

# “The Arsonist”: Are You Burning or Building the Bridges of Collaboration?

BY KIRK DANDO

They called him “The Arsonist,” and he lives in legend. Once upon a time, he owned a boutique creative establishment that generated ideas for clients. At least that was the stated goal of the company. But “The Arsonist” had other reasons for starting and running his own company, and many (maybe most) of those reasons were known only to him.

He got the moniker because he would throw out ideas at a moment’s notice that caught fire, and others in the organization had to extinguish them. He was also well known for having brainstorming sessions that never generated a single original idea. He would shoot down everyone’s ideas. Then, a week or two later, he would announce his answer to a problem, one that was always remarkably close to something he had heard only the week before from his increasingly frustrated creative staff. Eventually, his “team” began playing a little game; the members would try to guess which ideas he would likely go for. Then, they would only present those to him, hoping for some breakthrough and a modicum of credit.

But, alas, that never happened, and eventually the organization ceased to exist.

If I asked you what the “The Arsonist” could teach us about collaboration, you might say nothing, but surprisingly, he can teach us plenty.

For one thing, his story confirms that all organizations have collaboration of one kind or another. Either it is intentional or unintentional, but collaboration happens nonetheless.

I think it’s also important to note that collaboration always implies some kind of alignment. Note that alignment doesn’t necessarily have to be positive. In the case of “The Arsonist,” it was actually negative alignment. His people figured out what not to do, and then acted on that knowledge to save themselves from being singed when they offered their ideas, browbeaten in meetings or worse.

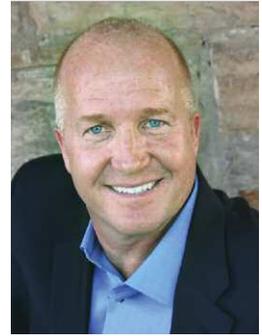
The second thing we learn from this cautionary tale is that collaboration is caught, not taught. People respond to what they see and hear. You can’t just write a collaboration manual, have everyone read and study it, give a collaboration test until everyone earns an A and then say you have a collaborative organization. It doesn’t work like that. The actions of the “The Arsonist” on a daily basis taught his associates how to act and forced them to collaborate with each other to offer only ideas that he might agree with. No manual or instruction can trump actions. People pay attention. Smart people pay even more attention and then figure out how to navigate successfully through the landmines.

And, if it’s true that collaboration is caught, not taught, then it is also true that collaboration muscles cannot be toned in a day. Rather, they must be worked on every day. It has to be a part of the organization’s DNA. There has to be trust and effective communication.

**THE STATE OF ORGANIZATION** In some ways, “The Arsonist” and his team were lucky. They were a small company with minimal billings. Eventually, they crashed and burned because they couldn’t (or wouldn’t) fix the culture. It rotted from the head down, and eventually was no more. It fell from the sky, but it wasn’t flying that high anyway.

What if you are running a fast-moving, successful company? You are traveling at supersonic speed every day, and there are a lot of moving parts and danger lurking around every corner. The right kind of collaboration is even more important in that environment, yes? How do you effectively collaborate and win when you are already successful? Why does it matter so? Because success can seduce us as leaders.

It’s easy to ignore the harbingers of looming trouble when the financials are looking good and your stock is



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soaring. But make no mistake. Every success contains the seeds of failure. The inverse is also true. In every failure lie the seeds of success.

In my 17-plus years of coaching C-level leaders around the world, I have identified 12 warning signs of success, and most of them relate to and strongly impact collaboration. They are:

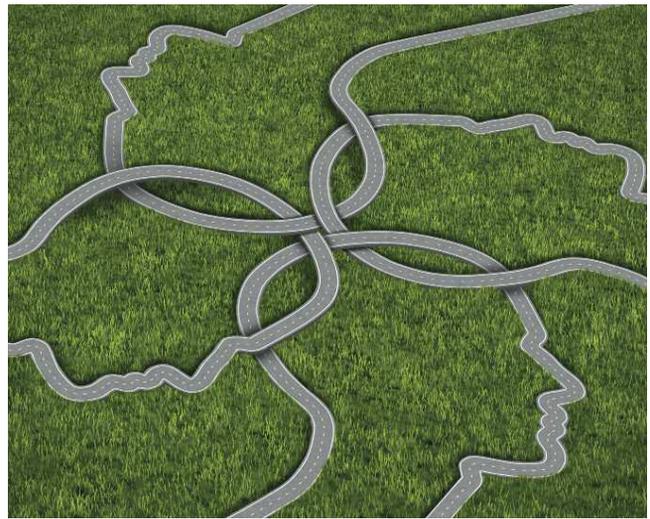
1. Right idea, wrong person
2. Bad management of great opportunities
3. Open door, closed mind
4. The leadership bottleneck
5. Hope is not a strategy
6. Core values meltdown
7. Drinking the chaos Kool-Aid
8. Communication vacuum (aka: It sucks)
9. Incentivizing failure
10. The false security of revenues
11. Random acts of accountability
12. Sowing the seeds of decay

Perhaps you have already encountered some of these warning signs of success in your organization. When communication is stifled, collaboration stops dead in its tracks. Sometimes it happens because of warning sign #3, Open door, closed mind. A leader lets people give their input, perhaps even encourages it, and then dismisses it out of hand. Has that ever happened to you?

Or, leaders are not intentional about building a healthy, collaborative organization. See #5: Hope is not a strategy. Time and time again, I have seen the same recurring patterns, no matter the industry or company involved. Each of these 12 issues has workable answers and can be fixed if they are recognized in time. No company is immune, in my opinion.

**BUILDING A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION** As with most problems, there are proven formulas that work. In this case, the formula sounds easy and has only three major steps: Define, Design and Decide. It's important to note that the order is important. Get these three steps out of order, and you are courting disaster. At a minimum, your collaborative effort will not be collaborative at all.

First, sit down as a team and define the issue or problem and desired outcomes. What does effective collaboration look like? How does it work when it's working best? Can you give examples of collaboration that worked or broke down? What are the benefits or consequences? How big a priority is it?



Second, design a solution, preferably measurable, that fits your circumstance and available talent pool. The solution should help you and your team prepare effectively for the issues that poor collaboration can cause to your growth.

Then, decide whether you have the resources (time, talent, commitment and money) necessary to execute the design, and then act on your decision.

Most important, be intentional about building the kind of collaborative organization you desire, but don't expect it to happen without your guidance and the guidance and input of your leadership team.

Trust me, the members of your team understand the things "The Arsonist" will probably never understand, such as: *You get what you set yourself up for!; It is impossible to be pathetic and powerful at the same time!; and, Behind every great company is a culture of great collaboration!* <sup>MW</sup>

*Kirk Dando is a highly sought-after and well-respected leadership and growth expert, who has been called "The Company Whisperer." He has coached more than 5,000 growth-hungry leaders, including the 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year award winners and several "Best CEO" winners. Dando is CEO of Dando Advisors and the author of the forthcoming book, Predictive Leadership: Avoiding the 12 Critical Mistakes That Derail Growth-Hungry Companies (Palgrave Macmillan, May 2014). To learn more, go to [www.KirkDando.com](http://www.KirkDando.com)*

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