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Navigating the High Seas of Teamwork

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"Individually, we are one drop. Together, we are an ocean."

Ryunosuke Satoro

In 1958, The United Nations issued their *Convention on the High Seas* to codify the rules of international law relating to "all parts of the sea that are not included in the territorial sea or in the internal waters of a State." In reviewing its 37 Articles, it struck me that *building and managing high performance teams* have a lot in common with the dangerous High Seas. To wit:

- Teams often move slower than a 'message in a bottle' in search of a distant shore
- The good work of team members can all-too-easily be 'pirated' by a select few
- The language of frustrated team members can all-too-easily get quite 'salty' at times
- Both deep waters and dysfunctional teams have 'untold depths'
- Many good people have 'drowned' in a poorly run team meeting

When the Good Ship Teamwork can so easily start ‘sinking’ like that, one can’t help but ask why even bother? **The answer, of course, is the promise and expectation of *synergy* that teamwork can bring – where $1 + 1 > 2$; where teams really CAN, and often DO, accomplish more (or better or faster or cheaper) than the same number of individuals can...individually.** So what causes so many teams to ‘crash into the rocks’ before achieving their assigned goals and objectives?

Navigating the High Seas of Team Meetings

“Together we can face any challenges as deep as the ocean and as high as the sky”

Sonia Gandhi

“It’s not that successful teams are necessarily any smarter than unsuccessful teams,” says Edward de Bono, author of *Six Thinking Hats*. Rather, in successful teams, “the intelligence, experience, and knowledge of all members of the group are fully used. Everyone is looking and working in the same direction.”

de Bono suggests that unsuccessful teams ‘sink’ because of *traditional* versus *parallel* thinking. Traditional thinking is argument-based thinking: You have your view; I have my view; let’s talk/discuss/argue/fight to see who’s right. de Bono traces this back to the “Gang of Three” Greek philosophers and their impact on Western thinking:

1. **Socrates (469-399 B.C.)** – Socrates wanted to clarify the correct use of concepts like justice and love by pointing out their incorrect usage. As such, he seemingly liked to point out whatever was “wrong,” just as people continue to do to this very day.
2. **Plato (c. 427-348 B.C.)** – Plato understood that much of what we believed to be “truth” was actually only our interpretation of “shadows of the truth,” as he called them. Indeed, countless arguments begin when one person asserts something to be true, but is unable to provide any proof of its truth when challenged.
3. **Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)** – Aristotle liked to categorize. From past experience, he said, we create “boxes” – definitions or principles – and use them to judge what something means and/or where it belongs. That different people create and define similar boxes in different ways (or different boxes similar ways) continues to be a source of argument, disagreement, and debate to this very day.

So, given our deep argument-based tutelage, is it any surprise that team meetings devolve into so many arguments? We should increase profitability by reducing costs. No, we should do it by increasing revenues. We should improve stakeholder value by slowing down and improving product quality. No, we should do it by speeding up to improve our time-to-market. We should give Steve a big raise because he does such good work. No, we should give that money to Mary because what she does is better.







Ready? Set? Argue!

The thing, though, is this: Depending on what aspects of a problem you're looking at, EITHER side can be right. BOTH sides can be right! But when team interactions are based on traditional/argument-based thinking, it's becomes a zero-sum game: Since I can only be right if you're made wrong, I must make you wrong so that I am right. Ah, the dysfunction is virtually limitless.

Diversity of opinion is both the greatest strength and weakness of a team meeting – if everyone is 'rowing in the same direction,' some amazing results are possible, but who *hasn't* been in a meeting where some excellent brainstorming was undermined by a Devil's Advocate? Who *hasn't* personally witnessed how one person's emotional rant 'torpedoed' the consideration of important facts and figures? HOW issues are raised can be both counterproductive AND frustrating.

But contrast this with what de Bono calls *parallel* thinking – that no matter how contradictory views are, everyone looks at the same thing from the same perspective at the same time. Then, they all shift to look at it from *another* perspective, again, at the same time. And another; and another, until all perspectives are fully considered. As such, everyone is involved, all views are considered, and the team makes the fullest use of *everyone's* intelligence and experience. In fact, that's the whole point of parallel thinking – to use everyone's experience and intelligence ... to the fullest.

The beauty of the Six Thinking Hats process is how readily it can align team member thinking *in the same way at the same time*. As shown in Chart 1, there are six different "hats" that team members can wear in a meeting at any given time, but it's the meeting's Chair who decides which Hat everyone wears when.

Chart 1. The Six Thinking Hats		
 <p>The White Hat Facts, Figures Objective Information</p>	 <p>The Red Hat Emotional Reactions Gut Feelings</p>	 <p>The Black Hat Devil's Advocate Logical Negatives</p>
 <p>The Yellow Hat Optimism, Brightness Logical Positives</p>	 <p>The Green Hat Brainstorming, Creativity New Ideas</p>	 <p>The Blue Hat Overriding Priorities Decision Process Itself</p>
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Each team member then has the responsibility – and opportunity – to weigh in with the appropriate "Hat color" comments.

"Let's wear our White Hats to start and discuss the facts, figures, and objective information most relevant to our situation," the Chair might say. And team members would, one-by-one, provide whatever facts, figures, and objective information they believed to be most relevant for the others to

consider. Once completed, the Chair would move to the next “hat” and repeat the process for all six hats.

And what if someone strayed from providing facts and figures during the White Hat round? It’d be the job of the Chair to politely say, “Thank you, Steve. As you know, we’ll be working through ALL of the Hats, but for the time being we’re still in White Hat mode, so please respond accordingly.”

The results? Using the Six Hats approach has enabled half-day planning meetings completed in as little as 45 minutes! And, by following the Six Hat protocol, the “neutral and objective exploration” of a subject is both far more thorough and free from the delays and distractions caused by irrelevant argument and debate. Why?

- Because everyone’s thinking focuses on the same thing at the same time, the conversation is far more meaningful and relevant.
- Because the ‘switch’ of perspectives is coordinated throughout the meeting, everyone continues to think ‘in parallel,’ significantly reducing transitional arguments.
- Because it’s insured that all perspectives will be discussed, no one feels like they have to shoehorn in a comment at an inappropriate time for fear they won’t have the opportunity to do so later on.

“The biggest enemy of thinking is complexity,” writes de Bono, “for that leads to confusion. When thinking is clear and simple, it becomes more enjoyable and more effective.” Indeed, the Six Thinking Hats process DOES remove the complexity and confusion and CAN make team meetings more enjoyable and effective.

Navigating the High Seas of Team Member Stress and Strain

*“Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take
between two deep breaths.”*
Etty Hillesum

Teams are (obviously) comprised of individuals and individuals often handle stress and strain quite differently. Some handle stress easily; others find that it quickly turns into STRAIN – the physical, mental, and emotional toll caused by stress. While stressful SITUATIONS are what they are, there are ways to prevent stress turning into strain. The research of Salvatore R. Maddi and Suzanne C. Kobasa, as reported in their book, *The Hardy Executive: Health Under Stress*, is particularly helpful in this regard. They found that a person’s strain-protection – or “hardiness,” as they called it – is significantly improved when they focus on three specific areas/perspectives:

- (1) **Control** – Actively managing what you CAN control, but not making yourself crazy trying to control what you CANNOT
- (2) **Challenge** – Purposefully focusing on finding a bridge ‘across the water’ rather than allowing yourself to be taken ‘by the raging tide’

- (3) **Commitment** – Truly believing that whatever you're working on is of significant meaning, relevance, and resonance.

So Stress: Yes. Worry: Loads. Concern: Absolutely. But Strain: Not so much.

