

We All Collaborate. It's Time We Learned to Do It Skillfully.

A White Paper for Business and HR Leaders
From a Practitioner's Perspective



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Table of Contents

Why Collaboration Needs a Rethink—Now	03
We All Collaborate The Question Is: Do We Do It Skillfully?	04
Collaboration Without Skill: A Risk to Results	06
Places of Skillful Collaboration: A New Paradigm	07
Why Collaboration Fails: The Four Barriers.	08
A New Approach: A Journey to Places of Skillful Collaboration	10
From Insight to Action: How Teams Learn Skillful Collaboration	14
The Science Behind Why This Works	15
Why Peer Coaching Matters	16
Future-Proofing Your Workforce.	17
Developing Skillful Collaboration in Practice	18
Showing Up in a Different Way—And An Invitation	19



Why Collaboration Needs a Rethink—Now

Collaboration is everywhere—and yet, too often, it falls short of its potential.

In today's fast-moving, hybrid, multi-teaming organizations, we ask people to collaborate without ever equipping them with the skills to do so effectively.

This whitepaper offers a fresh, practical, experience-based perspective on collaboration: not as a vague ideal, but as a set of learnable skills rooted in how we talk, think, and listen together. Drawing on over 30 years of working with teams and leaders, it highlights the real barriers to effective collaboration. Further it introduces an experiential learning journey to overcome them—a learning journey to “Places of Skillful Collaboration.” The aim is simple: to create space for teams and leaders

“Playing football is very simple, but playing simple football is the hardest thing there is.”

— Johan Cruyff

to learn together, connect more deeply, and unlock better outcomes through how they collaborate / work together every day.

As Cruyff observed, “playing simple football is the hardest thing there is.” The same is true of collaboration—it looks simple, but doing it well takes real skill.



We All Collaborate. The Question Is: Do We Do It Skillfully?

Collaboration, at its core, simply means to “work together”. The origin of the word comes from the Latin *collaborare* – “col” (together) and “labore” (to work).

For today’s organizations, effective collaboration isn’t a luxury; it’s a necessity. The challenges leaders face are often complex—they demand people who can think, act, and learn together. They require collaboration—not as a nice-to-have, but as a core human capability for navigating change and creating value.

And collaboration continues to be one of the most valued capabilities in the modern workplace.

The World Economic Forum’s “Future of Jobs” report for 2025 lists analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility, leadership, and social influence as the most important core skills—all of which may seem to have an individual focus but for real organizational impact rely heavily on collaboration.

Core skills in 2025

Share of employers who consider the stated skills to be core skills for their workforce.



Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025

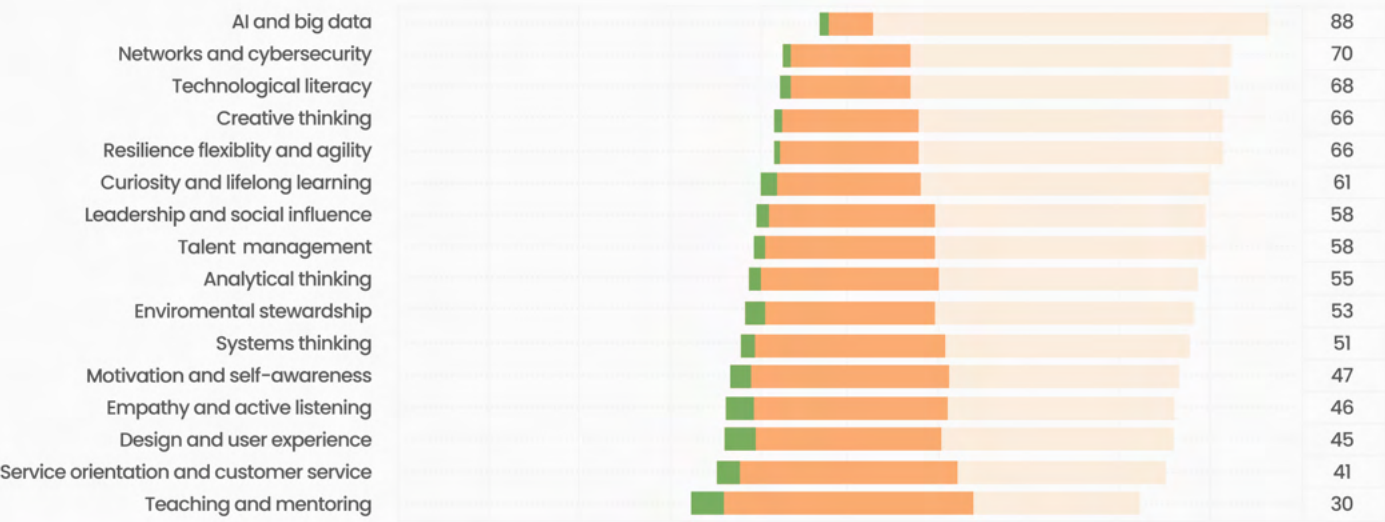
Looking toward to 2030, the WEF predict an emphasis shift towards AI and Big Data, cyber security, and technology literacy—but the need for collaboration doesn’t drop off the radar. In fact, with such complexity, the need for human collaboration together and with AI becomes even more vital.

