Building A High Performance Team

Is A Balancing Act

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“There doesn’t do any good to have a lot of really smart people around the table if you can’t access their smarts”

Effective Teamwork And Conversational Capacity
For twenty years I’ve been conducting workshops, advising organizations, and coaching leaders on the importance of conversational capacity – the ability to engage in open, balanced, nondefensive dialogue about difficult subjects and in challenging circumstances. It’s a pivotal competence. A team robust conversational capacity can address its toughest issues in a responsibly rigorous, nondefensive way. A team with anemic capacity, by contrast, can see its performance derailed by a trivial disagreement.

People and teams with high conversational capacity are distinguished by the ability to work what I call the “sweet spot” – that productive space where candor and curiosity are in balance and the conversations are open-minded, even-handed, evidence-based, and learning-focused. The best teamwork occurs in this sweet spot – especially when we’re up against tough issues and challenging
situations. Learning flourishes when we’re in the sweet spot; the risk of dysfunction goes up whenever we slip out of it.

**It’s Harder Than It Sounds**

But while balancing candor and curiosity sounds simple in theory, it’s surprisingly difficult in practice because, under pressure, we tend to drop one trait or the other. When a difficult issue hits the table, some people drop curiosity and stop listening, raise their voices, and argue past one another. Others drop candor and avoid issues, water down their points, and pretend to agree with one another.

High conversational capacity – the ability to balance candor and curiosity in situations where most people and most teams will lose balance, is particularly important for a team dealing with big challenges. Why? It increases their ability to lean into and learn from difference, to spark profound insights by exploring varying and conflicting points of view. In my book, *Conversational Capacity*, I explain that “it’s people with different views who are more likely to spark an “aha” moment – the experience of having a blind spot in our mental map of reality unexpectedly illuminated.”

**Adaptive Learning Isn’t Cost Free**

I also point out that these flashes of adaptive insight come at a cost: “The hitch, of course, is that it requires tremendous discipline to genuinely inquire into views that conflict with our own. Opposing ideas, particularly about issues we care about, easily trigger our fight-flight reactions, leading us to argue our point or withdraw from the conflict.” If we lack the capacity to stay in the sweet spot, in other words, we limit the value we can extract from different perspectives and experiences. A team with a low candor may provide a nice social experience, but it’s not likely to provide the responsibly rigorous dialogue needed to help them deal with their tough challenges. In a group that lacks curiosity, on the other hand, members put their thoughts on the table, but they often advocate their views in a way that sparks more defensiveness than learning.

Over the years I’ve had many people and teams openly admit to this problem. “I love this group, we get on really well, but we’re not getting into each other’s business nearly hard enough. We tend to play it safe.” Other groups suffer from the opposite problem. A team leader recently bemoaned the roughshod nature of his group’s interactions. “It’s strong-minded group and the afternoon discussions get really heated. Some of my colleagues get tired of it. We’ve had a lot of turnover.” Many other groups experience both problems at once, with two or
three members dominating discussions while other members of the team laying back and barely participate at all.

**Conversational Capacity And The Potential For Learning**

Simply put, when a team slips out of the sweet spot it squanders the learning-potential of the group. It may be full of A-grade thinkers but it can only generate C-grade analysis and action. It fritters away the very thing that makes a team so valuable – the profound learning that comes from leaning into difference.

The best teams strike a powerful balance. They cultivate warm, close, trusting relationships with their colleagues, but they refuse to let these relationships limit the hard-hitting, pragmatic, sharp dialogue they need to help them improve their decision-making and problem solving. Members work hard to manage – in a mindful and deliberate way – the natural tension between genuine collegiality and ruthlessly compassionate feedback. If your group needs to do a better job of striking this potent balance, building its conversational capacity is the first place to start.

**Effective Leadership Is About Capacity Building**

An important aspect of exceptional team leadership, therefore, is the task of building our teams’ conversational capacity, for it unlocks the learning potential in our relationships, meetings, teams, and projects. It strengthens our ability to make smart decisions, solve tough problems, capitalize on opportunities, and respond to change in more agile, deliberate, productive ways. It enables us to think smarter, faster, and together in difficult situations.

So team leaders take note: the more complicated the decision, problem or challenge your people are facing, the more important it is to ensure it they work in the sweet spot under pressure. Our world is growing more messy and unpredictable and there is a pressing need for people and teams who can apply their knowledge to their toughest challenges in a rigorous, constructive, and collaborative way. Learning to balance candor and curiosity under pressure is central to meeting this need. We can everything else in place – the best people, strategies, processes, and resources – but if the conversational capacity of our project or team is too low, it will underperform when it counts. A primary task for anyone interested in building a high performance team, therefore, is building this capacity.
In Summary
To sum up, a high-functioning team is an impressive thing to behold but it’s not an easy thing to create. The first challenge is getting a bunch of smart, experienced, committed people seated around the table. The second challenge is ensuring the group has the capacity to access and learn from the smarts of its members when it counts. It doesn’t do any good to have a lot really smart people around the table, after all, if you can’t put all their intelligence and experience to good use.

Given all this, let me suggest a few questions for you and your group to consider:

• Is conversational capacity of your team robust enough to allow everyone to fully capitalize on the potential learning-power in the room?
• Do you see moments when candor or curiosity is lower than it should be? If so, how does this affect learning in the group?
• Do others members of the team see things the same way? If not, what are the underlying reasons for their contrasting perspectives?
• And to take your teams’ conversational capacity from poor to good – or from good to great – what can you do to start building it?

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