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**SPOTLIGHT ON TALENT AND PERFORMANCE**

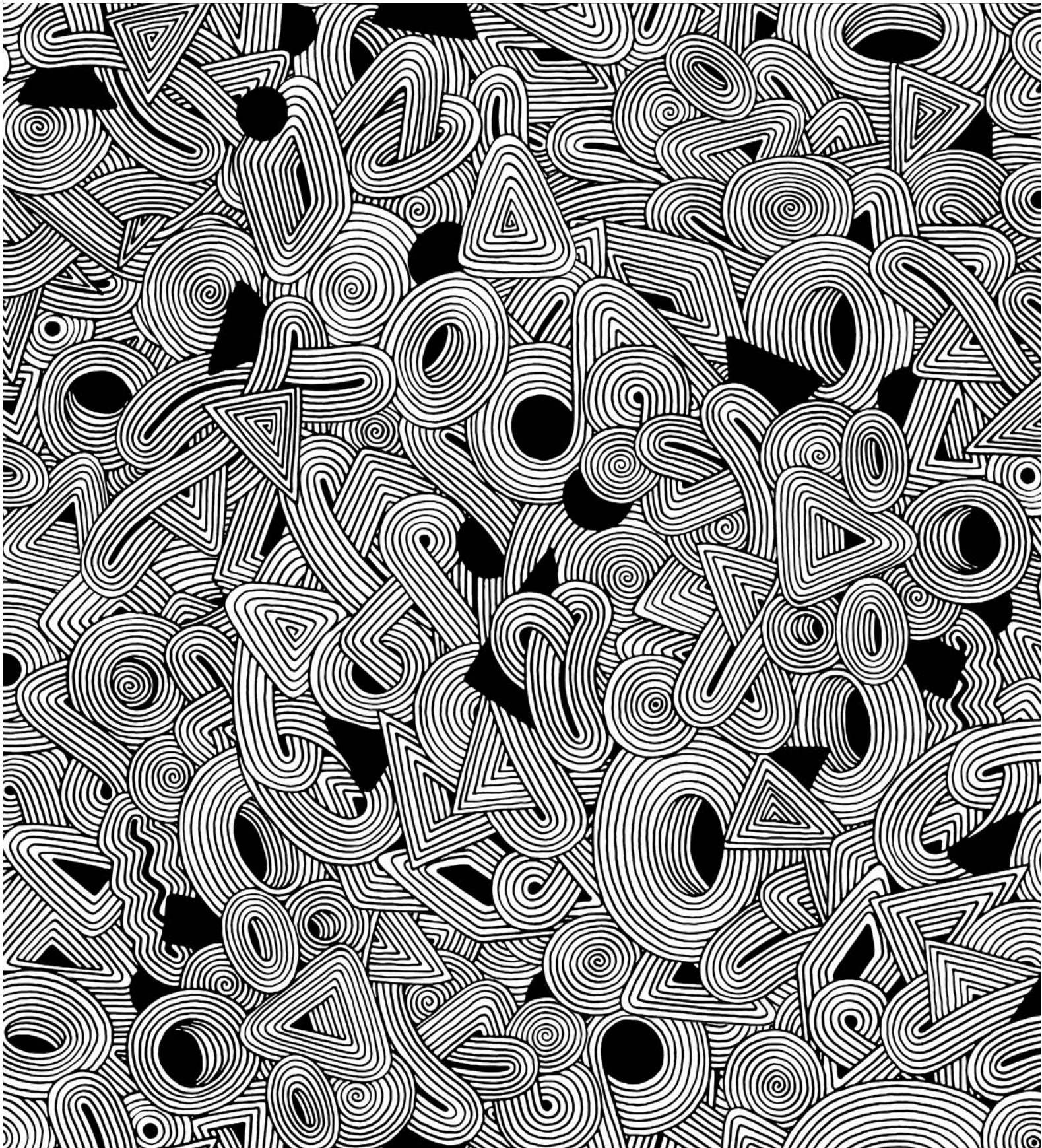
## IDEO's Culture of Helping

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*by Teresa Amabile, Colin M. Fisher, and  
Julianna Pillemer*

