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An unhealthy reliance on teamwork

Marketing is a collaborative field. Marketers value teamwork. We brainstorm in groups. Team-building is considered above almost any other trait when we promote people. One of the most common clichés of our industry is that it doesn't matter where a good idea comes from, and the more, the better.

Teams work hard to maintain this egalitarianism. Millennials, the newest generation coming into the work force, tend to believe they are entitled to the same perks and privileges as those of us who have worked many years before them — because we are all equal.

We tend to bend over backward to accommodate these team-building things because we're trying to be collaborative.

But we must consider the dark side of collaboration.

The first issue of over-collaboration is a lack of responsibility. Marketing (or even just business) at its best is accountable. Shared responsibility too easily lapses into no responsibility. Team members ought to have each other's back. Instead, the simplest things fall through the cracks. In our business, we find this played out every day in our proofreading processes. The more people who proofread a document, the more likely it is that errors will slip through. Each person believes the others on the team will do a more thorough job than they themselves are willing to do.

Another negative to over-collaboration is the watering down of great ideas. Too many cooks, each needing to have a say, create the blandest of broth. We've all been in brainstorm meetings where — in the name of improving the idea — the punch is taken out of it. Since "there's no

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to greatness.

This kind of over-collaboration can demoralize your star performers. If you force great individuals to work in an over-collaborative environment where everyone — even the mediocre — gets an equal vote, they may give up in frustration. Certainly, you will never get their best work.

To overcome over-collaboration, we need to create organizations that believe in responsibility and accountability — and that hold to those values above even what some might call fairness or equality. We shouldn't be ashamed of wanting our companies to be meritocracies. The people who make the best decisions ought to be the decision-makers. In many ways, this is a more fair approach than the "one employee, one vote" system many teams uphold.

Our teams need to be as small as possible, but not too small. Smaller teams are much better at retaining knowledge. They learn from their mistakes — and the shared experience makes them stronger.

Each person on the team should have a specific responsibility. And — this is essential — one person should own full responsibility of the project.

Keep in mind that the best team leaders aren't necessarily the best idea-

such thing as a bad idea," no one will kill it. But every idea must be modified with a "yes, but ..." from the rest of the team — leaving the poor idea limping along with no hope of ever breaking through

generators, and the best technical minds don't always become the best leaders. Team leadership is its own very important discipline. Great team leaders make sure the best ideas are executed and the worst ones are quickly discarded. This requires both open-mindedness and decisiveness — an interesting paradox.

When you think of very large teams — for example, an army — one person, usually a general, has responsibility for the results of the battle. A surgical team may have more than one surgeon in a particularly complicated case, but only one of them is in charge. Airplanes have a pilot and a co-pilot. They don't consult with the flight attendants in an emergency.

On a healthy team, everyone is a worker — including the leader. Frankly, it gets easier to pass off all the assignments the further up the ladder you get. Then it's possible to shield yourself from responsibility: "Oh, someone on my team did that. I wasn't even aware!"

While this attitude may prevent some near-term embarrassment, a statement like this makes you look like a weak leader to your peers, your boss and, especially, your team. They're the ones who take the brunt.

These are the types of things to do to make sure over-collaboration doesn't stunt the growth and oppress the brightest members of your organization. It's human nature to be social and inclusive. We often feel more important when we're on a big team. But small groups are usually more effective. And the best ideas thrive when they aren't reduced to appealing to everyone.

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