An executive's guide to high-value collaboration
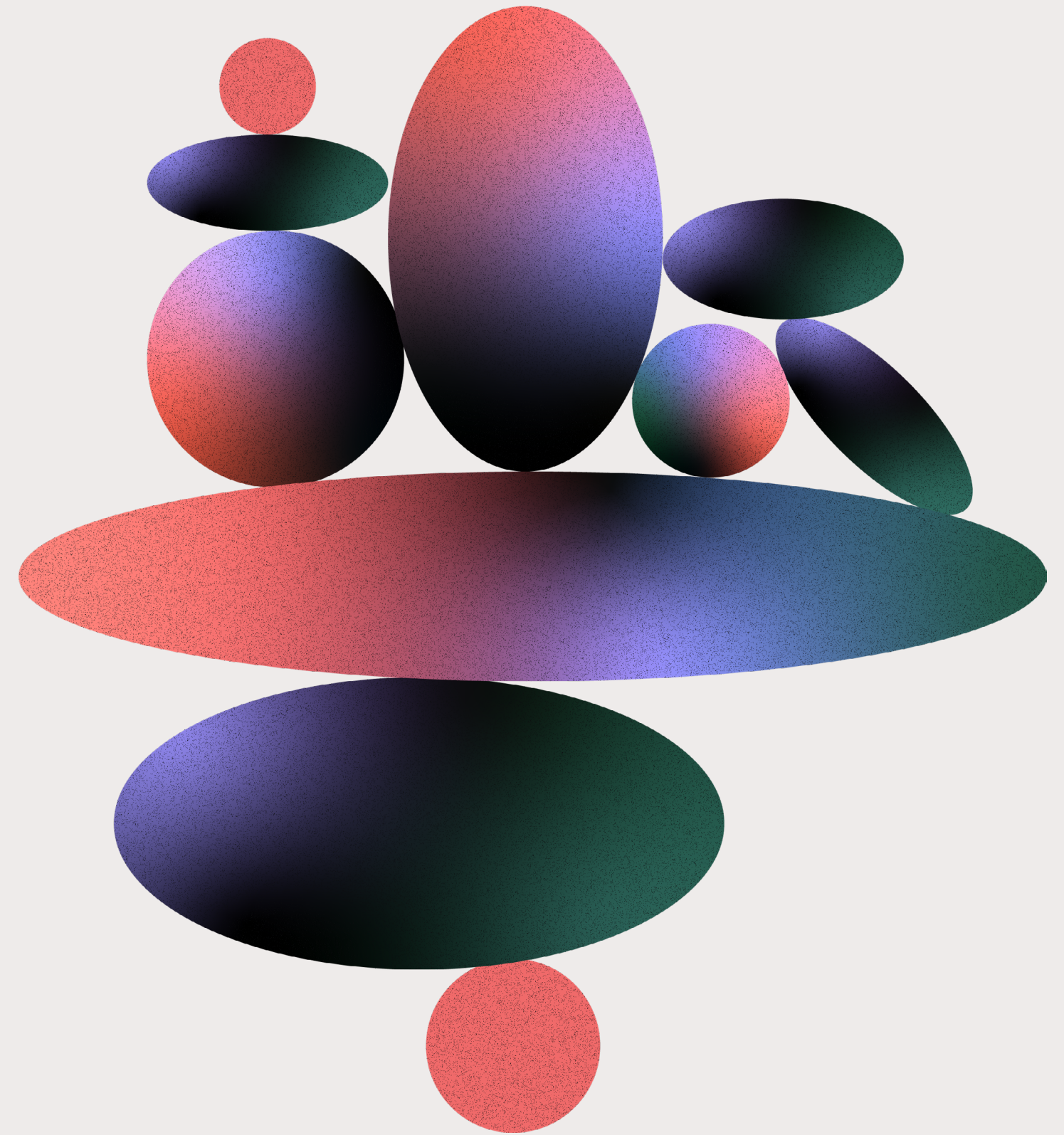
Contents

WRITTEN BY

THE WORK INNOVATION LAB

Rebecca Hinds
Head of The Work Innovation Lab

Alicia Raeburn, Tim Bowman,
Eliane Mitchell:
Researchers at The Work Innovation Lab

Michael ("Whit") Whitaker
Senior Vice President of Strategy Enablement and
Innovation Services at ICF

Carlos Valdes-Dapena
Collaboration Expert Author, and Former Director of
Organization and Group Effectiveness at Mars, Inc.

*Special thanks to: Jasmine Girn, Jordan Bogash, Khanh Vu, Julia
Martins, Jashandeep Singh, Arashdeep Singh and Steven Li*

Learn how to infuse your company with the right kind of collaboration

If you ask a leader whether they'd like more collaboration within their company, most will say "yes" without hesitation. Collaboration is highly regarded in companies today as a go-to solution for better products, bigger profit margins, and more innovation.

But more collaboration isn't necessarily better—far from it. Today's businesses are facing a collaboration crisis. Workers are getting clobbered by collaborative overload—spending too much of their time on status updates, attending meetings, and responding to emails and messages.

Today, workers collaborate 50% more than they did just 12 years ago.

Leaders are struggling to solve this collaboration crisis. Many leaders don't fully understand what collaboration is, or how it differs from less complex forms of working like coordination. And understanding that difference is crucial—especially if you want to boost efficiency.

Learn how to develop the right kind of collaboration

The Work Innovation Lab by Asana partnered with ICF—a global advisory and digital services provider that helps its clients solve their most complex challenges, navigate change, and shape the future—and collaboration expert, Carlos Valdes-Dapena, to research how executives can improve collaboration at their companies. The playbook is based on original research, as well as a framework first developed by Valdes-Dapena at Mars—one of the largest privately-held companies in the world, known for producing Mars bars, M&Ms, Skittles, Snickers, and more.The framework went viral and drove 33% growth within one of the company's key business units and markets. This playbook is designed to help executives

like you create more effective an efficient collaborative workplaces. You'll learn how collaboration differs from coordination (and why that distinction matters), and how to develop a culture with the right kind of collaboration—what we call "high-value collaboration."[1]

---

[1] This term was inspired by Valdes-Dapena's book "Lessons from Mars: How One Global Company Cracked the Code on High Performance Collaboration and Teamwork." We use the term "high-value" rather than "high-performance" because, as you'll read about in this playbook, effective collaboration can be low-value even if it is high-performing (in cases where collaboration is not necessary and coordination is enough).

Before you can solve a collaboration crisis, you need to understand what drove leaders and businesses to overvalue collaboration.

We surveyed 1,500 workers, 70% of whom were managers and executives. We also conducted a text analysis of public annual reports, and leaned on years of experience helping companies solve their collaboration problems.

Let's start with what caused the collaboration crisis to rear its ugly head in almost every business—probably yours as well.

