

Cross-functional Collaboration

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Integrated planning improves learning environment delivery

Cross-functional coordination reduces disruption and cost

- Facilities, IT, and finance align upgrade timing
- Marketing communicates accurately to families
- Admin supports smooth transition

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Download the slides and notes

<https://schoolleaderstraining.co.uk/resources/>



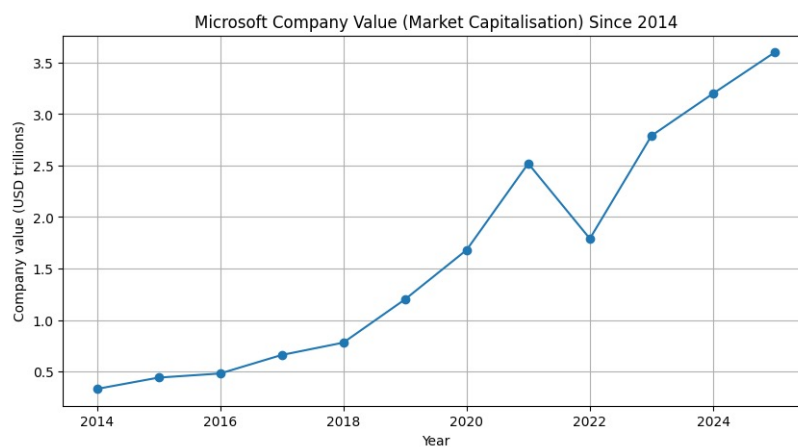
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What was the story behind this Bloomberg headline from January 2014?

Why You Don't Want to Be Microsoft CEO



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Fragmented support functions reduce efficiency and distract leaders from educational priorities

L - Leadership
E - Employees
A - Alignment
S – Signs, symbols, stories
H – HR

(Prof. Charles O'Reilly, Stanford GSB)

Operational silos create hidden costs, delays, and frustration for staff and families

- Decisions made in isolation create rework and duplication
- Teaching staff absorb operational inefficiencies
- Leaders spend time resolving preventable issues

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Building relational trust enables productive challenge and faster resolution

Psychological safety improves collaboration quality

- Encourage respectful challenge
- Model curiosity rather than defensiveness
- Address issues early

“When people believe you understand them, they give you permission to influence them.”

(Richard Mullender)

“Psychotherapy research shows that when individuals feel listened to, they tend to listen to themselves more carefully and to openly evaluate and clarify their own thoughts and feelings. In addition, they tend to become less defensive and oppositional and more willing to listen to other points of view.”

(Chris Voss: Never split the difference)

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Cross-functional collaboration improves outcomes when services align around the school mission

Shared understanding of educational priorities drives better operational decisions

- Support functions enable learning rather than compete for control
- Alignment improves decision quality and speed
- Mission clarity reduces inter-departmental tension

Discussion question:

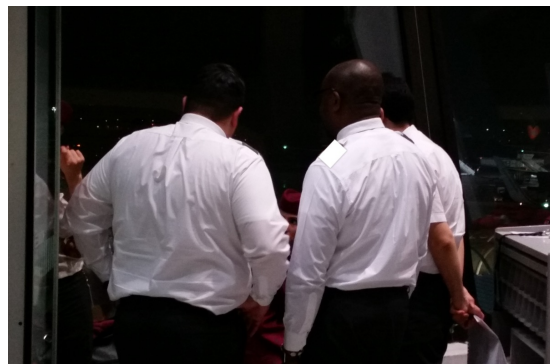
What are the four main purposes of education?

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Most collaboration failures stem from structure, systems and incentives rather than individual behaviour

Systems reward silo performance rather than shared outcomes

- KPIs prioritise departmental efficiency over system impact
- Accountability stops at functional boundaries
- Collaboration is encouraged but not operationally designed



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Organisational culture needs managing

“The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.

If you do not manage culture, it manages you, and you may not even be aware of the extent to which this is happening.”

Edgar Schein

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Clarifying shared outcomes aligns diverse functions around common priorities

Clear, shared goals reduce conflict and improve trade-off decisions

- Define 3–5 cross-functional outcomes
- Translate outcomes into implications for each function
- Use shared language rather than technical jargon
- Introduce shared KPIs
- Include collaboration in performance reviews
- Recognise cross-functional success

Do you have cross-functional collaboration KPIs?

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Defining decision rights prevents delay, duplication, and informal workarounds

Unclear ownership slows decisions and increases frustration

- Clarify who decides, who advises, and who delivers
- Separate strategic decisions from operational execution
- Document and communicate decision pathways

R – Responsible

A – Accountable

C – Consulted

I – Informed

Do you ever use a RACI matrix?

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Discussion questions

- How could you improve alignment?
- How could you build trust and psychological safety?
- How could KPIs be used to break down silos?
- How could you manage organisational culture better?

