their offshore allowances
- What are the catering provisions for 24/7 onshore working
- With wider collaboration who is responsible for inputting into individual appraisals
- How are bonuses calculated and awarded given wider group interactions

## Coaching Support & Reviews

Once the collaborative environment has been created, populated and becomes operational only then do people interact and develop new personal bonds. What is disastrous is to leave them to it, and not offer some form of continued coaching support to ensure people can work cooperatively together.

It is also extremely useful in addition to this coaching support to carry out independent "People Health Checks" that can

- Review relationships
- Identify inappropriate behaviors
- Surface and deal with personal issues

## Summary

Hopefully this paper has raised, if not totally deal with, a number of people related issues that occur in the design, installation and use of collaborative environments that afford a new a powerful connectivity capability.

What has to be remembered is that in dealing with joining people together from different cultures and with different ways of thinking and acting there is no standard process model. In every situation there are different issues, problems and concerns to deal with.

Technology or processes, whilst they might interact and be necessary enablers, do not have feelings, fears, emotions or aspirations and will therefore be more predictable, and any associated problems be easier to deal with – which is probably why they receive the most attention.

What is necessary and essential is to make people issues the number one priority on every agenda.