From Fragmented to Skillful: Rethinking How Teams Learn to Collaborate

Collaboration simply means working together. The word itself comes from the Latin col (together) and labore (to work).

Skillful means the ability to do something well. And as with any skill, collaboration is developed through practice.

And yet, in most organizations, while we are constantly asked to collaborate, very few of us have ever truly learned how.

The problem with collaboration as we know it.

Under pressure, many teams and their leaders fall back on habitual, automatic behaviors. Instead of aligned, collective responses, we see individual reactions and power dynamics take over.

I call this **Fragmented Collaboration.**

It shows up in familiar ways:

- People stuck advocating their own positions
- Decisions made (or not made) without real, considered input
- Disengagement and energy-sapping, back-to-back meetings
- One-way feedback cultures that close learning rather than open it

The result?

Teams that are working together in name, but not truly collaborating in practice.

So the question becomes:

How can we help teams and their leaders grow the human skills of collaboration?

Collaboration lives in everyday interactions.

In my work with teams and leaders, I see collaboration being shaped not in offsites or strategy documents, but in everyday human interactions.

Three places matter most.

1. Skillful Conversations

The most frequent interaction in organizational life is conversation.

How many conversations do you have each day with colleagues? And how many of them would you describe as truly skillful?

A skillful conversation is one in which people talk and think together with clear intention. Participants move consciously between advocating their own perspectives and inquiring into others', so that something wiser can emerge collectively.

Learning to have skillful conversations is the **first place of practice** for skillful collaboration.