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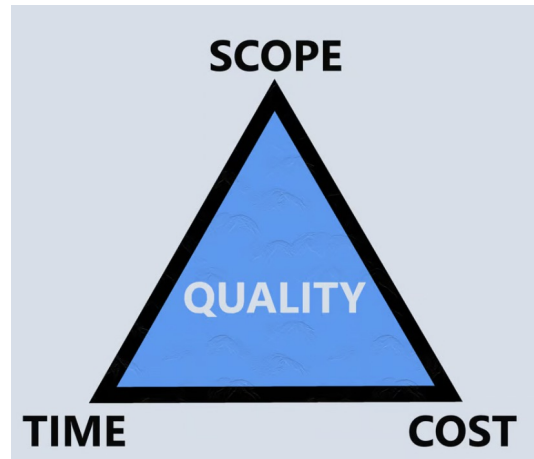
Shared planning cycles reduce rework and improve resource allocation

Early collaboration prevents costly downstream fixes

- Align budgeting, facilities, IT, and enrolment planning
- Involve marketing and admin early
- Surface constraints before commitments

“Problems don’t age well”

Jamie Dimon



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Using common data enables fact-based decisions across functions

Shared evidence reduces opinion-driven conflict

- Agree a small set of shared metrics
- Make data visible across teams
- Use data to diagnose system issues

What shared data would be useful?

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Senior leaders must model collaboration to legitimise cross-functional working

Leadership behaviour signals what truly matters

- Avoid reinforcing silos through language or structure
- Promote joint ownership
- Intervene when collaboration breaks down

- Bridgewater Associates example

What do you say when someone comes to tell you something about another employee?

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Managing tension constructively improves decision quality

Healthy disagreement strengthens outcomes when handled well

- Make trade-offs explicit
- Separate people from problems
- Use agreed escalation routes

NEFIART

(Name, Example, Feelings, Important, Accept, Resolve, Them).

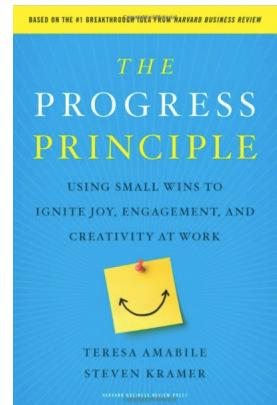
Susan Scott: Fierce Conversations

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Small, focused actions can significantly improve collaboration within one term

Quick wins build momentum and confidence

- Introduce one cross-functional forum
- Agree shared outcomes
- Clarify decision rights for one process
- Pilot shared KPIs



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Conclusion: Cross-function collaboration is a leadership and system design responsibility

Silos are predictable and preventable

- Structure drives behaviour
- Shared outcomes unlock efficiency
- Leadership consistency sustains collaboration

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Embedding collaboration requires deliberate systems rather than goodwill

Sustainable collaboration must be designed

- Clear structures
- Shared outcomes
- Aligned incentives
- Consistent leadership behaviour

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Strong cross-functional collaboration frees schools to focus on learning

Operational excellence enables educational excellence

- Reduced friction across support services
- Improved staff and parent experience
- Greater leadership capacity for strategy

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Stay in touch

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Appendix: cross-functional collaboration fails not because of people, but because of invisible power, capital, and professional identities embedded in different school fields (Bourdieu).

Schools as fields

Bourdieu describes a field as a social arena with:

Its own rules

Power relationships

What is valued and rewarded

In schools, departments and functions are distinct fields:

Teaching / academic departments

Pastoral and safeguarding

SEN / inclusion

Finance, HR, operations

Leadership and governance

Each field develops its own logic, priorities, and status hierarchy. Collaboration fails when leaders assume these fields naturally align.

Different forms of capital

Bourdieu argues that power comes from different types of capital, not just money:

Cultural capital – qualifications, subject expertise, pedagogy

Social capital – networks, relationships, informal influence

Symbolic capital – status, credibility, “whose voice counts”

Economic capital – budgets, resources, staffing control

In schools:

Teachers often hold high cultural capital

Senior leaders hold symbolic capital

Finance or operations hold economic capital

Pastoral leaders often rely on social capital

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Bourdieu: cross-functional collaboration fails not because of people, but because of invisible power, capital, and professional identities embedded in different school fields.

Habitus and professional identity

Habitus refers to deeply ingrained ways of thinking and acting shaped by experience.

In schools:

Teachers are trained to prioritise learning, autonomy, and professional judgement

Operations teams prioritise compliance, risk, and consistency

Leaders prioritise strategy, reputation, and accountability

When collaboration breaks down, it's often not resistance — it's habitus mismatch:

People are acting rationally within their own field.

Applying Bourdieu to improve collaboration (practically)

Make fields visible

Leaders should explicitly name:

Different professional logics, What each function values, Where power sits

This legitimises difference instead of pretending it doesn't exist.

Create shared capital

Collaboration improves when schools build:

Joint success measures, Cross-functional projects, Shared language and evidence

This creates new symbolic capital attached to collaboration itself.

Shift habitus through experience

Habitus changes through:

Cross-functional secondments

Joint problem-solving on real issues

Shared accountability for outcomes