I just hung up the phone with one of the graduate students in the class I am teaching this semester.

He was complaining about having to work with other students. He was very unhappy, arguing that he knew he could produce a better end product on his own rather than having to grapple with his fellow students. He complained that in every class with a group project he got stuck doing all the work. The other students were riding on his coattails, and it was all very unfair because everyone was getting the same grade. I get this a lot.

Why do I torture my students with these group projects? Quite simply, it is because out in the “real world,” partnership and collaboration are how things get done in business. Students need to learn how to work together effectively (or at least try and make it work).

I told my student that I would be doing him a great disservice if I let him out of his group obligation, because I truly felt that even if the project didn’t go as he liked, the process of attempting to work collaboratively would teach him something of value.
Clearly, collaboration isn’t a new idea, but I can’t help but think that now, more than ever, partnership and collaboration are really the only way that we can achieve success in today’s society. Our world is very complex, and the most urgent problems that need solving require the coordinated contributions of many talented people. We can’t really believe that alone we could identify all the issues and make all the connections that need to be made. Individuals working together produce more and achieve better results than those who have worked independently on a project.

We all have to learn to work together more effectively. Listen better. Respect everyone’s ideas. Have an open mind. Put our egos aside. But we also need to approach collaboration and new partnerships with excitement and not dread. Otherwise, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As I told my student, you really have to adopt a mindset that says: “I am going to learn from others who may well have some very good ideas I have not thought of yet, and I am very fortunate to have this opportunity to grow and learn.”

I don’t mean to minimize the importance of trust, accountability, communication, shared vision and all the other important characteristics of effective teams, but a positive attitude from the outset may make all the other aspects of collaboration fall into place a lot easier.

“In the long history of humankind (and animal kind, too), those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.” — Charles Darwin

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