For more than 25 years I’ve been collaborating with corporate teams and leaders. My career journey has taken me—from technical problem-solver in global automotive Engineering/R&D teams, to HR/L&D corporate academy

lead, to serial entrepreneur and learning strategy consultant. For the last 6 years I’ve worked as an executive coach, team coach, and professional dialogue practitioner.

Everywhere I go, I hear the same thing: “We need to collaborate better!” But in our world of core skills, emerging skills, reskilling and upskilling, I prefer to re-frame this statement “We need to collaborate skillfully!” That’s the key word here: *skillful*. Because everyone is collaborating. The real question is ‘what is skillful collaboration’?

Skills on the rise, 2025–2030



Source: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025

Business Impact:

When organizations invest in skillful collaboration, they strengthen the very abilities the WEF highlight as skills for the future. These skills will lead to stronger decision-making, better cross- functional teamwork, and a culture equipped to thrive in complexity, including in human–AI collaboration.

Collaboration without Skill: A Risk to Results

We're all invited to collaborate—but most of us were never taught how. It's not only about intention. It's about skill. While our systems educate and train us to excel as individuals, real

collaboration is a set of collective skills—and that requires a different kind of capability. And when this capability can be developed then it's a proven performance driver:



Companies that promote collaborative working are 5 times more likely to be high performing.

Forbes



Teams that collaborate precisely boost productivity by 39%.

Institute for Corporate Productivity



Companies that foster teamwork experience 50% lower employee turnover.

Gallup

In today's fast-moving, noisy, hybrid world, these skills matter more than ever. It's time to pause, reflect, and rethink how we work together.

This white paper explores where collaboration currently breaks down—and how we can learn to do it skillfully.

Business Impact:

Without collective skills development, collaboration remains inconsistent, relying on individual personalities rather than team & organizational competence. This creates many risks, teams are less productive, performance stalls, and employees disengage.

Places of Skillful Collaboration: A New Paradigm

I recently came across a wonderful concept called 'Skillful Conversation' developed by Peter Garrett and Jane Ball. They consider a 'Skillful Conversation' to be a conversation where we are 'revealing the thinking behind our words and actions' to deepen understanding and enhance decision-making.

I was intrigued by this concept and started asking my clients, leaders and their teams "Do you have Skillful Conversations?"

Most of them pause to think for a while and then answer "No!" And then we enter a conversation about what this actually is.

Later I was thinking, if my clients aren't having Skillful Conversations how are they possibly having Skillful Collaborations? Put simply, collaboration in our modern work spaces is "talking and listening and thinking together."

So with Skillful Conversations as a starting point I thought: Where else do we actually collaborate?

- We collaborate when we are in conversation.
- We collaborate when we are making decisions.
- We collaborate when we are in meetings.
- We collaborate when we give or receive feedback or engage in peer coaching.

These aren't abstract ideas. These are the moments that fill our calendars and our days.

These are the places where collaboration happens—or doesn't.

But here's the catch: collaboration is assumed. We assume people know how to do it. We assume they learned it somewhere along the way. But in my work with hundreds of leaders and teams, I rarely encounter anyone who has truly learnt how to collaborate skillfully. That's where the opportunity lies.

