

dynamics that separate great teams from everyone else



the  
ultimate

# TEAM

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To the point, this is a paper on what most people call “teamwork.”  
Bored already?

Believe us, we understand. Maybe your initial reaction would be different if this were the technology article unveiling the concept of the iPod or iTunes years before launch; especially now that we know it drove a world-wide music revolution. Or what about a report on a solar-powered laptop that weighs two pounds, has a 12-hour battery life, and is always connected to the Internet at DSL speed whether you’re in the Amazon or Beijing?

Better yet, imagine your interest if this was a paper announcing the discovery of the key that would wipe out cancer from planet Earth in less than five years. There are so many topics that could engage your mind and enliven hope.

But...teamwork?

Traditional talk on teamwork is overdone and underused, and so it’s natural that we would much rather read about new energy alternatives, the latest technology, re-modernizing medicine, or futuristic engineering. But most of those articles painting the picture of market evolutions and world revolutions would and will rely on a team—somewhere, somehow, some way. It was a team that developed the iPod (no matter how much solo media attention Steve Jobs receives), and a team will improve portable computing, elevate our use of energy (and maybe the Planet) and may ultimately conquer cancer.

The most inspiring possibilities and persistent problems we face as human beings will almost always be tackled by a team.

Pause for a moment to think about the energy crisis America faces. Which team from which company will be the first to crack the code and win the energy race? Consider the team working on the Chevrolet Volt that’s to be unveiled in 2010. It’s a vehicle designed to go 40 miles before it uses a single ounce of gas.

“We have devoted significant resources to this project: Over 200 engineers and 50 designers are working on the Volt alone, and another 400 are working on related sub-systems and electric components,” said Tony Posawatz, Line Director for the 2010 Chevy Volt. “That’s how important we think this is, and that’s how much stock we place in the future...”

GM is making a big bet and teams will either be the key to their success, or a major reason for their demise. The stakes in that race, and in almost any business race, are high because teams require a serious financial commitment before they ever produce a return.

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But it's never enough to throw smart people in a room, call them a team and challenge them with a Mt. Everest-sized goal. Thousands of ideas and strategies this year will either change the business world (at least your part of it), or be pushed to an early grave, by the way a team works.

So while the topic of teams and teamwork, at least as typically talked about, carries the baggage of being boring and ordinary, the results teams are expected to produce never are.

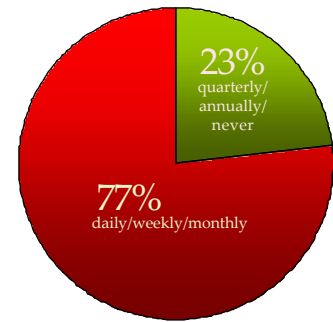


exhibit a. how often do individual agendas get in the way of team progress?

“Team dynamics are the **unseen**, but not **unfelt**, forces that impact performance.”



And that's why what happens inside teams, from a Presidential White House Cabinet to the Board of Directors at GE, from creative teams at Pixar Animation to your team, might be one of the most important topics we could ever talk about. And we have to talk about what happens inside teams—team dynamics— differently than in the past, and more candidly than we ever have, if we expect better products, people and performance.

Team dynamics are the unseen—but not unfelt—forces that impact performance. Great teams are remarkably open-minded, ready for change, candid, down-to-earth, know how to let ideas clash rather than people, and care that the right idea wins, regardless of whose idea it is. But most teams aren't great. They might think they are, wish they were, or hope they can be, but they're not. Whether they know it or not, whether they admit it or not, they're good at best. Performance proves it, and research validates it.

For instance, **among 327 teams representing nearly 4,000 people, the average “grade” teams give themselves on team dynamics is a “B-,”** or 80.3. That's close to being a good team (but not quite there), and a long way from being great. When it comes to team performance, good is usually the enemy of great. In an effort to raise performance, historically there's been a lot of focus on talent development, and how engaged people are in their work. And for good reason—companies who score high in employee engagement improve their operating income by 19% and their earnings per share by almost 28% when compared to organizations with lower engagement scores.

In a recent MarcumSmith survey, when asked how engaged people on their teams were, 70% said people were engaged or very engaged. So with that level of engagement you would expect more great organizational performance, right? Not necessarily, because “engagement” isn't the only way to better numbers—and engagement doesn't equal *great* performance. When asked how often individual agendas get in the way of making progress as a team, 55% of those same people said daily or weekly (figure b).

