
How Drawings May Get to the Root of Your Silo Issues



By Geert Vercaeren , INSEAD EMCCC '17

Having trouble bringing your teams together to realise your strategy? Drawings may help.

When describing silos, we often say that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing. Another common scenario, however, is when teams are explicitly required to collaborate, within an organisation or across firms, as ecosystems increasingly call for. But as they try to do so, things go sour. The different parties start thinking: *The other guys are just so difficult. Or idiots.* Variants on this line of thinking are infinite.

Top executives face this dilemma every day. They are tasked with creating great strategies, but they're typically not the ones implementing them. For this, they have no choice but to depend on their teams. It's hard enough to motivate individuals, but when successful execution requires different teams to work together, that's when the going gets tough.

The larger the organisation, the bigger the problem. In response, leaders tend to put in place all manner of structures, such as process logs, decision flows and role descriptions. While these are helpful, I would argue that they

don't address the real challenge: the often unconscious psychological blocks that prevent successful collaboration across teams.

Collaboration is like an iceberg

As a business consultant, I meet scores of top executives whose success is thwarted by silos. I've noticed that they generally lack awareness about the psychology of collaboration. Executives often don't have a language for it. They also wonder whether the workplace is the right place to bring up emotions. Some worry about opening a Pandora's box.

That being said, the majority of executives do believe, at a gut level, that human dynamics are key to effective collaboration between individuals and teams. Collaboration – and the issues that plague it – can be compared to an iceberg: Seven-eighths of it is found below the surface.

In essence, the “collaboration-in-the-mind” concept I have developed uses drawings to explore the hidden drivers of behaviour, such as perceptions, assumptions, projections, anxieties, emotions and values. As these dimensions typically reside in the unconscious, they can't always be articulated, even by the most open and willing individual. All manner of defence mechanisms kick in when you ask people to verbalise how a given collaboration is going. A rich history of research shows that drawings go a long way towards removing these filters. Therein lies the power of drawings.

The process starts with ensuring top management are on board. Individual sessions are then conducted with a number of people representing the different parties. (These could be two or three teams or even organisations.) These people are told that they are simply part of an initiative to improve collaboration between teams.

Drawings don't lie

During these interviews, we first look at things above the surface. Questions include: Are roles clear? What are the processes? How are results measured? Then the person takes a few minutes to draw how they experience the collaboration. That's the most interesting part, when we get a chance to go below the surface.

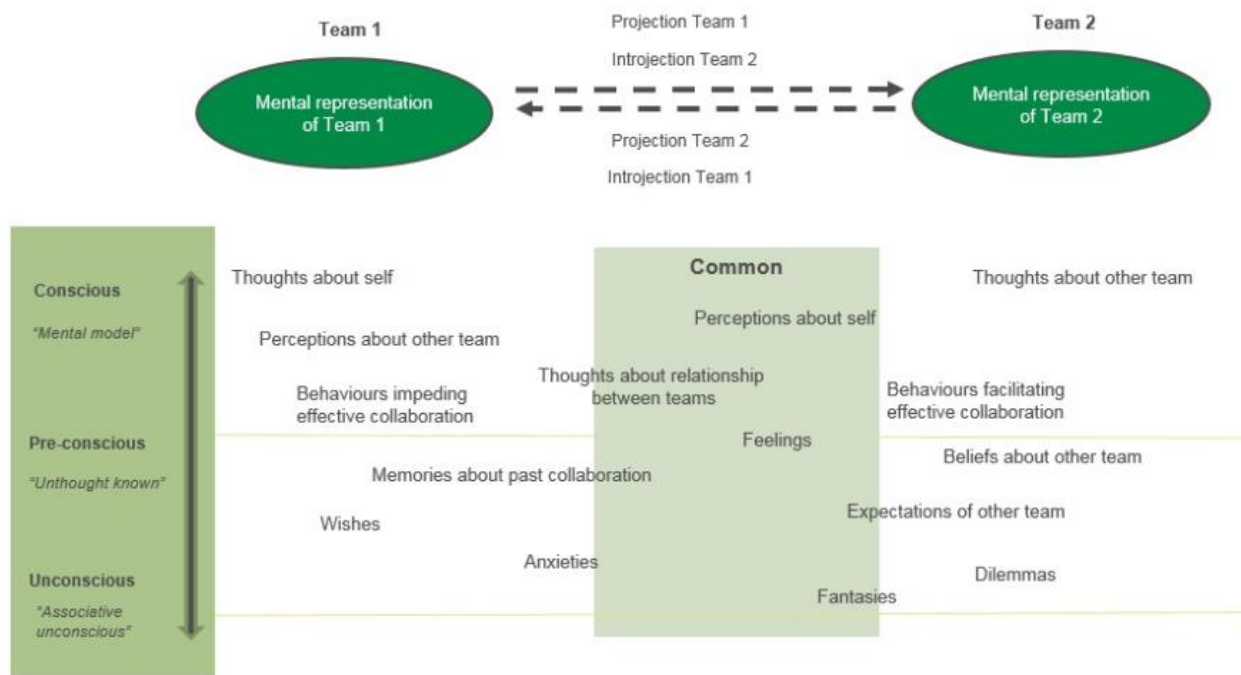
Instructions are simple. Participants must draw based on their gut feelings, without using words or thinking too hard about it. It's important to remind them that it's not about artistic talent. Most people laugh a little when they