Business Impact:

Understanding collaboration as an intentional set of skills (not just an expectation) enables leaders and teams to commit to a collaborative way of working. Approaching each conversation, decision, meeting and feedback opportunity as a place of skillful collaboration leads to smarter team and cross-functional teamwork, quicker problem-solving, and more effective customer engagement.

Why collaboration fails:

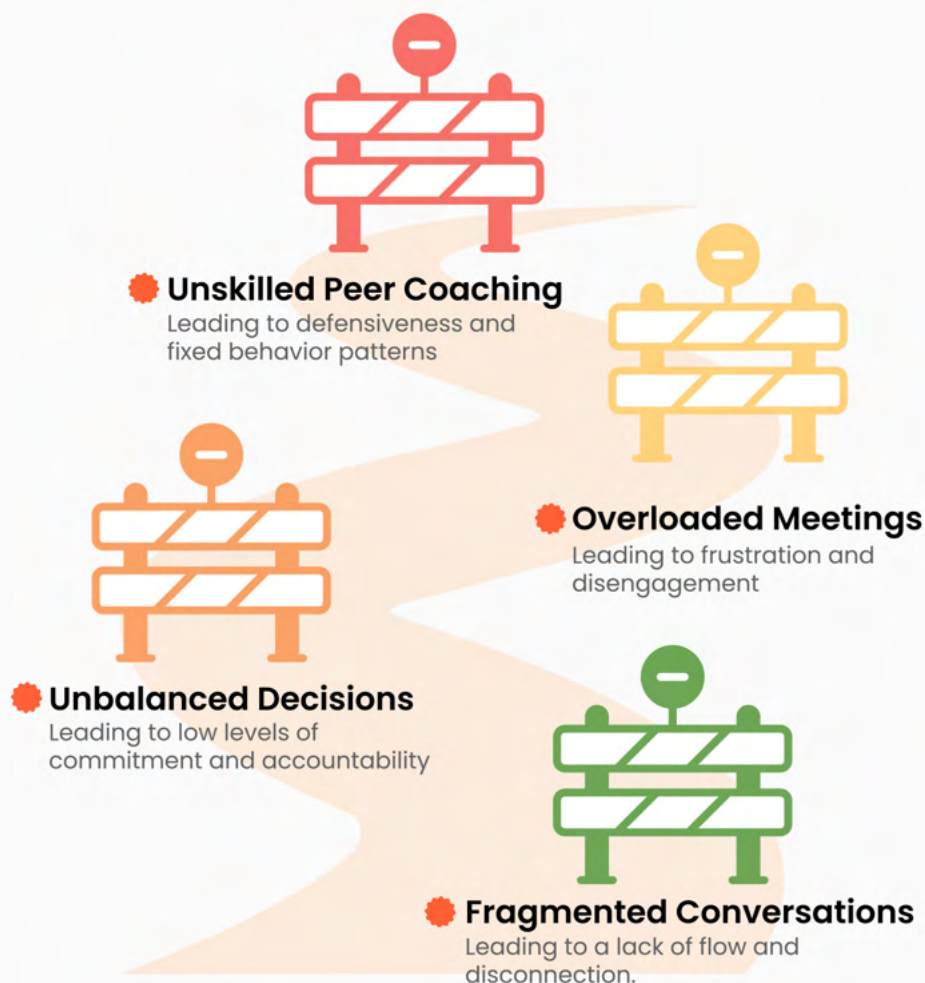
The Four Barriers

“We are doomed to failure without a daily destruction of our various preconceptions.” — Taiichi Ohno

When we meet teams and leaders, they're often not experiencing Skillful Conversations—and there's little awareness that conversation could (or should) be skillful at all. In fact, many carry unspoken preconceptions about how collaboration is “supposed to” work. So what are they experiencing in

their day-to-day interactions—in conversations, when making decisions, sitting in meetings, or giving and receiving feedback / peer coaching?

We call them the **Four Barriers to Skillful Collaboration**:



1. Fragmented Conversations

Disjointed, confusing, or emotionally disconnected discussions where people talk past one another, and nobody leaves feeling truly heard or understood.

- “Our discussions go round and round with no real resolution.”
- “The same people always talk. Others check out.”
- “When I talk with him / her, I don’t really feel heard.”

2. Unbalanced Decisions

Discussions where decision-making is either unclear, one-sided, or simply delegated to authority without genuine engagement or ownership.

