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The rise of Radical Collaboration and why it needs to kill the Myth of Alignment



By Lydia Feely | 3 July 2026

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Every now and then, a phrase appears that perfectly captures a challenge the industry has been struggling to articulate.

Recently I attended the AdForum Worldwide Summit in New York and heard one of those phrases: 'Radical Collaboration.'

It wasn't a conference theme. It wasn't plastered across presentations. It wasn't being discussed on every panel.

Rather it emerged quietly in conversations with a handful of agency leaders and marketers operating at the leading edge of what I recently described as the industry's shift from campaigns to operating systems. Yet the more I heard it, the more it resonated.

In exploring this paradigm shift, it has become undeniably clear that our industry is facing a structural crisis. We have spent the last decade investing heavily in futuristic technology, specialist expertise, and highly sophisticated marketing ecosystems. Yet, we continue to rely on ways of working that were built for a much simpler, slower era.

The tools have evolved. The problem is that the operating models haven't.

For marketers and their agencies, continuing down this path is no longer viable. The modern marketing landscape demands an urgent, fundamental shift away from passive 'alignment' towards active, radical collaboration. This is no longer a soft skill or a cultural aspiration. It is an operational capability and a core business mandate.

For decades, organisations could easily afford a degree of inefficiency between internal teams, business functions, and external partners. Campaign cycles were longer, media channels were fewer, technology stacks were simpler, and decision-making timelines were vastly more forgiving.

That world no longer exists.

Today's marketing ecosystems are expected to respond in real time, integrate complex data across multiple platforms, manage increasingly specialised partners, and continuously optimise performance. We are no longer just delivering episodic creative campaigns; we are building always-on platforms, embedding AI-enabled workflows, and managing hyper-connected delivery systems designed to generate continuous value.

Yet, many businesses continue to operate through rigid functional divisions, competing internal priorities, and fragmented decision-making structures. We see a growing gap between organisational capability and organisational coordination.

Brand leaders routinely invest millions in state-of-the-art marketing automation and data analytics, only to force those tools through legacy silos. The result is an illusion of progress. Individual teams work harder, but the collective ecosystem fails to perform.

To bridge this gap, marketers and agencies must redefine what it means to work together.

The 'radical' part isn't the collaboration itself. The radical part is the willingness to actively remove the structural and behavioural barriers that prevent it.

This model requires a level of trust that allows information, accountability, and decision-making to flow seamlessly across organisational boundaries rather than becoming trapped within them. It means marketing, procurement, media, creative, technology, data, operations, and commercial teams working towards shared business outcomes rather than optimising for individual, insular objectives.

Why is this the only way forward? Because competitive advantage in a hyper-connected marketplace is no longer created by the strength of an isolated team.



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Anyone can purchase media space. Anyone can license an enterprise AI tool. Anyone can hire talented individuals. The true differentiator is no longer what individual assets you own; it is how effectively you orchestrate the collective network.

If your creative agency operates in isolation from your data architecture, the creative will fail. If your media partner operates independently of your technology stack, the media will be inefficient. If procurement measures success solely by upfront cost reduction rather than ecosystem velocity, the entire system suffocates.

Modern marketing performance is created by ecosystems working better together.

Perhaps the biggest misconception plaguing our industry is that alignment is something you achieve.

Alignment is not an outcome or destination. It is an ongoing discipline and pursuit. Like culture, trust, or leadership, it requires constant attention, continual reinforcement, and regular, deliberate recalibration.

This is precisely why forward-thinking organisations globally are reviewing not just individual agency relationships, but entire marketing ecosystems. The focus is shifting from evaluating a single supplier to understanding how the collective system is performing.

To achieve this, we must discard traditional performance reviews. The standard, annual one-way scorecard is fundamentally flawed. It is punitive, backwards-looking, and unintentionally reinforces defensiveness. Scores are delivered, reports are circulated, brief discussions are held, and everyone returns to their silos until the next cycle. Awareness alone does not create improvement.

Radical collaboration requires evaluation programmes built around genuine, two-way accountability.

Clients must evaluate agencies. Agencies must evaluate clients. Internal cross-functional teams must evaluate one another. The objective is never to assign blame, but to understand exactly where the system itself is creating barriers to performance and to radical collaboration.

What frequently emerges from these 360-degree evaluations is that an apparent agency performance issue is driven by internal process challenges, competing priorities, approval bottlenecks, or unclear decision-making structures. Conversely, internal teams often discover that agencies are operating without the strategic access, clarity, or alignment needed to deliver their best work.

Ultimately, this is where radical collaboration either succeeds or fails. It does not succeed in the measurement itself, but in whether organisations are prepared to act on what they learn.

Dashboards, surveys, and scorecards all have value. They can identify friction, quantify performance, and highlight areas of misalignment. But none of them create change on their own.

Improvement happens when organisations are prepared to have difficult conversations, address structural barriers, change legacy behaviours, and commit to a shared path forward. The strongest programmes don't stop at reporting scores; they create improvement roadmaps, establish clear accountability, and track progress over time. They focus less on measuring alignment and more on actively building it.

The organisations that will create the greatest value over the next decade won't necessarily be those with the biggest budgets, the most advanced technology, or the largest agency rosters.

They will be the organisations that learn how to orchestrate increasingly complex ecosystems around shared goals, shared accountability, and continuous improvement.

Radical collaboration may still be an emerging phrase.

But the capability behind it won't remain optional for long.

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