PART 1:

How did collaboration become today's trendiest work practice?

Using "collaboration" as a catch-all term can be damaging.

Leaders and companies today tend to use collaboration as a catch-all term for a hodgepodge of shared work activities—including communication, cooperation, and coordination.

In our study, we found that 20% of leaders believe collaboration is the same as coordination, or don't know the difference. But top executives seem to recognize the importance of distinguishing between these two "C"s—the more senior the executive, the more likely they were to know that there's a difference between collaboration and coordination.

20%

of leaders believe collaboration is the same as coordination, or don't know the difference

Knowing the difference between collaboration and coordination is critical

As a leader, knowing the difference between collaboration and coordination matters—for you, your business, and your bottom line. If you don't know what collaboration means, how can you optimize it across your organization?

Coordination and collaboration both involve a collective pursuit of an objective. But they are fundamentally different activities—with different levels of effort and resources required.

Collaboration involves creating something new, through new processes

Collaboration involves developing something fundamentally new and through new ways of working. If you are asking a question like "I wonder if we could…?" or "I wonder how we could…?," the activities involved will probably rely on collaboration. Collaboration requires high levels of cooperation between individuals or teams who jointly own—in a highly connected and communicative way—creating a new outcome together.

Because new ways of working are produced, collaboration requires new goals, performance metrics, and incentives.

Coordination involves capitalizing on existing ways of working

On the other hand, coordination is more likely to rely on existing ways of working. The activities involved can mostly be specified in advance. Think about a four-legged swimming relay race. Each swimmer swims a different stroke—the order of the legs is known in advance and there's a hand-off at the end of each leg.

Coordination involves a common goal but because tasks can mostly be pre-specified, individuals and teams can maintain independent operations and performance metrics (each swimmer has a specific way of swimming their respective leg and a goal split time). Communication and cooperation are important for coordination, but less so than for collaboration where you need to commit to fundamentally new ways of working.

As a business leader, your bottom line depends on distinguishing between collaboration and coordination. Because coordination can be used through individuals and teams maintaining their independent operations and performance metrics, it's cheaper and easier than full-blown collaboration. And so, it's worth spending the time to get it right.

Collaboration is more expensive and complex than coordination because it involves committing to new ways of working, and it's often unnecessary when you replace it with the right amount of coordination.

When leaders speak about collaboration, it's usually used synonymously with teamwork and positive sentiment. There's an overwhelming perception that more collaboration is always better.

Avoid viewing all collaboration as positive

We used WebVectors, an open-source tool, to look at how news articles, press releases, and other texts reference collaboration and coordination.

The tool searches the English Gigaword Corpus, an archive of 26 gigabytes of newswire text, to calculate the similarity between the meaning of different words. Essentially, it finds the most commonly used words in conjunction with "collaboration" and "coordination."

The figure on the right shows the words most similar to "collaboration" and "coordination". Collaboration is more associated with positive work practices and objectives like "cooperation," "team," "partner," and "align." Coordination, on the other hand, is more associated with neutral or even negative words such as "concerted," "supervise," and "oversee."

Words most similar to

Collaborate

01	Cooperate
02	Co-operate
03	Team
04	Partner
05	Collude
06	Affiliate
07	Work
08	Align

Words most similar to

Coordinate

01	Organize
02	Concerted
03	Facilitate
04	Organize
05	Supervise
06	Formulate
07	Undertake
08	Oversee

In analyzing our own survey data, we saw similar patterns in how our survey participants used and defined the word "collaboration." Leaders were more likely to associate collaboration with more positive actions like "sharing," "achieving," and "common goal."

We also ran a bigram analysis—an analysis to see which word most often co-occurred with "collaboration" when participants defined the term—and found that the word our participants most frequently used with collaboration was "together." From these analyses, we can begin to see why there's such a strong halo effect surrounding collaboration.

In contrast, coordination is more often used in conjunction with neutral or negative work practices—words like "supervise" and "oversee." These are less appealing work practices often associated with micromanagement.

The bigram analysis that we ran on "coordination" showed that our survey respondents most commonly associated "coordination" with the word "goal." Coordination still involves shared effort and the pursuit of shared goals, but the "togetherness" happens at specific points—notably the endpoint (goal)—as compared to collaboration where communication, cooperation, and overall togetherness are constant.

When we asked our 1,500 participants for their definitions of coordination and collaboration, they were approximately two times more likely to use the word "work" when defining the word "collaboration" than "coordination." Once again, this demonstrates the near-obsession with collaboration at work today.

Collaboration is overwhelmingly used in conjunction with positive work practices and objectives like:

COOPERATION

PARTNER

TEAM

ALIGN

In contrast, coordination is more often used in conjunction with neutral or negative work practices like:

SUPERVISE

ORGANIZE

OVERSEE

FACILITATE

Avoid defaulting to collaboration over coordination

The third key driver of businesses' fascination with collaboration is that executives tend to over-invest time, effort, and other resources into collaboration and focus less on coordination.

Collaboration is the most costly and complex form of shared work. But in fact, many shared work objectives can be achieved by properly structuring communication and coordination efforts. That's why it's so important to learn the difference between these concepts—and the results of our study backed this up.

In our study, we found that leaders who did not recognize a meaningful difference between coordination and collaboration were 59% more likely to report that the expectations placed on their employees to collaborate prevent them from completing their work.

In other words, when leaders don't recognize the difference between collaboration and coordination, they are more likely to place excessive expectations on their employees to collaborate—like more meetings and status updates—which prevents them from doing more important work.

"

The lack of distinction between coordination and collaboration, and the tendency to want to drive more interactions all the way to collaboration, can over-complicate and drive costs up on shared work interactions that could otherwise largely achieve objectives via better coordination.

MICHAEL WHITAKER

Senior Vice President of Strategy
Enablement and Innovation Services, ICF

This obsession with collaboration over coordination was also seen in our analysis of publicly available annual corporate documents (10-Ks). We analyzed all public corporations' annual reports filed in 2022 using Edgar, which provides free public access to corporate information.

We found that "collaboration" occurs nearly 18 times more frequently as compared to "coordination" in these 10-Ks.

OF REFERENCES TO Collaboration

37,870

OF REFERENCES TO Coordination

2,344

"

We can't completely separate collaboration from coordination—work will often involve a combination. But leaders tend to overindex on collaboration and, in many cases, think much less about coordination. Understanding how collaboration is happening within your organization—a capability that we, at The Work Innovation Lab, call "Collaborative Intelligence"—will enable you to understand what types of work should rely more on coordination versus collaboration. That understanding matters for your bottom line—and for protecting your employees from collaboration overload so they can be more engaged, happier, and more creative.