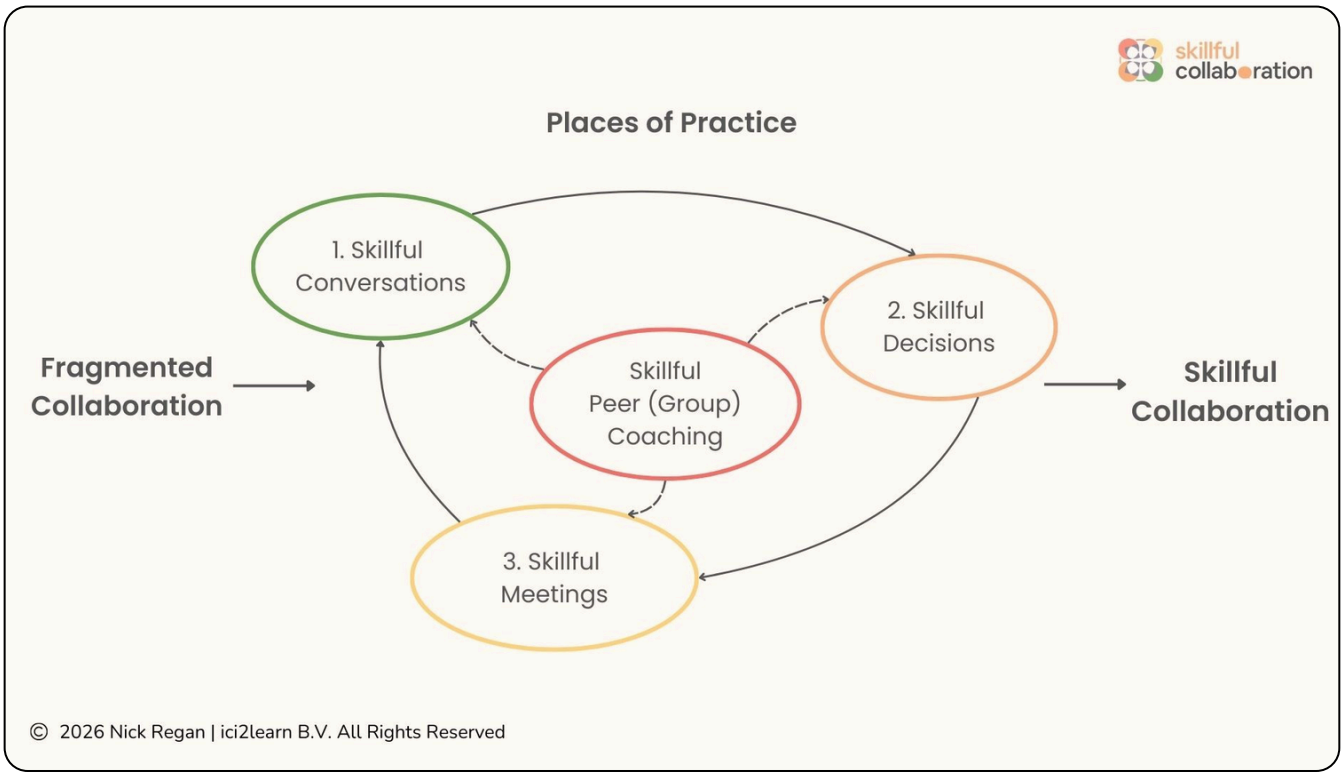


Figure 1. A Team Development Model: From Fragmented to Skillful Collaboration Through Everyday Practices

2. Skillful Decisions

Organizations create value through the decisions they make. Yet many decisions are too complex for any one individual to hold alone. They require the integration of multiple perspectives.

But if teams have not learned how to have skillful conversations, how can they possibly make skillful decisions?

Skillful decision-making involves:

- Understanding the context of the decision
- Choosing an appropriate decision-making process
- Recognizing power, authority, and roles
- Entering genuine dialogue before closing choices

This becomes the **second place of practice**.

Imagine the value we could create if teams consistently made decisions this way.

3. Skillful Meetings

Where do conversations and decisions come together?

In meetings.

Meetings are often seen as the problem. In reality, they are one of the greatest opportunities.

Skillful meetings are those where:

- The intention clear
- People understand their contribution
- Skilled facilitation supports balanced participation
- Top priority decisions are made well
- People leave more energized than when they arrived

Skillful meetings form the **third place of practice**.

Together, these three practices — conversations, decisions, and meetings — form the foundation of the Skillful Collaboration model.

The missing piece: Skillful Peer (Group) Coaching

But even when teams begin practicing these skills, another question emerges:

How do they continue to improve every day?

This is where **Peer Coaching and Peer Group Coaching** become essential.

Rather than relying on feedback cultures that often trigger defensiveness, closed reactions and no real change, peer (group) coaching creates spaces for openness and mutual learning. Observations are shared with curiosity and inquiry replaces judgment.

When peer coaching, peer group coaching, reflection, and shared learning is embedded into everyday work, teams begin a practice of skills development and continuous improvement.

They no longer collaborate habitually in a fragmented way.

Teams learn how to **collaborate skillfully.**

Why teams are the real focus

This model is intentionally focused on teams.

Because teams — including their leaders — are the real drivers of value in organizations. It is in everyday team interactions that collaboration either remains fragmented or becomes skillful.

When teams learn together:

- They apply learning together
- They hold each other accountable
- They notice when old habits return
- They consciously choose new ways of working



This shared ownership is what allows learning to stick.

Over time, these practices begin to spread — from one team to another, and eventually across the organization.

A different possibility

Can you imagine workplaces where **Skillful Collaboration** is practiced every day within teams?

Where conversations are intentional, decisions are thoughtfully considered, meetings are energizing, and learning is continuous?

This is how places of **Skillful Collaboration** are developed.

And this is also how real employee engagement and sustainable performance is created. First within teams including their leaders and subsequently across teams and organizations.

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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 working with corporate teams and their 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 seven years, he's focused deeply on team collaboration - designing and coaching experiential team journeys that surface real team dynamics and strengthen the human-relational skills that matter.

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

Nick is co-founder of two Learning & Development businesses. At ici2learn, he provides customized coaching, facilitation, and training. At Skillful Collaboration, he offers 'off the shelf' accessible assessments, debriefs, and Masterclasses for teams.

His mission is simple: Helping teams everywhere grow the human skills of collaboration.



For more information

Nick Regan

nick.regan@ici2learn.com
+31 (0)6 24 13 70 56

ici2learn

https://ici2learn.com/

Nick Regan

info@skillfulcollaboration.com
+31 (0)6 24 13 70 56

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https://skillfulcollaboration.com/