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Is Your Team Caught in the Solution Fixation Trap?

by Serena G. Sohrab, Mary J. Waller and Sjir Uitdewilligen

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Summary. In the face of escalating complexities, organizations are increasingly relying on teams to tackle these intricate issues and drive pivotal organizational decisions. To extract maximum value from team dynamics, leaders must remain mindful of potential... [more](#)

Have you ever found your team going back and forth to find a good solution to a problem and not making progress? Or maybe you've left a meeting feeling unsure about the chosen solution, wondering if your team overlooked important information. To help your team make better decisions more confidently, you need to address a decision-making bias we call the *solution fixation trap*.

The solution fixation trap emerges when a team rushes into discussing possible solutions before fully understanding the problem at hand. For example, a marketing team tasked with addressing declining sales may hurry into suggesting modifications to the existing marketing campaign without taking enough time to fully understand the root causes of the decline. Similarly, a recruitment task force responsible for enhancing the demographic diversity of job applicants may rush into suggesting new recruitment tactics without adequately analyzing possible inhibiting factors. Not only does this make it challenging for teams to arrive at solutions they feel confident about — it puts them at risk of committing to the wrong course of action.

In this article, we share the study that helped us uncover this bias, explain what the solution fixation trap looks like, and discuss what you can do to protect your team from it.

Visualizing a Team's Unfolding Decision-Making Behavior

To better explain what the solution fixation trap looks like, we developed a method to visualize and analyze a team's decision-making behavior. When we engage with the world around us (other team members, for example), each of our behaviors (verbal or non-verbal) serves a function. For example, sharing a piece of information or asking for information are behaviors focused on information processing. Close analysis of phase maps — illustrations that highlight time periods where teams engage with behaviors with a common function — helped us answer important questions about team dynamics and unravel phenomena such as the solution fixation trap. The phase-mapping technique focuses on identifying clusters of behaviors with a common function, which we label as a phase type.

One hundred and sixty-nine MBA students participated in this study. Forming 28 teams, participants took part in a learning simulation that involved a series of problem-solving tasks. (Disclosure: The Leadership and Team Simulation: Everest V2 is a product of Harvard Business Publishing.) We recorded audio and video of each team as they engaged with the simulation. Then, we transcribed team communications verbatim and assigned a code to each statement based on its function.

Prior research by scholars such as Marshall Poole, Jonelle Roth, and Robert Bales suggests that behaviors of teams tasked with solving a problem can be categorized into four phase types: 1) information processing, 2) solution exploration, 3) confirmation, and 4) executive

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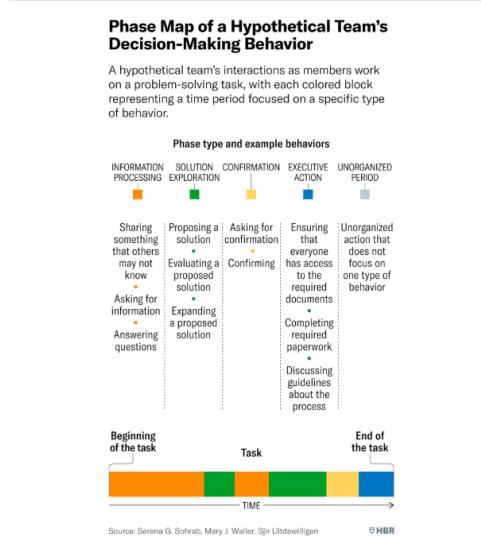
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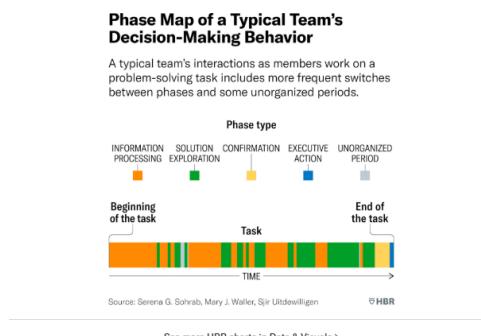
action. The below graphic shows examples of behaviors that shape each phase. As a team works on a task over time, it flows through these phases.



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The above graphic also depicts a hypothetical team's interactions as members work on a problem-solving task, with each block representing a time period focused on a specific type of behavior. The team starts by discussing the available information (the first orange block). Once members feel fairly confident that everyone has had a chance to share what they know, the team switches to considering possible solutions (the green block). Then, the team returns to discussing information to better inform its decision (the second orange block) before engaging in a long discussion of potential solutions and evaluating them (the second green block). This phase is followed by the team seeking everyone's verbal confirmation (the yellow block). The team ends the task by ensuring the decision is properly recorded and documented (the blue block).