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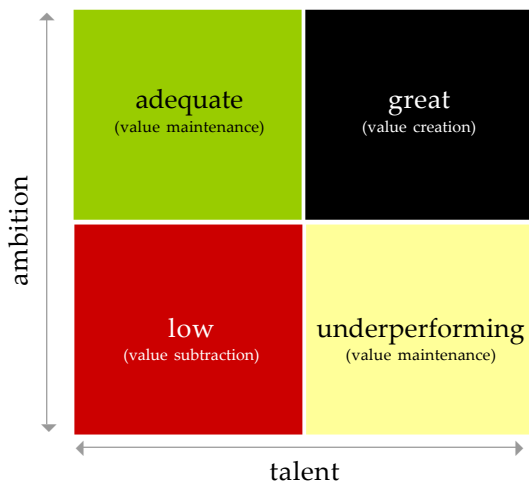
Another 22% said monthly. It's not that we can't get people on teams engaged, but it's the way team members engage with each other that undermines team dynamics and blocks great team performance. But before we talk about those dynamics, let's explore the first two vital building blocks that need to be in place to build a high-performing team. We'll then explore how team dynamics affect our ability to get the most from those two building blocks. The first two building blocks are: yes

**1. top talent, right fit:** the team has top talent in play, and people in the right roles. Not all teams are created equal in talent, but every team, regardless of talent level, has the ability to maximize that talent and their own performance by changing the way they work together.

**2. ambition:** the team sets bold objectives, what we call "G3" (great, gigantic goals), and their desire to hit G3 is uniquely high. Not every team dreams big, or cares enough, to push themselves as hard as they can.

There are dozens, maybe hundreds of reasons teams don't care enough to do their best. But regardless of the reasons or the legitimacy of those reasons, if people don't really care, then talent doesn't usually make much of a difference.

For a moment, let's assume ambition and talent on a particular team are very high; that we've attracted bright, capable, experienced people who are in the right roles and driven to do G3 work. The performance potential for teams with those two building blocks in place is represented in the chart below.



If we have the right levels of talent and ambition, the sky's the limit. If there's less of either talent or ambition (or, dreadfully, both), then we live with a heavy ceiling that limits our capacity.

Are these the only two factors at play, though? In considering both talent and ambition, is there *really* that much of a difference between, say, the talent of the engineers at Toyota and those at Ford, GM, Mercedes, and Honda? Does Toyota have exceptionally smarter people with greater drive



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“Does Toyota have dramatically more talent and ambition than, say, GM, Mercedes, Honda, or Ford? **The answer is no.** Then why aren’t more automakers outperforming, or keeping pace with, Toyota?”



than any competitor on Earth? The answer is no. So then why aren’t more automakers outperforming, or keeping pace with, Toyota? For any organization, why is the quadrant of great performance rarely visited if we essentially have equal talent and similar ambition? What’s the difference between one team that knocks performance out of the park, and the team that doesn’t? It could be luck. Luck is always a factor in business success (like it or not) but isn’t a very reliable strategy, and represents a microscopic percentage of the difference.

When talent and ambition are relatively equal and in place, what separates great performing teams from everyone else from is the dynamics of the culture in those organizations and on those teams. In the words of *Tribal Leadership* authors Logan, King and Fischer-Wright, “Culture eats strategy for lunch.” Team dynamics, the third building block of the ultimate team, is either the ceiling or competitive advantage in reaching great performance. There are five levels of team dynamics that impact talent and guide ambition.

In the chart below, the first column represents a team’s level of dynamics. The second column briefly describes the way those teams think about work. The third column shows the percentage of team cultures that operate at that level:

level	focus of team culture	%
5	<b>We-Then-Me (Interdependent):</b> Organizations and teams at <b>Level 5</b> think company first, team second, and me third. Ambition is driven by “what can we do uniquely to have an impact in the market,” not “what can we do better than Company X?” Debates about ideas are motivated by the best idea winning, not whose idea wins. Great performance is consistently delivered, even in difficult circumstances or tough market conditions.	2%
4	<b>Us-vs.-Them (Interdependent):</b> Organizations at <b>Level 4</b> get preoccupied attempting to best outside competitors. Teams at Level 4 work together effectively but get distracted by internal competition with other teams, i.e., Marketing vs. Sales, Products. vs. Services, East Region vs. West Region. As a result of their “enemy-centered” approach, organizations at Level 4 aren’t as collaborative with other teams as they could be, and as a result get value-added product replication or slight modification rather than original innovation. Short-term success often comes at the expense of long-term ability to produce results.	22%
3	<b>Me-Then-We (Independent):</b> The focus of <b>Level 3</b> teams is characterized by individual recognition and team member vs. team member competition. Diversity may be present, but is usually undervalued and poorly utilized because individual, me-first focus preempts collaboration and diversity. Debates and discussions are frequently competitive and occasionally combative. The dominant philosophy is “my idea wins” vs. “the best idea wins.” Agreeing to disagree is frequently the “easy out” to seeing things differently. Success is moderate, inconsistent and difficult to sustain.	49%
2	<b>Me-Centered (Isolated and Indifferent):</b> <b>Level 2</b> teams don’t care and are change-resistant. People and teams at Level 2 are “job-holders;” people who just do their jobs, and nothing more.	25%
1	<b>Me-Centered (Isolated and Corrosive):</b> <b>Level 1</b> teams (and we use the word “team” loosely) subversively undermine change and don’t like each other, much less other teams or the organization for whom they work	2%

\*Percentages: Logan, King and Fischer-Wright at USC.

The bottom two levels almost never change because they don't care enough to try. The market, when it has a vote, always votes them "out of office." Organizations at Levels 1 and 2 are dead men walking. Levels 3 and 4 can and do change, if shown a more effective way to work and want to either accelerate the positive direction they're headed, or put the brakes on the downward spiral they sense is inevitably coming. There are five key characteristics that define the dynamics of teams operating at Level 5. Let's talk about each in depth.

### 1. We-Then-Me Attitude

In business, a "we-then-me" approach to work translates to the progress of our company; the project our team is working on, the client in front of us, the market we serve, and so on. That dedication to progress requires a sequential focus: team first, me second. Counter to cultural business clichés, there is an "I" in "team," and an important "I" at that. We,-then-me doesn't exclude or downgrade what we personally need, or what our team needs compared to others. It just prioritizes the focus.

At first glance, we-then-me could sound like a nice, but naïve idea—naïve because, according to most, that's not the way we currently do business. In a Rutgers and University of Connecticut poll, 58% of workers believe most top executives put their own self-interest ahead of the company's, while 67% don't believe their bosses have the firm's best interests at heart.

The only realistic way to turn those numbers toward better team dynamics is if we believe that by putting the team's needs first, both we and the team will ultimately be better as a result.

**And before anyone would buy a more we-centered approach to work, we need to ask an ironic question; what's in it for me? The ironic answer is that the less we focus on our individual needs first, the more likely our needs will be met.**

Let's explore the idea. Imagine for a moment you're a salesperson for IBM (or any company). In a high-performance culture, the pressure is on. Like every salesperson, you have a monthly quota. Hitting your quota could mean many things: commission, promotion, reputation, college tuition, weddings, house payments, retirement, and so on. With that pressure, you have a sales presentation to make on a several-hundred-thousand-dollar proposal. If you walk into that meeting and begin making your

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presentation with your focus first and foremost on your needs—to hit your numbers and get your commission—are you more or less likely to make the sale? The answer is less likely.

But why?

As soon as the client senses a me-first intent from you, that intent taints the interaction on both sides. You may oversell product features, rush through a technical explanation, mistake understanding for agreement and enthusiasm, smooth over objections, or push too hard for the close. As the client feels your me-then-we intent, they grow suspicious of what you say, become guarded about what they say, and don't give you access to information or people they otherwise would.

In turn, their trust in you goes down, you lose the sale and your company loses the revenue. In fact,

“Is we, then me realistic in a down economy?  
Shouldn't it be 'survival of the fittest'?  
Actually, no.”



maybe you have a better product than your competitors, and the client loses the economic benefit of not getting the best solution. Everybody loses. In sales, the more important it is to meet your numbers, the more important it is to forget about your numbers and help clients meet their numbers.

In other words, the more important it is for you and your company to progress, the more important it is for you to suspend the focus on that progress and devote yourself to the progress of your clients first. The irony is that in suspending your own needs, the more likely you are to meet your client's needs, which in turn advances the progress of your company, and therefore more likely to meet your needs.

