



Column by [David Silverstein](#)

Collaboration

To COL-LAB-O-RATE. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines collaboration as: "to work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort."

Through my research over the past few years, I have come to appreciate the power of collaboration in ways I never did before. I have been amazed to learn of some collaborative efforts of the past -- mostly by people that history has painted as great individual writers such as C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien who years later were discovered to have worked together.

I've also come to learn -- or perhaps realize would be a better term -- that I accomplish nothing without collaboration. My study of how innovation really occurs, how we generate new ideas and how we make decisions, has convinced me that a deeper understanding of collaboration will help us all become better at just about anything that requires the use of our intellect. That's because the belief that we simply figure it out when called upon, or that we just come up with great ideas out of the blue, is a pure fallacy.

Few if any really meaningful thoughts are not the byproduct of considerable collaborative effort, often spanning great periods of time, and often happening in ways we don't recognize. The "epiphanies" that we have really represent the moment in time when all our collaboration comes together. We take in information from many sources, and our brains combine that information in many ways. Then often our best work happens between about 11:00 PM and 6:00 AM, when we're sleeping; ultimately when the right connections are made, the epiphany occurs. The more volume of collaboration we have, the faster the process plays out. But that doesn't mean you have to team up with a lot of people to collaborate. That's just one way of getting it done. Here are some others.

Collaboration with myself. This was perhaps one of my greatest epiphanies: *I collaborate with myself.* The mechanism that allows me to collaborate with myself could be called "separation in time," because I think about something, analyze it, research it and then I do something else. All the while, I'm processing information in the background, especially when I sleep. Then at some other point I come back to the problem at hand and think some more -- but now I'm combining my fresh thinking not just with my past thinking, but with all the new connections that have been made in the interim.

Collaboration with historical figures. I can collaborate with historical figures -- dead ones in fact -- by reading and understanding their thoughts. All great thinkers of history, whether we're talking about Plato, Ben Franklin or Robert F. Kennedy, collaborated with themselves and others before coming to their moments of brilliance. You can collaborate with them by picking up where they left off, by combining their wisdom with yours and by learning from them.

Asynchronous collaboration with others. It's not at all unusual for you to be working on the same problems as others -- even your competition. You can collaborate with them by studying what others do and why -- completely unknowing to them. You can also asynchronously collaborate with others by working on the same problem separately, before combining your efforts, or by handing the problem off from one to the other as some big companies are doing. Why not work on and think about a problem together continuously with different teams stretching across the globe on a 24x7 basis?

Open collaboration. This is a concept that's catching on fast, mostly due to the rise of the internet. Open-source code refers to writing computer program code that's open to developers to build and improve upon. Proctor & Gamble has a different kind of open innovation program, which entails sharing its challenges with a network of about 2 million people around the world to help it solve problems faster and cheaper than in the past.

Synchronous Collaboration. This is the type of collaboration most of us know and understand, but it actually should be a more rare form of collaboration than that which I've described above. The reason is that this type of

collaboration is inherently limiting -- you only have the opportunity to tap into the thoughts and knowledge of those in your immediate circle. But sometimes this type of collaboration is beneficial if not necessary, so it should be exploited as well.

So the next time you have a problem to solve, think about the kind of collaborative efforts that will help you get to a solution the fastest. Look at the problem from all angles, and recognize that there are many collaboration pathways available. Use them all if you can, because you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain.