10
Good Reasons
to
Hate
Work Teams

Tom Gibbons

10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams

Reason 1   They Have No Idea What They're Doing

Reason 2   They Think They're Solving World Hunger When They're Really Just Making a Suggestion for Dinner

Reason 3   They Make Everyone More Stupid

Reason 4   They're Just a Different Forum for the Boss to Tell You What to Do and Why

Reason 5   They Generate Tons of Extra Work for the Team Leader

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Reason 8   They Take Months to Make a Decision That Could Have Been Made in Minutes

Reason 9   They Make You Work with People You Can't Stand

Reason 10   They Involve You in Team Building Exercises

The Author

Tom Gibbons works as Managing Director and Partner in <u>Team Management Systems (Americas)</u>. He has worked with teams of all sorts and kinds for over 35 years. Most of those teams are genuinely trying to be excellent!

Tom thinks that the way we currently understand organizations and teams is flawed and this makes striving for excellence too complicated and unfocused. *10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams* is a step in making excellence much more simple and honest.

Want to talk more? <u>tom@tms-americas.com</u>

Copyright Information

10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams – A Little Background

I originally wrote *10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams* way back in 1998, shortly after I had decided to become an independent consultant in the area of organizational development and opened the business Pathways and Crossroads Consulting Inc. Back then e-books, blogs and other forms of social media for publishing your thoughts and ideas were still mostly just thoughts and ideas so *10 Good Reasons* was published as a booklet. It had a giant 10 on the cover with a picture of me in the middle of that 10 and my kids still 'strike the pose' of me in the middle of the zero and refer to the booklet as Dad's pamphlet! Kids can be a tough audience!

I sold and used a fair number of these at the time, but like a lot of hard copy booklets, the format became problematic, even though the topic was still relevant.

It was that last point that prompted the resurfacing of *10 Good Reasons*. While there are lots of writings on teams, most of them make the topic far more complex than it needs to be in my opinion. In addition, most of those writings espouse the wonderful nature of teams as if we should all yearn to be on one, or more! Closer to reality is that teams are simply a fact of organizational life and we are just as likely to yearn to be off one as on one.

10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams takes a little different approach. First, it's pretty simple. The 10 Reasons are not deep dark issues, but they are problems that surface all the time with teams. Second, the suggested actions to move these problems along are pretty simple too. Most teams can do great work by keeping things simple and that is the focus. Third, it's light and hopefully a little humorous. Sometimes humor is a very good way to surface problems that can be difficult to talk about.

One thing right up front is what I mean by a team for this work. It's a group of people that have 2 characteristics:

1. They meet (face to face, virtually or by some other means).
2. They have some common focus and output that they are responsible for.

And if you ask me to go into a more complex definition of what a team is; well then we have 11 reasons to hate work teams!

For this version of *10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams* the text has been updated and expanded a little (but not much) and when it's done I will no longer have my picture in the middle of a zero on the cover!

I hope you will engage with me, and the topic as this emerges; it will make this project better. Well at least if we don't run into any of the *10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams*! If we do however, we can use the suggested actions and see if this stuff actually helps!

Let's Begin!

E-book Addition – The original blog where *10 Good Reasons* was posted still exists <u>here</u> beginning with the first post so you can still add comments or tell your stories as you see fit.

Originally I was not planning on including the comments in the e-book but as they emerged I realized they would make the end product better. Your new comments would add to this exchange.

The original comments have not been edited for content purposes but may have been edited for spelling and grammar just to keep things nice and tidy. In this case all original comments have been included but just like any other blog, the owner of the blog reserves the right to delete any comment they may see as inappropriate.

In this e-book comments are attributed to the person providing them like they were on the comment itself when first posted. If by chance you would like to contact a commenter, you can post a reply to their comment and hopefully they will respond.

The light nature of the comments below set the overall tone for this work. I had contacted a number of people and asked if they would be willing to participate so there was a good chance of getting some comments rather than simply creating another blog and sending it off into the vast ocean of blogs and keeping my fingers crossed for people to read and participate.

The people I contacted were also experienced with team development so I knew their commentary would add value and perhaps differing perspectives which would be good.

As you read along you will see that this was the case as comments were posted for each reason.

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chat **9 Comments**

Andrea - Now I want to see the picture that was on the booklet! Looking forward to the discussion.

Wendy - Andrea, I actually have a copy of Tom inside the zero…thinking we could perhaps start a bidding war :)

Tom Gibbons - Oh crap! There still is a copy out there! And that 90's mustache is soooo bad!

Carrie Bumgarner - Andrea, it's worth bidding for :)

Katie - How tempting – who's putting in the first bid?? Tom! With a 90's mustache! Inside a zero!!! Tom, somebody could get quite rich with this!!…..And I'm seriously looking forward to this experience with you all and enjoying some of Tom's wit with it.

Andrea - Hmmm… I smell a challenge. I will find this picture :)

Dick McCann - This blog is a great idea! I'm sure we will all have experienced lots of these issues…..I do wonder if there are more dysfunctional teams than functional ones? I look forward to your creative journey….

Tammy - Are we all going to be a "Work Team" while doing this? Hmm what kind of team will we become?

> Tom Gibbons - Tammy. I don't think we meet the criteria being used to define a team… 1. meeting and 2. a common purpose! We will have to call ourselves something different…. You have illustrated something really important here and it happens all the time. People begin to interact about something and then all of a sudden they think they are, or should be a team and then all kinds of weird stuff starts happening. If they just left things as people interacting all the burden and expectations of being a team wouldn't get in the way of just interacting….

Introduction

I HATE THIS *@#!! TEAM

We've all muttered foul words under our breath as we gnashed our teeth, shook our heads and shuffled along to another meeting with the 'team from hell'. We are all sadly familiar with at least one profoundly ineffective gathering of souls which generally does nothing but suck up great portions of our valuable time while causing vast amounts of stress and frustration. Amazingly, a large number of work teams seem to be chugging along in just that manner.

This e-book and handbook is meant to bring those expletives out of the closet in order to describe how we REALLY feel about teams. Then we can begin to do something to make them better. Work teams in organizations are expected to produce results, results which contribute to the profitable outputs of that organization. If they don't, they are pretty well useless.

This e-book examines what it is that transforms teams into such awful monsters. It uses plain language to reveal what's really going on; a reality that can be concealed by fancy words and meaningless jargon. It presents some simple indicators to help you assess whether or not your team is caught up in one of these hateful traps, and it offers some simple suggestions for improvement.

Work with this e-book and these posts. Annotate, print and draw, share, make up new four letter words to describe your most hated team. Make up new reasons to hate it. After that, step back and have a good chuckle at what your team is really like. Laughter is a great precursor to accepting what is, and after acceptance can come honest change. And laughter is a much easier stepping off point than rage, tears or apathy.

So, let's see what your team is really like…..*#@!!%…

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. What's your number 1 reason to hate work teams?

E-book Addition - As you see from the post and the comments, much of what becomes problematic with teams is relatively simple and obvious while at the same time, difficult to actually <u>talk</u> about. It is this difficulty in actually 'bringing to conversation' the challenges a team may be facing that pushes them aside or underground and then we end up blaming something or someone for the problems and then they become less simple and even more difficult to talk about.

This is why *10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams* takes a very simple approach to team performance and development. If we can keep things simple it is much easier to bring challenges to conversation earlier or perhaps even before a challenge is experienced.

If we wait too long, the patterns of interaction on a team can become quite entrenched and changing those patterns, very difficult.

So jump in early, jump in together and keep it simple as much as you can.

chat **18 Comments**

Cherylynn - Lack of respect. My worst team experience had a manager who did not support the team, we were having a real challenge with an arrogant client and in expressing our concerns and how we can seek to improve the situation with our manager – he turned around and said to the client that he had 'sensitive women' on his team who found his behavior unacceptable, So that spiraled things into a worse state than they had been… the client became more arrogant and abrasive and frequently asked if he was upsetting the women on the team. It was something out of a sitcom! (Both the team manager and the client have since retired; as needs to be the case with 'old' ways of thinking and treating people). I felt a rush of fury just writing and recalling this period of my work experience. (Argh!)

> Tom Gibbons - Awesome post Cherylynn! Obviously not a good situation but your last line made me laugh…. sorry! Your scenario will fit into a couple of reasons as this plays out, with the boss being a jerk as a 'sub category' of one reason and lack of respect fitting into another, broader category.
>
> While your example is obvious in terms of lack of respect, it can also be very subtle, non conscious and even preference related so it can really be a complex issue to work on.
>
> Although perhaps you are also saying there is an 11th reason to hate work teams – MEN! :)
>
> > Cherylynn - Haha! Well MEN, obviously. Not all but some for sure.
> >
> > Mind you I had a similar 'learning' experience with a female manager; I remember we went for lunch one day and she was very confident (in how she carried herself) – I quite admired how she commanded attention and would be the center of attention in meetings (with men).
> >
> > So we were walking to lunch and she was taking such long strides that on occasion I had to run-step to keep up – she had ways to make you feel smaller and less important. Not sure if you have a category for that but there's the 'it's all about me' manager.

Sara - Lack of understanding of the purpose of the team. I really liked your definition of a team in the last post, as a group of people who both 1) meet and 2) have a common purpose. I have seen examples where one of these criteria is missing, and it doesn't really work. For example, I have seen a group that was called a "team" and did have a common purpose but never met to discuss how to work together to achieve that purpose. The team members were essentially acting independently rather than as a team. I have also seen teams that met on a regular basis but didn't have a sense of their common purpose. It is really interesting to facilitate a team building workshop and be told "but we don't actually do any of our work together – we each have our own area of responsibility."

> Tom Gibbons - Sara – the very first reason will focus on this exact issue! I guess you should win something! I have found this happens way more often than I would expect; with the most surprising thing being how often it happens with very senior teams. The different team members all have sections of the business to run for example and when you ask them what the purpose of the bigger team is, they struggle to answer.

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For me some kind of common goal or purpose has to be present or you do not have any foundation as a team and meeting is more or less a waste of time. I've actually worked with a few teams over the years that simply decided to disband and stop meeting because they could not identify a purpose that they thought was important enough to warrant meeting about.

Andrea - I have recently come to work with several groups who fall in this category of "not working together" as they are all focusing on their separate projects or what not. As simple as this post is, it has me thinking about different ways to discuss this topic when it presents itself in discussion.

> Tom Gibbons - Andrea, one of the things I have found is that there is ALWAYS a reason people are meeting. I know always is a strong word but people rarely get together randomly for no reason. Often the reason has simply not been discussed or sometimes the reason is so lame no one wants to discuss it! So the most important question once the purpose has been surfaced is 'Is this a good enough reason for us to be meeting about'?
>
> The next post presents a REALLY simple way to get at this. I use it and have found it works well, even in its simplicity.

Sheryl Roy - Misunderstood Team Strategy – Not only do team members need to know the team's strategy, they also have to believe in it and integrate it into their work. When each member of the group knows how the group will go about fulfilling its mission, people can work in unison. Is the team strategy to build products faster than anybody else? Streamline controls processes to be fit-for-risk? Overcome a sales shortfall by picking up market share in a specific segment? Maximize the value of organization effectiveness engagements?

Once the strategy is understood, team members must align on the group's tactics—that is, how the strategy will be implemented. If the strategy is to build products faster than anybody else, what approaches can they take to achieve that goal? Investing more money in tools? Training people to work better and faster? Leaders must make sure all team members understand the strategies that the group has targeted to meet its objectives. Once all the individuals understand and accept the group's strategies and tactics, they can better function as a team to meet those goals.

> Tom Gibbons - Well Sheryl, you've touched on a number of the 10 Reasons forthcoming! So often teams ASSUME there is a coherent and common understanding of things like strategy, tactics, how to problem solve, scope etc. or even respect as Cherylynn points out above and typically this assumption is wrong and actually dangerous.
>
> As you'll see as the 10 Reasons emerge I've really tried to keep things simple, it may even seem too simple. However, sometimes asking simple and direct questions can surface and create discussion around some complex issues. Kind of like what Andrea pointed out above in terms of her thinking regarding this simple post!

Andrea Boulden - Hi Tom, the title of this post made me laugh. I have said that to myself a few times!! Being the Manager of a team often feels a lot like parenting, where no one is happy (no matter how hard you try), no one appreciates the "parents", the "kids" are competitive with each other and critical of how every-one does their jobs, the list goes on. I look forward to reading more on your Blog!!

Tom Gibbons - Andrea, to add to your parent metaphor… one difference with being a parent with respect to a work team vs. your kids is that your work team never grows up and moves out! Sometimes it's like a 40 year old kid living in your basement wondering when you're going to make dinner for them and do their laundry.

But at least you might be able to fire your team member; kind of hard to fire your kid!

Carrie Bumgarner - Andrea, GREAT analogy!! I just read this to my husband, he agrees 100%. There is always someone who's unhappy.

Denice Shand - I think a common reason to hate work teams is lack of boundaries. Where people forget that TEAM is really just a means to an end (rather than the end itself) team members translate their "common purpose" into a need for "shared thought and action", laying out every aspect of their individual accountabilities for group think and judgement. And so, both in those l–o–n–g team meetings and on the job, teams lacking clear individual boundaries tend to just get in each other's way.

Tom Gibbons - Denice, this gets touched on in Reason 2 but more from an entire team boundary perspective. However both at a team and individual level as you point out this problem typically creates a lot of repetition of work or differing approaches to the same challenge and no one realizes until a lot of time an effort has been wasted.

Sarah - Something I've run into in the past is a lack of team accountability. The group comes together, makes a beautiful plan and then doesn't execute consistently. In some cases the plan is never revisited. A team I volunteered with a few years ago also was looking for the next exciting idea and plan. They would come together, plan, and then leave with a lot of excitement. But the milestones and objectives were never discussed again. They loved the "high" of creating new plans but struggled in the daily grind of execution and ultimately failed to hold themselves and each other accountable to their goals.

Tom Gibbons - Sarah, thanks for the post and the area of accountability is a reason that will be forthcoming pretty soon. You are very right that in the 'bubble' of a team meeting people can be very excited about ideas and then end up planning from that excitement rather than from the stark reality of other commitments, available resources etc. This can really drain a team of energy that at one point was a very valuable asset.

Katie - Hi Tom, just starting from the beginning and will be working my way through the posts over the next couple of days and weeks…. A fairly recent experience that comes to mind is of a team, quite small, that I was part of. The reason and the rules of play were, I thought, fairly clear until one member started some odd behaviour. What later transpired was that he was speaking with senior management behind our backs, getting extra brownie points and before we knew it, things just started to change… for example, roles and responsibilities, even pay (we were all freelancers working on a project together). He played a double game and it took all the excitement out of the project. He wasn't "local" so we meet on Skype, but even so he managed to get senior management's ear. Passion paled and engagement evaporated. Senior management "bought" his story – with ugly things like "so and so is not pulling his weight, hasn't produced anything…". Sad story. It always is when Teamwork doesn't live up to what we hope for hey?

Tom Gibbons - Awesome to 'hear' your voice here Katie! Your story hits on many of the 10 Reasons I think with the outcome I would imagine being Reason 9, They Make You Work with People You Can't Stand!

It is surprising though when you hear stories like this how a person could actually not see the damage that would be so likely to occur. I wonder sometimes if it is simply and unconscious act with good intentions somewhere, behavior edging toward nastiness or just plain stupidity; maybe all three in the case you describe!

Reason 1: They Have No Idea What They're Doing

This is the number one reason why a team does not work! Ask the members of any team from boardroom teams to bathroom teams, "What is this team supposed to be doing?" and observe the puzzled looks. If your team cannot consistently answer this question it is doomed to failure. And if you are a member of such a team you are doomed to experience the torture of participating in this failure. Most teams THINK they know what they're supposed to be doing. However, a painful number who think they know, really don't.

Try this at your next team meeting. Give everyone two minutes at the start of the meeting to write down their answer to the question: What is this team supposed to be doing? No talking allowed. If you end up with more than two different responses your team is in trouble. So either stop whatever you are doing and find one answer to the question or disband the team since it can't possibly do anything of value until the question is answered. Unless you can agree on what the team is supposed to be doing you are wasting everyone's valuable time.

By the way, if you are part of an organization where some people tell others what to do (the official term is hierarchy) then 98% of the teams should be told what they are supposed to be doing by someone up the ladder. This saves a lot of time, is consistent with how things work anyway and most teams are very happy to get the direction. Don't let anyone tell you this will decrease 'engagement' or some other such term; it won't. Teams want to be successful, and knowing what they are supposed to be doing is the first step in that success, regardless how that knowledge comes about. So if your team doesn't know what it's supposed to be doing, try asking the boss. If the boss doesn't know, disband the team quickly because you've got bigger problems to deal with!

If you are one of those few teams that is expected to figure out what it's supposed to be doing without direction from above, then do this task well. The key ingredient to finding the answer is honesty, and there is a really good chance you will need some objective help in being honest. You also need to test your behavior against what you say you should be doing. By testing behavior you can discover if your team is just TALKING about doing something but really DOING something else. Talk is cheap; activity tells the real story.

If you are puzzled about what testing behavior means or how to do it, don't get all complicated here. Start by looking at the measures your team uses to assess success. If they are not measuring what you have said is important you have a problem. It was your behavior that created those measures or your behavior that neglected to change them.

The next post will be suggestions about trying to deal with this reason to hate work teams. Use it to jot down some of your thoughts about your team, note any questions that might need answering, any ideas that you think might help your team be more effective. Bring these to your next meeting and continue to push for discussion on these topics. Who knows, it might help your team take a big step forward.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Have you ever been on a team like this? Describe the experience

2. Have you ever worked <u>with</u> a team with this reason to hate it? What did you do?
3. It is often expressed that getting the boss to tell the team what it should be doing isn't a good thing to do, other than at a high level. Do you agree? What assumptions might be driving this perspective?
4. Have you found measurements often are at odds with what a team says is important? Why do you think this is so?
5. And of course, any other musings you may have!

Reason 1 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. What result(s) is this team supposed to accomplish?
2. Why is this important?
3. What measures are we using to determine if we have accomplished what we are supposed to be doing or moving things along?
4. Should we ask the boss (or equivalent) for help in determining what we are supposed to be doing?

Interesting ones:

1. Look at your (and your team's) response to # 2 above. Does this response mean much to you <u>personally</u> or would you have a different response to that question if you could answer it with no one listening?
2. Is the way in which you and your team are going about accomplishing what it is supposed to be doing <u>consistent</u> with that result?
3. Does your team have any measures that look at 'how' you are doing what is important or only ones that let you know if you've done it?
4. How will you know if you are being honest in determining what is important for this team to be doing?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

• No team can function effectively without knowing what it should be focusing on and having some goals established.
• Finding some workable level of agreement among team members what the team is supposed to accomplish is the first task for any team.
• Honesty is the key ingredient in finding this workable level of agreement.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. If you actually were on, or working with a team on this reason and tried out some of these

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questions, what was your experience?

2. Would you have additional questions or key points to add?
3. What have you found the most challenging thing in determining what a team is supposed to be doing?
4. How have you addressed this challenge?

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chat **8 Comments**

Kathi Jolliffe - I think all teams, no matter how well they work together towards the same goal, get in to muddy situations. Maybe the leader backs off, significant change takes place that the team members may not even be aware of. The key is to find a way back to talking about what they should be doing.
I worked in the not-for-profit sector for a number of years, as the Executive Director. Often, our funder changed the game without any notice to us (myself and my board of directors). It was super frustrating as the team leader – we always referred to it as "dancing on a moving carpet".

I don't think it is a problem to have someone (higher up) telling teams what to do/setting the direction. Someone has to steer the ship. As long as they are setting the direction from an informed position with the information they need. Otherwise, it's just hierarchy. It's important that everyone understand the direction and then provide people with the ability to self-manage. Making an assumption that you are self-managed without a context/direction is just fooling yourself. And, not at all valuable to the team as a whole.

The worst team I worked on was in a municipal government setting. Our team leader's reason for any information/guidance/decision she provided was because "she was senior management". Doesn't do much to build a team or welcome input. Luckily, I had enough experience to keep that kind of comment in its proper perspective, still get a sense of the goal of my team and carry out my tasks. But I watched younger staff recoil at her words and at times become quite ineffective at being a part of the team. I didn't stay there long.

> Tom Gibbons - Kathi, I think you're absolutely right; teams always have ups and downs and should expect this. In many ways that's the reason for this e-booklet, to help teams recognize and act on many of the most common issues teams seem to face.
>
> Your worst scenario is looked at in one the 10 Reasons coming up pretty soon and in many ways, there is not a lot the 'team' can do about it, except as you say, recognize what is going on and then do what you can to be effective within your scope of control.

Wendy - Tom, this is timely. I am currently working with a senior leadership team who is working to understand their purpose or what we used to call mission.

One of the first things we did was look at what is the 'job to be done'. We broke them into two groups and asked three questions.

1. Who are the team's most important customers?
2. What are those customer's most important goals?

3. What specific job are your customers hiring your team to do?

The process was interesting and they had a very difficult time determining the answers to these questions. It did create lots of great dialogue that we will continue. There is a lot of role confusion on this team and my hope is this we are on the path to determining what this team is supposed to be doing.

My experience is that it if the leadership team is not able to articulate what the job is, how can they possibly expect the rest of the organization to successfully achieve their goals.

Thanks for confirming, we are on the right track and look forward to the other posts.