**If progress is truly our primary motivation, we won't let individual passion and commitment to a project or idea drift into a me- or us-first, client- or company-second view.**

That doesn't mean we shouldn't passionately make our case for our needs or ideas, but we should be guided by what's best for the business and our clients, not just our own territory.

But let's consider a tough situation outside of sales: your company is on the ropes and “downsizing” on the horizon. Is “we, then me” unrealistic if you're vying for a limited number of jobs? Is that a legitimate out for taking a me-first, “survival of the fittest” approach? Even though that's a typical response, it would be exactly the wrong approach. In good times, a company needs contribution from people, and people want to keep their jobs. But do company or employee needs change in difficult times? The answer is no.

The needs for both increase when times are hard—companies need more contribution and people need job security. If “we, then me” is effective when times are good, it's no less effective when times are bad. The irony of a survival of the fittest mentality is that as pressure for survival increases, so does the temptation to adopt a “me, then we” attitude—to be defensive about our ideas, treat colleagues as competitors, occupy time showcasing our “you can't live without me” brilliance, and seek the acceptance of those who can send us to the unemployment line. By definition, that decline puts us one step closer to the exit.

The more we focus on self-survival, the less likely we are to survive. “We, then me” is the most direct strategy and incentive for survival as well as moving to the next level of performance—on both sides of the equation.

People often think of a we-then-me approach to business as being a “team player.” That’s true, if by “team player” they mean strong, talented, focused and wanting to make a difference, but realizing they can’t do it themselves (or they can, but not as well). Intuitively, people know team playership is a difference-maker individually and collectively. A University of Connecticut survey of 2,435 employees in 400 organizations asked people to reveal the most important factor for getting ahead in the workplace.

**Being a team player ranked higher than all factors, including merit and performance, leadership skills, intelligence, making money for the organization, and working long hours.**

But “team player” has earned an unfair reputation by poor leaders as a phrase to get people “in line.” Leaders who lead by the force of their position rather than the power of their ideas use “team player” as a way of forcing people to cave in or give up for the “good of the team” when the “non-conformists” don’t agree. For decades, poor team leaders have abused the phrase “team player” for the sake (or illusion) of being right and in control. But in the truest sense of the phrase, team players are the people who play at Level 5 and know exactly what it means and the difference it makes.

## 2. Constructive Discontent

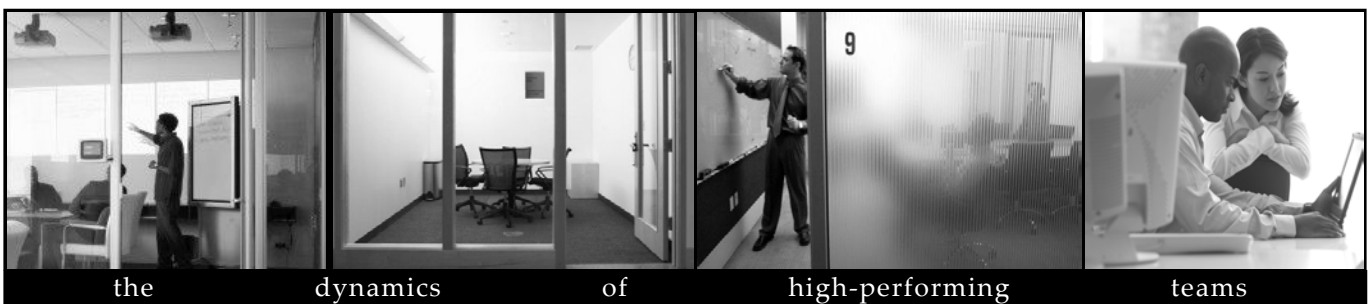
Constructive discontent is the ability to be proud of where we are and the work it took to get there, and at the same time never satisfied with “good enough,” no matter how well we did. Almost every great accomplishment in human history, and every record broken, came from a person or team who couldn’t accept the status-quo, or the “reasoned” explanations for current performance. Great teams are never satisfied.

Toyota is a model citizen of constructive discontent. In reality, it’s not “Toyota,” but the teams at Toyota, who are the real model citizens. Toyota is now the world’s largest automobile manufacturer. In a *Fast Company* article on Toyota’s dissatisfaction with satisfaction, Charles Fishman writes of a recent improvement the Georgetown, Kentucky Toyota plant made in how it paints cars. While their process wasn’t “broken” by competitive standards, it wasn’t perfect. That imperfection was incentive enough.

