

## Chapter 3

# TMI, TMC (Too Much Information, Too Much Collaboration)

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Let's revisit our earlier analogy comparing the workplace to a hive of bees. These busy pollinators work together morning to night to reach common goals. They are also in constant communication, using dance to share the location of nectar nearby. Much like our bee buddies, we too try hard to be collaborative and productive. But—thankfully, since we depend on them for our very existence!—bees are *so* much better at it than we are!

The sad truth is most human collaboration is incredibly inefficient. That is, we do too much of it, and we (often) do it badly. There is so much wasted time, so many pointless meetings, so much useless information flying about. No one has time (or makes time) to think, prepare, and communicate thoughtfully. People tend to wing it, think out loud, and talk past each other. There may be some viable ideas flung about, but generally, not much of substance happens after that. (We've got the hive . . . but where's the honey?)

## Quiet Works

We certainly can't blame a lack of tools for our lack of execution. We have email, Slack, Microsoft Teams, WebEx, Trello, and all their ilk to keep us connected. We have too many search engines, social media sites, and other digital platforms to even begin to name them all. Information has never been more abundant, more "in your face," more *relentless*.

So, when *do* we have time to think, to bring form and shape to the free-flowing mass of information, and to execute on the plans that come out of it?

We *don't* have the time . . . or the energy . . . or the wherewithal. We are in an age of TMI (too much information) and TMC (too much collaboration). Instead of tuning in to focus and create, we all tune out so we can survive. And until we force ourselves to stop (or at least pause) the merry-go-round and find some quiet corner where we can think, nothing will change.

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## TMI and TMC Cost Us Dearly

Lest you think I'm exaggerating, let's see what the *Wall Street Journal* had to say in a 2023 article Ray Smith wrote on these topics.<sup>1</sup> Here are a few of the revelations:

**We are drowning in meetings and email.** Data collected from workers who use Microsoft's business applications showed that many professionals spend the equivalent of two workdays a week in meetings and on email.

The article continues: "Researchers found that the 25% most active users of its apps—in other words, people who use Microsoft's business software for much of their online work activity—spent an average of 8.8 hours a week reading and writing emails and 7.5 hours logging meetings.

"Those figures don't include time spent instant messaging, on the phone or in other, impromptu conversations with co-workers. In all, the average employee spent 57% of their time using office software for

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communication—in meetings, email, chat. The remainder of time, 43%, they used for creating things, such as building spreadsheets or writing presentations.”

**No wonder we can't find time to do our “real” job!** A different study by Microsoft revealed that nearly two out of three people (from a survey of 31,000) “struggled to find time and energy to do their actual job. Those people were more than three times as likely as others polled to say innovation and strategic thinking were a challenge for them.” Jared Spataro, who leads Microsoft’s modern-work team and headed up the research, said, “People feel quite overwhelmed, a sense of feeling like they have two jobs, the job they were hired to do, but then they have this other job of communicating, coordinating, and collaborating.”

**It's costing our companies big bucks.** The article continues: “In a 2022 Harris Poll survey of more than 1,200 workers and executives, bosses estimated that their teams lost an average 7.47 hours a week—nearly an entire day—to poor communications. Based on an average salary of \$66,967, the lost time translates to a cost of \$12,506 for an employee annually, according to the report conducted on behalf of Grammarly, a proofreading-software company.”

TMI and TMC are ruining our lives and crippling our organizations. People are not machines. We simply aren't wired to always be “on.” We need time to think quietly, work alone, and allow our minds to rest. *Only* by fulfilling our human needs will we be able to be the thoughtful humans that will survive the AI explosion.