- “We don’t know how the decision is being made—or by whom.”
- “The boss already seems to have a preferred outcome.”
- “We made the decision, but I’m not really sure who committed.”

3. Overloaded Meetings

Meetings with unclear purpose, too many or too few attendees, bloated agendas, and little follow-up. The result? Frustration and a growing resistance to attending.

- “My calendar is wall-to-wall meetings, and I’m not even sure why I’m in half of them.”
- “The agenda is packed, but we barely cover anything in depth.”
- “Some people talk too much, others don’t say a word.”

4. Unskilled Peer Coaching

Feedback conversations that are poorly timed, overly critical, or lacking in depth and courage. Instead of learning, they create defensiveness.

- “We don’t really give feedback unless there’s a problem.”
- “When I gave feedback, it didn’t seem to land—or help.”
- “People say they want feedback, but then they get defensive.”

These barriers aren’t isolated incidents. We’ve seen them across sectors and continents. And when left unaddressed, they erode trust, sap engagement, and stall performance.

And the challenge isn’t just interpersonal. There’s a systemic and organizational component. We’ve built systems that reward action over reflection, meetings over connecting, and output over sense making. In this culture, attempts to collaborate keep hitting the barriers!

Business Impact:

These barriers—fragmented conversations, unbalanced decision-making, overloaded meetings, and unskilled peer coaching—are not just frustrations; they are silent productivity killers. Left unaddressed, they lead to wasted time, missed opportunities, and cultural erosion / disengagement.

A New Approach: A journey to Places of Skillful Collaboration

“My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.”
— Desmond Tutu

Skillful Collaboration is about building people capabilities together. It's about developing a set of inter-dependent relational skills through intentional practice, meaningful reflection, open connections and a commitment to continuous improvement. To borrow the phrase from Desmond Tutu, the skills of collaboration are 'human together' skills.

With this in mind, we began to reframe the challenges to collaboration not as check-list of individual skills to learn, but re-imagined as places that teams could visit and build their human together skills – places where teams feel a sense of welcome and belonging, can learn, experiment and practice the skills that make collaboration work.



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1. A Place of Skillful Conversations



A place of resonance where we share our ideas, our thinking and our emotions. We listen attentively and offer different perspectives. We debate respectfully and voice our agreement. A place where we enhance team / group engagement and cohesion.

Skills practiced: active listening, emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, presence, curiosity.

Outcomes: psychological safety, higher engagement, stronger relationships, more inclusive communication.

Example: With one recent team we worked with, we started by simply asking, "When was the last time you asked the full team? What's really going on for you right now?" Most couldn't recall. That's not because they don't talk. It's because we rarely create the conditions for real sharing, curiosity and connection.

2. A place of Skillful Decisions



A place of consideration where the decisions we make are informed, intentional and thorough. We follow a structured process and have clear responsibilities. A place of transparency where all voices are heard instilling team / group commitment and accountability.

Skills practiced: structured decision-making, alignment, balancing perspectives, analytical thinking, creative thinking

Outcomes: Trust, improved ownership, accountability, clarity, and commitment.

Example: We recently asked a team to work in pairs and to choose an on-going team issue that they could debate. Then we gave them a few minutes to debate for / against the issue. After those minutes we asked them to switch debating positions. During the de-brief the team leader said. *"I've never actually done this! I really empathized with the opposite position and we had new ideas together."*

3. A Place of Skillful Meetings



A place of participation where we are fully engaged. We arrive with full awareness of the purpose, the priorities, our role and our expected contribution. A place where the energy is refreshing, the process clearly facilitated and the output aligned and actionable.

Skills practiced: facilitation, time management, inclusion, analytical thinking, flexibility.

Outcomes: productivity, reduced meeting fatigue, increased focus, faster execution, connection, engagement.

Example: Another Management team reported that they decided to have a monthly strategy meeting with just one agenda point. "When we carefully decide the biggest priority for us to work on together, then we create real focus and progress on this issue. During the meeting we really have time to think together and it's amazing to leave it feeling so energized and aligned on the next steps."

4. A Place of Skillful Peer Coaching



A place of openness where we provide and receive. The flow of information is insightful, caring and bold, it is 'on point' and timely in both 1:1 and group / team settings. A place where we generate a sense of mutual support, deep learning and impactful growth.

