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Managing Conflicts

To Improve Your Team, First Work on Yourself

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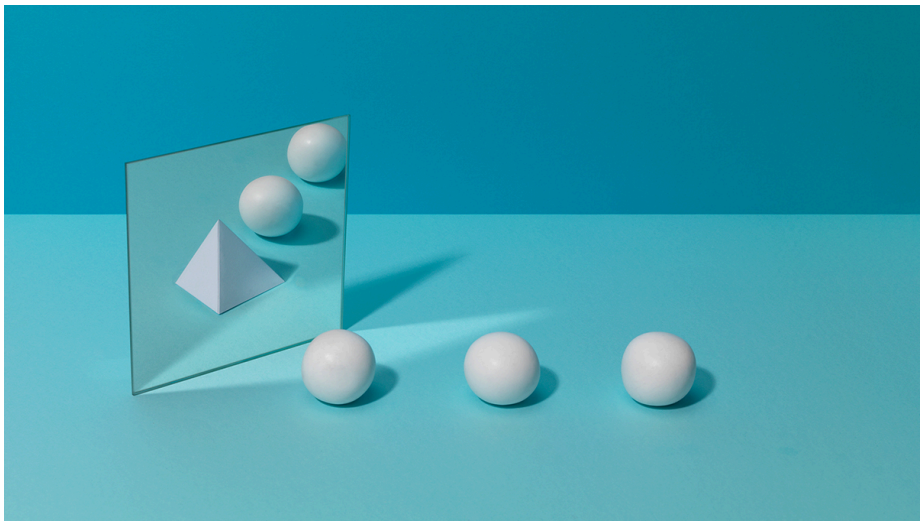

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A colleague and I were recently meeting with a CEO and his leadership team, observing them as they discussed how to improve their annual planning process. As the team of ten explored their current process, the conversation got heated. The team had been talking for 45 minutes, but it wasn't clear who was leading the discussion or what their objectives were. Many comments were off-topic, and they were not getting closer to answers.

We paused the meeting and posed this question: How are you reacting to this conversation and what *in you* is causing your reaction?

We were met with blank stares. They asked us to repeat the question, seemingly surprised that we had asked them to take responsibility for their reactions. Surely, we had meant to ask them what everyone *else* was doing wrong in the conversation, right?

Leaders and teammates often tell us that their team is "dysfunctional" (their word, not ours) and ask us to help identify and fix the issue. When we dig deeper and ask them to describe what they are observing in detail, we typically hear that certain team members are problematic and need to change their behavior. We also hear vague statements about "them" (everyone else) not knowing how to operate effectively. As experienced team development practitioners, we know that these are not accurate or helpful assessments of the situation.

Teams are complex systems of individuals with different preferences, skills, experiences, perspectives, and habits. The odds of improving that complex system in a meaningful and sustainable way are higher if every team member — including the leader — learns to master these three foundational capabilities: internal self-awareness, external self-awareness, and personal accountability.

Internal self-awareness

I once asked an executive I was coaching how he was feeling about a challenging situation. He replied, "You mean my emotions? I'm an engineer and I don't think about emotions." He then changed the subject.

This executive lacked internal self-awareness.

Internal self-awareness involves understanding your feelings, beliefs, and values — your inner narrative. When we don't understand ourselves, we are more likely to succumb to the fundamental attribution error of believing that the behaviors of others are the result of negative intent or character ("he was late because he does not care") and believing that our own behaviors are caused by circumstance ("I was late because of traffic"). Teammates with low internal self-awareness typically see their beliefs and values as "the truth," as opposed to what is true *for them* based on their feelings and past experiences. They can fail to recognize that others may have equally valid perspectives.

Let's look at another example: Manuel, a low internal self-awareness leader, and his colleague, Tara. In a product planning meeting, Tara, a big picture thinker, says, "We need to think of this plan in the context of our broader strategy." Manuel, an execution-focused leader, has an unconscious reaction of anger and frustration. He would rather focus on the detailed plan and the execution. But rather than recognizing his different thinking style as the cause of his discomfort and the root of his belief that strategy is unimportant, he concludes privately that Tara doesn't understand the situation, is annoying, and is not the right person for this project. He later tells another colleague she should be taken off the team.

This is a loss for everyone. Tara is misunderstood, devalued, and possibly dismissed. Manuel doesn't broaden his perspective or learn how to operate with people who think differently than he does.

The good news is that internal self-awareness can be learned. To start, you — as a leader of the team or a teammate — can pause, reflect, and consider your responses to these questions when you find yourself in challenging or emotionally-charged scenarios.

- What emotions am I experiencing?
- What am I assuming about another person or the situation?
- What are the facts vs. my interpretations?
- What are my core values, and how might they be impacting my reactions?