# Spotlight

**ARTWORK** Freegums, *Celestial Plane*  
2010, fully tileable ink drawing, 24" x 36"



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**F**ew things leaders can do are more important than encouraging helping behavior within their organizations. In the top-performing companies it is a norm that colleagues support one another's efforts to do the best work possible. That has always been true for pragmatic reasons: If companies were to operate at peak efficiency without what organizational scholars call "citizenship behavior," tasks would have to be optimally assigned 100% of the time, projects could not take any unexpected turns, and no part of any project could go faster or slower than anticipated. But mutual helping is even more vital in an era of knowledge work, when positive business outcomes depend on creativity in often very complex projects. Beyond simple workload sharing, *collaborative help* comes to the fore—lending

perspective, experience, and expertise that improve the quality and execution of ideas.

Helpfulness must be actively nurtured in organizations, however, because it does not arise automatically among colleagues. Individuals in social groups experience conflicting impulses: As potential helpers, they may also be inclined to compete. As potential help seekers, they may also take pride in going it alone, or be distrustful of those whose assistance they could use. On both sides, help requires a commitment of time for uncertain returns and can seem like more trouble than it's worth. Through their structures and incentives, organizations may, however unwittingly, compound the reluctance to provide or seek help.

The trickiness of this management challenge—to increase a discretionary behavior that must be inspired, not forced—makes what the design firm IDEO has achieved all the more impressive. Ask people there about the organizational culture, and

invariably they mention collaborative help. Observe how things get done, and you see it at every turn. Actually map the networks of help, as we did, and it becomes obvious how broad and dense they are. Clearly the firm is high performing; it is lauded all over the world for innovations in business, government, and health care, and regularly called upon to advise other firms that want to increase their innovation capabilities. All this help seeking and help giving apparently pays off.

The question for the rest of us is, How has IDEO managed to make helping the norm? Are there principles that leaders of other organizations could learn and apply to similar effect? We spent two years making observations, interviewing people, and conducting surveys to find out.

IDEO may seem like a very different kind of company from yours, but it is probably less so than you think. Your organization, too, is full of knowledge workers tackling complex problems. It, too, needs to boost its productive creativity. It could produce better outcomes for customers and provide a more attractive working environment for top talent if your employees, like IDEO's, engaged in effective mutual help. Let's look at the four keys to achieving those goals—beginning with a challenge to the people at the very top of the organization. Judging by IDEO's experience, that is where building a help-friendly company begins.

### Leadership Conviction

Not every large company's leader would, if asked about organizational priorities, bring up the topic of encouraging collaborative help in the ranks. But IDEO's leadership is explicitly focused on it. For Tim Brown, the CEO, that's not only because the problems IDEO is asked to solve require extreme creativity; it's also because they have become more complicated. Brown says, "I believe that the more complex the problem, the more help you need. And that's the kind of stuff we're getting asked to tackle, so we need to figure out how to have a culture where help is much, much more embedded." Essentially, this is a conviction that many minds make bright work.

Leaders at IDEO prove their conviction by giving and seeking help themselves. For example, we observed a particularly successful event (in terms of new ideas generated) when a C-suite-level helper joined a team for an hour-long brainstorming session. The team's project hadn't even formally kicked off yet, so it was not a situation in which help was des-

perately needed. Nor was this leader the only one qualified to provide it. His arrival in the room signaled strongly that helping is an expected behavior in the culture and that everyone is part of the helping network.

Our mapping of that network in one IDEO office clearly captures leaders' personal involvement. (See the exhibit "Mapping Help at IDEO.") In the diagram each person is represented by a circle; the larger the circle, the more times that person was named by someone else as a helper. Notice that the most popular helpers are spread across all levels of the organization. Contrary to common wisdom and even to much of the scholarly literature on helping in organizations, status is no barrier to being asked for help at IDEO. Low-level people are willing to approach those at the top—who, conversely, are not afraid to make themselves vulnerable by asking for help from people several levels down.