REBECCA HINDS

Head of The Work Innovation Lab

PART 2:

# It all starts when businesses overlook coordination.

Most of the problems with collaboration come back to the same issue—businesses have forgotten about coordination. In general, businesses think about individual work tasks and not how they come together. When individuals launch projects, they can suffer from what's called "coordination neglect"—they underestimate the difficulties that arise due to the challenges involved in coordinating work.

Then, when projects fail to finish on time or are unsuccessful, there's a tendency to attribute the failure to cooperation issues—like a lack of motivation or interpersonal conflicts. In reality, these failures are more likely to stem from two types of coordination problems.

Coordination neglect

Two primary drivers of coordination problems are integration debt and the failure to establish norms for working together.

# The two drivers of coordination problems
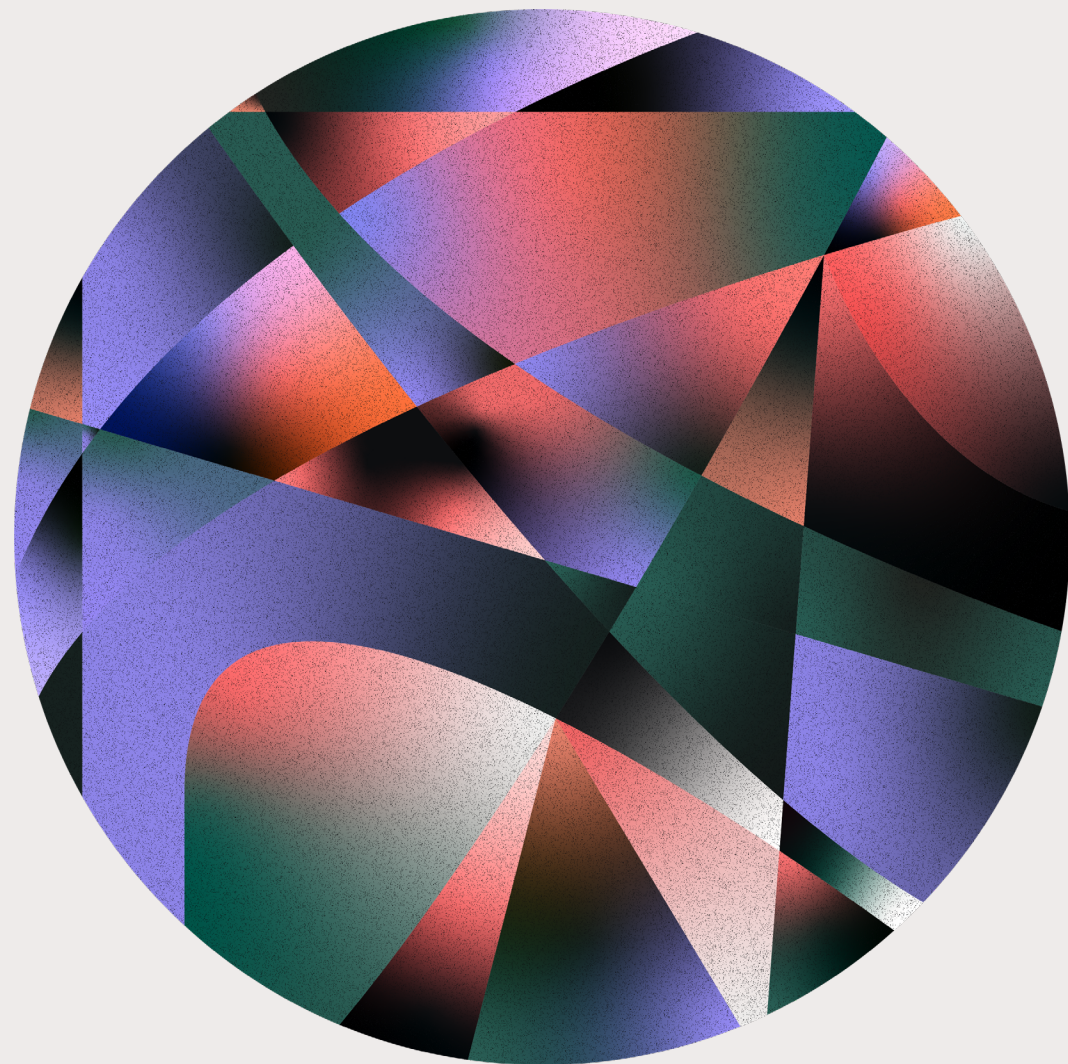
Integration debt

When groups are working on a project together, they're usually working towards a common goal. But sometimes, they lose sight of that goal, becoming too focused on the work of their individual team or specific tasks. This leads to integration debt—when there's a lack of focus on how to bring work back together. This usually happens for two reasons: partition focus and component focus.

