



## THE STORY OF WHY WE GATHER.

*We are social beings. We convene, congregate, confer, and collaborate. We come together to discuss, disagree, ideate, share, brainstorm, and solve problems. Sometimes, we want to be heard. Other times, we're there to listen. Large groups and small. Planned and impromptu. We come together when we have a job to do and often, we do it better in the company of others. It's the way work gets done. Because something special happens when we GATHER.*

Collaboration isn't a new way to work. In fact, it happens daily, spontaneously, and throughout the office and beyond. On the way for coffee you bump into a colleague in the hall. You ask a question about a project. The conversation continues, so you lean against the wall. A third person joins, and you scan the area for a place to meet. So we wondered, since collaboration is such an integral part of the way we work, is there a better way to help people come together to collaborate?

As Allsteel began to explore new solutions to make it easier for people to work together outside the individual workspace, it became clear that traditional meeting areas don't always accommodate the behaviors that happen in them. That spaces are often empty. That even more spaces were inflexible and uninspiring. And, too often, there aren't enough spaces that invite spontaneous collaboration, or the right kind of spaces aren't available at all. We found there were few products on the market that naturally and intuitively address the need for interaction and collaboration, and using conventional products wasn't always the best solution.

So Allsteel seized the opportunity to design a collection of furniture from the ground up to fulfill this unmet need in the marketplace. We set off to create something that everyone needed, but maybe didn't know they needed. The result is Gather,™ Allsteel's response to today's changing demographics, shrinking workstations, and evolving workstyles. Our goal? To redefine the workplace as a destination for people to come together to move ideas and thinking to a new level.

This non-traditional collection of furniture includes a dozen eclectic pieces that offer architects, designers, dealers, workplace strategists, and facilities planners intuitive solutions that accommodate human behaviors and unlimited possibilities to mix and match for a variety of environments and activities.

### **Not all spaces are created collaboratively.**

With this project, Allsteel set out to change the way the industry defines and designs to support interaction and collaboration. We started by acknowledging that work is no longer just a place people go, it's something they do. And they can do it anywhere.

With real estate costs on the rise and workstations shrinking, forward-thinking companies realize they need to dedicate more space for peers to get together. But often, the response is to drop in traditional furniture or lounge seating before completely understanding the work to be supported or considering the importance of location. So the spaces end up at the end of a long hallway or in unused areas of the building, then facilities managers are surprised when they go unused.

“Sometimes the collaborative area is too far away or the space does not accommodate the technology needs of the group it was designed for,” explained Jan Johnson, Vice President, Design and Workplace Resources, Allsteel. “You can’t just drop lounge furniture into a corner and expect it to be used. **You must define before you design.** It is critical to understand the types of activities and groups of people who need to be supported. And what the space needs to do for its users. And how to best provide for that.”

It’s also evident that today’s changing workforce demonstrates behaviors that current furniture does not support. Allsteel realized early on that it’s not about being furniture experts. It is about understanding human behavior in context of the work environment. So we watched, asked a lot of questions, and found solutions that addressed real behaviors and enabled better interactions between people.

### Putting collaboration to the test.

It’s no surprise that the Allsteel team partnered with a strong group of designers to look at collaboration in a new way.

The design team was led by industrial designer Mitch Bakker and his team at IDa Design, with consultation from the HOK design team of Annie Bergeron, Louis Schump, Tom Polucci, and Steve Hargis. Working with industry design experts allowed Allsteel the opportunity to obtain immediate customer feedback and provided a great opportunity to bring various perspectives and expertise together from concept through design.

“Industrial designers are designing products and interior designers are designing spaces. But most aren’t doing it together. So we knew we wanted individuals from both areas who are out there working with it day in and day out,” according to D.J. Heil, Director, Product Business Management, Allsteel. “With IDa’s industrial design background and knowledge of the Allsteel brand, and HOK’s consulting and design application expertise, we felt confident that this team of professionals could help us define the vision for the future of this industry.”

As part of the product development process, Allsteel has created a body of knowledge about how to effectively design interactive and collaborative spaces that work. “We’ve tended to assume that if we built it, they would come. But that didn’t always work. Now we have a deeper understanding of how these spaces can fit the way people need to work,” Johnson said. Allsteel’s “Define and Design” white paper guides the conversation around designing productive, inspiring collaborative areas.