### The Two Sides of the Helping Coin

It would be easy to assume that to promote helping in your organization, you should focus on increasing your experts' willingness to offer assistance. Consider the story Jon Gertner shares in *The Idea Factory*, his history of AT&T's Bell Labs. At one point AT&T's patent department wanted to figure out why certain individuals in that famously inventive group were more successful than others at hatching novel ideas. They discerned just "one common thread," Gertner wrote. "Workers with the most patents often shared lunch or breakfast with a Bell Labs electrical engineer named Harry Nyquist." Nyquist was particularly skilled, it turned out, at asking good questions.

At first glance Nyquist seems to be the helping hero of that organization. But many of those lunches probably occurred because he was invited by someone who was working on a complex problem and needed a sounding board. There are two sides to every helping encounter, and both must be encouraged and supported.

People in many organizations might well hesitate to extend such an invitation. Because most cultures have norms of reciprocity, getting help from others can put you in their debt. Even if you are unfazed by the prospect of a future request, you might worry about seeming weak or incompetent if you ask for assistance, especially from someone of higher status. IDEO makes a conscious effort to sweep that hesitation away. From the beginning of every project, designers are encouraged to assume that they'll need

## Idea in Brief

### THE EXEMPLAR

IDEO is the model of a help-friendly organization. Renowned for its creative output, the firm encourages frequent collaboration among colleagues.

### THE RESEARCH

By surveying all the employees in one IDEO office and mapping their helping relationships, the authors revealed a dense network of mutual assistance: Help comes from all organizational levels—and those considered most helpful tend to be the most trustworthy and accessible, rather than the most technically competent.

### THE KEYS

IDEO's ability to cultivate this high-performing culture comes down to four keys: true conviction among top leaders; recognition that every helping event has two sides, both of which must be encouraged; reinforcement of norms with formal processes and roles; and willingness to leave slack in employees' schedules.

help. A project team with a demanding client learns that it would be irresponsible not to ask a colleague who had a lot of experience with that client to review its work. The team members might ask for that colleague's input throughout the project, in sessions lasting anywhere from 15 minutes to half a day. At IDEO there is no shame in asking for help, and this psychological safety shows up on many levels: For example, people cheerfully accept frequent all-office e-mail blasts along the lines of "Does anyone have experience with Spanish-language radio?" or "Who's tried the new quick-loss diet?"

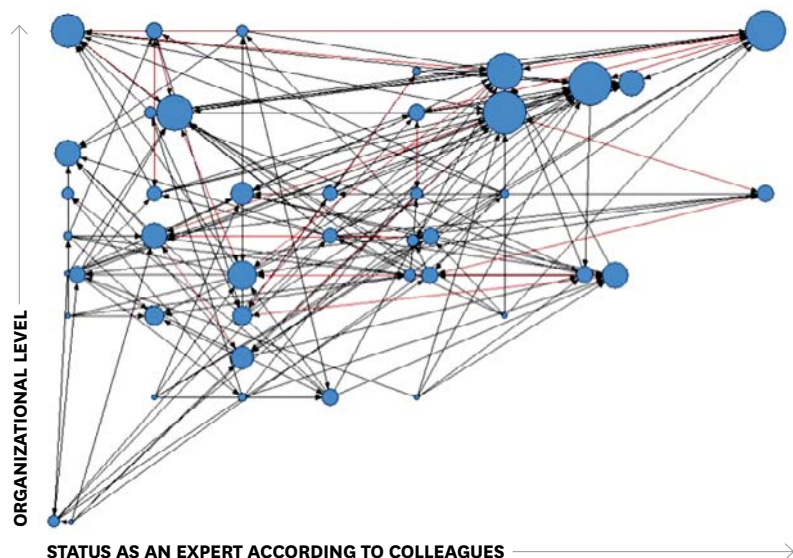
In most cases, however, asking everyone in the organization for help isn't particularly effective. The help seeker must figure out whom to approach. You might assume that the best helpers in your organization would be the people with the greatest expertise, but that assumption turns out to be flawed. Expertise is of course valuable, but our study of the IDEO helping network shows that it matters less than you might think. Look again at the helping map. The horizontal axis indicates people's status as experts. (We computed expertise scores by using a separate survey in which several key people in the office listed the primary experts in each of the many disciplines and functions represented there.) On the basis of previous research, we expected that expertise in a field would strongly predict popularity as a helper. But we were wrong. Many popular helpers had two other attributes going for them.

