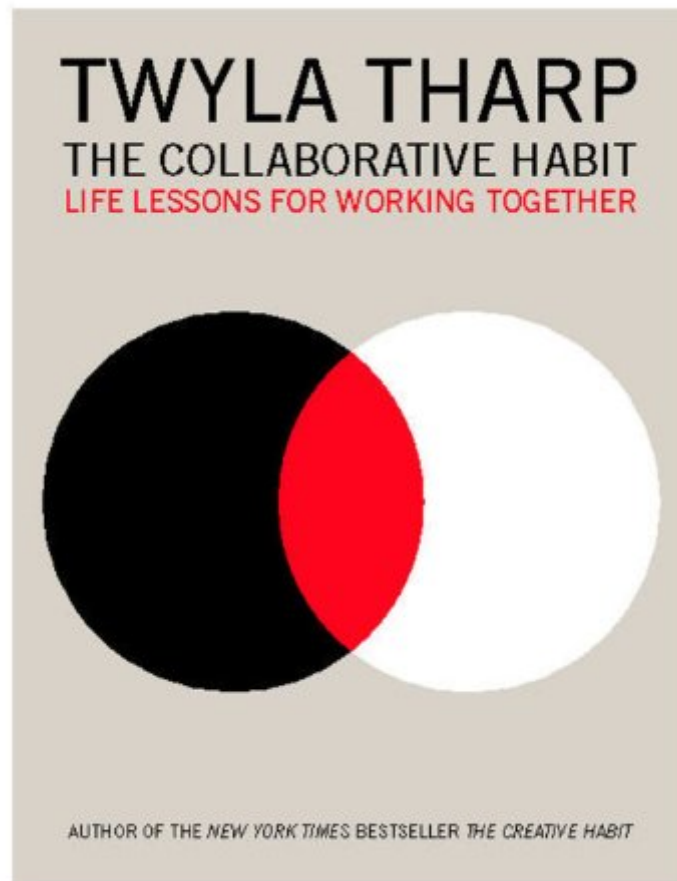


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The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons For Working Together



Synopsis

In a career that has spanned four decades, choreographer Twyla Tharp has collaborated with great musicians, designers, thousands of dancers, and almost a hundred companies. She's experienced the thrill of shared achievement and has seen what happens when group efforts fizzle. Her professional life has been -- and continues to be -- one collaboration after another. In this practical sequel to her national bestseller *The Creative Habit*, Tharp explains why collaboration is important to her -- and can be for you. She shows how to recognize good candidates for partnership and how to build one successfully, and analyzes dysfunctional collaborations. And although this isn't a book that promises to help you deepen your romantic life, she suggests that the lessons you learn by working together professionally can help you in your personal relationships. These lessons about planning, listening, organizing, troubleshooting, and using your talents and those of your coworkers to the fullest are not limited to the arts; they are the building blocks of working with others, like if you're stuck in a 9-to-5 job and have an unhelpful boss. Tharp sees collaboration as a daily practice, and her book is rich in examples from her career. Starting as a twelve-year-old teaching dance to her brothers in a small town in California and moving through her work as a fledgling choreographer in New York, she learns lessons that have enriched her collaborations with Billy Joel, Jerome Robbins, Mikhail Baryshnikov, Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello, David Byrne, Richard Avedon, Milos Forman, Norma Kamali, and Frank Sinatra. Among the surprising and inspiring points Tharp makes in *The Collaborative Habit*: -Nothing forces change more dramatically than a new partnership. -In a good collaboration, differences between partners mean that one plus one will always equal more than two. A good collaborator is easier to find than a good friend. If you've got a true friendship, you want to protect that. To work together is to risk it. -Everyone who uses e-mail is a virtual collaborator. -Getting involved with your collaborator's problems may distract you from your own, but it usually leads to disaster. -When you have history, you have ghosts. If you're returning to an old collaboration, begin at the beginning. No evocation of old problems and old solutions. -Tharp's conclusion: What we can learn about working creatively and in harmony can transform our lives, and our world.