> Tom Gibbons - Wendy, these are very good questions to get the team thinking about their purpose or goals plus it wouldn't surprise me if you had some good conversation about who the customers of this team even were!
>
> Your post is also an example of the types of post that will expand and deepen this initiative. Other ideas and experiences that people can use to help them deal with these 10 Reasons. While the posted text for *10 Good Reasons* is very basic, practical and simple, the perspectives and experiences of others adds tremendously to efforts in helping teams be more effective.
>
> In addition to your questions above I also like to make sure the team thinks 'internally', at least a little, in terms of what they want for themselves from being on this specific team. I do think the focus on customer or organizational value is of primary importance but I also think a team needs to discuss what might be called the more 'self'ish goals they may want to achieve that are just about them as individuals on a team.
>
> > Wendy - Hmmmm….I never thought about it from the perspective of the more 'self'ish goal. I will try this on with the team next week and let you know how we make out.
> >
> > Tom Gibbons - Wendy, I really hope you do see what the group has to say on this topic and you share it here….
> >
> > The reason I ask this of teams is that when it comes right down to it, simply achieving organizational goals as a team is simply not enough at an individual level; those goals rarely resonate deeply with us I find.
> >
> > I was doing some work with a large group a while ago and we had done the warp speed exercise (the one where tennis balls are thrown) early in the day. At the end of the day the leader of the group was doing a debrief of what had been learned; you know, that serious revelation of how your life has been changed by 'seeing the light' that day.
> >
> > One person stands up and says, 'The best thing for me was the game! I had fun and I don't have enough fun on this team!' I was at the back of the room and actually stood up, pumped my fist in the air and said 'YESSSS' and then sat back down realizing I might have ruined the seriousness of the heavy expectations of the debrief.
> >
> > Yet for this person, fun was important, probably just as important as any organizational goal the team was tasked with. For me, that has to be important.

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I have found that sometimes teams are reluctant to talk about these 'self' ish goals, or they shroud them with organizational speak. But if you keep it light and honest it can really be important for a team I think.

Katie - Tom, in my experience teams often do know what they are doing and need to do but unfortunately meet resistance or a different story elsewhere in the organisation. And this throws things into doubt and brings on frustration. Coherence in the system is key and often the big thing that is absent. Alignment up and down and across the organisation is a real killer for teams.

Tom Gibbons - Hello Katie! I would agree that coherence and alignment are important, but are also very difficult to attain in larger organizations with so many competing priorities (well often even in small organizations!)

Nevertheless I am regularly surprised, especially by senior teams comprised of people who are accountable for large divisions that respond with blank stares or silence when asked what are they supposed to be doing as a team.

This just happened a few weeks ago and they were quite honest about this situation and began work on establishing a purpose shortly after.

Reason 2: They Think They're Solving World Hunger When They're Really Just Making a Suggestion for Dinner

This can be especially damaging. The team puts in all kinds of work and time to come up with wonderful solutions and implementation plans for organizational change and then finds out that all they were supposed to do was identify a few issues so someone or some other team can actually work on them. At this point team members start to hate their team. In fact they start to hate the <u>idea</u> of any other team that might conceivably be formed in the next decade! Sound familiar?

This is a special case of the first reason to hate work teams – They Have No Idea What They're Doing. In this case, they have an idea what they are doing but the boundaries are not understood. The team is playing the right game but don't know what position they are playing. This reason pops up surprisingly often in the following scenarios:

- Dealing with the results of employee surveys focusing on things like engagement.
- Employee 'participation' initiatives.
- Change implementation teams and processes.
- Action learning projects.
- And horror of horrors; culture change initiatives!

Teams have this wonderfully annoying habit of wanting to do too much. Give them a project and they want total control from start to finish and are royally offended when organizational processes, like budgets for instance, get in the way!

Now if you're reading this with the thought that you just wish you faced such a problem, don't be too quick to act on those wishes.

Organizations don't work by the annoying habit noted above so why should teams in those organizations? Rarely (actually almost never) will a single person or group be able to undertake an entire project from start to finish. Yes, even executive teams! Other people or processes are required to help, to get buy in from, or to take responsibility for parts of the project or initiative. This is just the way things work. So teams need to understand not only what they should be focusing on, but also what their boundaries are, when they need to pass things on, ask for approval or just stop doing stuff.

Like Reason 1, the roll of the boss (or equivalent) is very important here, maybe even more important. So if you are unclear of the boundaries for your team the first step should be to ask the boss. Sometimes however if you go to the boss and ask, 'What are our boundaries here?' you will get a response something like, 'Well you figure it out and then come check with me.' At this point the room should fill up with red flags (the boss likely won't notice these but you should!). All of these red flags should read, 'We need to be more specific!' So ask a more specific question; something like, 'Well we think we'll need $10,000.00 to make this work' or 'Well we're going to talk to your colleague in that other department to see if they're on board' or 'It's going to take us about 6 months to work this through'. This is pretty much guaranteed to initiate a more specific interaction about boundaries and that's what you need. It's like that response to the question "what does quality look like?' 'I'll know it when I see it.' The boss may not be clear about boundaries but when faced with something tangible, they know what they want or don't want.

When the role of the team is reasonably defined and its boundaries reasonably understood the team can take pride in its accomplishments, whether they are large or small.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Have you experienced this reason to hate work teams? What is your story?
2. What effective methods have you used for boundary setting with teams?
3. If you've experienced a team that has gone through this, what have you done to 'recover'?
4. Do you find it is more common for teams to want to do more, or want to do less?
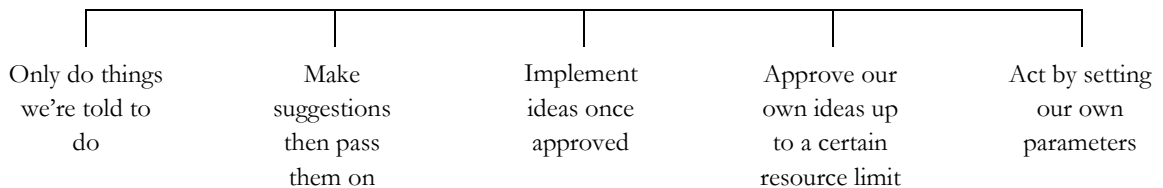
Reason 2 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Where is our team on the following involvement scale?

Only do things we're told to do	Make suggestions then pass them on	Implement ideas once approved	Approve our own ideas up to a certain resource limit	Act by setting our own parameters

2. Who should we ask to determine if we are correct in our assessment of where we are on this scale?
3. Are we at the appropriate point on this scale for our level and expertise in the organization?
4. If not, why not?

Interesting ones:

1. If you were being brutally honest at what point on the scale above do you think your boss wants you to be?
2. If you were being brutally honest at what point on the scale do you want your team to be?
3. What do you think drives teams to want to do more than they are asked to do?
4. What is it like to be on a team that is at the far right of the scale?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- Initially and from an efficiency perspective it is more important to know WHERE your team is on the involvement scale than WHY it is at that point. You can work on the WHY while you're doing a good job doing what you've been asked to do.
- Only successful teams move along this scale to the right. Unsuccessful teams fall right off the left end and you might even fall further if you are on a team like that.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Have ever worked with, or on a team that discovers they are trying to do more than they have really been asked to do? What was the state of the team after this discovery and what did you do?
2. Most organizations will say they want teams as far to the right of the scale above as possible but when teams actually begin to push and act at that level, the team is 'reigned in'. Why do you think this happens and have you experienced it?
3. Do you have other ways of ensuring a team is really focused on what they have been asked to do right from the start?

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chat **6 Comments**

Wendy - I have many stories where I've experienced people controlling, complying and protecting in order to make themselves look good, smart, valuable, this list goes on and on.

Tom, I like what you have leaned into, as it relates to when the red flag goes up ask specific questions. Better to find out up front what the boundaries are rather than half way into the project that you find out you are not aligned. Good to have this open, direct conversation and intentionally design upfront what happens when things go off track because they will. It is easier to do it at the beginning when people are excited about the new opportunity.

Great leaders are clear as to what the expectations are and sharing those with the team. Remember to constantly communicate when things change.

I think it is human nature for us/teams to want to do more. We want to know we are adding value and it can be very demotivating when we are going down a path only to find out it was not the right one.

> Tom Gibbons - Wendy, you are the comment ninja! I love it; and your comments. They are making this work better, a lot better.
>
> I agree very much with the first sentence in your last paragraph. However I also think organizations and teams still foster a lot of Theory X leaders, even though that term is long out of vogue.
>
> There are always constraints however in our desire to do more, always, and it is important to be realistic with these I think.
>
> I also think it is normal for a leader or manager to not be clear about boundaries for a team, until something specific surfaces. Thus the need for more specific questions.
>
> I remember years ago working with Dr. Ed Freedberg, one of the luckiest things that happened to me in my organizational life. We were talking about empowerment and he said most leaders say they want empowerment but what they really do is just 'lend' it to you. And when they discover

you have gone too far with the empowerment thing they take it back. It wasn't that they were a jerk or anything, they just didn't know the boundary until they actually experienced it.

The real problem was that there was never any conversation about the fact that the leader may truly not know what boundaries were pushing their comfort zone too far. Your point above – 'Remember to constantly communicate when things change' – is so important in this regard.

Katie - Totally agree with the red flags! I haven't had firsthand experience here but have worked with many teams in that vicious circle of not knowing and having no authority to define for themselves even though the boss doesn't have a clue…it is just pure frustration and demotivation and a huge reason to hate teams!!!

Tom Gibbons - Hi Katie! It's surprising how often this happens with the boss not really having thought through the boundaries a team in their area should have. I don't think this is necessarily a problem since sometimes you can't know until you start doing things. The big problem, as you mention is when the boss doesn't know and doesn't want to talk about it and the team has to struggle along in semi darkness.

Brooke - I love the chart! Such a useful way to have a conversation about the importance of "doing the dishes and mopping the floor" vs. being the executive chef designing the concept.

Tom Gibbons - Brooke, thanks for the comment! I like how you have used your language to not put a 'value' on "doing the dishes and mopping the floor" vs. being the executive chef. This is one of the key points of this reason. If the team can have a good conversation about and understand the boundaries that exist for the team, then regardless of what the team is tasked with doing, it can be done well and through this, have value.

Regardless of the socially constructed value that might be assigned to various tasks or jobs, doing something well is universally valued.

Reason 3: They Make Everyone More Stupid

Amazing isn't it? You put eight bright people into a room together and their collective intelligence sinks like a stone in water. Here's a valuable rule of thumb: the bigger a team grows, the dumber it gets. So why bother with teams at all you might ask. Good question. Teams don't HAVE to make everyone more stupid, it's just that they often do. The collective intelligence of the group never reaches its potential. And surprisingly this is usually on account of one of the following three pretty darn simple reasons:

1. They don't know what they're supposed to be doing.
2. They know what they're supposed to be doing but don't care.
3. They don't know how to go about doing what they are supposed to be doing.

We've already examined the first reason.

The second can be approached in one of two ways. Either enlist volunteers who care about the issue, or make it a performance requirement. Okay, okay, this second solution seems heavy handed and oh so uncreative so you may want to supplement it with sophisticated motivational techniques, but after all that make it a performance requirement anyway.