In our survey of the entire office population, people were asked to click on the names of all those who helped them in their work and to rank their top five helpers from first to fifth. (See the exhibit "What Makes an IDEO Colleague Most Helpful?") Then they were asked to rate their number one helper, their number five helper, and a randomly suggested "non-helper" (someone whose name they hadn't selected) on several items. Those items assessed three charac-

## Mapping Help at IDEO

Is IDEO really an exemplar when it comes to colleagues' helping one another? Take a look at the diagram below, which shows the helping network in one of its offices, a 47-person workplace. Individuals are represented by circles; the larger the circle, the more times that person was named by someone else as a helper. The lines signify the helping connections: A one-way (black) arrow points toward a person named as a helper, and a two-way (red) arrow indicates that the people named each other as helpers.

The most striking thing about this whole-office helping network is the sheer number of connections it reveals. Most network diagrams of relationships in organizations show cliques (people are interconnected in small, tight groups, with only a few ties between groups) or hub-and-spoke patterns (nearly everyone interacts with a central character or two but not much with one another). At IDEO, in contrast, most people have a large and diverse array of helping interactions.



teristics: *competence* (how well the person did his or her job); *trust* (how comfortable the respondent was sharing thoughts and feelings with the person); and *accessibility* (how easily the respondent could obtain help from the person).

Here was the surprise: Trust and accessibility mattered much more than competence. That doesn't mean competence is irrelevant: People did rate their number one and number five helpers as more competent than their nonhelpers. (And IDEO has experts in a wide array of domains, so it's pretty much guaranteed that the competence to solve any problem exists somewhere within the firm.) But the number one and number five helpers received fairly close scores for competence, whereas people trusted their top-ranked helpers more than they did their fifth-ranked helpers, and they trusted both much more than their nonhelpers. The results for accessibility were similar.

The finding that you have to be trustworthy to get to the top of someone's helper list at IDEO is consistent with work by Amy Edmondson, of Harvard Business School, and her colleagues. They find that groups work much more effectively when members feel safe discussing mistakes and problems with one another. (See "Speeding Up Team Learning," HBR October 2001.) Asking for help involves at least some vulnerability, so it stands to reason that people would turn to helpers whom they can trust with their thoughts and feelings. When we talked with the IDEO partner Diego Rodriguez about the firm's practice of designating helpers to check in on projects, he said, "The situation where I think it works really well just boils down to this: There's trust in the room that the intention of the person popping in is to help the project."

Accessibility involves being available, willing, and able to lend a hand. We tracked the day-by-day help seeking and help receiving by four teams during the course of their projects. When a team failed to get help, it was usually because the person needed simply wasn't available—he or she was out of the office, out of e-mail contact, or simply too overcommitted to devote the time. This happened occasionally even with helpers who'd been assigned to a project. Often a team's best helper was someone who hadn't been identified as such at the start of the project.

IDEO's people know that the way to do their jobs well is to make good use of help and that helping is expected not only of people recognized for their special knowledge or competence in a discipline. IDEO's leaders know that the relationships between help

givers and help receivers—and levels of accessibility and trust—can be heavily influenced by features of the organization.

### Processes and Roles

How pervasive is helping at IDEO? Our network mapping revealed an extraordinary fact: In the office we studied, nearly every person was named as a helper by at least one other person. Even more amazing, an overwhelming majority of employees (about 89%) showed up on at least one other employee's list of top five helpers. Clearly, effective helping isn't a rare skill. Most people at IDEO learn to do it as they become steeped in the culture of the organization, participate in its regular activities, and develop networks within the firm. It would be hard, we think, to achieve this simply by communicating the desired culture. And indeed, IDEO goes much further, building the value of help into formal processes and explicit roles.