start drawing. But later, as we explore the information contained in it, they are often surprised to start discovering their blind spots. With some analysis, the implicit becomes more explicit.

An example: One female executive was troubled by the idea the collaboration wasn't working out because of gender inequality. But ultimately, her drawing said nothing about this issue, a fact that she found very revealing.

After having conducted the individual sessions, the facilitator can start making associations based on his or her observations. (It is best to avoid taking notes during individual meetings so to minimise distractions.) Often more insights emerge in the mind of participants sometime after the drawing session, so a follow-up session may be useful to capture them. Ultimately all the patterns, images and insights are consolidated in a single document called a "working note", based on the concept of "collaboration-in-the-mind" as in the figure below.

Collaboration-in-the-mind



All parties are subsequently invited to participate in a facilitated group discussion based on the hypotheses raised during the exercise and presented in the working note. The goal of this discussion is to come up with

a solution that addresses the root cause of the problem. The solution typically involves a mixture of rational structures, as well as work on the uncovered perceptions, assumptions and projections. By shining a light on hidden dynamics, it becomes possible to (re)build trust while reducing the inherent anxiety that comes with collaboration.

Implications for organisation design

In today's ecosystems, top executives have become more dependent than ever on collaboration. However, these internal or external parties often have their own agendas, not to mention a **self-preserving bias** where most of us tend to give ourselves too much credit. No wonder friction is rife and many managers are at a loss as to what to do about it.

As an organisation grows, it typically creates more structures and departments to take away complexity. This helps employees have a clearer understanding of their role. But having more units opens the door to more silos, more conflicts and more frustration, hampering productivity.

Some organisations prefer a horizontal structure, freeing collaboration. The downside is a higher level of complexity and ambiguity. Not every employee can do well in such an environment. Organisations must consider the trade-offs carefully.

In all scenarios, a greater understanding of psychology can help senior executives and organisations succeed. My concept of "collaboration-in-the-mind" represents a novel application of such understanding which can offer hope to teams that need to increase their collaboration "smarts". It may even save them the trouble of yet another unproductive off-site team building session.

Geert Vercaeren is a senior business advisor and owner of consulting firm B15. He holds an MA degree as Commercial Engineer, a Co-active® Coaching certificate from The Coaches Training Institute and graduated with distinction from INSEAD's Executive Master in Consulting & Coaching for Change (EMCCC).

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About the author(s)

Geert Vercaeren Geert Vercaeren is a senior business advisor, coach and founder of B15, a consulting company dedicated to humanizing strategies.