Partition focus

Partition focus occurs when people focus more on partitioning tasks—dividing them into pieces—instead of integrating them. This is useful during project planning, when you need to determine all the tasks that will help you hit your end goal. However, in later stages of the project, team members also need to plan for how to bring that work back together after they've finished their tasks.
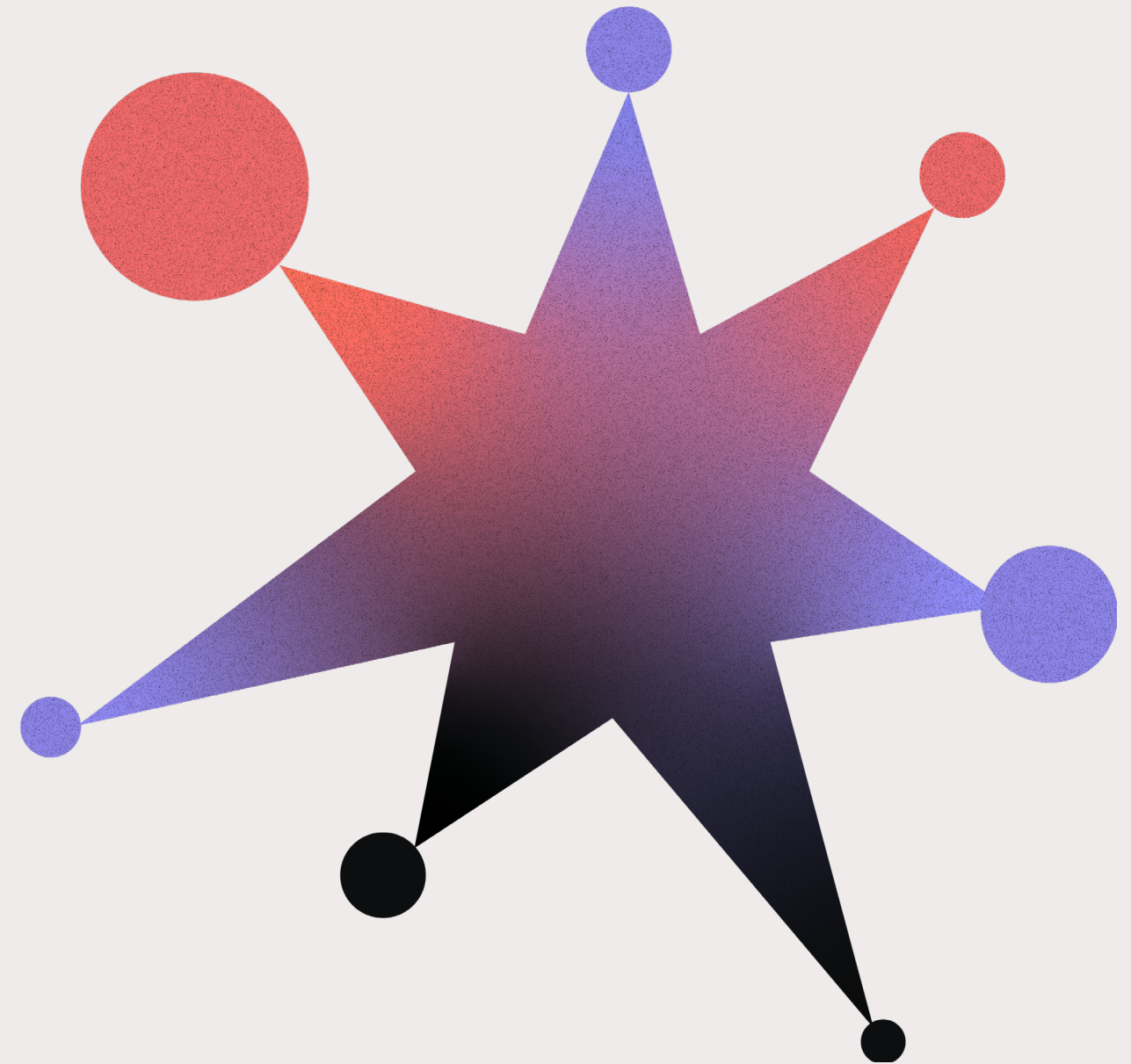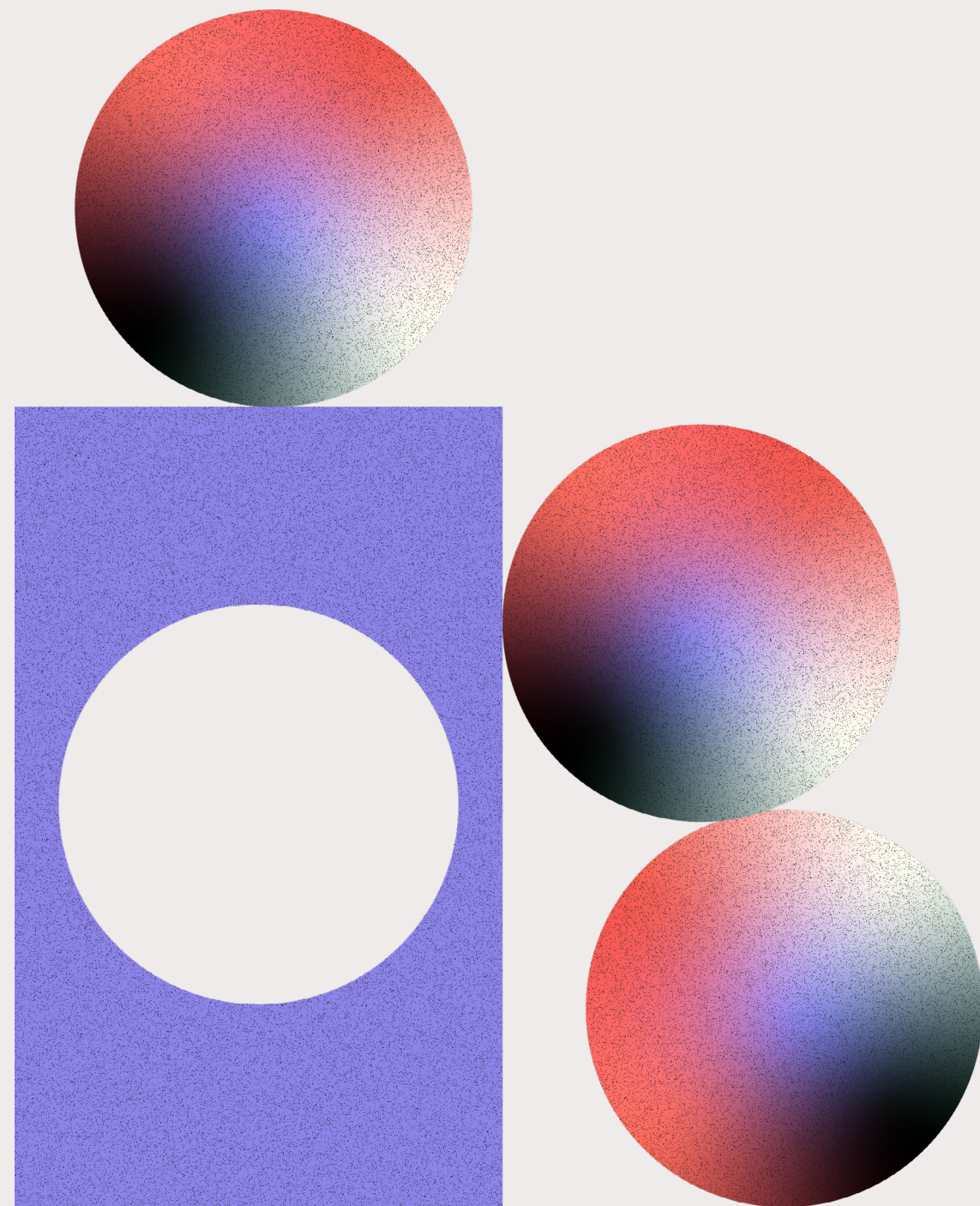
Component focus