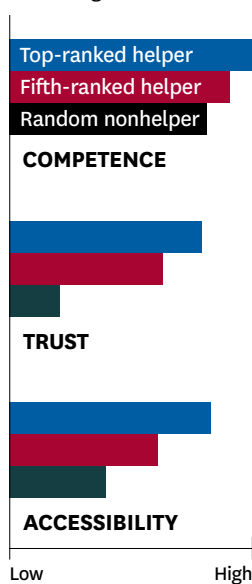
Help is embedded in the entire design process, from IDEO's famous brainstorming sessions, through formal design reviews, to the many forms of support and encouragement for project teams seeking feedback on ideas. In this way IDEO builds essential habits of mind. In fact, Brown told us, when help is not seen as an integral part of the process, "teams will rush through their project and get quite close to the end before they realize 'Wow, we completely missed something—which we wouldn't have missed if we had stopped and asked for help.'"

In our network survey we asked people to rate the helpfulness of various office activities as well as of their colleagues. Internal design reviews were among those named most helpful. Design reviews are required of teams, but no "reviewer" the team invites is obliged to come; a potential helper may, for example, be unavailable at the scheduled time. Teams sometimes have trouble getting people to show up for a design review; we heard about instances in which five were invited but only one actually came. Here process is used to reinforce—but not to legislate—behavior.

Explicit helping roles are part of IDEO's signaling about what behavior it likes to see in general. One IDEO office designates "design community leaders," or DCLs. These leaders have all demonstrated accomplishment in one or more aspects of design, such as mechanical engineering and human factors; some are known for their facility in working at the intersection of disciplines. When we asked people to rate the helpfulness of office activities, they gave

#### WHAT MAKES AN IDEO COLLEAGUE MOST HELPFUL?

People in one IDEO office named the five colleagues who had helped them most and then rated them (along with a randomly chosen nonhelper) on three attributes. Surprisingly, trust and accessibility were more differentiating than competence in the helpfulness ratings.



the informal meetings their project teams had with DCLs high marks—higher, in fact, than those they gave formally scheduled check-ins, perhaps because the former were more spontaneous.

Most IDEO project teams have one or more senior designers assigned as helpers. These people have expertise in a given domain, deep experience with the team's client, or simply a reputation for being particularly good helpers. They are generally available to the team and check in with it periodically throughout the project. We saw an example of this when a designer we'll call Ellen, who was relatively inexperienced at IDEO, was having trouble synthesizing data she had gathered during an off-site interview session. After she asked Kathy, her assigned helper, for assistance, the two came into the office over the weekend and spent three hours piecing together something visual and tangible. To us, this went well beyond what might be expected from someone outside the team, but such episodes are quite common at IDEO.

### Slack in the Organization

Part of the case for building a help-friendly organization is that it produces greater efficiency. It may seem paradoxical, then, that one of the keys to collaborative help at IDEO is allowing slack in the organization. A certain amount of give in employees' schedules pays off because, as we described earlier, the accessibility of potential helpers is very important. It allows people to engage with one another's work in unplanned ways.

Remember that helping is a discretionary behavior. That's true even for a formally assigned helper at IDEO: The role is only a small part of anyone's overall job. A potential helper may or may not be able (or willing) to respond to any given request. Because IDEO wants helping to occur, it must avoid overloading people with tasks of their own. Notice the implication: Time that might be spent on billable client work is made available to facilitate ad hoc assistance. This strongly reinforces messages exhorting people to help their colleagues.

It's an expensive commitment, given the opportunity cost, but it makes sense in light of the nature of design work, with its complex, open-ended projects, and the role serendipity plays in it. "In the creative process," Brown told us, "help is something you often don't know you need until it's there in front of you. I do think that's something that organizations can do something about: They can set up their culture such that serendipitous help is more likely to be avail-

## In the office we studied, nearly every person was named as a helper by at least one other person.

able." Because employees have plenty of informal interactions in an IDEO office—through the practices we've described and at gatherings such as frequent all-office lunches—help often comes whether it is consciously sought or not. In fact, one of our most interesting findings at IDEO was that much of the truly useful help occurred more or less organically, as part of everyday life in the organization.

### The Surprising Omissions

These keys to collaborative help at IDEO may seem uncontroversial. But note what isn't part of the equation: some of corporate leadership's favorite talent-management levers. The firm seems not to rely on fancy collaborative software tools or other technologies (although e-mail and videoconferencing are used frequently). Most pointedly, financial incentives don't play a prominent role in promoting the culture of help.