While this behavior may seem aligned with what most of us would expect to happen on a team when making a decision, most teams' behavior trajectory actually looks more like the graphic below, with more frequent switches between phases and some unorganized periods (illustrated as gray blocks).



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The Solution Fixation Trap

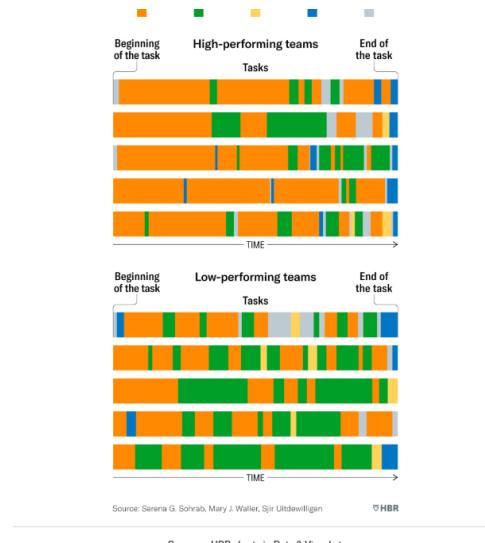
In our research study, we examined the phase maps of 28 teams that worked on a moderately complex problem-solving task. By analyzing their interactions during the task, we were able to uncover a behavioral pattern that was a key performance indicator, distinguishing high-performing teams that found the best solution from low-performing ones that chose the worst solution. The below graphic shows the phase maps for five high-performing and five low-performing teams.

Comparison of Phase Maps for Five High- and Five Low-Performing Teams

Low-performing teams' discussions are dominated by solution exploration and assessment rather than by gathering and analyzing the information required to arrive at a good solution.



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As evident in these maps, low-performing teams' discussions are dominated by solution exploration and assessment rather than by gathering and analyzing the information required to arrive at a good solution. Interestingly, both high and low performers started the task by discussing what they knew about the problem. However, shortly thereafter, low-performing teams became fixated on pitching suggestions about what they should do and began generating various solutions. Once this happened, they failed to return to information analysis for any sustained period of time.

We also found that when these low-performing teams became fixated on their solution exploration, they were less likely to seek information to answer questions that surfaced. If a team member asked, "What do we know about X?", low performers would typically ignore the question and continue discussing potential solutions without substantiating them. This fixation on debating solutions limited the low performers' ability to reveal and fully evaluate all the information available to them, which in turn led to poor decision outcomes. Interestingly, these teams that seemed to rush into debating solutions did not finish the overall task any faster than the high-performing teams.

Protecting Your Team from the Solution Fixation Trap

So what can managers do to prevent their teams from falling into this solution fixation trap? Here are a few easy-to-implement strategies based on our research:

Start the meeting by reviewing all the available information.

Go around the table and encourage people to share what they know — not their opinions — about the situation or problem at hand. Once everyone has had a chance to share what they know, ask the room if they're aware of any information that was not discussed. This is essential because more than three decades of research offers solid evidence that information not known by all team members is significantly less likely to be mentioned during team discussions.

Be mindful of immature solution suggestions.

Meetings are hardly anyone's favorite event, as most people find them a waste of time, overwhelming, and even soul-sucking and painful. As a result, when you gather people into a meeting to solve a problem or make a decision, you may come across people who, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to rush the discussion and end the meeting as soon as possible. They may do this by making explicit comments about time or in more subtle ways, such as jumping to discussing possible solutions. When you notice an immature solution suggestion, label it by saying something like, "Thanks for that suggestion — let's come back to that when we're sure we've uncovered all the relevant information." Then, bring the discussion back to information sharing and analysis.

Encourage evidence-based decision-making throughout the process.

When questions arise, guide the team to answer them based on the available information, not their opinion or rough guesses. You might say something like, "Sounds like we need to go back and dig into this issue a little more."

Use visualization tools to organize the information and solutions

diagram

Some of our other research suggests that teams sifting through and sharing complex information can benefit significantly from the use of a collective display, such as a dry erase board or electronic whiteboard. Writing information on a shared display can certainly help tie information to possible solutions as they are discussed.

In the face of escalating complexities confronting organizations, the reliance on teams to tackle these intricate issues and drive pivotal organizational decisions is on the rise. To extract maximum value from team dynamics, it's paramount to remain mindful of potential biases that may impact team dynamics and to actively steer and fine-tune team processes.



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