Enlisting volunteers who care about the issue is a really good way to keep everyone from getting stupid but it is really critical to deal with that first point above right away. Quite often you find out volunteers THINK they care about the issue but when push comes to shove they really care about something else that's attached to the issue and then not only do people begin to get stupid, they also get angry with each other. Volunteers or not, in most organizations being on a team needs some kind of performance imperative.

The third reason requires either technical or interpersonal solutions or both. If the technical reason is that nobody on the team actually has the skill or capability to act on what they're doing then you have to ask why the heck are these people on the team? You simply have to have people with the skill or capability so go find them.

More often though, the technical reason has to do with problem solving or decision making. If the problem is in decision making (and it often is) then figure out how the team is going to make a decision. Majority vote, pass it up the ladder, (consensus is another reason we'll deal with later) or someone having the final say. Whatever it is, figure it out and stick to it.

If the technical mess is problem solving such as understanding root causes, generating solutions etc. then find a problem solving process that the team can work with. At last count there was about a million of these processes to choose from and your organization probably has a bunch of these so just pick one and stick to it. Just one word of caution here. Don't pick a problem solving process that is more complicated than the challenge you are working on.

On the interpersonal side of things, teams get more stupid because members aren't good at expressing themselves or can't handle conflict well and as a result, potentially great contributions never

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surface. These interpersonal problems will, in many cases, require outside help since either the solutions are not obvious or the team doesn't want to make them obvious.

While it may seem like more fun to begin with the interpersonal stuff, resist the temptation to do so. After addressing the first two reasons noted above and the technical part of the third, you'll be amazed at how many interpersonal issues just disappear. If not, and the team is still stupid then find someone who knows what she or he is doing in the interpersonal area and get them working with the team on these issues. Make sure they don't have any big investment in whatever the team is working on. If they do, they're at risk of becoming part of the problem and just as stupid as everyone else involved.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. What have you experienced that makes some teams just get stupid?
2. Have you ever found that working in depth on interpersonal issues doesn't help the team actually perform any better?
3. What do you think are the primary things that help teams actually achieve their potential?
4. Have you ever worked with a volunteer team? What were some of the challenges you faced that could/did make them more stupid than they should have been?

Reason 3 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Do we know what we're supposed to be doing?
2. Do we care about what we're supposed to be doing? Why do we care?
3. Do we know how to approach this issue or challenge?
4. Who should we ask for help if we need it?

Interesting ones:

1. Are you performing at <u>your</u> potential on this team?
2. If you have interpersonal challenges are you sure they're not really work issues in disguise?
3. How can the team tell if it is reaching its potential?
4. Does it really matter if the team isn't reaching its potential?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- Volunteers almost always make the most effective team members, but work early and honestly on what is to be focused on to find out if those volunteers really do care about that focus.
- It is critical to have some kind of performance imperative regarding involvement on a team. It's surprising how rarely this actually happens.
- Fix the work stuff first, then see if you need to work on interpersonal stuff.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Given that working with others on a team both enables and constrains the individuals do you think it is the enabling or constraining that has the most impact? Why?
2. Have you seen other things that make a team stupid?
3. What have found in helping a team not get stupid and actually move toward their potential?

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chat **2 Comments**

Sara - Building on your idea that sometimes team members think they care about the issue but really care about something attached to the issue, the place where I have seen teams act "stupid" is when the outcome of the team's work will affect team members in different ways. Rather than asking the question "How can we come up with a creative solution that will meet most or all of everyone's needs?", the team becomes divided along lines of two or more different directions/approaches to the problem and never gain the alignment needed to make progress toward a result/solution. This stalemate can be addressed through a neutral mediator, but in my experience we more often see intervention from a higher level to mandate a particular path forward.

> Tom Gibbons - Sara, you have touched on a good point and a difficult one to get at since quite often the different perspectives on direction or approach do not surface until the team is well along in its work. The team may have thought they were aligned then find out they aren't and by then you can have entrenched positions and people get defensive and aggressive.
>
> Actually intervention from above can be effective to solve this problem but it does very little to prevent the problem from occurring again….

Reason 4: They're Just a Different Forum for the Boss to Tell You What to Do and Why

Surprisingly, this isn't necessarily bad. If your boss is honest about the fact that a team is needed to do something and then outlines fairly clearly what is to be done, it can actually be pretty positive. You'll probably get sick of this if it happens continually, but once in a while it's a good way to help a team be successful.

On the other hand, if your boss is a jerk, it doesn't take long to generate a good hatred for the team. Everyone resents being treated like slaves in order to do some menial task which is below the dignity of the boss. Of course, if your boss is a jerk you're probably doing menial tasks with or without the team so that's not the real issue. The real issue is that you're now stuck on a team that is supposed to accomplish something and no one really wants to be there. Short of quitting or finding devious (and probably illegal) ways of having your boss eliminated, there is no permanent solution to this problem. You just have to make the best of things and in this way strive to improve things over time.

Making the best of things starts with getting your boss to be absolutely clear (relatively clear might be best case though) as to what is expected of the team. Be aware that the boss may well have hidden agendas or other reasons for creating the team. Try not to allow these to interfere with what YOU are trying to accomplish. So check with the boss on a regular basis to make sure you are on track. If you wait until you've completed the task, you may find that the target changed when you weren't looking and you will get roundly chastised, then sent off to 'do it right' this time. But if you sincerely try to get a clear picture from the start and honestly check progress on a regular basis things may get better. Sure, you're playing games a bit, but it speeds up the process which is good for teams in this situation. It's healthy to vent once in a while too but don't go overboard. Get the work done quickly and maybe you can spend the extra time searching out a good headhunter or a new work address.

You may also find that this reason to hate work teams takes some time to recognize. The biggest red flag is a lack of clarity from the boss about what is required of the TEAM. Don't be surprised if there are a couple of cycles of the target changing for no good reason before you catch on to what may be going on.

Oh, if you are one of the bosses who creates teams for a hidden agenda, at least be honest about it. Of course if you are one of these bosses you probably don't recognize it. Just in case, take a look around you; if lots of teams in your area aren't accomplishing much, you're likely the problem, not them. Take a big dose of humility, ask the teams for help and listen, really listen to what they have to say, if they have the courage to say it. And good luck. You will need it.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. This is not an uncommon problem. What are some of the hidden agendas you have seen for bosses to create teams to deal with these agendas?
2. If a team is stuck in this reason and needs to vent, how can that venting be contained so it actually adds value and does not spill over into creating a generalized negative atmosphere?
3. Have you ever had to coach a boss that creates this problem? How did you coach them?

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Reason 4 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Are we aligned with the boss regarding what is to be accomplished?
2. Are we following up enough with the boss to make sure we are on track?
3. How effectively are we dealing with the frustration this situation may be causing?

A question for the boss:

1. Are the problems this team is experiencing similar to what other teams in my area are experiencing? Am I the problem with this team? (Be honest!)

Interesting ones:

1. What might the hidden agendas be that our team is dealing with?
2. Can we perhaps deal with these in a different and more effective way?
3. How might we be able to prevent this type of thing from happening in the future?
4. How much am I compromising myself by staying on this team and do I care?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- Being on a team that is told what to do and how to do it doesn't have to be all bad. It allows you to quickly get to work!
- Vent enough to diffuse some of the frustration of this reason, but....
- Excessive complaining about a situation like never resolves it; only activity does.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. It's often not so much being told <u>what</u> the team is to focus on that causes frustration it's more about being told <u>how</u> to focus on the issue. If you have experienced this, how have you dealt with this type of situation?
2. How do deal with a boss that is a jerk!?
3. What assumptions do you think are at play when a boss creates a team to deal with hidden agendas?
4. When situations like this occur, how really aware do you think people are (including the boss) of the dynamics and causes of this situation?

💬 2 Comments

Wendy - Tom appreciate you highlighting the piece of the hidden agenda from the boss and my experience has been they really don't recognize that they are the issue. It is easy to say have a courageous conversation with your boss however unless they are really open this rarely happens due to power and control issues. In order to have courageous conversations they often need skill development in this area as well as some intentionality as to what this looks like. Once you create a culture where they feel safe to have these conversations is when the magic on a team can happen. Often it is trust issues that hold people back.

Venting or clearing if done in a productive manner can be very helpful. If people do not have the means to vent they often remain stuck and have a tough time moving ahead. Again, by being able to articulate they just need to vent and do not want anything done with it. They may just need to get it off their chest and have someone really listen to them without judging or solving the problem.

Yes, I have had the opportunity to coach a few bosses that create this problem. Once you have designed the coaching relationship it is helpful to start to hold up the mirror and start looking at the impact that he or she is creating. Often it is unintentional and they need tools and skill development to do things differently. Not always, however in some circumstances a 360 can be helpful to focus in on specific areas of development and always remembering to leverage the strengths.

> Tom Gibbons - Wendy, another great comment! I was interested in your points about 'courageous' conversations and think you are very right that these types of conversations can be highly problematic due to power and control dynamics that are primarily not seen or understood by the person in power. Unfortunately there is a fair bit of content out there that focuses on having these types of conversations and if you do them 'right', you will end up with a good result. Most of this content does not deal with the very real existence of the power issues you note.

> This can easily end up making things worse in that the person trying to make things better can feel like a failure since the courageous conversation did not work. In some ways it is like the 'blaming the victim' dynamic that occurs in various other scenarios and not just teams.

> This is why, with this reason the focus is on trying to make things more effective by first dealing with the non power issues since it can make a difference for the entire team. It is not effective to deal with a jerk boss through the team as the issue is always bigger and more complicated than the effect he or she is having on the team.

> As you note, often outside information and support is needed.

Reason 5: They Generate Tons of Extra Work for the Team Leader

This is a classic problem faced by teams with little experience in operating effectively or by teams formed simply because the organization has decreed that teams are the way to go and everyone must be on some team or another. Other common situations where this reason regularly occurs are:

- 'Improvement' teams, employee 'participation' teams, employee 'suggestion' teams and other such teams with vague terms meant to make things better.
- Health and safety teams and committees.
- Teams formed to keep unions from getting a foothold.
- More junior teams where everyone on the team reports to the team leader.

Whatever the case the result is the same. The team is put together with some vague idea that they have to improve something and the first meeting is scheduled. Everyone arrives bursting to express their wonderful ideas for improvement. The team leader (often the direct manager) notices that everyone is looking right at him or her as one idea after another is enthusiastically put on the table. Accustomed to being the local heroine or hero, the team leader accepts each idea as valid and necessary with a growing sense of dread. Leaving the meeting with an additional workload heavy enough to cause a hernia, the team leader works like a bandit to get all these ideas off the ground. By the next meeting about a quarter of the ideas have been acted on. Everyone is righteously indignant that three quarters of the ideas are still on the 'to do' list. This continues for about four meetings and then something happens to cause meetings to be delayed, rescheduled or just cancelled. And why not? Would YOU want to go to meetings where you ended up with more work you couldn't get done and then have a convenient forum for everyone to point out how inadequate you are???

