

How to choose the right UCD collaboration style

There are 4 key collaboration styles when carrying user-centred design (UCD) projects:

- **Instruct** – Clarifying the task & providing clear direction.
- **Pair** – Pairing to listen, support and problem solve together.
- **Coach** – Listening, questioning and coaching to support self-directed task completion.
- **Delegate** – Setting expectations and encouraging visibility to support autonomy.

Key questions to ask

The best collaboration style to use will depend on the person(s) competency completing a task, together with their level of confidence and commitment. Some key questions to ask to help determine this are:

- What is the task?
- Is the task understood?
- Have they done the task before?
- How do they feel about doing the task?

Choosing the right collaboration style

As a general guide, use the following collaboration styles given the task competence, confidence, and commitment.

- **Instruct** – Keen beginner with little task experience.
- **Pair** – Demotivated learner with some task experience.
- **Coach** – Experienced, but concerns & lacking confidence.
- **Delegate** – Confident with extensive experience of task.



Collaboration approach

STYLE	WHO	HOW
Instruct	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Keen beginner• Little to no experience of task• Enthusiastic & motivated	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clarify understanding of task• Provide clear direction• Regular check-in
Pair	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demotivated learner• Some experience of task• Confused & overwhelmed	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen and support• Work together to problem solve• Build confidence• Pair where possible
Coach	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Capable, but not yet self-reliant• Good experience of task• Concerns, might be lacking confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Listen and question• Understand concerns• Coach to build self-reliance• Give space between check-ins
Delegate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confident & self-reliant• Extensive experience of task• Enthusiastic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support autonomy• Set expectations• Encourage visibility• Don't get in the way!

Exercises

(Suggested answers are shown on the last page.)

1. You are an experienced product designer working within a cross functional team. Your team is part of a group of teams, all working on the same product. Sarah, a less experienced designer working in a different team within the group has asked for your help planning and running a design workshop. The workshop is to define a new feature that Sarah's team has been asked to deliver. Sarah has experience improving existing features within the product but has never worked in a team that has to research and deliver a new feature from scratch. The workshop is certainly outside Sarah's comfort zone, she has run workshops with her team in the past, but nothing like this before. Which collaboration style would you use with Sarah?
2. You are an experienced product designer working on a website redesign. Having defined the information architecture and screen design for the updated site, you need to work with Sunil, the lead content writer to ensure that the copy is ready for the relaunch. Sunil is an experienced content writer and has previously worked on the website. The two of you have worked on projects in the past, and whilst Sunil has some concerns about timescales, he is confident that he can get the copy written in time. Which collaboration style would you use with Sunil?
3. You are an experienced product designer working with Tom, a user researcher who joined your team as a graduate a few years ago. Tom has a social science background and has quickly found his feet as a researcher (he's a natural). He is comfortable presenting research findings back to small teams, but for his most recent research project will be presenting back to the executive team. He's nervous about presenting to senior stakeholders and you're keen that Tom does a great job, so you've agreed to work with Tom on his presentation. Which collaboration style would you use with Tom?
4. You are an experienced product designer working with Divya, a full-stack developer to deliver a new feature. Whilst Divya has lots of experience writing code for the back-end of systems (such as APIs), she is still very new to writing production ready front-end code. She has never worked with a designer before and truth be told, isn't really sure exactly what a product designer does. Which collaboration style would you use with Divya?

Further resources

Articles

- Situational leadership – A summary (Paul Hersey & Ken Blanchard)
<https://com-peds-pulmonary.sites.medinfo.ufl.edu/files/2014/01/Hanke-Situational-Leadership.pdf>
- Guide to Situational leadership (Research in Practice)
<https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Situational-leadership-1.pdf>

Videos

- Situational Leadership Model Explained (10 mins)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pykuvuA-QFU>
- Situational leadership talk by Hal Mayer (60 mins)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiGoG61s_48

Books

- Leadership and the One Minute Manager (Ken Blanchard)

Exercise answers

(Note: These are suggested answers. Often a range of collaboration styles could be appropriate for a given situation.)

1. **Pair** - Sarah has experience of running workshops, but not necessarily this sort of a workshop. A good approach is to listen to Sarah's concerns, clarify the goals and to work together planning the workshop.
2. **Delegate** - As an experienced content writer you can delegate this task to Sunil. It's important to agree expectations with Sunil (such as timelines) and to agree how to keep this work visible, for example communicating progress.
3. **Coach** - Tom is a well-versed presenter who primarily needs support and coaching. A good approach is to listen to his concerns, to ask him how he is planning on tackling the presentation and to be a sounding board for his ideas.
4. **Instruct** - Whilst Divya is an experienced developer, she has little experience when it comes to front-end development. A good approach is to clearly define what's required, to outline the process (e.g. UI reviews) and to ensure that any questions Divya has are answered.