The immediate question, no doubt, is how REAL is this hardiness dynamic? How effective are the elements of Control, Challenge, and Commitment in everyday life? The research data is actually quite compelling as Chart 2 indicates with respect to the severity of illness:

Chart 2: Average Severity of Illness for Groups Defined By Hardiness and Stressful Events			
		Hardiness	
		High	Low
Stressful Events	High	513.53	1,060.56
	Low	415.26	528.88

- The LOWEST illness scores (415.26) were for individuals in the Low Stressful Events/High Hardiness group.
- The HIGHEST illness scores (1060.56) were for individuals in the High Stressful Events/Low Hardiness group.
- The illness scores for the High Stressful Events/High Hardiness group (513.53) were HALF that of the High Stressful Events/Low Hardiness group (1060.56).
- The illness scores for the High Stressful Events/High Hardiness group (513.53) were LOWER than the Low Stressful Events/Low Hardiness group (528.88).

Compelling, no?

For those too easily 'capsized' by stress and strain, Maddi and Kobassa offer several ideas for improving one's hardiness...and the hardiness of one's team:

- **To increase your sense of Control** – Believe (or just act as if you believe, at first) that you really CAN influence what's going on around you. Dig into how you might turn a given situation to your advantage; don't just accept things the way they are, as oftentimes very small changes can make huge differences. Don't allow yourself to feel powerless or act like a passive victim. Show initiative; utilize whatever resources you already have at your disposal, as effectively as you can. Don't get stuck in your own myopia.

- **To increase your sense of Challenge** – Realize that it's natural for things to change and that change is often a "useful stimulus" for helping good things happen sooner. *Rather than seeing your work (or life) as strenuous instead of exciting, practice seeing it as exciting because it's strenuous.* Don't fall into the trap of thinking that it's natural for things to stay stable...because it's not. Don't fear change because it will overly disrupt your comfort and security...resisting change is often the bigger threat to your safety and well-being.
- **To increase your sense of Commitment** – Get interested in WHATEVER you're doing – as in REALLY interested. Dig in and figure it out. Engage wholeheartedly, cheerfully, zestfully! Don't hold back, withdraw, alienate yourself, label your work as boring, or neglect your physical appearance or presence – fight the urge to appear exhausted and disheveled.

For a team to be at its best, both its leader AND team members must be at their best. "Exhausted people are seldom able to perform at consistently high levels or with sufficient creativity to meet new challenges," says Barbara Bailey Reinhold, Ed.D., author of *Toxic Work*. So actively help those around you become more hardy – and let them help you with your hardiness, as well. Create a 'main mast' of team strength and identity by insuring that you're committed to helping your team members weather their storms, 'choppy waters' notwithstanding.

Navigating the High Seas of Team Decision-Making

"Every drop in the ocean counts"
Yoko Ono

With smoothly run meetings, and hardy team members, the best ideas will likely 'bubble up' to the surface. How then to choose among them?

A wonderfully quirky tale published in *Organizational Dynamics* provides instruction. Written by Arthur Elliott Carlisle and titled "MacGregor," it's a story about the manager-in-charge of the largest and most successful refinery. Curiously, though, MacGregor refuses to make any operating decisions whatsoever – he simply decided a while back "not to get involved in the decisions that his subordinates are being paid to make." That's not to say that MacGregor didn't care, however.

"MacGregor's overriding concern was with RESULTS: the results his subordinates achieved through methods they developed either by themselves or working with their peers. He simply refused to do their work for them, even at the risk of incurring short-run costs." Doing otherwise, he felt, would be tantamount to training his team to abandon their own problem-solving skills, something he was loathe to do. So, he "divorced himself from direct involvement in solving problems his subordinates came upon in carrying out their responsibilities" and concentrated his efforts, instead, on "formulating and negotiating staff performance objectives."