Component focus happens when people fixate on the work of their particular team or function and ignore how it should be integrated into broader project work. There's nothing wrong with teams or individuals focusing on doing the work that they do best, the problem is that they don't explicitly define the difference between:
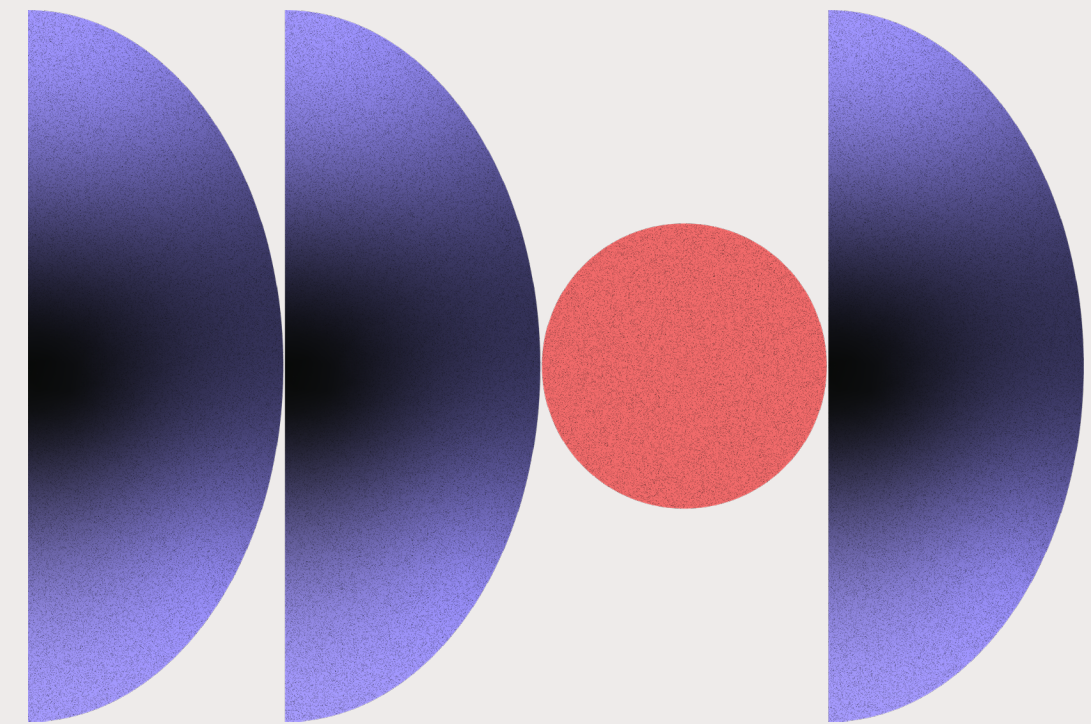
- Work that needs support from other teams or functions.

- Work that they can start individually but will later rely on other teams to integrate and complete it.

Failure to establish norms for working together

The second driver of coordination problems is a failure to establish norms for how teams should work together. For example, how will you conduct the shared work? Startlingly, we found that one-third of leaders (33%) said that their companies haven't established norms for how collaboration should happen. No wonder collaboration is broken.

You also need to establish norms for how conflicts will be resolved. But many companies don't. 40% of leaders said that their companies haven't established norms for how conflicts should be resolved during shared work. Norms give you and your organization a shared understanding of how work should happen and remove the guesswork. They also serve the same purpose as guardrails on a bridge—they make it "safe" to cross it without fear and, in doing so, drive psychologically safe environments.

By establishing norms early on, you are acknowledging that there may be challenges when you're working together, but everyone is accountable for how the team collectively overcomes them.

More than 50 years ago, American sociologist John Thompson outlined three different types of interdependence: sequential, pooled, and reciprocal. This framework is useful for understanding the different types of coordination and helping to avoid coordination breakdowns.

The more that work involves reciprocal interdependence, the more likely it is to require collaboration. It will, of course, still involve high levels of coordination, but collaboration will become more crucial.

The types of interdependence

TYPE OF INTERDEPENDENCE	DESCRIPTION	IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGNING YOUR ORGANIZATION
Sequential Interdependence	Sequential interdependence is similar to the concept of an assembly line. One team needs to accomplish a task before another team can complete a task. For example, a marketing team must qualify leads before passing them to a sales team.	You'll need a strong focus on planning to understand how to move work from point A to point B.
Pooled Interdependence	Pooled interdependence is used in cases where each person or team has their own assigned task that is later pooled together. An example is an SDR (sales development representative) team in which each employee is responsible for their own individual quotas but are working to hit the same aggregated target as a team.	You'll need a strong focus on standardizing individual work so that it can be pooled more effectively.
Reciprocal Interdependence	Think of reciprocal interdependence as a more complex assembly line. Teams work sequentially on their own assigned tasks but also go back and forth and adjust to each others' actions as the situation changes. An example is a design team working with stakeholders. Stakeholders provide "ingredients" like content or a brief. Then the designer produces the design, but needs to go back and forth with stakeholders to make sure their vision comes to life.	This is the most complex type of coordination. Planning and standardization are more likely to break down and you'll likely need constant touchpoints.

There's such a thing as too much collaboration

When leaders and businesses overemphasize collaboration, they create a breeding ground for collaboration overload. When workers are overwhelmed with collaborative work—meetings, matrixed organizational structures, collaboration tools—they can lose sight of what matters most. In turn, this keeps them from doing their most important work and contributing to your company's mission. In our survey, about a third (29%) of leaders say that the expectations put on our employees to collaborate prevent them from completing their work.

29%

of leaders say that the expectations put on their employees to collaborate prevent them from completing their work

Collaborative overload in the technology sector

In our research, we also found that collaboration overload was particularly prevalent in the tech sector. More than one-third (36%) of leaders in the tech sector said that the expectations put on their employees to collaborate inhibit their ability to get work done (compared to 29% of all leaders).

Based on our research, this is partly due to the fact that employees in the tech sector are expected to use many different collaboration technologies. This increases switching among apps, distractions, and an endless stream of notifications and pings, which negatively impacts your employees' abilities to get work done. This seems to have only been exacerbated by the pandemic; more than half (55%) of leaders say that their employees are collaborating more today than during the pandemic, with only 14% saying that their employees are collaborating less.

55%

of leaders say that their employees are collaborating more today than during the pandemic

What do high-performing companies do differently?

Across our research, we found that high-performing companies have one key characteristic in common: they more keenly distinguish between collaboration and coordination work.

> **High-performing companies more often rely on collaboration for brainstorming and problem-solving**

How can we explain this? Brainstorming is often focused on producing something new—like a new shared outcome. It is ambiguous and the outcome can't often be specified in advance, making it a prime candidate for collaboration. High and constant levels of communication and cooperation are essential.

Effective problem solving is also likely to involve high levels of collaboration. Research shows that teams solve problems faster and more effectively when they're more cognitively-diverse.

To harness cognitive diversity, leaders need to create environments where people can demonstrate and deploy their diverse ways of thinking. And this requires psychological safety—your employees need to know that they can voice divergent views without risk of punishment or humiliation.

Psychological safety is inherently a collaborative activity—diverse people need to come together in a safe space to be creative and voice different ideas. If you try to solve big, hairy, complex problems through coordination (for example, through activities that rely heavily on information transfer and handoffs), you aren't going to foster an environment that encourages and rewards cognitive diversity. Without cognitive diversity, you're likely to produce lower quality work, causing you to be less innovative and hurting your bottom line.