The design brief that led to one of Allsteel's most ambitious product collections charged the team with multiple objectives. The collection had to:

- Be flexible, adaptive, and evolve for current and future technology needs.
- Be aesthetically appealing and adaptive so the individual pieces can work together or stand alone.
- Offer dual design purposes: absorptive or as a focal point, depending on business needs, company culture, or designers' intentions.
- Offer easy choice and support for different postures and sitting positions.
- Continue Allsteel's design aesthetics and standards, which include intuitive design that's durable, sustainable, and provides long-lasting value.

Before they started to design, the team took a step back to think about how, why, when, and with whom collaboration occurs, and explore the elements that make collaboration successful.

"Public spaces were our inspiration," said Mitch Bakker, Principal, IDa Design. "We spent a lot of time observing how people use them and were keen on people's postures in short-term durations. How they lean or avoid committing to the sit." The team observed a lot of short, chance encounters, which seemed to be a natural way that collaboration was happening. And they spent a lot of time looking at how today's students interact in higher education environments, which tend to be much more collaborative. It was also important to consider the different expectations and behaviors across generations. Then they went to work to create furniture that would support those actions and different generations, and be conducive to collaboration.

According to Bakker, the idea of postures was key to the design. Every pitch, angle, height, and measurement was critical to achieve the right balance of comfort, relaxation, invigoration, and engagement. For maximum performance, collaboration has to occur in an effortless manner. So the furniture needed to support what people do naturally.

"After the first brainstorming session in San Francisco, it was clear that we were on a mission to conceive and design a collection that was simple and intuitive," explained Louis Schump, Senior Associate, Senior Interior Designer, HOK. "We wanted to strip out the design elements that would be too specific, and create something deceptively simple to fulfill a function."

In order to truly understand which concepts were the most relevant and compelling, Allsteel conducted substantial in-market needs assessment and concept review research. More than 300 designers, office managers, corporate real estate brokers, and end-users were interviewed about collaborative environments and activities taking place in those environments. During this research, Allsteel went on the road to meet in eight major markets across the United States for in-person interviews and engaged designers throughout Europe and North America.

“We always made sure to include the design and product engineering teams so they could hear firsthand from our customers and nothing was lost in translation,” said Heil.

The vast knowledge discovered during in-market research greatly impacted the design and functionality requirements for the Gather collection. The team learned that while the word “collaboration” means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, it is often synonymous with productivity. Different “space types” were identified and opportunities for these spaces were outlined.

The mission to create furniture that could evolve as the needs for interaction and collaboration evolve was definitely a priority. “So far the industry response had been to solve these problems with traditional furniture products, and we learned that approach doesn’t make sense with the changing behaviors of today’s working professionals,” according to Laci Lower, Product Manager, New Product Development, Allsteel.

During the project, the team gathered for multiple meetings including design charrettes, brainstorm sessions, and concept presentations.

“It was amazing to watch a team member take a design to the next level,” said Annie Bergeron, Associate, Design Leader, HOK. “After being apprehensive about the concept, one of us took on Rise™ and was able to enhance it to become a favorite among the group. It was a truly collaborative process that included people with very different opinions and backgrounds.”

The team was free to create, but always presented all ideas to Allsteel in real-life applications to ensure that the concept was realistic and relevant. Several of the final pieces featured in the Gather collection are intuitive, yet unique. It was crucial to confirm that these components would make important contributions to the real-world work environment.

“It was also important to us that the final collection of pieces needed to go together, but not match,” Bakker explained. “All the pieces must work on their own and work together in an infinite number of ways. The design process for Gather was looser and quicker with more immediate feedback. Instead of the design team working in a silo and then overselling our story, the products had to speak for themselves. This allowed us to get to a more thoughtful collection of products.”

## **Gather. Where ideas meet.**

Gather’s mission is to support and inspire interaction and collaboration. Each piece is intuitive and functional, with the ability to work well together and blend into spaces with different business environments and cultures. With pieces like Rise, Hedge,™ View,™ and Sketch,™ Allsteel introduces inventive products that are developed for different postures and preferences.