He did, however, have a particularly well-developed, seven step, decision-making protocol which he insisted everyone on his staff use:

1. **State — as precisely as possible — what the problem is.** A surprising number of today's teams actually ignore this step, assuming that all team members will interpret the ambiguous assignments they receive in the same way or that they'll all be able to figure it out as things unfold.
2. **State any/all Conditions of Success necessary for a solution to be deemed "satisfactory and appropriate."** As with Step 1, a surprising number of today's teams jump right to the "doing" and never actually articulate what success would ideally "look like" – or how to recognize its "near-success" and "near-failure" counterparts.
3. **Identify/brainstorm possible solutions.** The Six Thinking Hats process has a Hat for that!
4. **Vet each possible solution in Step 3 against the conditions of satisfaction and appropriateness as set forth in Step 2.** Lewis Carroll said: "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there," and this is the step that highlights this most. Too many teams simply fail to check their potential solutions against the Conditions of Success set forth in Step 2. As a result, they proceed with faux-solutions, ones that meet some, but not all, of the necessary conditions – which is why Steps 5 and 6 are so important.
5. **Repeat Step 3 and Step 4 until there's at least one potential solution of each of the Conditions of Success set forth in Step 2.** In all likelihood, each of the first set of options will satisfy some Conditions of Success ... in different ways. So the goal here is to insure that ALL Conditions of Success are met ... even if that means, temporarily, that more than one solution is seemingly needed.
6. **Create a HYBRID solution by combining various components from each potential solution in Step 5 so that each and every Condition of Success set forth in Step 2 is satisfactorily (and appropriately) met.** The notion of creating a "hybrid" solution is very powerful, indeed. It takes the best-of-the-best and combines those elements into an optimal solution for moving forward.
7. **Implement the hybrid solution identified in #6.**

MacGregor's trained his managers to first try and solve their problems on their own, but if they could not, they were to ask their peers for help. When presenting their ultimate solutions to MacGregor, they were always asked to disclose the names of those who were particularly helpful to them, at which point MacGregor would thank, and recognize accordingly, those who helped their teammates.

As a result of MacGregor's approach, his team dramatically improved both their teamwork and decision-making:

- Since a manager's peers knew they'd be recognized by MacGregor for their helping a peer vet an issue, they were very EAGER to help vet issues, and do so to the BEST of their abilities.
- Because MacGregor insured that the issues managers faced were sufficiently complex, managers quickly learned that they NEEDED to ask their peers for help.
- Team members started showing greater RESPECT and REGARD for each other when: (a) they saw that others were asking THEM for help; and (b) they saw that they could ask OTHERS for help, as well.
- Because everyone HAD to ask others for help, everyone's egos were kept in check.

- And as results dramatically improve, a spirit of true camaraderie developed – and sustained – regardless of how ‘choppy’ the waters got.

Navigating the High Seas of Success

*“My goal in sailing isn't to be brilliant or flashy in individual races,
just to be consistent over the long run.”*

Dennis Conner

Building and managing high performance teams really DOES have a lot in common with the dangerous High Seas: adventure; possibilities; vibrancy; discovery. Effectively leveraging 1 +1 >2 practice and application of synergy; empowering your team to accomplish more (or better or faster or cheaper) than the same number of individuals could...individually; and helping insure ‘safe passage’ of the promise, expectation, and results of effective collaboration, is ‘helmsmanship’ of the highest order.

‘Fair winds and following seas’ to both you AND your team.

Barry Zweibel, Master Certified Coach, heads LeadershipTraction®, a division of GottaGettaCoach!®, Inc. The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and CNN.com have quoted Barry as a subject matter expert on a variety of personal/professional development topics; his articles on leadership, conflict management, career planning, and coaching have been widely published; and his book, Leadership Haiku: Increasing Your Impact and Influence 17 Syllable at a Time has been widely received.

Starting from where seminars and training programs typically leave off, Barry’s fully customized 1-on-1 coaching and mentoring is particularly well-suited for executives and mid-level managers interested in increasing their leadership competencies and organizational impact and influence. Those looking to improve their confidence, creativity, charisma and work/life balance, benefit from his coaching, as well.

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