Skills practiced: self-awareness, empathy, active listening, adaptability, direct communication, accountability.

Outcomes: Trust, Psychological Safety, increased resilience, growth, development, performance.

Example: The conference room went quiet as Laura said, "Can we just pause for a moment to agree on what we're actually trying to achieve in this agenda point? We seem to be going in circles." Ashley, the team leader, nodded. "Phew—thanks for saying that, Laura. I agree. Let's take a moment to hear all voices and realign on what we're here to do."

See below a table that summarizes the Four Places of Skillful Collaboration concept.

Table 1: Turning Barriers Into Breakthroughs: The Four Places of Skillful Collaboration

Place	Guiding Spirit	Core Skills Practiced	Best Used to Overcome This Barrier	Impact on Team Climate
Place of Skillful Conversations	"It's about talking and thinking and listening together."	Active listening, emotional intelligence, perspective-taking, challenging, presence, curiosity.	Fragmented Conversations – when people talk past each other and don't feel heard.	Builds trust, engagement, openness, Psychological safety.
Place of Skillful Decisions	"It's about making considered and transparent choices together."	Structured decision-making, alignment, inclusion, analytical thinking, creative thinking.	Unbalanced Decisions – when decision-making is unclear, top-down, or lacks ownership.	Increases clarity, accountability, commitment, Performance.
Place of Skillful Meetings	"It's about engaging and making this time together matter."	Facilitation, focus, time management, energy awareness, flexibility.	Overloaded Meetings – when meetings feel aimless, bloated, or draining.	Boosts focus, alignment, engagement and effectiveness.
Place of Skillful Peer Coaching	"It's about learning and growing together."	Self-awareness, empathy, active listening, adaptability, curiosity, direct communication, accountability.	Unskilled Peer Coaching – when feedback is avoided, unclear, or unhelpful.	Deepens learning, support, resilience and growth mindset.

Business Impact:

By 'visiting' the four "Places of Skillful Collaboration," companies equip teams and their leaders with actionable, scalable practices that transform daily work.

These practices drive connection and growth that results in a more collective-focused organization that improves, creativity, innovation, engagement and performance.

From Insight to Action: **How Teams Learn Skillful Collaboration**

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” — Stephen R. Covey

Creating space is essential. In the noise of modern organizations—with constant pings, back-to-back meetings, and competing priorities—there is rarely time to reflect, let alone consciously practice something new.

Our Experiential Masterclasses are designed to create a space. A space of learning and growth linked with the work of the team.

Key features:

- **Experiential:** Participants don't just hear about collaboration. They practice it, they experiment, receive feedback, and reflect with a focus on improving.
- **Team-based:** Learning is embedded within real team dynamics and real / ongoing team topics, not abstract case studies.
- **Journey-oriented:** Learning doesn't happen from one day to the next. We make progress over time from Conversations to Decisions to Meetings to Peer Coaching.
- **Self-reflective:** Self-awareness and Internal dialogue is nurtured alongside interpersonal skills.

In each place, participants experience “what good feels like.” They taste the resonance of real connection. They feel what it's like to be heard and to voice their ideas. They see what's possible when collaboration is done skillfully.

And, crucially, these experiences happen with their real teams. Not in a training session with strangers, but in a space where learning can transfer back to work simultaneously.

Business Impact:

Experiential learning accelerates behavioral change. When teams learn together in real time, the shift is immediate and lasting. Business benefits include clearer communication, stronger decision-making, and reduced internal friction. The ripple effects include higher morale and reduced leadership burden.

The Science Behind **Why This Works**

Individual learning can of course be valuable. But collective learning is transformative.

When teams learn together:

- They create shared meaning.
- They normalize new behaviors.
- They support each other in applying what they learn.

We've seen again and again: when teams experience new ways of working together, change takes root faster and deeper.

This is not just our belief—it's backed by decades of research. From the **Johnson brothers'** work on cooperative learning to **Amy Edmondson's** findings on psychological safety, the evidence is clear: teams that

learn together grow stronger.

This is echoed in the research work of **Ruth Wageman**, who identified six essential conditions for team effectiveness—including real team interdependencies, a compelling purpose, sound team structure / team norms, supported with available and skilled team coaching. When these foundations are put in place collaboratively, learning together becomes integrated into the effectiveness and growth of the team. And as **Peter Hawkins** emphasizes in his work on systemic team coaching, high-performing teams don't just reflect together—they learn together in service of their shared goals and wider organizational systems.