To be sure, executives have help in mind when evaluating job candidates. Brown wrote about this recently: "During job interviews, I listen for a couple things. When people repeatedly say 'I,' not 'we,' when recounting their accomplishments, I get suspicious. But if they're generous with giving credit and talk about how someone else was instrumental in their progress, I know that they give help as well as receive it." Helpfulness is considered in promotions as well. It is a value that everyone in a senior position at IDEO is expected to model. But on a daily basis, the incentive to help comes from the simple gratitude it produces and the recognition of its worth.

In his recent book on prosocial behavior, *Give and Take*, Adam Grant describes a company that reserved a spot for people to post "Love messages" to those who had helped them. The helpers found this deeply rewarding. We suspect that explicit incentives in the form of, say, bigger bonuses for the most helpful people might well give rise to competitive helping—rather an oxymoron. Rewards should be based on the assumption that people begin with prosocial motivations and are happy when their helping is recognized.

## The Helping Tango

Not every helping encounter we observed or heard about at IDEO was a resounding success. In fact, some were disasters—the “help” actually confused matters or left one or the other party with bad feelings. Looking more closely at these incidents, we came to see that success in collaborative help requires that both sides skillfully dance their parts in a helping tango.

Because it’s the specific interaction between a help giver and a help receiver that either works or doesn’t, the same person can be helpful in some instances and a hindrance in others. Consider this example involving an employee we’ll call Kathy. Another employee, Ellen, had asked her, as a helper assigned to Ellen’s team, for assistance in turning some raw data into a coherent visual display. Kathy did this and more, devoting three hours of her weekend to what Ellen later rated as an “extremely helpful” event. A week later, however, Kathy dropped in unexpectedly on Bert, another member of Ellen’s team, thinking she could help him flesh out some ideas. A combination of poor timing and lack of preparation made this episode quite a different story. Bert, who had been building a prototype when Kathy arrived, had to stop what he was doing, reorient his attention, and spend a lot of time catching Kathy up. Not surprisingly, he

viewed the check-in as a disruption that not only yielded no progress but actually set him back.

For a particular helping episode to succeed, the receiver and the giver of help must have a good awareness of each other’s bandwidth and receptivity.

If you’re looking for help, you need to consider who the experts are, who’s available, and to whom you feel comfortable exposing your in-process work, warts and all. Make sure, too, that you prepare the helper by giving relevant background information or keeping him or her in the loop throughout the project. You might do this by showing prototypes or sketches, sharing a slide deck, or simply talking about the project and the issue at hand. Whatever form it takes, this information sharing must accomplish two things: It must bring the helper up to speed on relevant aspects of the project, and it must clarify the kind of help you’re seeking.

We found exactly this through another aspect of our IDEO research. Surveying people on both the giving and the receiving end, we found that the experience of successful help boosted morale and job satisfaction. Most striking, being listed more frequently as a helper correlated with higher job satisfaction.

This apparent joy in collaborative helping speaks to a larger reality of IDEO’s culture: It is not about cutthroat competition. Many organizations discourage helping, at least implicitly, because it is seen as incompatible with individual responsibility for productivity. Some have cultures that actually promote competition among peers, so aiding a colleague seems self-defeating. IDEO’s message is that the thing to beat is the best work you could have done without help—and that when the firm produces the best work possible for clients, all its employees do better.

### First Steps Toward Change

If you want your employees to keep finding ways to improve what they do, ways to serve your customers better, ways to more effectively execute your strategy, then you need them to be engaging in collaborative help. They should not only pitch in to balance one another’s workloads but also examine, challenge, build, and refine one another’s ideas.

Start by being very clear that helpfulness produces better outcomes than internal competition.

Model that conviction in your own help giving and help seeking. Make yourself accessible, and don’t be afraid to show a little vulnerability. Respect the helper by using the help. That will send a message more powerful than anything you could possibly say.

