

Collaboration: The Benefits and Challenges of Working Together

By Joe Whitefield

Wilbur and Orville Wright, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, and Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield—what do these men have in common? Of course, they are examples of great collaborators. As a result of their great work together, today we enjoy flight, advanced personal computing, and delicious ice

cream. These are just a small sample of the number of great products and innovations that have resulted from serious collaborative efforts. And yet they highlight the tremendous achievements that happen when people work together toward a common goal.

As I survey my work environment,

A WINNING STRATEGY

Collaboration—working jointly with others, especially in an intellectual endeavor—produces results that are superior to individual efforts. This essentially occurs because there is the opportunity to aggregate ideas derived from diverse experiences, expertise, and skills to improve a singular idea or product—no matter how great it may be to begin with. Equity of ideas is not even required for success. A great idea or product that is only marginally improved upon (even 1 percent) by a lesser idea is still better. Simply stated, collaborative efforts, effectively executed, can produce wonderful innovations as well as enhancements to existing ideas and products.

Within facilities management, collaboration is critical. Given that we design, construct, clean, operate, and maintain facilities and grounds for others to occupy and use effectively for decades, it is obvious that many people are involved in these integrated endeavors. The degree to which they collaborate in these endeavors can vary quite a bit. This can have a direct impact

C Completion
O Organization
I Innovation
N Being Nice

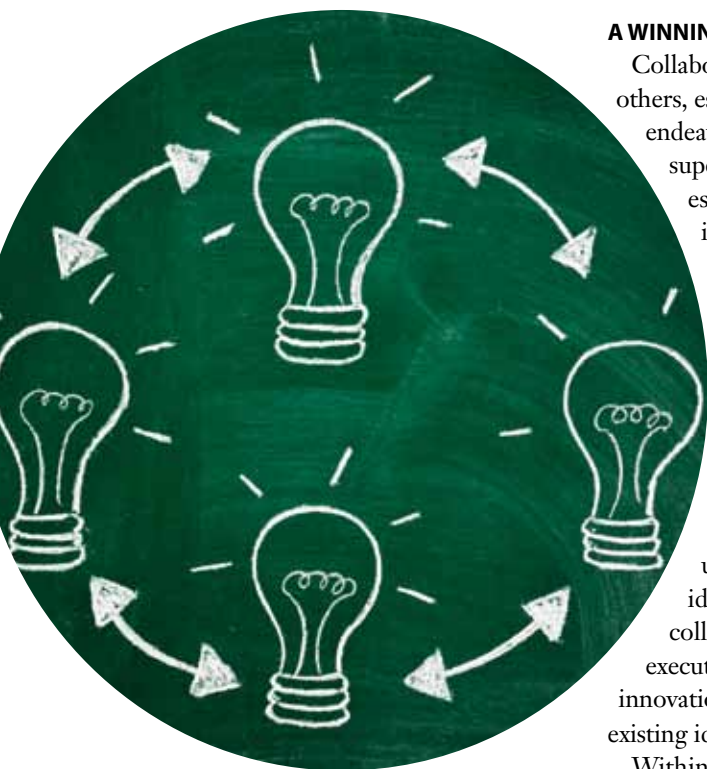
on the quality of the functionality, cleanliness, and safety of the campus built environment.

If collaboration is so necessary and beneficial, then we must ask: why is it so hard to achieve? There are probably several legitimate reasons, but I want to focus on only a couple.

COMMON GOALS A MUST

The first major roadblock is having a common goal. With many diverse participants, this task is more important and more elusive than we realize. For example, think about the myriad of goals and agendas that are present when you program, design, and construct a new building on campus. In general, the future occupants have to have maximum functionality and comfort; facilities has to have maximum operability and maintainability; and everyone is concerned with aesthetics and economics.

All of the criteria for each of these areas must be put on the table, evaluated, and usually require trade-offs for the project to have the *best combination* of features provided at the maximum value. The evaluation and negotiation processes are always difficult. But they are much easier and more effective when a common goal or performance standard



is established and adhered to properly. As it turns out, the establishment of common goals in many endeavors is an uncommon occurrence.

NEVER ENOUGH TIME

The second major deterrent to people working together collaboratively is time. No one seems to have enough of it. Sharing of ideas, interests, needs, etc., requires time from multiple parties. Even when the principal players have time, it typically does not align with the availability of others to produce a common schedule. Therefore, meetings do not take place, and collaboration is stunted. Therein lies one of the major issues involving time—people often consider collaboration to be synonymous with meetings.

Typically, the process requires you to be physically present at the discussion and decision tables, or your interests are not represented or incorporated. This does not need to always be the case. There are many creative ways to have someone's interest represented besides being present at a meeting. One primary way is to establish and document effective campus standards for the different disciplines. Whether they are prescriptive- or performance-oriented, they can be presented and included in most discussions involving budgets, relative value, and trade-offs. I have seen many good examples of campus standards and process best practices from APPA members that can aid the "too many meetings" virus that is going around.

Implementing standards and best practices work best when each party has a healthy understanding of—and respect for—the other parties' needs and goals, in addition to their own. This process of collaboration is made or broken on trust. Seek to spend time on documenting interests and standards, understanding others interests and standards, establishing common goals, improving communication systems, and building trust. An hour spent in any of these areas can yield many hours saved and fewer headaches.

As it is for every great organization in any industry, collaboration is essential to our work in facilities management.

It draws on the best ideas and practices, and combines them in a way to produce a product that is better than it would be otherwise. Innovation, efficiencies, and better-best practices are the byproduct of these efforts.

So, the next time you are on a plane, watching a movie on your computer or smart phone, or simply eating ice cream, just remember how important and in-

novative collaboration can be. And when you land, you might want to try some collaboration of your own. This can be time well spent. ☎

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