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Customer Reviews

I enjoyed Tharp's *The Creative Habit* immensely. I consider it one of the clearest statements of what it takes to succeed in a creative field, be it dance, art, engineering, or any of the sciences. So I dove into this with high hopes. I fully agree with everything she says. Collaborations differ according to whether the rest of the team is nearby or distant, or is a friend, institution, or community.

Collaboration is learned, and it matters critically in all but the smallest kind of endeavor. And, as in everything else, careful preparation and hard, continuous work improve your chances of success as much as they can be improved. Tharp illustrates these points largely through her own experience with dancers like Barishnikov, dance companies around the world, and small companies of her own.

Always, in the relationship between choreographer and dancer, there is an asymmetry: the choreographer designs and the dancer executes. Tharp emphasizes the other half of this relationship as well: the choreographer pays close attention to each dancer, as well, in order to discover and play to their unique strengths. And, of course, performers collaborate with the audience. She illustrates this with "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum." That nearly failed as a stage production until the creators added one song: the introduction, "... comedy tonight."

Once viewers had their expectations set properly, they loved it. Each chapter ends with a case study: Steve Martin, clothing designer Norma Kamali, her experience with David Byrne, and more. These add focus and concreteness to the discussion.

As is my custom when a new year begins, I recently re-read this book and *The Creative Habit* while preparing questions for interviews of thought leaders. The insights that Twyla Tharp shares in them are, if anything, more valuable now than when the books were first published. It would be a mistake to ignore the reference to "habit" in their titles because almost three decades of research conducted by K. Anders Ericsson and his associates at Florida State University clearly indicate that, on average, at least 10,000 hours of must be invested in "deliberate," iterative practice under strict and expert supervision to achieve peak performance, be it playing a game such as chess or a musical instrument such as the violin. Natural talent is important, of course, as is luck. However, with rare exception, it takes about ten years of sustained, focused, supervised, and (yes) habitual practice to master the skills that peak performance requires. Tharp is both a dancer and a choreographer and thus brings two authoritative, indeed enlightened perspectives to her discussion of the life lessons for working together. Many of the same requirements for effective collaboration on classic Disney animated films such as *Snow White* and *Pinocchio* must also be accommodated when members of an orchestra and of a ballet company collaborate on a performance of Stravinsky's *The Firebird*. Tharp characterizes herself as a "career collaborator" who identifies problems, organizes them, and solves them by working with others. Many of the stories she shares in this book "involve the world of dance, but you don't have to know anything about dance to get the pint. Work is work.

The first time I took the elevator to Twyla Tharp's penthouse was a grey, chilly morning in early April. We sat in her minimalist office that overlooked a terrace that overlooked Central Park, but when you're in a room with Twyla Tharp, it's hard to notice anything else. To say she can be intimidating is to understate. Her features are sharp, her hair is no-nonsense white, her glasses are oversized and round. Somewhere below her neck is a small, taut body, and a white shirt and loose jeans, but none of that matters. Only her gaze does, and it was focused on this newcomer with curiosity and skepticism. I thought: I am not worthy. I'm surely not the first to think that. Tharp revolutionized dance with her insistence that classical ballet and modern movement need not be antagonists, and over a 40-year career, she's explored that breakthrough idea in a dizzying catalogue of greatest hits. She's choreographed movies. She's had a Broadway hit. She was anointed with a MacArthur Fellowship, the one that certifies you as a "genius". And she's written two books. One is an autobiography, *"Push Comes to Shove"*. The other, *"The Creative Habit; Learn It and Use It for Life"*, is a surprise --- a wise guide for the general reader about harnessing your personal creativity. It was a book that brought us together. Her new one, *"The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons for Working Together"*, would be published by Simon & Schuster in November. She'd

written enough for several volumes, and would, in time, surely have been able to carve a book out of it. But she was also embarking on a new show --- "Come Fly With Me", a night of dance built around Frank Sinatra songs --- and her time was tight.

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