If you take the time to consider your responses and resist the impulse to rush to an answer, you can learn a great deal about yourself. As William Deresiewicz, author of *Solitude and Leadership,* said in an address at West Point, "[The] first thought is never [the] best thought."

External self-awareness

External self-awareness involves understanding how our words and actions impact others. Most of the leaders and teammates we work with have no idea how their behaviors are impacting their colleagues. As a result, it's difficult for them to recognize and leverage the strengths that make them a productive teammate, as well as identify and correct behaviors that negatively impact the team. Without this knowledge, they can't improve.

One way to start building external self-awareness is to observe others' reactions during discussions. Did someone raise their voice? Stop talking? Gesture? Sit back from the table? Smile? You can collect some valuable information this way. You should also be mindful of the fact that you will reach some inaccurate conclusions. In these situations, remember that you are *interpreting* why colleagues react the way they do, and those interpretations will be influenced by your personal beliefs and experiences. Paying attention to your internal self-awareness and considering how you reached your initial conclusions will help.

A more direct approach is to ask teammates for specific, straightforward feedback:

- What am I doing in team meetings that is helpful?
- What am I doing that is not helpful?
- If you could change one part of how I interact with the team, what would it be?

This may feel risky and uncomfortable, but it's the only way you can get accurate data about the impact of your words and actions.

In terms of timing, you should carefully assess whether it is additive to the discussion at hand to ask for feedback in the moment, or whether it is better to ask later. For example, in a one-on-one conversation with a trusted colleague, it's probably OK to

pause and ask. However, in a big team meeting, pausing the conversation to get personal feedback can be disruptive to what your team is trying to accomplish.

Personal accountability

When we think of accountability, we typically think of holding others accountable. But the most effective leaders and teammates are more focused on holding *themselves* accountable.

Like self-awareness, this sounds easy, though it rarely is. When confronted with a challenge or discomfort, many of us have established unhealthy patterns: blaming or criticizing others, defending ourselves, feigning confusion, or avoiding the issue altogether.

If a team is not working well together, it's highly likely that every team member is contributing to the difficulty in some way, and each of them could be taking personal accountability to make the team more effective.

To be a personally accountable leader or teammate, you need to take these steps:

1. Recognize when there is a problem. Sometimes this is the hardest part because we'd rather look away or talk about how busy we are instead. Resist the urge to do so.
2. Accept that you are part of the problem. You are absolutely contributing to the situation.
3. Take personal responsibility for solving the problem.
4. Stick with it until the problem is completely solved.

Going back to the example of Manuel — if he were practicing personal accountability, he would have first recognized that he had some conflict with Tara that was impacting the team's ability to create a solid plan. He would have then had the mindset to accept that he was contributing to the conflict, committed to working on a more productive relationship with Tara, and avoided the temptation to jump to conclusions and talk behind her back.

A small shift in mindset will directly impact behaviors and can have a significant positive impact on an entire team.

Taking action

In most teams, a typical response to frustration is “my teammate is annoying.” But when an effective leader or teammate becomes frustrated, she will put the above tips into practice instead:

- Explore her reactions by considering her emotions, beliefs and values, and asking herself what in her is causing this reaction (internal self-awareness).
- Consider the impact she may be having on others by observation or inquiry (external self-awareness).
- Assess how she is contributing to the situation and make a conscious choice about how to react to improve the team’s outcomes (personal accountability).

Most teams we work with learn to operate more effectively by building and strengthening these three capabilities over time. Changing how we process information and respond requires not just learning these new skills, but also demonstrating them long enough to form new habits. Effective teammates believe that, sometimes, you have to go slow to go fast. They invest the time and energy needed to build these foundational skills, so they can be better at tackling the difficult business opportunities and challenges that they face.

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Summary. If a team is not working well together, it's highly likely that each person is contributing to the difficulty in some way. The odds of improving the team dynamic in a meaningful and sustainable will be higher if everyone — including the leader — learns to master three foundational capabilities: internal self-awareness, external self-awareness, and personal accountability. Internal self-awareness involves understanding your feelings, beliefs, and values, and how they impact your reactions. If you find yourself in an emotionally-charged situation, ask: What are my core values, and how might they be impacting my reactions? What are the facts vs. my interpretations? Next, consider the impact you may be having on your teammates. This is external self-awareness. One way to start is to observe others during discussions. Did someone raise their voice? Stop talking? Smile? You can collect some valuable information this way — but it also leaves room for misinterpretation. A more direct approach is to ask teammates for specific, straightforward feedback: What am I doing in meetings that is helpful? What am I doing that is not helpful? Lastly, to be personally accountable, practice assessing how you are contributing to the problem and make a conscious choice about how to react to improve the team's outcomes. Changing how we process information and respond requires not just learning these new skills, but also demonstrating them long enough to form new habits.