> **High-performing companies more often rely on coordination for information transfer, hand-offs, and project planning**

We found that higher-performing companies tend to rely on coordination for information transfer, hand-offs, and project planning. Why? The tasks and activities involved can largely be specified in advance and performed independently using existing operations and processes. By relying on coordination for these activities, higher-performing companies are able to operate more efficiently. They don't need to develop new ways of working, which are expensive and resource-intensive. Thus, companies can protect their bottom line, while saving resources for more resource-intensive and "expensive" activities like brainstorming and problem-solving—which often require more collaboration to drive innovation and performance.

> **Higher-performing companies tend to rely on coordination for decision-making**

Finally, high-performing companies tend to rely on coordination for decision- making, but not as definitively as they do other activities, like information transfer and project planning.

We hypothesize that higher-performing companies more often rely on coordination for decision-making because they use decision-making frameworks like RACI[2] and RAPID[3] that coordinate decision-making roles and specify them in advance. This is different from collaboration, where decision roles can be less clear as new ways of working are developed.

---

[1] High performance was based on self-reported survey data. Respondents evaluated their company's levels of profitability and innovativeness. While this data is subject to selection bias and subjectivity, the findings are suggestive and align with our broader research.

[2] A RACI chart is a way to identify roles and responsibilities for a task, milestone, or project deliverable. RACI is an acronym for: Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed.

[3] The RAPID model is used to assign roles to different people during the decision-making process. RAPID is an acronym for: Recommend, Agree, Perform, Input, and Decide.

For which activities do more <u>profitable</u> companies rely on collaboration versus coordination?
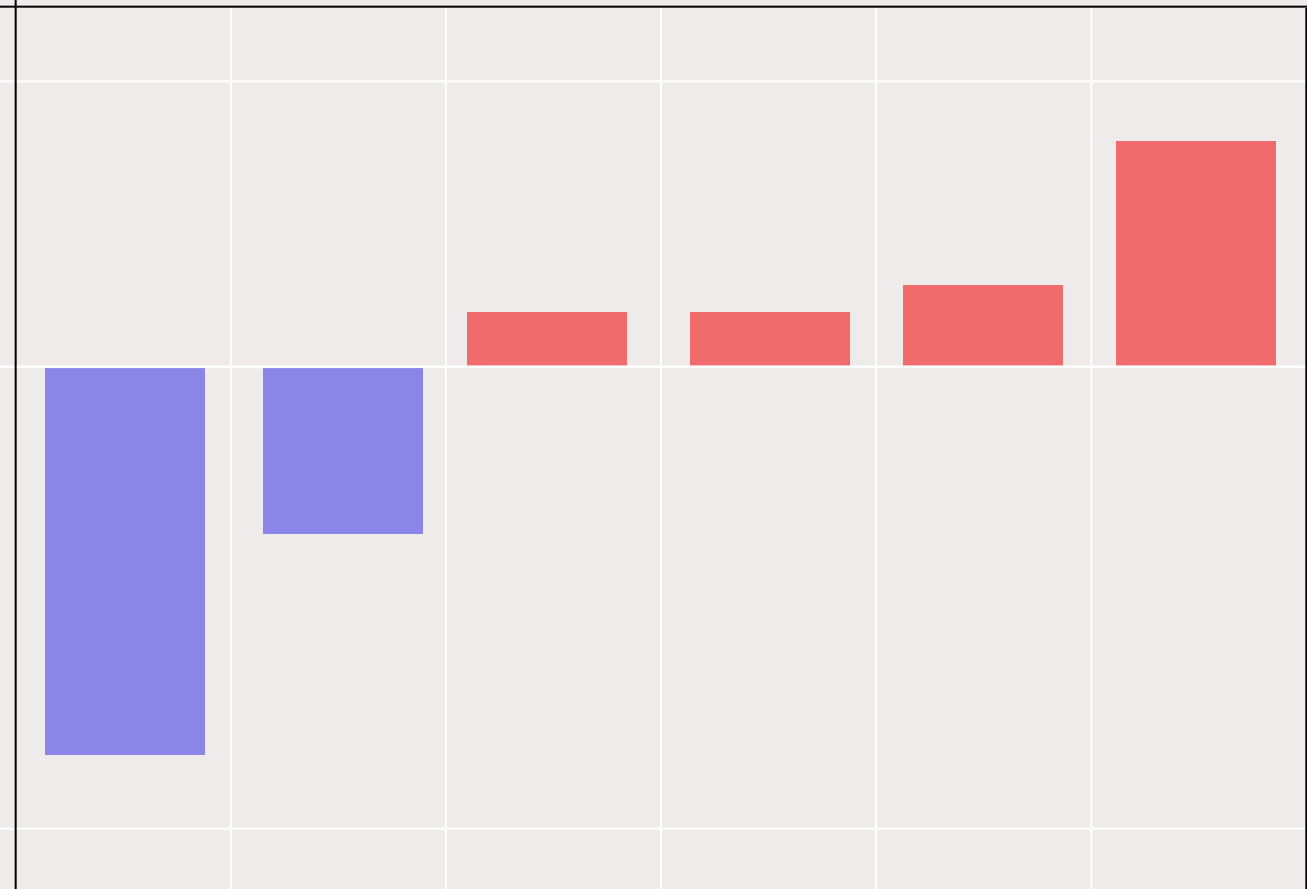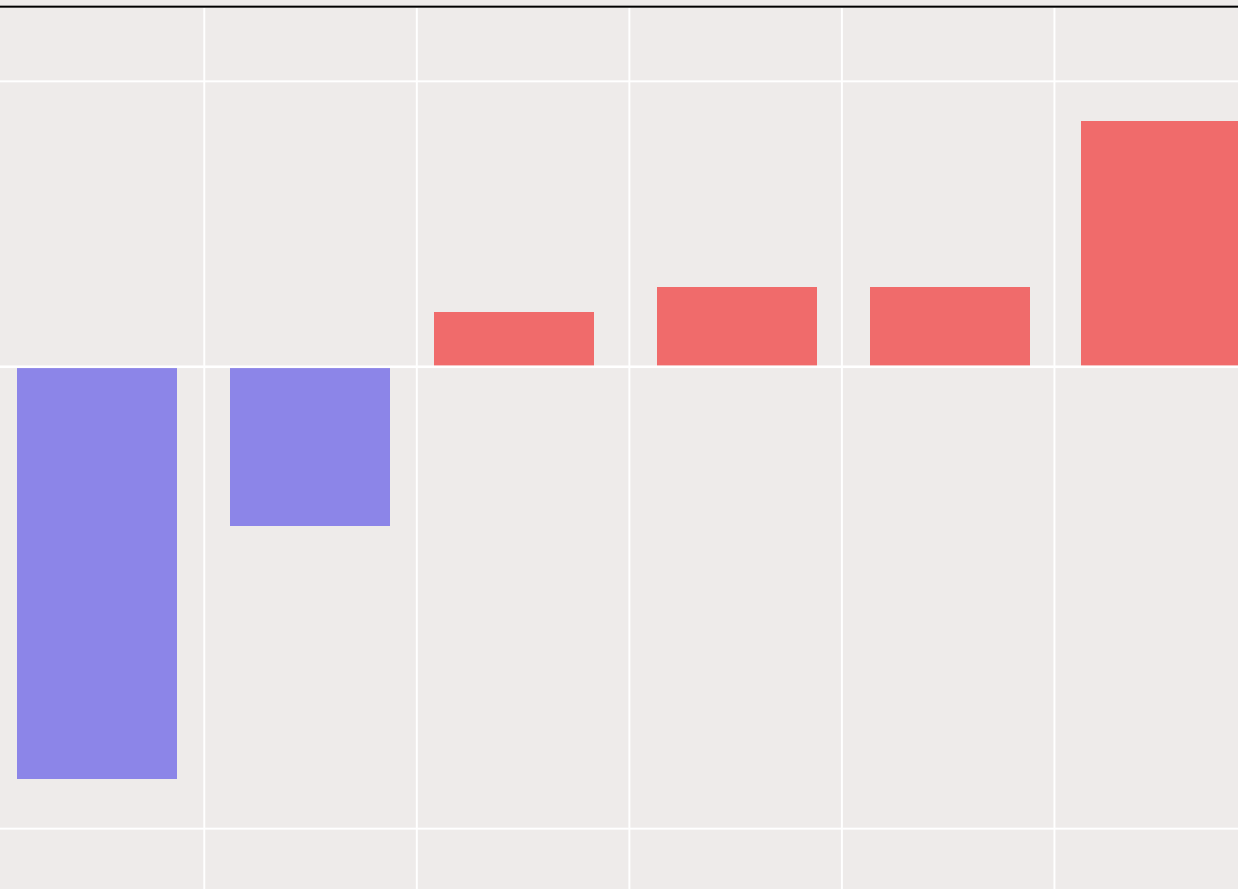
For which activities do more <u>innovative</u> companies rely on collaboration versus coordination?

