

Collaboration  
**Begins**  
with **You**

Collaboration  
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with You

Be a Silo Buster

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*a BK Business book*

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**First Edition**

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*Ken Blanchard*

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To my father and mother, Ted and Dorothy Blanchard, who came from completely different backgrounds but modeled collaboration in over fifty years of marriage.

*Jane Ripley*

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To my late father, Bill (William) Anderson, who always taught me it is better to collaborate than to just cooperate. To my mother, Betty, who provided the support for my research and the confidence to write it up as a story.  
You are my inspiration.

*Eunice Parisi-Carew*

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I would like to dedicate this book not to a person, but to a community of people who make up the faculty of NTL Institute. NTL is an organization committed to democratizing organizations and social justice. These values are deeply instilled in its members, and it continues to be a guiding force in my life.

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**PART I**



**A Journey to  
Collaboration**



# A Troubling Conversation

“It was the worst shareholder meeting I’ve endured in years. The worst! Everybody could see the numbers plain and clear: the Primo project produced no profit. No profit! Zero. Zip. None!” Jim Camilleri, CEO of Cobalt, Inc., punctuated the point by slamming his fist on his desk.

Dave Oakman, the division head in charge of the Primo project, had never seen his boss this angry before. It was making him nervous. He kept his mouth shut to give Jim time to blow off more steam.

“The whole point of this project was to put some distance between Cobalt and our competition. The idea, in case you missed it, was to generate some revenue for capital investments and to reward shareholders. The fundamentals were great. There was absolutely no reason we couldn’t have made money on this thing—other than lousy



project management.” Jim leaned forward and looked Dave in the eye. “Can you give me a better reason? What happened here?”

“It’s a long story, Jim.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“We had departments operating in silos. A lot of people were trying to protect their own interests rather than make the project a success.”

“Why don’t you break that down for me, Dave. What are you talking about?” Jim’s mouth was a straight, grim line.

Dave hesitated. Should he tell the truth, or should he bend it? He knew exactly what the problem was. What he didn’t know was whether it was safe to divulge. Considering Jim’s current mood, telling the whole truth could get him fired.

Dave decided he should fudge it, or at least try to. It was what he usually did—and it usually worked.

“Primo had some great moments.” Dave began with an air of confidence—but he knew he was flying by the seat of his pants.

“Great moments? Not from where I’m sitting,” Jim said.

“As you said, the fundamentals of the Primo project were solid. We just encountered some hiccups.”

“Bleeding money is not a case of hiccups. Quit trivializing this! I want some straight answers.” Jim’s eyes were steely.

Dave recognized that fudging was not going to work this time. He had to come clean.

“The truth is, Jim, the group didn’t really work as a cohesive unit. Rival departments undermined the project.

As long as they got their job done on schedule and their department made a profit, they didn't care what happened to Primo." A bead of sweat on Dave's forehead betrayed his uneasiness.

"Can you be specific?" Jim asked.

"For example, I asked for a few of our newer associates to join the project. They had great energy and ideas, but they kept getting sidelined by the department heads who wanted all the glory. Some of our best people were kept off this project by their own leaders." Dave could hear the desperation in his own voice.

"Any leaders in particular?" Jim asked.

Dave thought about Wayne Lundgren, the veteran manager of the research and development department. Just last week Dave had witnessed Wayne brushing off a helpful suggestion made by Sarah McKenzie, a young engineer in his department.

"I'd rather not name names," Dave said at last. "Besides, it's not the people who are the problem. It's the whole culture around here." The words were out of his mouth before he had weighed them. Now he wondered if he'd said too much.

"Names don't matter, anyway," said Jim impatiently. "*You* were in charge of Primo. *You* should have fixed it!"

"It's not that simple, Jim. Certain department heads around here have a lot of power, and they don't hesitate to use it to their advantage. You know Cobalt is riddled with politics."

Jim shook his head. "Politics is a way of life. It's part of the environment we live in. I expect my top managers

to know how to navigate through the obstacles. And that includes *you*.”

*He's not getting it*, thought Dave. Doing his best to keep the defensiveness out of his voice, he said, “Jim, I’m telling you about a problem that’s beyond my scope to manage. This is about Cobalt. The company is made up of all kinds of self-serving silos. We offer no incentives that encourage people to work together toward organizational goals. Managers get promotions and bonuses based on their own individual success and the success of their siloed groups—regardless of the success of the projects they work on or the company as a whole.”

There, he’d said it. He caught his breath, feeling relief and fear at the same time.

Jim got up from his desk and began to pace. “I need time to think about what you’re saying here. In the meantime, remember that as the division vice president, you’re expected to fix these issues you’re complaining about. You should be coming to me with solutions, not problems.” He shook his head. “How many times do I have to—” He left the sentence unfinished.

Dave held his breath. *Is Jim going to fire me?*

A long silence followed. Finally, Jim walked to the door and opened it, making it clear the meeting was over.

As Dave walked out, Jim said quietly, “I want a full report about what went wrong with Primo, along with your recommendations, on my desk in two weeks.” He paused. “I’ll just leave it at that. I need to do some thinking, too.”