Fishman goes on to describe how they improved the painting; nozzles, paint cartridges, paint flush changes, processes, etc. “Cars now spend 8 hours in paint, instead of 10.” writes Fishman, “The paint shop at any moment holds 25% fewer cars than it used to. Wasted paint? Practically zero. What used to require 100 gallons now takes 70.” But the details of the specific improvements aren’t really the point. Fishman continues:

[Improvement] is rooted in an institutional obsession with improvement that Toyota manages to instill in each one of its workers, a pervasive lack of complacency with whatever was accomplished yesterday.[What’s] interesting is to compare how they think about work at Georgetown with everywhere else. How come the checkout lines at Wal-Mart never get shorter? How come the customer service of your cell-phone company never improves, year after year? How come my PC gets harder to operate with each software upgrade? It’s almost as if Toyota people see the world with special four-dimensional glasses; the rest of us are stuck in 2-D.

Speaking of 2-D, over half of all teams in our team survey research say they only make occasional big changes, change when circumstances force it, talk but never do anything about it, or are too satisfied with status-quo. When driven by constructive discontent, we aren’t looking for a final destination thinking we’re “finished.”



Instead, we value the movement along the way as much as, or more than, the end result. “We’re all incredibly proud of what we’ve accomplished,” said Chad Buckner, an engineering manager of Toyota’s paint division. “But you don’t stop. You don’t stop. There’s no reason to be satisfied.” His colleague John Shook added, “Once you realize that it’s the process itself—that you’re not seeking a plateau—you can relax. Doing the task and doing the task better become one and the same thing.” The Toyota story is an example of small changes a team made inside a very large corporate machine. Important changes aren’t always a vision

that descends upon us, seizes us, and galvanizes everyone. If you just consider the paint change improvement as a snapshot, it wouldn’t seem revolutionary. But the constant pursuit of small, incremental changes accumulated over time make the bigger difference. That doesn’t mean that constructive discontent is only about small, nearly indiscernible differences. Sometimes changes are revolutions, but most of the time they’re not. Besides, whether the changes are big or small misses the point—it’s the attitude and drive that analyzes opportunities and pursues

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change that matters.

### 3. High Intensity, Right Intent

“Unless one considers alternatives, one has a closed mind,” said Peter Drucker. “Decisions of the kind the executive has to make are not made well by acclamation. They are made well only if based on the clash of conflicting views, the dialogue between different points of view, the choice between different judgments. The first rule in decision-making is that one does not make a decision unless there is disagreement.”

On any team that cares about performance and making a difference, there will be passion and intensity. We can’t accelerate progress without “clash,” “differing points of view,” and “conflicting judgments.” But if we can’t handle intensity, we won’t get diversity of thought. When diversity goes down, so do the odds of success. But if we mislabel intensity for being egotistical, we trade progress for soft conversation and swift consensus. There is too much focus in business on “being nice” and political safety. That focus takes us nowhere. Let’s first clarify what we mean by intensity. “You need executives ...who argue and debate—sometimes violently—” said Jim Collins in his landmark book *Good to Great*, “in pursuit of the best answers.” The words Collins and Drucker use are interesting choices in describing what it takes to make good decisions: clash, conflict, disagreement, dissent.

But...violent?

When’s the last time any of us read a book on communication and the opening line stated, “The first rule of effective communication is to embrace violence”? If there is a place for violence in communication, then effective debate depends on what kind of violence you’re talking about.

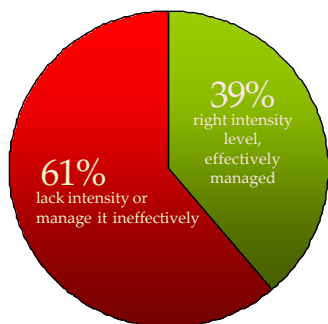


exhibit c. team intensity levels

The first words that surface in connection with the word “violence” are aggression, fighting, hostility, brutal, cruel, and vicious—definitely not words that smooth the exchange of ideas, the worst of which cause many people to avoid debates altogether because of the emotional hangover they leave.

Sixty-one percent of people believe (exhibit c) that they either poorly manage the intensity they do have, or they lack intensity to begin with.

