

TEN TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

Steve Harper

OVERVIEW

Unless you work alone and live alone, you're already collaborating. But are you doing it well? There are some tried and true ways to work with others – essential for creative groups, theatre projects, filmmaking, relationships and any other group activity. Here are ten of my favorite ways to set up a productive space for collaboration.

TIP ONE: SET GROUND RULES

It's likely that no two people see anything the same. So the first task is to get on the same page. Set rules about everything you can think of: the when, where, how and how fast of the work. The clearer you are at the top, the more you'll avoid surprises in the midst of the project. Take the time and let the discussion go deep.

TIP TWO: WRITE CONTRACTS AND AGREEMENTS

Some people consider “contract” a dirty word. But it's simply a set of rules on paper. If you're working on a creative project, it can be helpful to figure out logistics, deadlines, ownership and compensation prior to starting to work. It can get much trickier later. Do this thoroughly and do it first.

TIP THREE: ESTABLISH A SAFE SPACE

Any creative collaboration benefits from an atmosphere where a participant can try out any idea. What do you need to do to set a playful and safe atmosphere?

If it helps to play games at first or watch movies, share secrets, or invent a ritual that breaks the ice – do it. Safety in collaboration is everything.

TIP FOUR: CONTRIBUTE LIKE YOU'RE PLAYING CHARADES

The job in collaboration is to generate ideas and contribute. Jump in like you're playing Charades. In that game, the key is to keep guessing. Here, the key is to keep contributing. Speak up. Speak often. Speak freely.

TIP FIVE: EVALUATE FROM A PLACE OF GENTLENESS AND KINDNESS

Communicate with your collaborators without trashing them or their ideas. Telling the truth doesn't have to be done with a sledge-hammer. Start with the positive. Then talk about what doesn't work. Then perhaps throw in a few suggestions. A gentle approach will keep lines of communication open.

TIP SIX: DISCOVER OTHER MATERIAL THAT CAN BE YOUR "TRUE NORTH"

It's a big help to know what kind of piece you're creating. Define, with your team, what your project is like. Discussing it in terms of "this (established project) meets that (established project)" is not only a useful short-hand, but gives the team material to view, read, and point to when the project hits a snag.

TIP SEVEN: STAY IN THE GAME

Collaboration can be like giving birth. You have to keep breathing. You have to keep pushing. When you stop, nothing happens. Success demands you stick with it.

TIP EIGHT: CELEBRATE AND GRIEVE TOGETHER

Each good idea and each project milestone can be celebrated. Why not? It can only increase morale and create a sense of accomplishment. On the flip side,

each disappointing moment and challenging day can be mourned with the team. Take the time to acknowledge what is and give the group time to absorb it fully.

TIP NINE: TALK ABOUT EVERYTHING

Resentments can fester, good things can be ignored – anything might explode in the midst of the project. The project, after all, is a relationship, and, in some sense, a family. Talking about what’s going on is like having regular family meetings. Clear the air.

TIP TEN: FIND AND USE ARTISIC CHAMPIONS

Don’t you love it when people “get” you and what you do? Let your collaboration have those champions too. They may be helpful when the group gets stuck. They may be available for guidance or advice, or simply to celebrate along with the team. All support is good support. Seek it out and make use of it.

RESOURCES

Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process by Liz Lerman

ABOUT STEVE HARPER

Steve is a professional actor and writer with a passion and commitment for coaching artists who want to pursue their creative work while keeping a healthy balance between their professional and personal lives. A graduate of Yale, The A.R.T. Institute at Harvard and The Juilliard Playwriting program, he’s appeared at The Guthrie and The Kennedy Center, and his writing has appeared in on stages across the country and in publications like The Juilliard Journal, Creativity Calling and The Kenyon Review. Find him at www.yourcreativelife.com