## A Well Timed Visitor

Back in his office, Dave stared at his computer screen. A calendar reminder popped up with a *ding*. His eyes locked on the little window but the information didn't register. His mind was replaying his meeting with Jim—particularly Jim's last words: *I want a full report on my desk in two weeks. . . . I need to do some thinking, too.* Dave wondered if his job was on the line. Was firing Dave what Jim needed to think about? He was demanding, but he usually didn't make threats.

*Ding.* The reminder popped up again, urging Dave to take notice. When the information finally sank in, he grabbed his phone, stuffed his laptop into his briefcase, and hurried out of the building. Saying "Call home" to his phone as he ran through the parking lot, Dave then cursed under his breath. *Damn, I'm late again.*

Dee picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

“Honey, I’m just now leaving the office. I’m sorry, but I’m going to be late.”

Dee sighed. “I’m pouring wine now. We’ll save a glass for you.”

Twenty minutes later, Dave pulled into the driveway. He walked around the side of the house and entered through the back door. He slipped into the bathroom, cleaned up, took a deep breath, and prepared to greet his sister-in-law from the UK. This would be the first time he’d seen her in several years.

She spied him as soon as he entered the living room. “Hello, Dave! How are you?”

The years had been kind to Beattie Anderson. Dave thought she looked like a wiser, more dignified version of the blonde, twenty-something maid of honor at his wedding. She stood eye to eye with him, offering a handshake and a warm smile. He leaned in for a quick embrace.

“Great to see you, Beattie. I’m doing well, thanks.” *Was he?* Now that he thought about it, Dave felt stressed out. He gestured to the glass in her hand. “I see you have some wine. Don’t mind if I do.” He poured some wine from a decanter into a glass and promptly took a drink.

Dee came in from the kitchen. “Dinner is served.”

Beattie and Dave made their way to the dining room, where the table had been set for three with the good china and silver.

“Wow,” said Dave as they took their seats. “This is quite a spread.”

“Of course it is,” Dee replied. “It’s not every day I get to cook for my sister.”

Dee tapped her fork against her wine glass and a clear note rang out. "Before we start our appetizers—or as they say across the pond, *starters*—I'd like to make a toast." Dee turned to their guest. "To my dear sister, Beattie, and her recent success!"

"Hear, hear," said Dave, smiling and raising his glass.

"I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate the sale of my company than to get over to the States for a good visit," said Beattie. They all clinked glasses and began to eat.

"So, Beattie, I hear you made a killing on the London Stock Exchange," said Dave.

"Yes, yes, I did," Beattie admitted. "Now I have the time and the money to come and see you in sunny San Diego. You have no idea how much I could do with some sunshine right now."

"So it's raining in London?"

"God, yes. It's been the wettest April since records began—and that's saying a *lot*," Beattie said with a laugh.

Still reeling from his meeting with Jim, Dave found it difficult to engage in polite conversation. After all, there was only so much they could discuss about the sun in San Diego and the rain in London.

Beattie took the initiative. "Dave, what's happening at work these days? Dee told me you recently headed up a big project—*Primo* was the name, I believe?"

"Yes, *Primo*. I found out today that it was a failure—and it looks like I'll take the hit." *Did I really just say that in front of Dee's sister?* Dave thought. He was immediately embarrassed at his lack of discretion in the presence of such a successful woman.

“Oh, Dave,” said Dee, “that’s awful.”

Beattie was sympathetic. “Gosh, I’m so sorry. If you don’t mind me asking, what do you think the problem was?”

“Problems *plural*,” he corrected. “It was one of those projects where if something could go wrong, it went wrong.”

“Sod’s Law!”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, nothing—it’s a British saying for things that go wrong.”

“Ah—here we call it Murphy’s Law,” said Dave with a nod. “Anyway, I had three departments working on this project, and each of the department managers wanted to lead the whole thing. When the managers weren’t fighting, the team members started acting out, claiming they needed to take care of their bosses’ interests.”

Having heard Dave’s stories about Primo as the project had evolved, and being an experienced HR executive herself, Dee joined in. “That’s what silos are all about—everyone protecting their own interests. Talk about egos!”

Beattie nodded thoughtfully. “Sounds tough. I had similar issues at Blenheim when we really started to grow—self-serving managers and siloed departments. I hadn’t realized that moving from a startup to a midsized company would cause so many growing pains. My executive team and I had to really think about the most efficient method of operation—something that would ensure excellent results *and* human satisfaction. In the end, we realized we would never achieve our goals without genuine collaboration.”

“What kind of collaboration? What do you mean?”  
Dave asked.

“I mean we had to focus on everything from our vision and values to how individuals at every level could feel they were making a real contribution. It was a huge culture change for everyone. Managers had to give up their silos and their perceptions of power and start focusing on the collective good rather than on their own gain.”

Dave let out a laugh. “Ha! There’s an impossible dream—getting department heads to give up their fiefdoms. How on earth did you manage *that*?”

“Dave, please,” said Dee quietly.

“It’s all right,” said Beattie. She smiled at Dave. “I don’t blame you for scoffing—it took quite a bit of time for us all to become what we called ‘silo busters’ and to make the shift to a collaborative culture. But we did it—with fantastic results. I’d be happy to chat it through with you if you think it would help.”

“Silo busters, huh?” said Dave, unconvinced. “Thanks—I’ll think about it.”