Believing that collaboration drives innovation and innovation drives company success. For example, Google wants employees from across the company to talk with each other (Waber, 2013). The company invests in providing physical spaces that foster employee conversations. Google New York City occupies a large single story office without physical barriers between people and groups. Its California campus encourages people to collaborate spontaneously as well as facilitate scheduled meetings. The company’s physical spaces promote a community where people support each other and become friends. Google invests in helping employees feel happy to be a part of a community, and therefore more loyal and productive.

Working Together at Continental Airlines

In three years, Continental Airlines went from bankruptcy to earning awards for being the best managed airline, ranked as one of the best 100 companies in the US to work for, and rated highest among airlines for customer service. Its chief executive officer (CEO) Gordon Bethune (1999) credited its Working Together program for this turn-around.
Bethune explained that understanding that “an airline is the biggest team sport there is” led to the Working Together program. Pilots, flight attendants, gate agents, airport agents, mechanics, and reservation agents are all parts of the same “wrist-watch” that requires each and everyone to work together; the failure to understand that about the airline business means failure. To consider some people as very valuable and to demean other employees risks finding that “the watch doesn’t work.”

Teamwork began at Continental with top management. Bethune, the president, the chief financial officer, the head of legal and public relations, and the head of operations each brought “smarts to the table,” but each could be short-sighted. “We must collectively agree or we just don’t do them.” When “we all say yes, it’s probably OK.”

On-time arrival is the most important contributor to passenger satisfaction and commitment to an airline. Continental was at the bottom of all major airlines with late arrivals costing millions of dollars in direct costs; several of these millions went to rival airlines for taking Continental passengers who had missed connections. Everyone was responsible for late planes; no one group working alone could fix the problem. The Working Together program developed a straightforward foundation to improve on-time arrivals that everyone could understand. Continental promised to deposit $65 into each employee’s bank account every month the airline reached its on-time target.

The program, with each individual being rewarded when the airline reached its goal of on-time arrivals, changed how Continental employees approached poor performance. Employees stopped blaming each other and found many big and small ways to improve on-time service. If there were not enough meals on board, attendants reminded the caterer to fix the problem next time; to deal with the issue this time, attendants found passengers with whom they could trade drinks for meals so the plane could leave on time.

As its on-time arrivals improved and its customer service ratings climbed, Continental was depositing $65 checks totaling millions into employee bank accounts, rather than making deposits in those of rival airlines.