Business Impact:

Evidence-based learning isn't a luxury—it's a strategic necessity. Teams that learn together build psychological safety, boost retention of top talent, and improve performance. Investing in this kind of team-based development directly supports leadership pipelines, employee engagement, and long term capability growth.



Why Peer Coaching **Matters**

In the coaching profession, feedback is part of the fabric. We practice, reflect, coach each other, receive supervision, and stay open to growth. This same philosophy can transform team culture through peer coaching.

In Peer Coaching, team members:

- Learn how to challenge constructively
- Receive feedback they can act on
- Build mutual trust and accountability
- Become allies in each other's growth

Unlike traditional feedback cultures—which can trigger defensiveness or hierarchy—a peer coaching culture emphasizes mutual respect, curiosity, and shared learning. It shifts the tone from critique to co-reflection, making it easier for people to stay open and engaged.

And because peer coaching is part of each Masterclass, these skills are reinforced and normalized over time.

This approach aligns with Richard Boyatzis's Intentional Change Theory, which shows that sustainable development occurs through cycles of visioning, experimentation, and supportive relationships. Peer coaching provides exactly that: an environment where growth is nurtured over time, not imposed in one-off interventions.

Business Impact:

Peer coaching embeds learning into the fabric of the organization. It creates a culture of mutual support, honest feedback, and continuous development—without needing constant external facilitation. Over time, this lowers reliance on top-down leadership, increases initiative, and builds a more self-aware and adaptive workforce.



Future-Proofing Your Workforce

As we look to the future, where work is re-shaped by AI and complexity, I believe that human skills will matter more than ever. Further, in a world still largely shaped by masculine norms, I'm inspired by the powerful words of two women:

"Dear brothers and sisters, I am not against anyone." – Malala Yousafzai

"I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong."
– Jacinda Ardern

These are words of abundance and reflect the spirit of Skillful Collaboration—a way of working that builds essential capabilities for the future:

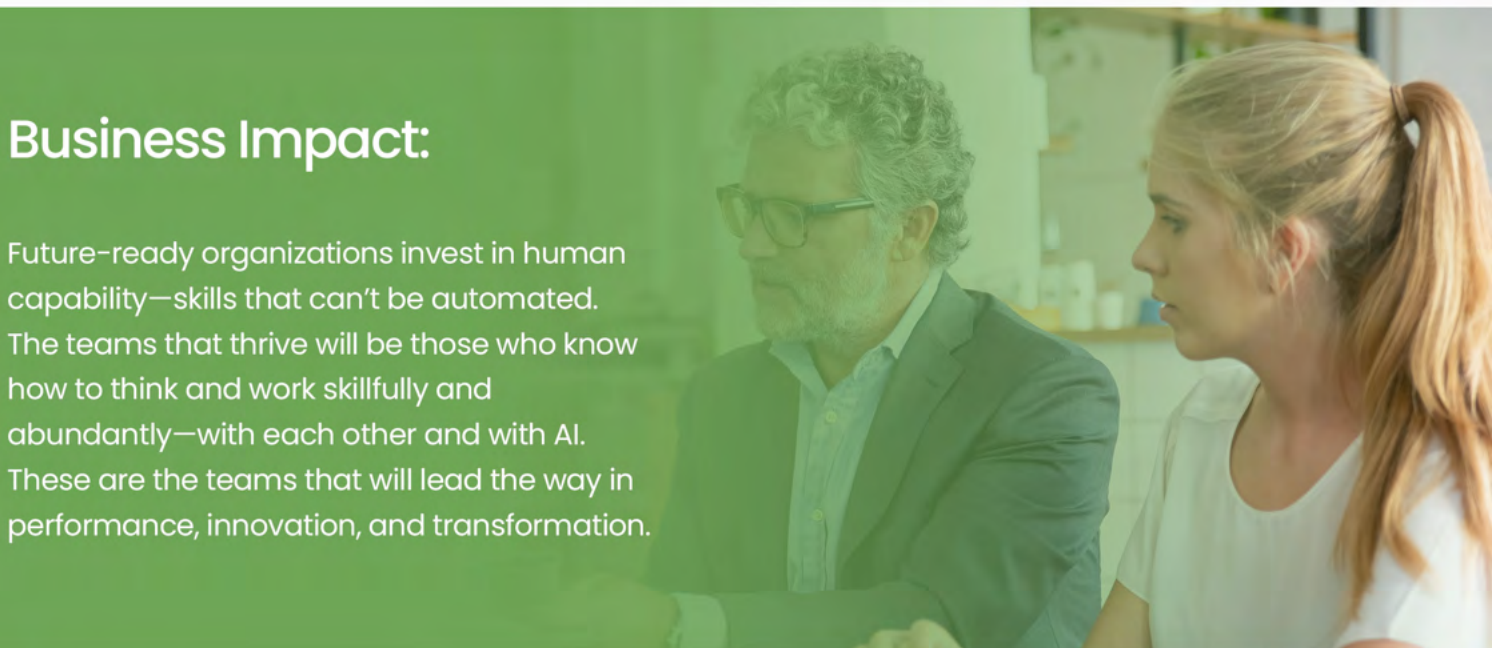
- Emotional intelligence through honest conversations.