More often rely on coordination

More often rely on collaboration

| Problem-solving | Brainstorming | Information transfer | Decision making | Hand-offs | Project planning |

Type of work activity

More often rely on coordination

More often rely on collaboration

| Problem-solving | Brainstorming | Decision making | Hand-offs | Information transfer | Project planning |

Type of work activity

How do you decide whether you should use coordination versus more "expensive" collaboration?

What type of work activities are involved?

As we've seen, higher-performing companies are more likely to rely on collaboration for problem-solving and brainstorming, whereas they are more likely to rely on coordination for transferring information, hand-offs, and project planning. These can serve as good rule of thumbs to decide whether you might want to rely more on coordination or collaboration. For example, if you're mostly doing project planning such as assigning deadlines or creating a workflow, you'll likely want to rely more on coordination and use existing operations and processes. However, if you're setting up a problem-solving-focused initiative, such as resolving a product bug, you'll likely want to rely more on collaboration and consider whether fundamentally new shared goals and objectives are required.

Do the major components of the work align neatly with existing teams or functions?

If there's more alignment, you should aim for more coordination. If there's a lack of alignment, you should power up collaboration.

For example, if you're asking your marketing department to prepare a media brief for a product redesign launch, they can likely rely heavily on coordination for that work. However, if you need input from the product team, engineers, and C-suite executives to create a brief for a completely new product, you'll need to rely on collaboration.

Do you require a new set of shared goals or performance metrics to achieve outcomes? Or, can you achieve the outcomes based on currently established, independently maintained goals and metrics?

If new goals and performance metrics are necessary, you'll need to lean heavily on collaboration. But if outcomes can be achieved by existing units working together using existing goals and performance metrics, then the focus should be on effective coordination.

Let's look at employee reviews as an example. If you're using the same system and structure for employee reviews this year as compared to last, then you can probably rely on coordination to complete them. However, if you're implementing a new system, you'll need to collaborate company-wide to make sure that managers know how to use the new system and will communicate and cooperate enough to effectively roll it out.

You've decided whether coordination or collaboration is best. What comes next?

Structure work practices

Depending on whether you decide work should involve coordination or collaboration, your work practices—meetings, communication, metrics, and resources—should be aligned accordingly.

	COORDINATION	COLLABORATION
Meetings	Fewer	More
Nature of Communication	More asynchronous	More synchronous
Automation	More automation	Less automation
Metrics	Outputs	Outcomes
Planning	Minimal to moderate	Extensive
Level of Predictability	High	Low
Resources	Managed separately	Managed together, need for more slack resources
Goals	Separate	Shared
Key Risks	Operational (process)	Relationship (teamwork)

How to create a culture of high-value collaboration to drive work efficiency and effectiveness

There isn't a bulletproof solution to bring the best collaboration into your workplace, but the following framework can help you get started. This framework was developed by Valdes-Dapena during his time at Mars, one of the largest privately-held companies in the world, known for its mouth-watering confectionary items like Mars bars, M&Ms, Skittles, and Snickers. The framework went viral in the company and drove 33% growth within one of the company's key business units and markets.

High-value collaboration drives efficiency by clarifying whether work should skew more towards coordination or collaboration. And for work that involves collaboration, it helps drive more effective outcomes. It helps to minimize the "coordination tax" and maximize collaboration value.

1

Bringing clarity to shared work

2

Bringing intentionality to shared work

3

Bringing discipline to shared work

Bringing clarity to shared work

- Determine what type of shared work is required (e.g., collaboration or coordination). Use the questions above:

  1. What type of work activities are involved?

  2. Do the major components of the work align neatly with existing teams or functions?

  3. Do you require a new set of shared goals or performance metrics to achieve outcomes? Or, can you achieve the outcomes based on currently established, independently maintained goals and metrics?

- Differentiate shared work from individual work. Make a list of tasks and projects that can be handled by individuals and those that will be meaningfully improved by coordination and collaboration.

- Document the reason you're working together. Why is your working together, as a team, more valuable than just the sum of your individual efforts? This "why" or purpose will serve as the guiding light for how you move forward and inspire sustained action. It's invaluable especially in intense, or high-stakes, forms of collaboration. A strong, clear why helps when collaborators find themselves at odds and in conflict. A clear, compelling "why" serves to remind collaborators what's most important about their collaboration and puts sometimes conflictual details into perspective.

> "A clear "why" for collaboration becomes a decision tool during the collaborative process. If you and I are at a decision point in our collaboration, if we have to choose one option over others, it can be helpful to go back to our "why" to help us decide which option is most aligned with the highest purpose of our working together.

CARLOS VALDES-DAPENA

Collaboration Expert Author, and Former Director of Organization and Group Effectiveness at Mars, Inc.

Bringing intentionality to shared work

● Create clear accountability by assigning accountable individuals to lead each collaborative workstream.