In producing constructive conflict and disciplined debate, don't make it personal, and don't take it personally. In the pursuit of intense debate the opposites of violence, e.g., "peaceful," "gentle" and "passive," are necessary, but not enough by themselves to produce real talk.

Upon further investigation of the word violence, a second set of words describe a productive violence: "fierce," "passionate," "hard," "powerful," "strong" and "intense." To distinguish the two kinds of violence, we'll refer to good "violence" as vigorous—as in "vigorous debate." Not every debate needs vigor, but when it is needed the words just listed should characterize those debates. Vigorous debates require a heavy investment of humility to keep intensity productive, vigor from becoming violence, and when necessary, to keep us from being lulled into courteous but meaningless exchanges that continue discussions, but don't advance them.

### When Nice Isn't

On too many teams, the pendulum of argument swings to one side (violence) or the other (silence)—either of which trades intellectual diversity for isolating, egotistical clashes or tranquil, pseudo-harmonious agreement. Great teams don't have less civility or understanding. They encourage the right kind of argument. The willingness and ability to listen has its place, and a crucial one at that. But progress requires more than listening. It requires us to passionately push ourselves to explore every angle, and go to intellectual extremes that test our assumptions before we make a decision.

**Debate on any team in any organization is as critical as financial capital, especially considering that every decision that team makes will, in some way, impact the top or bottom line.**

The main ingredient that allows people to handle intensity in a conversation is the intent of the people in the debate. Intensity must be driven and guided by the right intent. The right intent sees everyone as equals (not as superiors and subordinates), is open to ideas no matter from where and when they come, and spends as much time listening as advocating for positions. If the right intent is missing, the intensity will usually turn quickly into contention and argument. And mediocrity won't be far behind.

### 4. High Curiosity

Let's say your boss gives you the assignment to put together a team for a critical, highly visible project, and one of the criteria she gives for the team is diversity. So, you scour the company and labor market in order to put together a diversity dream team. When your boss meets the team for the first time, she finds you've assembled the following people:

- ▶ A 32-year-old African-American woman who's been an entrepreneur.
- ▶ A 38-year-old French-born American man with degrees in finance, philosophy, and European literature.
- ▶ A 56-year-old seasoned Caucasian man with 25 years' experience running his own company.
- ▶ A 25-year-old Chinese-American woman graduate student straight from Harvard Business School.



“On too many teams, the pendulum of argument swings to one side (violence) or the other (silence)....”

“Diversity, without **curiosity**, isn’t worth much. Great teams know how to tap into the collective experience and POV of everyone on them.”



- ▶ A 44-year-old Latino man with 10 years as a product manager for a *Fortune 500* Company.
- ▶ And you.

You’re pretty much guaranteed diversity, right?

Not so fast. Although you’ve increased your odds, you haven’t guaranteed anything. Unless you build the right environment for the team to work together, you might as well have ten 40-something men, all white, all from the same city, country, state, all with similar degrees, etc. Well maybe not that extreme, but you get the point. In order for a team to truly tap into the diversity that exists between them—their experience and ideas—they must have a high level of curiosity.

Curiosity is one of the traits that separate the ultimate team from an ordinary one. Diversity, without curiosity, isn’t worth much. Great teams know how to tap into the collective experience and POV of everyone on them. But that “tapping” isn’t frequent enough on most teams to move them from “good enough,” to great.

Over 67% (exhibit d) of business people say people on their teams think more like the driver's license bureau who just ask questions within the confines and routines of our functions and jobs rather than entrepreneurs looking for the biggest problems to solve or the prime opportunities to capitalize on. The good news is most everyone is curious, so most teams have a head start. But to what degree we’re curious is another question, and a vital answer in determining the value we create by the way we work together.

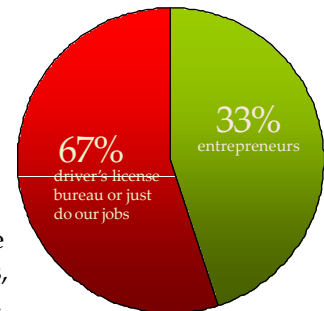


exhibit d. how my team thinks about improving their work

### Open + Order = ?

Highly curious teams are different than you might imagine. Think of someone you know who’s very open and who loves to engage and explore—they’re adventurous, flexible, artistic, unencumbered, and energized by new ideas. Now, think about someone you know that’s the opposite—organized, orderly, analytical, logical, structured, and methodical, with everything under the sun in its proper place. Which of the two would you put your money on to have the highest level of curiosity?