- Adaptive thinking through shared decision-making.
- Collective intelligence through inclusive meetings.
- Growth mindset through peer coaching.

These are skills that help people—women and men—work more abundantly together. At the same time, as AI takes on more data and analysis, we are called to do what machines cannot: ask critical questions to AI systems, apply our insights and ethical judgment to co-create real value. Skillful Collaboration prepares teams to do just that—*partnering with AI, not just using it.*

Business Impact:

Future-ready organizations invest in human capability—skills that can't be automated. The teams that thrive will be those who know how to think and work skillfully and abundantly—with each other and with AI. These are the teams that will lead the way in performance, innovation, and transformation.

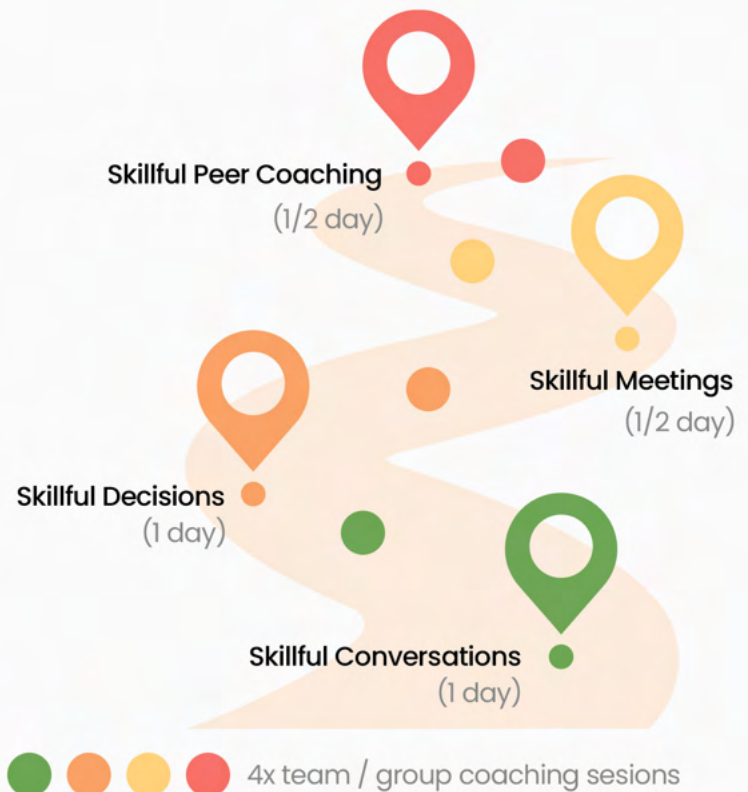


Developing Skillful Collaboration in Practice

We deeply believe that Team development journeys are the optimum way of learning Skillful Collaboration.

The typical team journeys we design and deliver look like this:

- A series of Experiential Masterclasses designed around the four Places of Skillful Collaboration.
- Tailored sessions for intact teams or leadership cohorts.
- Integration of team coaching, peer coaching, and reflective learning.
- Direct application to your teams and organizational challenges.



This goes beyond theoretical models. These journeys develop real collaborative skill, together.