This sort of situation can kill interest in teamwork indefinitely and typically spills over in negativity about management in general. It simply should not happen. EVERYONE on a team should be ACTIVELY doing something to help the team achieve its goals. If they're not, then your team is carrying dead weight which it doesn't need. There are three common reasons why team members don't actively contribute to a goal:

1. They haven't been asked to.
2. They don't want to.
3. They don't have the power to.

The first two can be dealt with simply. Ask them – that's how you find out if they want to. If they don't want to then get them off the team, you don't need them. The third reason is more complex. The lack of power to do something active towards accomplishing a goal is a problem only solved by those that allocate power in an organization; management. At least 95% of the activity necessary to accomplish team goals occurs outside the team meeting. If the team is to accomplish anything management must be prepared to give team members the resources (time and money) to do things between meetings. Oh- oh, now the labor budget is screwed up, or heaven forbid the capital budget. Well, if you want effective teams it's going to cost you, operationally, no way around it. If management is not willing to pay for effectiveness, it doesn't happen. That's why it's so crucial to have teams well focused against things that matter. Things that matter get resources.

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So decide up front whether this team has the power to be effective or not. If not, then you're better off doing nothing. To push ahead without the power to be effective will just aggravate people.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Many teams exist or get formed without an understanding of the resources they might need to be effective. What have you done in a situation when it becomes clear that the resources needed will not be available for the team to be successful?
2. Have you experienced this reason and if so what happened?
3. If you have been a team leader in this situation, what did you do?
4. When resources are not available for a team to be successful does it mean what the team is focusing on is not important to management?

Reason 5 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. What am I doing to ACTIVELY contribute to our team's objectives?
2. On average is the work load fairly evenly distributed among team members?
3. Do team members have the POWER to act on these objectives?

Interesting ones:

1. Do you care if the work load is distributed fairly evenly?
2. How can you get, or access the power required to secure the needed resources to help this team be effective?
3. Does the team leader of this team love the role of heroine or hero?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- Teams without equitable distribution of activity don't disintegrate quickly, they die a slow and agonizing death.
- Teams do not create results without resources. Effective teams cost money and time, make sure you have both.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Interesting question number 3 above asks about the team leader as heroine or hero. Have you found this reason to hate work teams can be created by this dynamic and it works fine until the load becomes too heavy for the team leader and there is a crash? How have you worked with such a situation?
2. Why do you think this hero or heroine role has become so prevalent with teams?

3. Accessing power and having power are two very different things. For teams to be effective which do you think is best to have or work towards getting?
4. Have you ever been part of a team that had more power or resources than it really needed to achieve its goals? What was that like?

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chat **2 Comments**

Bonnie Cooper - I like this post … it's important because of the amount of resources – time, energy, people, materials – that are wasted in this frustrating situation and that it happens all too often. And at the end, you are often left wondering if it was simply a make work project because all the waste doesn't seem to matter. Except when it does; and when it really does matter it's almost always the team leader who is held 100% accountable. There are very few organizations that measure 'team' performance. The result is that, when it is just not working, it is the leader's performance that is measured … very few consequences for those team members who opt out when it becomes clear that they are individually 'better off doing nothing'.

> Tom Gibbons - Bonnie, thanks for the post! I think your point about measurement is very relevant here. People will often talk about how important teams are in organizations but as you note, the actual performance of the team is not measured in any meaningful way.
>
> A team leader can try every 'technique' in the book to create equal distribution of accountability, when the real issue tends to be one of power. And if the team does not have the power to act and fails, it will be the leader who pays. He or she pays because they are the person being measured on the teams success.
>
> It would be interesting to see what might happen in terms of accountability if there actually was more and better, real team measures.
>
> Thoughts???

Reason 6: They Force You to Brainstorm

Okay, without judging any of your ideas and building on those you have already made, jot down all the reasons why the thought of another 'brainstorming' session makes you want to throw up. Go!!!

What's most nausea-inducing about brainstorming is that we expect too much from it. Brainstorming is only a starting point; nothing more, yet it gets treated as more than this. As a starting point though, it works, no doubt about it. It's still one of the best techniques for generating ideas within teams. The trouble is, what do you do with all those ideas?

The ideas produced in a good brainstorming session will include great ideas, bad ideas, creative ideas, ridiculous ideas, stupid ideas, profound ideas, useless ideas and useful ideas. Everything comes up, which may account for that feeling of nausea. So now the task is to narrow down the list and the quickest way to do that is with brutal, and objective honesty. The reason you need brutal and objective honesty is you have to switch gears from the subjective nirvana that makes brainstorming effective to the harsh light of organizational reality.

To do this just try asking the question "What's really going to work here from this list"? Likely a large portion of the ideas will be quickly discarded. Then you can have a really good fight over what remains and come up with a short list of the best ideas. If you've got people on your team that talk endlessly you can speed up the process by giving everyone three votes and they assign their votes to the ideas they think are best; often referred to as multi voting. Count up the votes and see which ideas get the most and go from there. Keep in mind you're not really going to know which idea(s) are best until you actually start to do something with them and that's why you don't want to take forever to narrow down the list. Usually it's the taking forever to narrow down the list that makes you want to throw up and never use the word brainstorm again.

As you narrow down the list you may find there are a few ideas that are on the fringes; maybe good, maybe not. This usually occurs when a team doesn't know enough about the idea or how to implement it. Don't lose these ideas. Hold on to them and re-examine them once in a while as things progress. They may end up being valuable.

Don't be a brainstorm slave either. Sure it works but it can be tiresome. Brainstorming is best used when a group is stuck in its thinking or its roles. You know you're stuck when people are bored or experiencing a gnawing sensation that something is missing.

Brainstorming is also good for groups that don't know each other very well. With a team that has been around for a while and isn't dysfunctional to any large degree, simply asking what ideas are out there usually gets to the heart of the matter pretty quickly. If you've addressed the first five reasons to hate work teams you can trust that your team knows what's going on well enough to get the important ideas out on the table, and that's what you're really looking for.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. What is the best idea you've seen come out of a true brainstorming session?
2. The shift from the more subjective nature of brainstorming to the more objective nature of

narrowing the list can be challenging. How have you helped groups do this?
3. Usually, suspending the critical analysis of ideas during brainstorming is difficult. How do you do this for yourself and how have you helped groups do this?

Reason 6 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Are we 'stuck'? Would a good brainstorming session help us out?
2. Have we been brutally honest in narrowing down the 'big list'?
3. What's REALLY going to work here?
4. Are there some fringe ideas out there we should keep an eye on?

Interesting ones:

1. Are we stuck and don't know it? How can we know?
2. Are we using multi-voting to be more efficient or to get around challenges we have in being objective or concise?
3. How can we (or should we) try to stay personally detached from our own ideas when it comes to figuring out what ideas to move forward with?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- Brainstorming is only a starting point to a larger process and it is the easy part. The tough part is narrowing down your list to the best idea(s) that can work.
- Brainstorming is a DIVERGENT process, it opens things up. The end point of problem solving is a CONVERGENT process, narrowing things down. Each requires a different way of thinking and interacting.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Why does brainstorming sometimes feel so dopey? How can we get over that?
2. Have you ever had a disaster brainstorming session? What created it and were you able to make it better?
3. Do you have a story about a fringe idea that ended up being very important?

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chat   4 Comments

Sara - One way to help teams get comfortable with the shift from brainstorming to narrowing is to

reassure them that all the good ideas generated will not be lost. For example, I participated in a brainstorming session with one team that came up with a long list of ideas on how to improve their work. At the end we acknowledged that it would not be feasible to tackle the whole list, and that it should be narrowed down to 5 items that the team could focus on. While this seemed reasonable to everyone, there were far more than 5 good ideas on the list! We agreed that the remaining ideas would be captured for future reference, so that we could re-visit the other good ideas after the first 5 were accomplished. This approach can help reduce the number of brainstorming sessions, and especially the kind where the participants are thinking in dismay, "What about all the good ideas I came up with last time?"

> Tom Gibbons - Sara, thanks for the comment and I think you make a good point about not losing those good ideas and making sure the group knows they will not be lost or forgotten.
> There can be a 'watch out for' here as well and it's linked to Reason 5 about generating tons of extra work for the team leader. If the team leader is the one that gets stuck making sure ideas don't get lost it can be problematic. One of the things I've done in these situations is to get people to 'own' holding one or more of those ideas that have been put aside to make sure they don't get lost. In this way the responsibility is shared and since each person has less to focus on they can focus more intently on the idea they own and may find links to the ideas already being acted upon in novel ways.

Wendy - What I like about brainstorming or brainshowering as someone recently referred to it as is the energy it can create. Important to set up the ground rules and a couple that I find effective are, want to hear all the voices of the team system, everyone is right partially and lets have some fun.

A couple ways to stretch the process is have them use metaphors as it gives deeper meaning. I'm always amazed at what comes out and it seems to take participants to a different place. Another fun idea is once the ideas are presented narrow them down and put the ideas out front. Write them on a piece of paper and have people vote with their feet. This really shifts the energy and generates some creative thinking. Ask a couple powerful questions and have them stand closer to the idea or further away if they don't agree. I like it because it taps into the right hemisphere which helps us look at things more holistically.

> Tom Gibbons - Wendy, thanks for another great comment! Love the term brain showering! Not sure if that creates an image of more or less ideas coming forth or perhaps a different kind of energy in the process…
>
> I would like to hear more about asking the group to use metaphors. How do you position this and what is the process of working with them?
>
> Voting with their feet is a nice approach too I think. The physicality of it is what will also stimulate different brain networks and it is very visible and visceral so it is tends to make further discussion almost inevitable.
>
> One other point not so much related to your comment but your comment made me think of this and isn't that the idea of brainshowering!?!
>
> The brainstorming process is very extroverted and one of the introverted equivalents is mind mapping. I have used both with groups as part of the same idea generation process to find some balance in these two preference areas and it works very well.

Reason 7: They Require You to Make Decisions by Consensus

The word 'consensus' probably has about as many working definitions as the word 'participation'. And about as many problems associated with it too. The real problem is not consensus but the different definitions that we apply to it. Definitions that can be used like weapons to slow things down, manipulate thinking and generally turn a team into a plodding, boring nightmare.

One of the biggest misconceptions about coming to decisions by consensus is the belief that everyone on the team must AGREE with the decision. This is fatal since it allows those team members with personal agendas or pet peeves to stand up in their self righteous glory and whine that the team can't move forward because THEY don't agree with the decision. Don't you hate it when that happens!?

Even though the word consensus is a noun it should be treated as a verb, a word of action. The end point of consensus is that everyone will actively support the decision made. You may not AGREE with the decision but you accept that your points have been heard and considered and that the team must move on. Given this, you will do what is needed to actively support the decision. When you use consensus in this way there isn't much room for whiners.