As it turns out, the answer is neither.

According to decades of research by Dr. David Beswick at the University of Melbourne, people with trait curiosity have a rare, unique blend of both. “They have a sufficient sense of security in their world to put their cognitive maps in jeopardy,” he said, “without experiencing debilitating anxiety.” That blend creates heightened curiosity and the security to work in the intellectual space “belonging at the border between chaos and cosmos.” At first glance there appears to be a conflict between order and openness. In fact, when psychologists evaluate personality traits, there is a negative correlation between the two—the “orderly” aren’t open enough, and resist disruption to their systematic approach or arrangement of things. The “open” undervalue order, and curiosity is too carefree, easily accepting change without enough thought of the impact. When order overrides openness, curiosity loses freedom to explore. If left to openness alone, curiosity loses structure and purpose. The highest concentration of curiosity isn’t created by adding an ounce of order to a pound of openness, or vice versa.

Productive, diversity-tapping curiosity requires equal parts of both.

Teams with a high level of curiosity don't see the world differently than the rest of us every minute of the day—but they do see it differently for a few minutes. In those minutes curiosity might catch a glimpse of a subtle difference in what appears routine to everyone else.

The problems we face every day pressure us to do something—and we should. But how fast and what we do deserves more curiosity than it typically gets. As a result, we invest time, people, and money before we get the levels of curiosity and diversity needed to make the best decisions. With unlimited ideas and limited resources, high-performing teams demand tapping into diversity by doing our homework first, execution second.

## 5. Water-Cooler Honesty

Have you noticed there's often a gap between what executives think is going on, and what front-line managers know is going on—and vice versa? What about the difference between what Marketing thinks the market is ripe for, and what Sales is convinced clients really want? What about the divide between you and a colleague -- on the same team, on the same project, in the same meeting—and yet you hardly see anything the same?

What's unsettling is what we don't know, and that unsettling feeling is caused by fear of saying what's unknown to someone else, or of hearing what's unknown to us. When people are afraid, they save those important conversations for the water cooler with the people they trust rather than say them where they can have an impact on performance. What teams need to create a high-performing culture is the ability to say things in the meeting that are usually reserved for the water-cooler. The only way to close that gap is if people have the courage and diplomacy to say it, or listen and embrace it when said. But as a result of typical reactions to candor, many people believe bridging that gap is risky. In a study by Amy Edmondson of Harvard University and James Detert of Penn State University on why employees are hesitant to speak up, they found, "employees aren't failing to provide ideas or input because they've 'checked out' and just don't care, but because of fear."

Their work was triggered by a survey of over 50,000 employees from one company where nearly 50 % of all employees from the boardroom to the mailroom reported it wasn't safe to speak up or challenge traditional ways of doing things.

Emotions like fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, and distrust arise when people don't think it's safe to speak. Situations vary widely, but the feelings behind them don't. People resent giving artificial support to an idea they think will fail, especially if they know something others don't that will stop it from working. If they don't believe anyone will listen if they speak up, they keep quiet while bad projects or corporate inefficiencies keep sucking money from the bottom line. As a result, mum's the word.



If water-cooler honesty is to become habit, teams need people with two specific abilities: hearing down and speaking up. In using the words down and up, we're referring to reporting relationships at work, not in our value to a team or company.

Hearing down means we listen in a way that encourages people to speak their mind, and not to have seeking our acceptance as their highest priority—or us to seek theirs.

Speaking up requires courage, candor and tact. People tend to confuse criticism of their strategy with criticism of who they are. Consequently, we must speak up in a way that doesn't provoke others to be defensive or showcase brilliance to defy what we say.

**If we expect and even demand honesty as a team or leader, we're bound to hear or uncover things we wish we hadn't. A major barrier to hearing down is our belief that dissent is disloyalty.**



If we view dissent as disloyalty, we've closed our mind and created a closed culture. Dissent from the current point of view, or arguing the opposite of an idea, does not mean the dissenter isn't a team player. Most dissent is not disloyalty. Real disloyalty is keeping silent when something needs to be said. Only 34% of people we've surveyed say people on their team speak up when something isn't working and it's expected that they should be saying something (exhibit f).

More often than not, there's positive intent behind a "negative" comment. When people speak up, it can be hard to listen if we perceive what they're saying is bad news. However, most bad news, no matter how negative, is in another way an expression of positive value.

