

In Conversation

with Carolyn Fischer, Director of Comcast
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Facilitative Leadership® helps Comcast Create a Collaborative Culture

INTRODUCTION

Comcast Corporation is the nation's leading provider of cable, entertainment and communications products and services. With 21.5 million cable customers and more than 6.5 million high-speed Internet customers, Comcast is principally involved in the development, management and operation of broadband cable networks and in the delivery of programming content.

Recently we spoke with **Carolyn Fischer**, Director, Comcast University, New England, about Interaction Associates' work with Comcast's New England Region.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *Tell us a little about Comcast.*

CAROLYN FISCHER: The cable industry is a young industry: it began in the 1940's. Comcast was established in 1963, so we've only been around about 40 years. It was not until the 1990's that we added products such as high speed Internet and telephone to our service offerings.

We are unlike many other service providers. We have the unique opportunity to interact with our customers every day – in their homes. We connect people to what's important in their lives and we value the trust that our customers place in us.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *What's the business environment for Comcast?*

CAROLYN FISCHER: We have grown through acquisitions. In New England, for example, in the span of 15 years we have changed hands many times. Establishing and creating a culture is very difficult in such a fast-changing environment. It's mind-boggling for employees to understand how to operate effectively when change is so rapid.

In this kind of environment, we needed to drive collaboration. A collaborative workplace was our best chance at remaining competitive. We looked for a partner who could help us achieve this goal.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES' development program, *Facilitative Leadership*®, was exactly what was needed. We were prescriptive about introducing *Facilitative Leadership* into the organization. First, we needed to teach people to understand the value of collaboration, and then give them the skills to collaborate together to get the best results.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *What kinds of capabilities are needed to succeed in today's competitive climate?*

CAROLYN FISCHER: You need to be flexible, adaptable, collaborative, innovative, and creative. You can't run a business like ours in a siloed environment. You can't have high speed Internet, separate and distinct from cable, separate and distinct from telephone. You have to be able to break down walls and collaboratively meet the needs of customers.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *What specific skills stand out as being most helpful in helping you remain competitive, in your opinion?*

CAROLYN FISCHER: They all operate together, of course. I would point to “Levels of Involvement” and “Stakeholder Voice” as being two of the tools I reach for on a regular basis. I value working within a structure of continuous improvement through the practice of “Plus/Delta”, too. It’s almost like using a short after-action review, to see how we can continue to improve, innovate, and be as productive as possible.

When Comcast acquired us, our colleagues across the country were curious about how we were able to consistently sustain our results, while innovating and managing to get along so well. People asked, “What is the common denominator?” It is the concept and practice of collaborative relationships at work.

Sometimes collaboration may take a little bit longer, but it’s sustainable. It’s “going slow to go fast.” Once we’ve established and built our framework, we can move faster through the process. So we are able to avoid both the “ready-fire-aim” trap, and “analysis paralysis.”

Of all of the practices, RPR (Results-Process-Relationship), has stood out for me.

No matter what business problem or issue is handed to us, we can navigate our way through it. That’s the beauty of *Facilitative Leadership*: if you have the framework and the practices in place, and you know how to move a group through a collaborative process, it doesn’t matter what the content is. You can bring it to a successful resolution. You can put a man on the moon, or you can launch a new career path. It works for any problem or opportunity. Over time, we have seen the benefits of *Facilitative Leadership* take root in our culture.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *What makes Interaction Associates a good partner for Comcast?*

CAROLYN FISCHER: I find that INTERACTION ASSOCIATES is an organization with its heart in the right place. I appreciate the INTERACTION INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE.* Obviously, you’re in business to make money and grow, but you also give back. Any time I have worked with anyone from Interaction Associates, it’s been in a consultative and collaborative manner. It’s always about what I am trying to accomplish.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *Tell us a little about the values of Comcast.*

CAROLYN FISCHER: Our COO came from Disney Corporation, and he really wanted to bring the spirit of the Disney Institute here. He selected 100 highly successful Comcasters to develop for Comcast The Credo, The Promise, and the Touchstones.

The Credo is: We will connect people to what is important in their lives.

Our Promise is how we are going to deliver on the Credo: for example, by having superior financial results, and outstanding relationships with our communities.

* The Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) was founded by Interaction Associates in 1993 as a way of bringing powerful process, teamwork, and leadership skills to nonprofit groups and NGO’s. Interaction Associates donates 10% of its pretax profit, and at least five days of each employee’s time, to the IISC each year.

It really does come back to our founders. Our culture was inspired and shaped by the belief system of our founders. We are so lucky at Comcast to have our original founder (from 1963), who still works four days a week at Comcast. His value system is very well entrenched in our organization.

Our values are embedded in everything we do. Ethics are key. In the cable industry, the most important thing to have is access to capital funding. You have to dig up the street and lay the cable, so you need to have investor relationships with people who can trust you.

Comcast welcomes a diverse culture; it is all about valuing the input of all levels of the company. I have worked at companies where, unless you had a title behind your name, your opinion didn't matter. Here, everyone's opinion matters, and we find we come up with a richer process because everyone is included.

We have a customer and an employee focus. We are active in our communities, and we never rest on our laurels. Unbridled enthusiasm is demonstrated by our "can do" spirit and "can do" attitude. Many of our executives were stringing cable 20 years ago, so they know what it's like to get up every day, put work boots on, and crawl through people's basements. It makes for a true compassion and connection with our front line.

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES: *You seem to walk the talk of a Facilitative Leader.*

CAROLYN FISCHER: When my boss sent me to *Facilitative Leadership* in 1998, she told me "This is a life-altering experience." I thought, "That seems dramatic." But it really is. Once you learn the skills of *Facilitative Leadership*, and practice them, you really can't help but operate from that perspective. It really leads to richer, more meaningful relationships. You treat people the way you want to be treated. No matter where I go, or who I interact with, that will be the way that I lead.

I'm constantly thinking about the practices — how can I celebrate success, how do I involve people, what's the appropriate level of involvement, what is the right Pathway, where am I going and how am I going to get there? All the models that seem deceptively simple are so powerful that they really do enrich my life.

The *Facilitative Leadership* practices have improved the processes that we've implemented and executed in my region. The other day I did strategic planning and visioning with my team, and I introduced the idea of ethos, pathos, and logos. We applied these concepts to visioning, and the vision statement we came up with knocked all of our socks off!

For more information on Comcast, please visit www.comcast.com

INTERACTION ASSOCIATES has more than 35 years' experience in developing leaders and change agents in large organizations, helping them maximize their strategic advantage and generate sustained business results. Leaders who participate in our development programs emerge with an extraordinary set of models, tools and skills that significantly increase their probability of success.