I recall feeling overwhelmed and helpless from TMI and TMC when I was invited to speak at a large national sales conference. I had colleagues to support in numerous breakout sessions and dealt with nonstop days of working, collaborating, providing and receiving updates, and rehearsing. It was intense to the point where I felt I couldn't breathe, since there were

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no gaps in the schedule. No time for quiet. Knowing what I know now—and practice now—I should have scheduled pockets of time to plan and unwind and not let the schedule consume me: quiet appointments instead of jumping into unplanned collaboration. Quiet could have directed me to hone in on why I was there and to more clearly define my role and my value to the client and my colleagues. Our most important core values are easy to lose in these moments where we feel overwhelmed and feel we can't say no to the influx of information and the expectation of constant collaboration.

I'm not saying we can stop communicating and collaborating with our teams and coworkers altogether. We probably can't even throttle it back all that much. What we can do is approach it all in a different way. It's the quality—not the quantity—of these exchanges that makes the difference.

High-quality collaboration lets us connect on a deeper level. We can share the information that is important and then disband to do our portion of the work, project, or task. It opens up time and energy we otherwise would not have. A study conducted by Microsoft backs up this idea.

### **Microsoft Study: Less Collaboration and More Focus Helps People Thrive**

Like most organizations, Microsoft once strived to measure engagement as the benchmark for success and satisfied employees. But they continually found that, despite high engagement scores, employees were struggling. A 2022 article in the *Harvard Business Review* titled “Why Microsoft Measures Employee Thriving, Not Engagement”<sup>2</sup> shares how Microsoft's People Analytics team set out to explore this disconnect and then made a big discovery. What they found was that *thriving*, not engagement, is the key to employee happiness. (For the record, they define thriving as “to be *energized* and *empowered* to do *meaningful work*.”)

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They also learned that thriving at work is not the same thing as having work–life balance. That’s an important distinction in our new era of hybrid and remote work, where the lines are sometimes blurred between our work and personal lives. To address this, the team started gathering data on thriving and work–life balance.

In doing so, they found some interesting insights:

... those with the best of both worlds had five fewer hours in their work-week span, five fewer collaboration hours, three more focus hours, and 17 fewer employees in their internal network size.

What this tells me is that these employees who are thriving and achieving work–life balance have more time in their day to focus and to think. They have fewer people interrupting them for collaboration and fewer people to deal with in general. In other words, more *quiet*.

The article continues:

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This reinforces what we know from earlier work-life balance research and network size analysis, which showed us that increased collaboration does have a negative impact on employees’ perception of work-life balance. It also confirms that collaboration is not inherently bad—for many employees, those times of close teamwork and striving toward a common goal can fuel thriving. However, it is important to be mindful of how intense collaboration can impact work-life balance, and leaders and employees alike should guard against that intensity becoming 24/7.

There you have it. Reducing collaboration is key for thriving *and* work–life balance. It empowers employees to take the quiet that they desperately need. They can think, reflect, read, work, and choose to be inaccessible when it matters most.

### Collaboration Overkill . . . And What to Do About It

Remember that collaboration isn't inherently bad. But neither is constant collaboration good or beneficial. Some tasks, projects, and endeavors simply don't need to be done "by committee." We should trust our employees, our teammates, and ourselves to work well independently and to reach out if necessary. Otherwise, we risk them (and us) burning out. A good rule of thumb to follow is: better collaboration is *less* collaboration.

In a *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Where We Go Wrong with Collaboration," Babson College professor Rob Cross observes that we often overdo collaboration in the workplace. He shares that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, people spent "85% or more of their time each week in collaborative work—answering emails, instant messaging, in meetings, and using other team collaboration tools and spaces."<sup>3</sup> Since then, that number has increased. (Who could forget the Zoom fatigue of 2020?)

But not everyone is struggling. Cross reveals that while nearly everything we do in a professional setting is some sort of collaboration, the people who are performing at the top of their game and thriving in their work collaborate 18 to 24 percent more efficiently than their peers.

Interviews with these top performers revealed the three behaviors that made them better collaborators:

1. They identify challenging beliefs that lead us to collaborate too quickly.
2. They impose structure in their work to prevent unproductive collaboration.
3. They alter behaviors to create more efficient collaboration.