If people complain that red tape and bureaucracy get in the way, at same time they're expressing a desire for freedom to get things done. Creating a culture where truth is heard requires we see the positive side of negative facts.

**People who speak up are often labeled as not being "team players." In fact, they may be the strongest team players you have. It's those who never speak up and only agree with the current momentum of an idea or discussion that aren't real contributors or team players.**

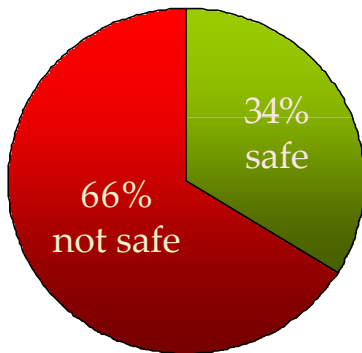


exhibit e. safe to speak up on my team about difficult issues/brutal facts

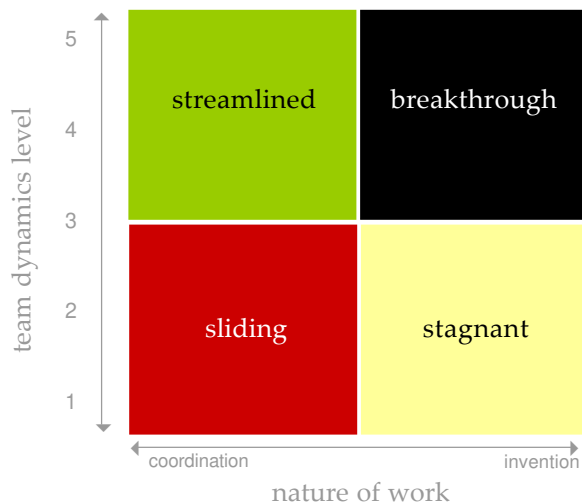
Don't assign negative intentions and labels to negative comments. Hearing down is only half the equation in building a team culture of water-cooler honesty. If we want those "above" or tied to an idea or strategy to hear down, those speaking up have a responsibility equal to those who should be listening. When speaking up, what we say, how we say it, and our intent plays a big part in where the conversation goes. While it's true that some things are better left unsaid, too often silence stifles progress. Most of us have been in a meeting where silence prevails even though everyone knows the truth is being avoided.

There are dozens of reasons we keep quiet: "silence is golden," "better safe than sorry," somebody else will speak up, they probably already know, it won't make a difference anyway, they have seniority, you're new, they're new, fear of the unknown, and on and on. Moving a team from average or good performance to great depends on the ability to build a culture of water-cooler honesty. It's not the only thing you need to reach the next level of performance, but you can't get there without it.

## Reaching The Next Level

Not every team is tasked with breakthrough innovation. If the nature of our work as team is simply to coordinate resources, align effort, and maximize efficiencies, then the best results Level 5 team dynamics can get you is being superbly streamlined. There's nothing wrong with that. The difference we make is in large part a function of our assignments. But if invention (new opportunities created, high-risk problems solved, etc.) is the assignment, then only Level 5 can produce breakthrough results. Regardless of the assignment or responsibility of our team, if we don't make don't break the bands of Levels 1-3, then sliding or stagnant results are the predictable outcomes.

In contemplating whether or not to make the move to Level 5, consider this: If we don't make the choice to change, we will change anyway. We change every day—without any effort. Teams who stay the same actually move backwards as other teams or companies pass them. By not moving a “muscle,” their status changes. The business world grades performance on



a curve, and someone is pushing that curve upward right now. Even if it's just one person who pushes that curve, everyone else will be measured by a higher standard. A decision to take the next step is an individual choice, and we will all make that choice when the pain is intense enough that relief becomes a high priority. Or it could be the opportunity in front of us makes us restless with the current state of affairs.

Organizations, teams and people most interested in change generally fall into two categories: already great or dying. It's the one's who are “good enough” who rarely make a move, and opt for status-quo. But wherever we are, if we want to change, now is the time.

**“This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off” said Martin Luther King, Jr., “or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”**



“In the economics of change, the point of departure is

irrelevant.

It's the departure itself that matters.”



Our workshops help clients build the ultimate team and team players.

When you ask people the last time was that they were on a high-performing team, the average answer is 5.9 years ago.

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