Business Impact:

Team Development journeys with Experiential Masterclasses aren't a training expense—they're a strategic investment. They directly address key business challenges: disengagement, decision paralysis, siloed teams, and culture drift.

By building a shared language and skillset around collaboration, organizations become more cohesive, innovative, and performance-driven.

Showing up in a different way— And An Invitation

Skillful Collaboration isn't about doing more. It's about showing up in a different way when we do the things we already do every day—with more intentionality, more presence, more clarity, more connection and more skillfully.

We invite you and your teams to join us on this journey. A journey to the Four Places of Skillful Collaboration—where you have space to pause, reflect, practice, experiment and grow together.

Let's stop defaulting to our conditioned, unskillful habits. Building real skillful collaboration—can change everything, in real time and to create real impact.

"Cruyff changed everything — not just the system, but the mentality. He taught us to look at football, and life, in a different way."

Pep Guardiola

Our Invitation:

Interested in bringing Skillful Collaboration to your teams & leaders? We offer our experiential masterclasses designed for intact teams and leadership cohorts.

Reach out to co-create a journey that meets your context, your challenges, and your aspirations.

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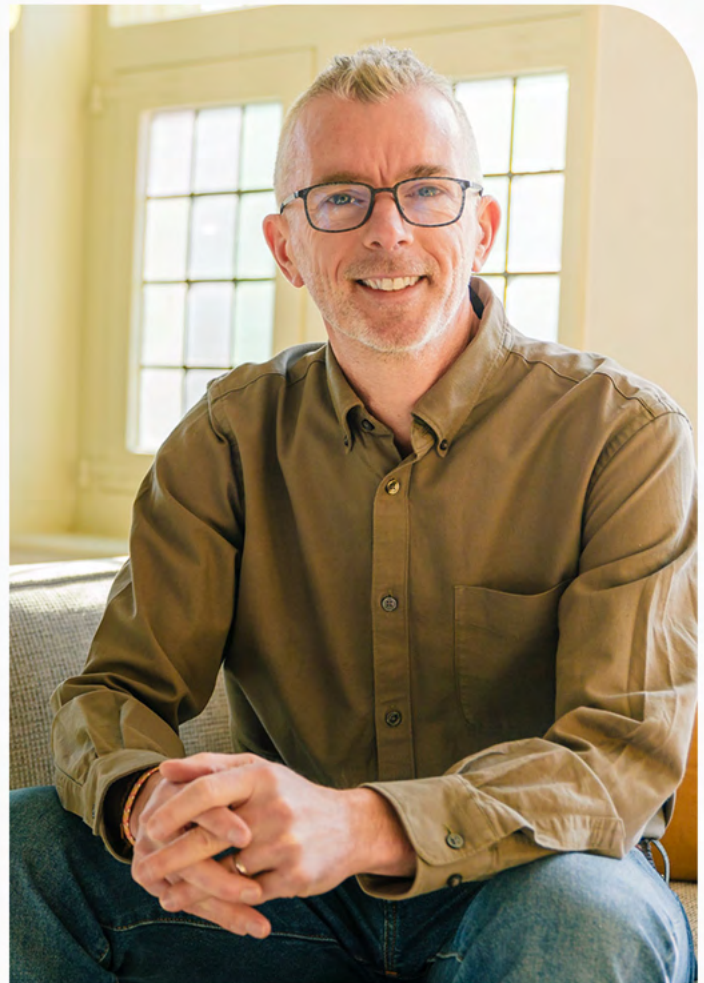
About the Author:

Nick Regan is an ICF-certified leadership coach, experienced team coach, and Accredited Professional Dialogue Practitioner with over 25 years of experience supporting corporate teams and leaders.

From leading global engineering teams to heading a corporate L&D academy and launching entrepreneurial ventures, he brings a rich mix of business, learning, and coaching experience.

For the past six years, he's focused deeply on team collaboration—designing and coaching experiential journeys that surface real team dynamics and strengthen the human-relational skills that matter.

Nick is originally from the UK but has lived and worked for the last 20+ years in Utrecht, The Netherlands.



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"In dialogue, when we are thinking together, not merely reporting our thoughts to one another, there is a kind of intelligence that is present in the group, and we are not merely individuals." — David Bohm