There is often great discussion and sometimes even good fights as different points of view are expressed with real passion. Everyone agrees that a decision must be made and that if the team is to move forward, as a team, everyone must support that decision. If you complain about the decision to others, outside the team then you don't have consensus, you have cowardice or dishonesty and your team is in deep trouble. Consensus requires courage and honesty. If your team lacks these qualities, make decisions by some method other than consensus. You will have to deal with similar issues but at least they won't take as long to surface.

It's curious how often teams are expected to decide by consensus, when most other organizational decisions in organizations are not made in this way. Decisions in organizations are generally made by the person with the greatest power, no matter how camouflaged this may be. So why on earth should teams be different? This is not to say that consensus isn't a great way to make decisions, but it is useful to be aware this approach goes against the normal and well learned traditions of the organization. It will not be easy and there will be times when it just doesn't fit the situation.

People in organizations have power and one of the consequences of this is they can make decisions by themselves. If your team is operating in this type of situation there will be many times when it is most effective to make decisions in the traditional way; it's normal and it works. Consensus should not be an etched in stone rule or an unquestioned approach, but one that fits the situation.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Why do you think many teams assume they should be making decisions by consensus?
2. Have you ever made a team ground-rule that you would make decisions by consensus only to discover each team member had a different definition of what that meant? Tell your story.
3. When a team does use consensus do you think they should also talk about what active support for the decision looks like? What do you think it should look like?

Reason 7 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Is consensus the best way to make this particular decision?
2. Have we REALLY listened to everyone?
3. Even if we don't agree with the decision, will we actively support it so the team can move forward?
4. What will this active support look like?

Interesting ones:

1. Is anyone on this team using consensus decision making as a weapon? Why might this be occurring?
2. Do we talk about our team differently with people outside our team than we do with those on our team? Is this positive or negative?
3. Overall, is our decision making as a team effective?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- The RESULT of consensus is that everyone will actively support the decision made.
- The PROCESS of consensus is really listening for the validity in the points of view of others on the team
- A signal that consensus is not working is when the passion goes out of the conversations and arguments. When this happens it might be time to consider a different decision making process.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Have you ever been on a team where consensus decision making worked really well? What helped in making it work well?
2. And the opposite! Being on a team where consensus was just a pain in the neck (and elsewhere).
3. What assumptions might be present when we think that consensus is a good way to make decisions?

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chat 4 Comments

Amanda - First of all, forgive me, I use a lot of sports references. When it comes to the first discussion

question, I think teams focus on consensus because people feel it's the most inclusive thing to do and because they want to move forward with a plan. They think teams should proceed with one common goal (e.g. sports team common goal = to win) and we often believe that everyone has to agree or proceed in the same way to achieve that goal. To me, I agree with Tom, this is deeper than just the consensus on a decision. I see the "how do we get to the decision" as more important than the actual decision. If people are comfortable with how a decision was reached, they will be more apt to support the decision going forward. Overall, I think many teams need to focus more on valuing differences of opinion during the decision-making process (or differences in strengths). For example, If you have a basketball team and the point guard believes the way to the end goal (winning) is for him to have a lot of assists, that's great; however, it's only a piece of the overall picture. The center will have to rebound and everyone will have to score and play defense in order to win. So each person has to do something different along the way to achieve the end goal. How often do you sit in a meeting and someone immediately suggests a solution, decision, or end goal right at the beginning of the discussion and then you have to back track to discuss it. In my experience, when a team does this, they often get stuck because they feel they have to get consensus during the discussion. I think if teams focus less on whether consensus exists in the process of getting to the final decision and more on how to use everyone's ideas to get there, team members would be better suited to support the plan going forward. I realize this is similar to what Tom said (just longer), but I just wanted to expand a bit.

> Tom Gibbons - Amanda, how cool to see your comment! Also cool to see you have landed on the 'process of decision making' as more important than the decision itself! You may have an awful lot of people vehemently disagree with you however, but between you and me, they are all wrong! You may have opened a can of worms here but a good can of slimy worms never hurt anyone….
>
> When I have posed the question to groups, 'What's more important, the decision or how that decision is made?' the arguments are endless and often very heated. Usually it ends up with the group being angry that the question was asked in the first place!
>
> Your point 'If people are comfortable with how a decision was reached, they will be more apt to support the decision going forward' is critical here I think. Without good implementation, even the best ideas tend to fail and the variable of how the decision is made being important to implementation is very accurate. And there are numerous other ways to make decisions that people can get comfortable with than consensus.
>
> You noted that often consensus is seen as being the most inclusive way to make decisions and I would agree but I would also say that are a lot of other ways of being inclusive in a decision making process.
>
> It's these 'other ways' that often do not get talked about and the default position of consensus is simply expected.

Wendy - Tom - boy does this take me back to my previous life in corporate. The President of the company believed that ALL decisions s/b made by consensus. Needless to say, I did not last long under her helm. Initially, I thought hmmm lets be open and see how this will work. Very quickly however I realized it works for some decisions however not all. She actually wanted terminations, compensation, project releases etc. all done by consensus. I believe the reason she wanted consensus was she struggled making decisions. If felt like we were chasing our tails, namely when big decisions had to be made.

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I do want to be clear, I do believe strongly in "deep democracy" where everyone in the team has a voice and we want to hear it. However at the end of the day the weight has to go to the leader. There are times that the Leader may have additional information that they are not able to share. It is important that the individuals of the team understand that the leaders voice has more weight and not always however at times will make the final decision. People so want to have a voice and often they are able to share the day to day implications and impact that a leader may not be privy to. To have deep democracy it needs to be set up intentionally with the team system. The deep democracy happens best when there is high level of trust and the leader really does listen to not only what is being said however what is not being said.

Also important if the leader has made a decision to not go with what the general consensus is to communicate if possible why.

> Tom Gibbons - Another great comment Wendy; and while one corporation I'm sure is missing you, many others are benefiting!
>
> It is interesting how often people think consensus is the best way to hear 'all voices' when in reality it is a decision making process that may or may not hear all voices. The ideas of involvement, listening, engagement are patterns of interaction that can be experienced in countless way, yet often consensus can be the fall to process.
>
> Your point on deep democracy is interesting and likely better discussed (at least for me!) in the *OUCH!* work. I think in many ways, democracy, deep or otherwise is at odds with the way power is used and expected to be used in organizational life. I hope we can interact more on this topic, including what you mean by the term 'deep democracy' down the road…

Reason 8: They Take Months to Make a Decision That Could Have Been Made in Minutes

This fate awaits any team that is bound and determined to apply every team tool and toy ever invented. Fresh from the latest team training session they brainstorm, fishbone, mindmap, vision, right brain activate, neuroscience themselves, SOP, input/output, listen with sensitivity, scenario plan, survey, prioritize and analyze everything in sight. They read the latest guru's book on team Zen, rise to higher levels of consciousness and are at one with the universe. Their karma is amazing. All this to decide what soap dispensers to install in the new bathrooms. By the end of it you are ready to pull out your hair and scream for someone, anyone to just make a decision, any decision. Admit it, you've been part of this haven't you? We all have.

The obvious question that is too often missed in the enthusiasm of using new techniques (or imposed techniques) is 'How important is this decision?' For the answer, the team needs to:

- Consider the big picture context of the decision,
- While at the same time focusing on solutions.

There is a direct, positive correlation to the importance of the decision and the amount of time needed to reach that decision. The more important the decision, the longer the time required, even though many teams do just the opposite. If your team can determine objectively how much time and energy the decision warrants, your decision making process will speed up considerably.

One particularly time consuming activity to be wary of in the decision making process is the survey. Sure, survey's can be of value but way too often they are poorly done and are more of an excuse to avoid making a decision. Red warning lights should go off as soon as you hear the word survey. Surveys might be valuable to determine what issues are out there but are typically much less valuable in determining what to do about those issues. That's why we have teams; to figure out what to do about those issues.

Basically teams have two general areas of value.

1. They often make better decisions than a single individual (especially if you address all these reasons to hate teams!).
2. They help in the implementation of decisions.

The second point is often of greatest value and this should not be ignored when determining the importance of the team's decisions. Most teams take far too long figuring out WHAT to do and not nearly enough time figuring out HOW to do it. Interestingly, most of the team tools out there deal with figuring out the WHAT rather than the HOW. But that's ok, because a lot of the work on the HOW will depend on the team's environment, context and people, so it's hard to have a set process for the HOW. It's up to each team to invent the HOW that best suits their own environment.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. What's the most overused team tool?

2. What's the most effective team tool you have used?
3. What's your favorite book on teams (you can include this one!)?
4. How do you know when you need some tools or when they are being overused?
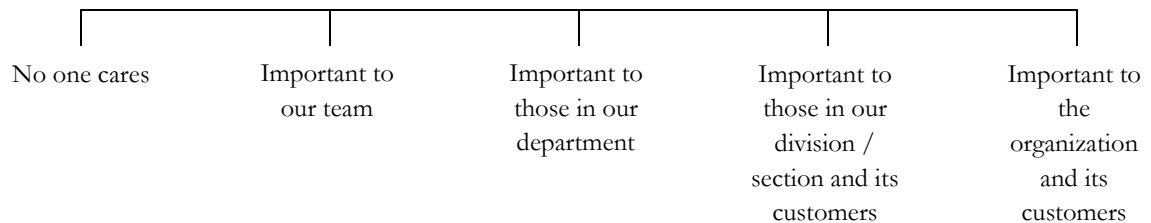
Reason 8 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. How important is this decision? You might want to use the following scale as a rough guideline.

No one cares	Important to our team	Important to those in our department	Important to those in our division / section and its customers	Important to the organization and its customers

2. Does the time it is taking to make this decision match the importance of the decision?
3. How much time do we have to make this decision? Is it an appropriate amount?
4. Is this a 'what' decision, a 'why' decision or a 'how' decision?

Interesting ones:

1. How do we keep our objectivity in determining how important a decision really is?
2. Would we like to be making decisions further to the right of the scale above or not?
3. Do we have a good balance in using or not using team tools?
4. Are we using team tools and simply not naming them as such?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- If no more relevant information concerning an issue is likely to come forward, then make a decision. Don't wait longer for information that you either won't get or doesn't matter.
- Decisions about 'how' to do things are just as important as decisions about 'what' to do.
- Surveys are notorious time wasters. Make sure you REALLY need one before you go to the trouble of using one.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. How have you handled situations when 1 or more people on a team really believe a decision that needs to be made is way more important than the rest of the team does?

2. Have you ever dealt with a situation when a stakeholder affected by your decisions thinks the decision is way more important than the team does?
3. How have you either sped up or slowed down decision-making on a team?