Cross revealed that 50 percent or more of the problem of collaborative overload stems from those pesky challenging beliefs we have about ourselves mentioned in behavior number one. These are the "deeply held, and often unexamined desires, needs, expectations and fears centered around

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how we feel we need to ‘show up’ for others each day.” Cross explored some of these typical internal triggers that professionals might need to become aware of and/or guard against to prevent collaborative overload. For brevity, I will paraphrase them here in my own words:

- I want to help others, so I say yes all the time (or too often).
- I love the rush of accomplishment, so I seek more and more collaboration.
- I’m an information magnet. I need to know it all.
- I’m worried that I’m not good enough, so I ask to be abused with too much information.
- My desire for perfection leads to constant communication.
- I’m needed for everything, so I need to know everything.
- Everything starts with, ends with, and circles back to me.
- The plan must be picture perfect and clear, and I’ll go deep into the weeds to get there.
- I need to know all there is to know, and you must tell me everything.

**To learn more, check out the *Just Saying* podcast, episode “HBR Article Review: Overcoming Collaboration Overkill”: [podcast.thebrieflab.com/ep-247-hbr-article-review-overcoming-collaboration-overkill](https://podcast.thebrieflab.com/ep-247-hbr-article-review-overcoming-collaboration-overkill).**

Most of us recognize ourselves in at least some of these statements. I certainly do and reflect on a time when a colleague shared that collaboration isn’t necessarily a time for thinking. He challenged me to “think alone; plan collaboratively.” Since collaborating and thinking are two different tasks, we need to think on our own—then go to our collaboration time with more thoughtful ideas in order to plan, prepare, perfect, and decide.

## Quiet Works

What will make a difference is learning to challenge these beliefs. The next time you have a knee-jerk reaction, take a pause to consider whether you really need to be involved. You always have the power to say, “No, not now,” and protect your time and space for quiet.

Even still, there are times when collaboration is necessary. Professionals need to work together a certain amount to set and achieve their goals and innovate for the future. But in those moments, a more mindful and targeted approach is best. I recommend that professionals follow the principles used by my company, The BRIEF Lab, in its mission to help organizations and individuals master concise communication and improve operational efficiency and effectiveness. Further, these principles embody the remaining two behaviors of the top performers mentioned in the *Harvard Business Review* article above, as they actively prevent unproductive collaboration and create more efficient collaboration. They are:

- **Less is more.** Trim the information you share with others. When in doubt, stick to what you feel people will really care about.
- **Be more intentional.** Think before you speak or write to others. Don't speak off the cuff or wing it when communicating. Take more quiet time to prepare.
- **Reduce habitual collaboration.** Cancel (or stop scheduling) needless meetings. But when you do need to meet, schedule only the amount of time you need to cover the information on the carefully crafted agenda.
- **Spend more time alone.** If you have the option to work independently in quiet, do it! (Remember, you can always converge again to discuss, analyze, and fine-tune your individual work.)

I believe that when we make the effort, we can find a happy medium between working together and working alone in quiet. We can value collaboration while appreciating that we must also prioritize time for focus



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and concentration. We can learn to say no to the overabundance of information flowing through most organizations.

Achieving a balance (or something close to it) between these opposing tensions is possible when *we* get to decide when we need to put our heads together with others and when we need to retreat to our own space (and headspace). Success is even more likely when we learn the skills and tools that I'll cover later in the book to help you mitigate the noise and build a haven of quiet.

But first, let's look at the important role of leaders in setting the tone for everyone else.

### BRIEFLY STATED

There is an abundance of inefficient collaboration in most workplaces, so we need more quiet time to make it more effective.

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### QUIET CONSIDERATIONS

**DO I:** feel frustrated with increasing information, meetings, and collaborations that limit the time I have to do my actual job?

**WOULD I:** like to thrive and be empowered to do deeper, more meaningful work?

**CAN I:** eliminate unnecessary collaboration to increase opportunities to focus and think?

