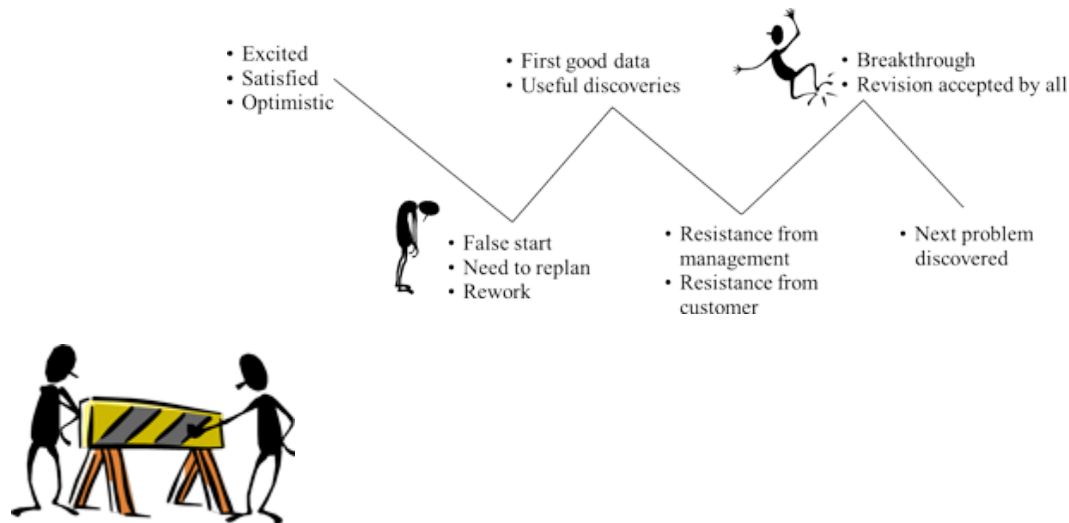


Natural Barriers

There is the natural roller coaster of highs and lows that every team experiences. With every step forward, the future looks bright and team members are optimistic, but no matter how qualified and how well the team works together, progress is never smooth. As progress swings from forward to stalled and stalled to backward, the team mood will swing also.



Natural barriers, the hidden concerns of each team member, pulls team members away from the team's tasks; if not handled well, natural barriers can cause problems. Natural barriers as they relate to teams are: personal identity on the team, relationships between team members, and identity within the organization. Let's examine each one.

Personal Identity on the Team: Have you ever wondered how you will fit into the team?

- Team members question their **membership** on a team having thoughts like: Do I feel like an insider or outsider? Do I belong? Do I want to belong? What can I do to fit in?
- **Influence, control, and mutual trust** are required on a team and often have team members asking themselves: Who's calling the shots here? Who will have the most influence? Will I have influence? Will I be listened to? Will I be able to contribute?
- **Getting along and mutual loyalty** also contribute to personal identity with questions like: How will I get along with other team members? Will we, the team, develop a cooperative spirit?

Relationship between Team Members: Team members want the team to succeed and work together cooperatively. They extend the personal concerns just identified to the team asking questions like: What kind of relationships will characterize this team? How will members of different ranks interact? Will we be friendly and informal or strictly business? Will we be open or guarded in what we say?

Identity with the organization: As team members, we identify strongly with our departments such as software engineering or systems engineering and we need to know how membership on the team will affect this role. Will my loyalty to the team conflict with my loyalty to my department? Will my responsibilities as a team member conflict with my everyday responsibilities?

Ensuring that team members are comfortable in their roles will help alleviate these natural barriers.

Eight Common Problems and What to Do About Them

Looking at teams from another perspective, there are eight common problems that we will discuss and provide some suggestions to improve the issues.

- Floundering
- Overbearing or Dominating Participants
- Reluctant Participants
- Unquestioned Acceptance of Opinions as Fact
- Rush to Accomplishment
- Discounts and Plops
- Wanderlust, Transgressions, and Tangents
- Feuding Team Members

Problem 1: Floundering



Teams commonly have problems starting and ending a project or even phases of the project. At the beginning it is not uncommon to suffer through false starts, rework, and directionless discussion. As the effort progresses, teams sometimes resist moving from one phase to the next often referred to as "analysis paralysis." At the end of a project or phase, teams may delay unnecessarily, postponing decisions or conclusions because "We're not ready to finish yet."

The team leader can deal with floundering by applying these tactics:

- Make sure the team is clear about the tasking.
- Make sure the group's work is the product of consensus.
- Get the group to look critically at how the project is being run and review the plan.
- Ask questions including "What do we need so we can move on?", "What is holding us up?", "Do we need data, knowledge, assurances, or support?", "Are we stuck because we have previous business that is unfinished?"

Problem 2: Overbearing or Dominating Participants



Overbearing participants seem to have an unusual amount of influence in the group, often because of their rank in the company or in-depth technical knowledge. They inhibit the team from building a sense of

team accomplishment or momentum. Most teams benefit from the participation of senior personnel and subject matter experts (SMEs), but their presence is detrimental when they discourage or forbid discussion that encroaches into his or her authority or expertise; signal the "untouchability" of an area by using technical jargon or policies as the ultimate determinant of future actions such as "What you don't understand is that PP8756 requires a bimodal interface between the crag stop and any abutting AC135."; or regularly discount any proposed activity or solution by declaring that it won't work.