💬 **2 Comments**

Brittany - I have to admit that I personally find myself focused more on the HOW than on the WHAT in these situations due to my strong preference for quick action. In recent years, I have found that I have to really force myself to think about the WHAT before I get to the HOW. In the past, when I have rushed to the HOW, I find that the decision either may not be the best decision in the long run or not everyone really agrees that it is the best decision…they just went along with it because they could tell I was anxious to get to action :) I do agree, however, with your comments that there must be a nice balance between the focus on the WHAT and the HOW. I find it difficult (obviously) to sit through a meeting that focuses for hours on end at the WHAT. So…in order to address the WHAT in a way that hopefully gets us to the HOW quicker, I have found the De Bono Six Thinking Hats technique to be quite useful. I have just recently read the book, but have to admit I haven't been able to put it into practice too much at this point. However, I think with this kind of technique where you can identify when during a meeting you are going to say vent about the decision to be made, and then innovate about the decision to be made, it brings in more structure to the decision making process and in my mind will get you to the HOW quicker.

> Tom Gibbons - Awesome to see your comment Brittany! And also interesting to hear your personal affinity toward the HOW of decisions, although in some ways it sounds like your affinity to the how is as much about getting the what done and over with as it might be about the actual how of things!
>
> Nevertheless, I do find lots of teams over focus on the WHAT and lose the overall balance between the two. I imagine you would be able to help teams find the needed balance!
>
> As you note, De Bono's work can be very useful helping teams find a balance here and also to help surface, through the various hats, things that a team might not normally focus on.
>
> I'm going to connect with you off line about this as well….

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Reason 9: They Make You Work with People You Can't Stand

Of all the reasons to hate work teams this is one of the most obvious and the least talked about. We all have people we can't stand. How is it that they inevitably end up on a team with us?

Teams are supposed to be cohesive units of highly effective individuals. Admitting you would like to rip the face off your teammate would only prove you are not a good team player which would likely put you at odds with one of the 'core competencies' of your organization. So it's better just not to admit it, or go underground with your comments and slander the individual that way. Feelings however, have a nasty way of leaking and finding outlets. You might find yourself disagreeing with everything the person says, dismantling with flawless logic every idea they have, deviously and subtly pointing out how they are the barrier to effectiveness but never, ever admit you can't stand the sight of them.

Guess what. No one really cares if you like everyone on the team or not. As long as the team is effectively meeting its objectives, the seething rage you feel at the sight of your teammate is your problem. Maybe you've heard that if the people on a team don't get along, the team can't be as effective as it might be. Who can argue with that? It's obvious and that's the problem. Too many teams go through elaborate measures to address pretty obvious interpersonal problems and have done very little to understand what task they should be working on. A team whose members hate each other, but nevertheless work on a clear objective will be much more valuable than a team that does group hugs and has no idea what they're doing. Get your task stuff clear first and then work on the interpersonal stuff. You'll encounter fewer interpersonal issues if you go about things in this order, since a lot of interpersonal issues are really task or performance issues in disguise.

One exception. On occasion a team will have such problematic interpersonal issues that nothing else can be effectively focused on. Every time you try to focus on the work issues the interpersonal black hole just sucks that focus into the blackness. It's not often that teams get to this point but if they do then you do need to sort out this mess before moving on.

There are really two types of interpersonal issues:

1. Those based in style or preference.
2. Those based on weird stuff.

Both require one critical factor to resolve them – all parties must want to resolve them. If this is not the case, not only do you have an interpersonal problem, you have a performance problem; with the person(s) not wanting to resolve it.

In the work world probably 95% of interpersonal issues fall into category 1 and can be effectively addressed without too much trouble. Thank heavens category 2 is only 5% because they are weird enough that it can be a big challenge to deal with, especially if they play out with someone in power.

Category 1 interpersonal issues usually require some version of better understanding the style or preference diversity in a team and how to best work with that diversity. There are countless ways of going about this and in essence the team is learning a new language to understand behavior. Like

learning any new language it takes time, application, repetition and context. Often an external resource is helpful, just like with learning any language. A half day workshop won't do the trick. It might get things started but the team will have to keep it going.

Category 2 issues are complex, often loaded with baggage that is hard to surface and likely harder to resolve. That's why they are weird. Go get outside help. You're not learning a new language here, an old language is being forgotten and a new one invented.

Keep in mind 95% of interpersonal issues are category 1; don't assume category 2 until all else has failed, including dealing with the issue as a performance issue. Also, even when you are dealing with interpersonal issues, don't take your eye and focus off the task at hand. When it comes right down to it, no one else in the organization cares about the interpersonal issues on your team. They care about the team producing results.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. How have you effectively worked with interpersonal issues on a team?
2. Have you ever worked on a team where members really didn't like each other? Tell us the story!
3. Have you ever seen an interpersonal issue resolved by making it a performance issue?
4. When interpersonal issues go underground, what things have you done to deal with this?

Reason 9 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Have we looked after all of our task issues?
2. Are interpersonal issues really affecting the performance of our team?
3. Do the people involved in these issues want to resolve them?
4. Who can we ask for help?

Interesting ones:

1. Why do people not get along on our team?
2. Are the interpersonal challenges we have caused internally with the team or externally?
3. Are YOU the common denominator in the interpersonal challenges?
4. Do we engage in conflict effectively?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- If you are working with category 1 interpersonal issues, keep in mind you are in essence learning a new language. It takes practice and your team is accountable for that practice.

- Most category 2 interpersonal issues will be deeply rooted in some kind of a power dynamic and are complex and personal. Get help.
- For the rest of the organization, team performance matters more than if the team likes each other.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. How have you effectively dealt with a team where interpersonal issues override any other focus?
2. Do you have one good 'I can't stand my team mate' story? Go ahead, VENT! (Names will be edited out, except for the poster's name)
3. Have you experienced a situation where fixing a task issue has resolved what seemed to be interpersonal issues?
4. What's your best tip on dealing with style or preference issues?

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chat **6 Comments**

Brittany - I absolutely agree with your statement that teams must "Get the task stuff clear first and then work on the interpersonal stuff." Sometimes I see teams immediately assume that the issue is interpersonal (which it may be) and that some team building is going to solve all their problems. We've recently had this discussion within our team and have been looking at a framework of team collaboration where at the base you have goals and role clarity, then the next step up would be process, then communication, and at the top of the pyramid you have team effectiveness. This visual has helped when I get calls from clients that say everything is going wrong in their team so they need to do some sort of "feel good" activity to fix it! The framework I mentioned can lead me to asking some additional questions about the team, which will unfold if we first need to focus on a few other critical items before stepping in to the interpersonal issues territory.

> **Tom Gibbons** - Another neat post Brittany; thanks! Your framework for looking at or analyzing how to work with a team sounds good and it's interesting to note that nowhere in the graphic is 'interpersonal' mentioned even though teams may gravitate there very quickly as you note.
>
> The 'interpersonal stuff' is always part of the process of doing other things and those other things need to be considered first I think before you land on the need to fix interpersonal challenges.
>
> They are just so obvious and emotionally charged however that they can easily look like the most important thing to work on.

Wendy - Hmmm Brittany, thanks for sharing your perspective on this and I like the framework in which you have laid it out. I have had some success working through some of the interpersonal challenges within the team. Something that is quite simple is just have them put the issue out front so they can see it. Often the issues are between them so there is a real push and pull and they are stuck. By intentionally putting the issue out front they are able to look at it from a different lens and often it does not seem as personal. The TMP is a great tool to ensure the voices of the team system are being heard. Seeing that people relate differently it is important as a facilitator, leader, coach or whatever your role is to understand some of the

fundamentals of the differences and how best to work with them.

Yes, I have worked on a team and with teams where people really don't like each other and that is okay. Because I like harmony this can be a real challenge for me and I have worked very hard over the years to 'get over it'. This has been very freeing and as long as you have a common goal and you work toward that you really don't have to like each other. That is not to say that you can be rude or disrespectful. Often we need to get out of our on ways to make things happen :)

> Tom Gibbons - Thank you Wendy! When I have worked with teams, I too on occasion have simply put the interpersonal issue 'out front' so it is more present and obvious.
>
> Sometimes these issues are like those monsters under our beds when we were little. They seem much worse when we just think about them and imagine what they might really be like and then when we actually look under the bed it's not so scary at all! Often however we might need someone to actually force us to look under the bed though!
>
> By using this metaphor I am not saying it is like dealing with children! People (all of us at times) are often so close to our interpersonal issues that we cannot really see them clearly enough to understand what is happening and it is valuable to get some help.

Dick McCann - I like your comment about interpersonal issues based on 'weird stuff'. Although these issues may occur only 5% of the time, they can be the hardest ones to resolve.

On my fridge I have a quotation. "The problem with the world is that the intelligent people are full of doubt and the stupid people are full of confidence." This is a tongue-in-cheek interpretation of the Dunning-Kruger effect, resulting from a study by the eponymous authors with a sample of students at Cornell University. It describes an effect where incompetent people fail to realize they are incompetent because they lack the skill to distinguish between competence and incompetence. Actual competence can weaken self-confidence, as competent individuals may falsely assume that others have an equivalent understanding. This effect is one of the many psychological biases that can destroy teamwork.

When the Dunning-Kruger effect combines with other biases in judgment and decision-making we can start to see the origin of serious pathologies in teamwork. Confirmation Bias (sometimes known as Myside Bias) is an important aspect that magnifies the Dunning-Kruger effect. It involves favoring information that confirms previously existing beliefs or biases. It's an unconscious act of referencing only those perspectives that confirm our pre-existing views, while at the same time ignoring or dismissing opinions – no matter how valid – that threaten our world view. People holding both Dunning-Kruger and Confirmation biases are likely to accept only the views of those who agree with them and in the extreme may extrapolate from the specific to the general e.g. finding one person to agree with them may be enough to hear them say, "Everyone I have spoken to says this is the best thing to do." Anecdotes rather than facts become their mantra.

There are even more biases that can raise the level of dysfunctionality. How does a team deal with the Egocentric Bias that occurs when people claim more responsibility for themselves for the results of a joint action than an outside observer would credit them? What about the problems of the Empathy Gap, where some people have a tendency to underestimate the influence or strength of feelings, in either oneself or others. Or the Backfire Effect where people react to disconfirming evidence by strengthening their beliefs. And perhaps the 'grand-daddy' of them all, the bias that begets all other biases, the Blind Spot – a

tendency to see oneself as less biased than other people, or to be able to identify more cognitive biases in others than in oneself.

Weird stuff indeed!!

> Tom Gibbons - Hello Dick!!! Your comment made me smile and I'm pretty sure I have and do exhibit most of these biases and likely many more! Probably why I went the route of independent consultant and now on a small virtual team! And here all along I thought those were my choices! Your post illustrates well how deep and dark the waters of 'weird stuff' can be and why it can be important to get help if needed. Also that it is best to try and deal with the not so weird stuff first and see if things get better.
>
> Your post also prompted me to get out a journal I have called 'In My Humble Opinion' which is basically a journal to rant about all those people I can't stand or are just incredibly stupid 'in my humble opinion'. I highly recommend it!
>
> It has some awesome quotes as well so in light of your comment here are some quotes that might make us all smile when thinking about those people on our teams that we can't stand:
>
> 'Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity, and I'm not sure about the former'. – Albert Einstein
>
> 'The world is populated in the main by people who should not exist'. – George Bernard Shaw
>
> 'I only go out to get me a fresh appetite for being alone'. – Lord Byron
>
> 'It's too bad that stupidity isn't painful'. – Anton Lavey
>
> 'Cabbage, n. A familiar kitchen-garden vegetable about as large and wise as a man's head'. – Ambrose Bierce
>
> 'Just think of how stupid the average person is, and then realize that half of them are even stupider'. – George Carlin.
>
> So I read these quotes ever once in a while, smile, perhaps do a ranting journal entry and then consider that there are likely quite a number of people who see my face when they read those quotes. After that I can get on with things….