IF COLLABORATION IS INVOLVED:

● Set expectations for collaborative behaviors between leaders and team members. For example, how accessible will leaders be throughout the collaboration? How and when should team members escalate concerns to leaders?

● Only make collaborative commitments you can keep, and consistently keep the collaborative commitments you make.

● Identify which leaders within your organization are required to sustain collaboration over time, either from within the team or the broader organization. Don't leave effective collaboration to chance—you need one or more strong leaders overseeing the process.

● Clearly define objectives and measurable key results for the shared work. The OKR framework can be useful in defining upfront the qualitative objectives and quantitative key results for the initiative along with identifying initial activities to undertake. Doing this well increases focus and alignment across leadership teams that may typically operate independently.

Bringing discipline to shared work

- Agree on a decision-making approach, RACI/RAPID. ICF uses the RACI framework for overall team responsibilities while RAPID is specifically focused on how decisions will be made, who has veto power, and who must be consulted.

- Set cadence and expectations for meetings and communications. Be sure to establish clear objectives for meetings—do not meet if the meetings are low-value.

- Use meeting times for highly collaborative activities like brainstorming and problem solving. Avoid using meetings for transferring information, for hand-offs, or for project planning.

- Regularly document progress and develop new sets of near-term, achievable milestones.

- Define processes for assessing and evolving the initiative to ensure value is returned for collective time invested.

Most of the problems with collaboration actually come back to the same issue—businesses have forgotten about coordination.

How ICF creates a culture of high-value collaboration

To kick off new shared work initiatives, ICF uses what they call "Challenge Briefs."

A Challenge Brief includes:

● **Problem context:** The specific problem we want to solve.

● **Opportunity:** Why the potential value is worth the effort.

● **Objectives and measures of success:** Typically different from the performance goals of participating teams, these should be shared and focus on outcomes (not activities).

● **People:** The overall sponsor, assigned workstream leaders, and key stakeholders.

● **Proposed activities, workstreams, and deliverables:** Targeting a small, achievable, discrete scope and rough outline of the envisioned process. This is not a detailed project plan.

● **Timelines:** Shorter timelines are better because the value of collaboration efforts tend to diminish over time.

Planning for progress, not perfection

ICF has found that there's a learning curve when teams come together to solve problems in a new way. In the beginning, it's not always obvious how disagreements will show up or when teams will need to have more in-depth conversations about certain components. This can be clarified through the planning process, where every piece of work is written out in detail.

As well, ICF has found that high-value collaboration requires intentional engagement and disengagement. It can be better for teams to first come together and complete discrete coordinated work efforts. Then, they can re-group to consider what (if any) shared work is needed for the next phase. Otherwise, well-meaning and potentially valuable collaborative efforts can turn into zombie collaborations that continue to steadily consume resources long after their useful life has expired.

Bringing intentionality to shared work

In examining how to improve shared work, ICF found that many parts of the business didn't have established norms for shared work, such as how they would conduct shared work and resolve conflicts. Even when teams did have established norms, the norms weren't developed with the stakeholders from other parts of the organization that they would be working with. Without established norms or a say in how they were created, there was limited accountability, and behaviors were largely dictated by expectations from someone's immediate manager.

To address this issue, ICF has teams collectively define their expectations for how they will interact with each other during shared work. While details may differ, a few foundational norms have arisen repeatedly across the organization. Let's review them on the next page.

Avoid lazy asks: The burden is on the person requesting help to ask the right way, making it easier for others to respond. Be precise—identify what you need, why you need it, by when, in what format, and suggest an alternative option if they cannot help you. Asking the right way the first time can save everyone a lot of time.

Establish response time service level agreements (SLAs): Requests for assistance must be acknowledged in a timely manner. The responder does not have to solve the issue promptly but should acknowledge the request, be clear on what help they might provide, identify potential next steps and timelines, or recommend alternative options if they cannot help. Requests for help that seemingly fall into a black hole quickly undermine trust.

Show gratitude: A "thank you" goes a long way. When shared work is complete, make sure to acknowledge the value of colleagues' contributors, outcomes, and the impact that the outcomes will have moving forward. Employees are more likely to help each other in the future if they feel like their work is appreciated and valuable.

Identify the real issues: When conflict arises, take time to determine what value, norm, or rule you think was violated. Is the disagreement interpersonal, about content or process, or based on different perceptions? Deconstructing seemingly large disagreements can help to identify more discrete, addressable areas.

Confirm agreement: After a shared work meeting, draft a written summary of the agreements and give everyone time to confirm or amend them. This extra time allows for post-discussion thinking and the opportunity to reconsider or revisit agreements. With more autonomy in the process, participants are less likely to feel forced into decisions and instead actively commit to the path forward with greater buy-in.

Escalate together: If higher level intervention is required, work together on a plan to engage collaboration coaches or leader. Avoid escalating in isolation or unintentional escalations through side conversations or back-channel communications because this can lead to miscommunication.

Bringing discipline to shared work

Build accountability into performance

Research by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) and Rob Cross, a research partner at The Work Innovation Lab, shows that high-performance organizations are between 3 to 5.5 times more likely to reward effective collaboration.

At ICF, appropriate collaborative behaviors are rewarded and built into performance reviews and compensation. Importantly, peers assess leaders on not only their personal behaviors, but also how their teams engage with others. Specifically, reviewers look at how these leaders use pre-established, co-created expectations for shared work and conflict resolution. This approach can be an effective way to reward and incentivize healthy collaboration.

In the last 12 months, how frequently did your business work with the following lines of business/divisions to achieve its business goals?

- We did not work together

- We periodically worked together, but not in a sustained way throughout the year

- We regularly worked together

On a scale of 1-5, please rate how well the following lines of business/divisions are building and maintaining the desired culture of collaboration.

1 – The business regularly exhibits behaviors that do not support the building and maintenance of the culture of collaboration.

2 – The business is struggling to promote best practices for building and maintaining the culture of collaboration.

3 – The business usually promotes the best practices for building and maintaining the culture of collaboration but the behaviors are not yet consistent across all levels of the organization.

4 – The business consistently promotes the best practices for building and maintaining the culture of collaboration.

5 - The business is a leader in demonstrating the best practices for building and maintaining the culture of collaboration across all levels of its organization.

The fascination that today's leaders and businesses have with collaboration can be toxic. There's a prevalent "more is better" misconception that can hurt your bottom line—emphasizing a more expensive and resource-intensive process. Using this playbook, you can drive greater operational efficiencies within your company walls. Collaboration should no longer be your company's trendiest work practice—high-value collaboration should be.

The Work Innovation Lab is a think tank by Asana that develops human-centric, cutting-edge research to help businesses evolve today to meet the growing changes and challenges of the future of work. To learn more about The Work Innovation Lab and get our other research-backed insights, visit workinnovationlab.com.