In a class of its own, Hedge defines collaborative areas and invites users to lean on it or lounge against it. This multi-functional, two-sided design provides support for a variety of quick interactions.

“We kicked around a lot of forms for the leaning posture we observed,” Bakker said. “Then we started thinking about how this product could work in the overall floorplate. That was another benefit of working with the team from HOK, as they had a wonderful idea about how Hedge could be used to divide space within a work area, without the expense or permanency of drywall. We took the familiar idea of ‘talking over the hedge’ and dropped it into the business setting.” It’s a natural for creating spectator areas, where several people can sit in front while others gather around the back. The top surface of Hedge is designed to hold a laptop, to spread out papers, or as a writing surface, so it’s the perfect pit stop when people don’t want to commit to the sit, allowing for quick conversations and idea sharing.

“People love to lean and Hedge supports this natural posture. And since it’s two-sided, it’s like being in the back row of an event,” explained Johnson. “It’s surprising, organic shape conforms to the natural shape of your back, encourages collaboration from every angle, and fits beautifully into a variety of meeting areas. It’s really unique, and yet people intuitively know how to use it.”

“Hedge is by far my favorite piece in the collection,” Steve Hargis, Senior Vice President, Director, Consulting, HOK said. “It’s one of the pieces folks gravitate to. You cannot walk past it without stopping. It gives you a place to stop, to rest, to lean, to perch, to write on, to focus your attention. You can stand behind it or stand in front of it. Everybody likes to lean.”

During the design process the team carefully defined elements that needed to be moveable or mobile. View supports group interaction with the necessary technology support in either enclosed or open environments.

“It was really important to get technology into the collection, because it’s such an important part of collaboration,” Tom Polucci, Senior Principal, Director of Interiors, New York, HOK pointed out. “It isn’t intended to take the place of a traditional conference room, but it’s a place where folks have the ability to plug in their laptops and share ideas.”

Sketch is a highly mobile white board that also features a pleasing design aesthetic. “Sketch may be the first white board that you don’t want to hide in a closet after the meeting,” said Polucci. “The strikingly clean design allows it to be displayed in the most sophisticated of board rooms.”

“With Sketch, we wanted to create a product that did what it was intended to do, but did it in the absolute simplest possible way,” Bakker added. “It’s a beautiful product in the fact that it’s simple.”

Providing a collegiate or theater feel to a room, Rise is a favorite of the design team and many of the end-users, designers, and facilities managers who gave Allsteel their input because it is incredibly distinctive and intuitive. This multi-level soft seating is an ingenious solution for gathering large groups in a small space or creating a meeting area with one grouping of furniture. It naturally accommodates the postures that people take when coming together to talk, listen, share, or brainstorm. It instantly makes spaces more productive, more comfortable, and more relevant. The surprisingly comfortable Rise offers an extremely simple form that can create a variety of different landscapes.

"It's comfortable, but it's upright," Bergeron explained. "It's not something you sink into, so it encourages an active type of collaboration."

"Rise offers a different way of using space," Schump said. "I've always imagined this furniture on one side of an unused private office with a white board on the opposite side. It allows more people to come together comfortably, and would be ideal for team meetings that should last 15 minutes."

"Some of the Gather pieces are not things that people will immediately recognize as furniture," according to Bergeron. "But they are intuitive. You know what to do with them. They broadcast their function clearly and simply."

"Gather is unique in its scope and it offers a simple recipe to encourage collaboration," Hargis said. "No one piece does just one thing. Each piece can be used and interpreted depending on the space, the person, and the need."

From a hip boutique, college lounge, or airport terminal, the design team members all agree that elements of Gather will have major impacts on spaces where people come together to exchange ideas, interact, and get work done.

Now, anywhere people come together to discuss, debate, ideate, work happens. And companies can encourage it with unique furniture options that invite interaction beyond traditional meeting spaces. We call it Gather. Flexible, informal options that let you work any way you want. Sit, stand, lean. Settle in or pause for a moment. Think comfortably. And posture yourself for success. Gather. Where ideas meet.