

Human Processes Keith Harrison-Broninski

## Turning Down the Heat of Collaboration

From the second law of thermodynamics, we know that the universe is gradually and inevitably descending into "heat death" – a state in which no free energy is available to perform any form of work. This may have an impact on the market for business process management software, although on the bright side, it won't happen for at least a googol (10 followed by 100 zeros) years.

In the meantime, we have a different problem, which is to make the best use of the energy available. In physical mechanics, a key concern is to reduce the wastage due to friction, which transforms energy applied to a system into heat that cannot always be used and often wears out the mechanisms that produce it. What is the counterpart of this in the workplace?

We often talk about friction resulting from colleagues, or people who could potentially become colleagues, having different attitudes, opinions, working styles, and/or temperaments. To reduce this, managers may either separate the people concerned – i.e., give up on getting them to work together – or use soft skills to apply mediation techniques. The former approach is simply a wasted opportunity, while the latter is expensive in terms of effort, often very time-consuming, and not always successful. Could there be a simpler, quicker and cheaper way to reduce workplace friction?

For many people, their job provides a close-knit community – in the best cases, almost a family – that is highly important to them and on which they are able to rely for many forms of support. However, most people even in this happy situation will have colleagues with whom they have little in common, and may not even particularly like, yet with whom their contact generates no friction. Personal like or dislike is not usually the cause of workplace friction.

The workplace is exactly that – you are there primarily to deliver results according to expectations and to be recompensed accordingly. As a result, friction in the workplace is generated from the belief that others may well prevent you from achieving your personal goals. The personal strength of feeling that often appears to underlie workplace friction is not the cause but the result – the cause is typically a perception that the intentions and actions of colleagues are likely to frustrate your own intentions and actions.

So the secret to taking the friction out of workplace collaboration, and reducing the wasteful heat that it generates, comes down to identifying goals. There are really only 3 possible cases.

The goals could be the same, in which case you need to work together. The compensation will have to be split between all parties, but the increase in effort is likely to create better results and hence more compensation overall. The goals could be related, in which case there is likely to be mutual advantage from reducing the total effort spent on the overlap. The compensation for the overlapping area will have to be split between all parties, but the reduction in effort is likely to create a better effort to compensation ratio for each party.

The goals could be unrelated, in which case it was all a misunderstanding. Put like this, it becomes clear that most workplace friction can be eliminated by applying the 5 Cs (see my August 2015 column, "Collaborate has 5 Cs"). If you identify and agree the goals to which people can **Commit** and to which they will **Contribute** as stakeholders then friction will often just drop away.

Not always, of course! People are not machines, and may take against each other for no apparent reason. However, when it comes to the workplace most of us just want to be able to get on with and succeed in the activities we are currently focusing on. What a manager needs to do in order to keep their human processes running smoothly is recognize friction when it starts to appear, then eliminate it by using the 5 Cs to ensure that their staff are not threatening each other's workplace goals.

## Author



**Keith Harrison-Broninski** is a consultant, writer, researcher and software developer working at the forefront of the IT and business worlds. Keith wrote the landmark book "Human Interactions: The Heart And Soul Of Business Process Management", described by reviewers as "the overarching framework for 21st century business technology" and "a must read for Process Professionals and Systems Analysts alike". Keith founded Role Modellers, whose company mission is to develop understanding and software support of collaborative human work processes, the field Keith pioneered with his work on Human Interaction Management. For more information about Keith, see <http://keith.harrison-broninski.info>.