The team leader or facilitator can deal with overbearing participants by:

- Reinforcing the idea that no area is sacred and the team should explore alternatives.
- Getting the authority to agree before the project starts and reiterating during the project that team participation and consensus is important to the health and growth of the team.
- Talking to the authority off-line and asking for cooperation and patience.
- Enforcing the primacy of data and the scientific approach.
- Dominating participants who monopolize each meeting, ramble on, and rarely give others a chance to contribute.
- Structuring discussion on key issues to encourage equal participation
- Using nominal group technique.
- Listing "balance of participation" as a general concern to critique during meeting evaluation sessions.
- Practicing gate-keeping such as "We've heard from you on this, Joe. I'd like to hear what others have to say."

Problem 3: Reluctant Participants



Reluctant participants usually feel shy or unsure of themselves in the group, and must be encouraged to contribute. Each of us has a different threshold of need to be part of a team, that is, the "tribal" instincts versus "loner" instincts. Also we each have a different comfort level with speaking in a group; this is our preference towards being an extrovert or introvert. There is nothing right or wrong about one or the other, but problems develop when nothing is done to encourage the introverts to participate and the extroverts to listen.

A team leader can deal with reluctant participants by:

- Structuring participation the same way as for dominating participants.
- When possible, dividing the project task into individual assignments and reports.
- Acting as a gatekeeper by asking questions directly to the reluctant participant like "Does anyone else have any ideas about this?" or calling on them by name. You must be careful if you call them by name as sometimes the reluctant participant recoils rather than responding.

Problem 4: Unquestioned Acceptance of Opinions as Fact



Some team members express personal beliefs and assumptions with such confidence that listeners assume they are hearing a presentation of facts. Most team members are reluctant to question self-assured statements from other members, as the skeptic could be wrong and lose face with the team.

The team leader can deal with unquestioned acceptance by:

- Challenging with questions such as "Is what you said an opinion or fact?", "Do you have data?", "How do you know that is true?", or "Let's accept what you say as possible, but let's get some data to test it."
- Having the group agree on the primacy of the scientific approach.

Problem 5: Rush to Accomplishment



Most teams will include one "do something" member who is either impatient or sensitive to pressure from managers. This type of person typically reaches an individual decision about the task before the group has had time to consider different options, urges the team to make hasty decisions, and discourages further efforts to collect data, analyze, and discuss the task. Teams must realize that task completion takes hard work and rarely can be accomplished overnight.

A team leader can deal with a rush to accomplishment by:

- Reminding the team that the scientific approach will not be compromised or circumvented.
- Making sure that you as the team leader don't panic and exert the pressure to rush on.
- Confronting the rusher using the techniques of constructive feedback including having examples of rushing and describing the effect that this impatience has on the team.

Problem 6: Discounts and Plops



We all have certain values or perspectives that are, consciously or unconsciously, important to us. When someone else ignores or ridicules these values, we feel "discounted" which can cause hostility on a team, especially if it happens frequently. Also there are times on every team when someone makes a statement that "plops." No one acknowledges the comment and the discussion picks up on a totally different subject leaving the speaker to wonder why there was no response. Discounts and plops occur for many reasons including the team member said something that was irrelevant or unclearly stated the idea but no matter what the reason every member deserves the respect and attention of the team.

A team leader can deal with discounts and plops by:

- Including training in active listening and other constructive behaviors early in the team's life.
- Supporting the discounted person by saying "I think what Jerry said is worthwhile and we should spend time on it before we move on."
- Talking off-line with anyone who frequently discounts or plops others on the team.

Problem 7: Wanderlust, Digression and Tangents



Wide-ranging, unfocused conversations are an example of wanderlust and our natural tendency to stray from the subject. Sometimes these digressions are innocent and worthwhile tangents from the task. Sometimes they occur when the team wants to avoid a subject that it needs to address. The facilitator or team leader is responsible for bringing the conversation back to the meeting agenda.

A team leader can deal with wanderlust, digressions, and tangents by:

- Using a written agenda with time estimates for each item and referring to the topic and time item when the discussion strays too far.
- Writing topics or items on flipcharts and posting them on the wall where all team members can refer to them throughout the meeting.
- Directing the conversation back on track.

Problem 8: Feuding team members



Sometimes a team becomes a field of combat for members who are vying with each other. Usually these feuds pre-date the team and in all likelihood will outlast it too. Whenever possible, form teams so that adversaries are not on the same team; otherwise, bring the combatants together before the first meeting to work out some agreement about their behavior.

A team leader can deal with feuding team members by:

- When confrontations occur during a meeting, getting the adversaries to discuss the issue off-line and offering to facilitate the discussion.
- Pushing them to agree to some ground rules for managing their differences without disrupting the group.