Reason 10: They Involve You in Team Building Exercises

It's inescapable. Sooner or later someone will inflict a team building exercise on your team. You will survive a mythical plane crash in the desert, fall backward into the loving arms of your teammates, dissect your personalities, climb ropes, perch on platforms, build models and solve puzzles. If you're really 'lucky' you might get to brave the real wilderness for a few nights! Every team building exercise ever invented is designed to get the members of the team to do two things:

1. Look at things differently.
2. Look at things more deeply.

The reason we grow to hate these exercises is that we really don't want to look at things any differently than we do right now. It's too hard and we're too busy and we're not convinced it's really necessary.

So step one in making these things matter to the rightfully skeptical team is making a connection to something that does matter; performance. It never ceases to amaze how many team building exercises are concocted and inflicted without any consideration of performance.

Team building exercises typically fall into one of three categories:

1. Fun diversions
2. Potentially good
3. Transformational

Fun diversions are the one category where a link to performance doesn't matter. They are activities that the team normally doesn't do together. You go bowling or out for dinner and have a good time. No one brings a flip chart to record 'takeaways' or 'next steps'. No great learning or change is expected. These are valuable since you see different sides of people. It's nice to be on a team that does this sort of thing (well, unless you haven't dealt with Reason 9).

By far the majority of team building exercises fall into the second category, potentially good, which consists of activities designed to enhance the potential and performance of the team. So keep in mind, if you can't answer why a team building exercise will enhance performance, you are doing a fun diversion.

In order for potentially good exercises to work, the learning MUST transfer back to the workplace. And this is where most of these exercises fall short. Transfer of learning requires two things:

1. An exercise and debrief that make sense in the context of the teams work.
2. A process for practice and application outside of the exercise (i.e. once back at work).

To point one, the best team building exercise ever designed is the debrief of an actual piece of work the team has done. The problem with this is that the team is often so immersed in the work the debrief does little to help the team see things differently or deeper. So an exercise that is somewhat abstracted from the work and then applying the learning back to the work scenario is potentially good. This means the debrief of the exercise is of primary importance. Who really cares if your teammates caught

you when you fell into their arms? Did you really think they'd let you fall with everyone watching? In the debrief, someone has to say, 'Sure, you caught me here but when I made that mistake last week at work you let me drop like a rock!' That takes more courage than it does to depend on your team to catch you physically. Without the courage to speak the truth in the debrief the necessary links cannot be made back to the work world and the potential for improved performance is lost. And it's easier to find this courage if the exercise is meant to improve performance.

To point two, a team building exercise in itself is never enough. People and teams see things the way they do because they have a pattern of seeing things that way. That pattern has developed and been sustained for long periods of time. To actually change such a pattern requires incremental change over extended periods of time. Practice, and lots of it. That's why you need a process for practice and application of what was learned in the exercise. You can do this by making the use of learning a performance requirement and by building in real-time practice over time. Do both.

Transformational team building exercises are so rare you've probably only read about them in books. Never expect, or design for transformation; you will be disappointed. And be rage-fully skeptical of those that promote their transformational exercises. If transformation takes place, let it be a wonderful surprise, a gift. Transformation is 99.99% dependent on the person, or team being ready. When this occurs almost any exercise will work.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. In your experience, is more effort, from a design perspective, put into the team building exercise/workshop or the process for practice and application outside of the exercise workshop? Why?
2. What's the most effective team building exercise you use?
3. What's the most effective design for practice and application that you use?
4. How have you dealt with the challenge of getting teams to see things differently or deeper?

Reason 10 - Ideas to Try

Some key questions to ask yourself and your team.

Basic, really important ones:

1. Will this exercise really do anything to help us perform better as a team?
2. What usable links and learning back to our work has this exercise surfaced?
3. How do we intend to transfer this learning into work performance?
4. How will we practice these new skills and learning?
5. Is the application of this learning a performance objective?

Interesting ones:

1. Do we have the capacity to skip the metaphorical exercise and jump right into a debrief of a

real work experience and think differently or deeper about that experience?
2. Why do we need to think differently or deeper?
3. How can we push and surface honesty in the debrief of this exercise?
4. Is this exercise really more of a fun diversion from a design and potential perspective?

Key points of this reason to hate work teams:

- The debrief of a team building exercise is ALWAYS the most important part of a potentially good exercise. Squeeze every ounce of learning out of it by asking for and giving honesty.
- Activating the 'potential' of a good team building exercise depends on demanding the learning be applied back in the workplace in the form of changes in behavior. You need to design in lots of practice for this new behavior. The team should take accountability to sustain this practice.

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. Why do you think so much emphasis is put on team building exercises/workshops to change behavior?
2. How do you bring honesty to a debrief?
3. How do you think behavior changes?
4. What's your best transfer of learning story?

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chat   **4 Comments**

Brooke - "The reason we grow to hate these exercises is that we really don't want to look at things any differently than we do right now. It's too hard and we're too busy and we're not convinced it's really necessary."
So True!

> Tom Gibbons - Thanks Brooke! What is both interesting and problematic about this situation is that the practitioner/facilitator of the team building exercise too often is complicit with this outlook and then tries to design some magical event that will not only solve the issue noted above but then also create some kind of transformation within the team.
>
> The magic wand is never good enough and the facilitator gets blamed for not creating change and is royally pissed off at the group for being blamed. And no one has really talked about the real important things; how is this exercise going to affect performance and how are we going to sustain what we have learned?
>
> Both of these are joint accountabilities too often left undiscussed!

bonnie369 - I too have facilitated many 'events' that incorporate such exercises. In the moment, it is always very gratifying to witness the energy with which groups engage as well as the insights that emerge in a good debrief.

"Without the courage to speak the truth in the debrief the necessary links cannot be made back to the work world and the potential for improved performance is lost."

I find the courage is often there … but taking the insights back to the 'real' world almost impossible. Perhaps because of the patterns that are so entrenched personally and reinforced by organizational 'stuff'. Brooke's comment is important … gets down to what really matters for people individually, for teams and for organizations.

Another challenge is the understandable cynicism that plays out. Once an individual has had the courage to speak out about something important and seen nothing come of it, they begin to see such exercises as fun and will play enthusiastically but have no expectations for anything to change and no commitment to driving that change.

> Tom Gibbons - Thank you Bonnie! Your point – 'taking the insights back to the 'real' world almost impossible' – really emphasizes how stable our patterns of interaction can be and thus challenging to alter. I would say you are right if the only hope of altering a pattern of behavior is in a single event, typically loaded with content.
>
> If the design of learning shifts to incorporate more real practice back in that real world then the potential of altering patterns becomes much more possible.
>
> Interestingly, two other things happen as well. First if the team doesn't want to design in real world practice then they quite simply do not want to alter their patterns and you can just move on. Second, it unburdens an actual learning 'event' from the expectation of being the only thing to alter behavior patterns so the event can be much freer of endless content and more focused on interaction and emergent ideas.

Some Final Thoughts

Chances are you've recognized some of your team's behavior in *10 Good Reasons to Hate Work Teams*. If you haven't, you are either on the most amazing team in the known universe or you're choosing not to recognize things too well. Teams are a fact of life in organizations. Perhaps there was a time when a single 'heroine' or 'hero' could manage everything and tell people what to do and they would gladly or otherwise go do it but that time is long gone. Life, and organizations are too complex, too busy and too big for mythical roles of leadership and management anymore. We really do need others in our organizations if we are going to succeed. Many leaders and managers still trying to play those mythical roles are finding this out the hard way as they become more and more irrelevant with each passing day and their teams and organizations become more irrelevant as well.

Maybe you were able to laugh at your team a little too, as you recognized behavior that described it pretty well. All teams experience similar problems and the only problem that's really unacceptable is not trying to do something about them. That's when teams become horrible, time-wasting, resource sucking monsters. Perhaps in the midst of your laughter you were also able to see, or try some solutions that will work for your team.

If you look back over this e-booklet you will notice a couple of words that have been used a number of times when describing what is needed to dig your team out of the hole it might find itself in. The words are courage and honesty. Some situations are just darn ugly and some are wonderful. In order for a team to be effective both these states need to be honestly recognized to be able to continue to move forward. It takes courage to be honest and honesty to be courageous. It also takes courage to share honest information with your team so it can do the work it is supposed to do. All the bells and whistles ever invented to help teams be more effective are useless if you don't have the courage and honesty to apply them. It can be pretty tough at times. Good teams do their best to ride the roller coaster of good times and bad and press on. Amazing teams learn to love the roller coaster. They learn from each up and down and press on just a little bit better. Or perhaps even know when it's time to get off, which can be the toughest choice of all.

There are choices to be made. Do you choose to have a useless team you can't stand being a part of or do you choose to push yourself and your teammates to be amazing?
Which choice will you make?

Discussion and comment points for this post:

1. What are some of your final thoughts (on this initiative, not your final thoughts ever!)?

💬 chat   **4 Comments**

bonnie369 - An excellent – and thought provoking summary. Inspired a conversation with a team member where we both asked a few tough questions and although it is a struggle to stay open to those honest replies … they will undoubtedly move our work together forward.

Thanks for this whole work … an invitation to stay enough on the edge of the ways things have always been done to be able to question/reinvent ourselves.

> Tom Gibbons - So Bonnie, we now want to hear about the conversation with your colleague and how it relates to this post!
>
> You are right I think; it can be a struggle to stay open to honest replies, or even honesty in general, and we need to be ok with that struggle and not assume if we, or our team, was 'better' we would not have such struggles.
>
> It can be very tempting though to simply not engage in those struggles and then when your team is a mess it becomes even more tempting to simply blame someone else. It's then that the mess becomes much more difficult to clean up.

Chris - Thank you so much for this thought-provoking series Tom. I've enjoyed the way it's asked us to each reflect on our own experiences, trials and tribulations – the ugly and the wonderful. And how critical it is that we not only understand and accept our reality, but take responsibility for it. Thank you.

> Tom Gibbons - Thanks Chris and good to see you here! You are so right in the 'taking responsibility for it' point. It can be hard to do this when things get ugly but that is typically when accountability is most needed. When this doesn't happen we often end up with patterns of behavior that are filled with blame or guilt and being on teams like that are not much fun at all.
>
> And it is our accountability in some ways if we are part of that.