But also use your influence as an organizational leader to establish expectations. At IDEO, employees are given something called *The Little Book of IDEO*, which spells out the most important values of the organization. Chief among them is “Make others successful.” Take a cue from it and use your own format to campaign for more help seeking and help giving. Make sure that new recruits understand the importance of those norms. Make it known that you consider help giving a productive activity and that help seeking in your organization is viewed as motivated self-development, not stigmatized as weakness. Celebrate help when you see its positive impact.

Work hard to foster high levels of trust across the organization by stifling political battles, encouraging high-status people to admit and learn from mistakes, and not blaming or punishing those who come forward for help after good-effort failures. Create opportunities and spaces for people across disciplines and functions to interact informally and frequently. And use meetings or training sessions to teach people throughout the organization how to seek, find, give, and receive help effectively.



These actions can do much to avoid help that's ill-timed, such as a pile of new ideas for your basic design when the final deliverable is one week away, or at the wrong level, such as edits to your presentation when you really wanted a reaction to the basic idea.

Finally, after you've received the help, acknowledge it and express your appreciation. It's demoralizing for helpers to get no feedback on whether their ideas and suggestions made a difference.

As a help giver, you must also do your part well. Before you start solving problems or offering suggestions, determine the needs and expectations of help seekers by asking questions and really listening. Prepare by carefully examining the background information they gave you, and if they didn't give you anything, ask. If you're going to be helping throughout a project, occasionally reach out for updates. You need to understand the current

state of the project so that you can match the type and level of help you give to that phase. Blue-sky concepts that open up diverse possibilities can be great at the start of a project, but as the final deadline is bearing down, that sort of input usually provokes anxiety and confusion. Tactical, hands-on help can be more useful then. And don't hack the project, taking over the work to such an extent that you wipe out the help seekers' sense of autonomy and ownership of the project. Show respect, in both speech and behavior, for the people you're helping, even when you're delivering negative feedback. Stay constructive.

In one particularly damaging attempt at help, a senior designer physically took the computer from a less experienced project leader and changed so much of the final presentation that she was left feeling completely deflated. Although the client liked the final presentation, the project leader viewed this event as undermining

both her work on the project and her role in the organization.

In another case, a different project leader was described by her teammates as having done a stellar job of preparing helpers for an especially fruitful design review. Not only did she send advance information on the team's progress to that point, but she presented it in a way that made the session clear, compelling, and fun for the helpers.

In a well-danced tango, one partner gives cues that allow the other to synchronize beautifully. Whether the helping interaction is a 15-minute discussion or a weeks-long series of exchanges, the two parties must create a shared understanding of what help is needed and how it will be given. It's a matter of setting mutual expectations up front and remaining sensitive to each other's reactions during the process.

Establish regular activities and practices, such as internal reviews with a few key insiders, so that people doing the work can get help from others in your organization. Consider regularly assigning one or two helpers to project teams. (But don't load on the official helpers. In creative collaboration, too many cooks can easily spoil the broth.) Include "help those outside your own team" as part of job descriptions or assignments, and make it clear that people must be able to engender trust.

Finally, don't overload people to the point where even if they are willing to lend their expertise to someone who needs it, they simply don't have the time to do so. Embrace the seeming paradox that high-performing organizations are notable for their slack.

**MANY LEADERS** of creative organizations today are concluding, as IDEO did years ago, that they can no longer rely on the lone geniuses in their ranks. In complex projects for demanding customers, everyone's work is improved by a dynamic process of seeking and giving feedback, ideas, and assistance.

Businesses are also learning that in a world of highly mobile talent, creating an environment where people can do their best is the way to attract able people and keep them engaged. Useful help at work lifts emotions; improves perceptions of coworkers, managers, and the organization; and boosts intrinsic mo-

## Surveying both givers and receivers of help, we found that the experience of successful helping boosted morale and job satisfaction.

tivation to dig into the job. (See "The Power of Small Wins," HBR May 2011.) Research across many kinds of companies finds that those with higher rates of helping have lower employee turnover, enjoy greater customer satisfaction, and are more profitable.

The same could be true for your company. Perhaps the organization you have today falls short on pro-social behavior. But the first step to a more productive culture is not mysterious; at heart it's a simple recognition that the projects that display the most creative excellence and fuel the highest performance of your enterprise depend on truly useful help. ♥

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