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Which of These Five Team Malfunctions Is Costing You Results?

Five common team dynamics that undermine excellence, and what you can do about them

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As a leader, you depend on your team to deliver. Unfortunately, many teams operate in ways that undermine their ability to produce results. For example, one of my clients was leading a team that had failed to meet significant performance expectations for three quarters in a row. There was squabbling among team members, and morale was low. Another leader I worked with was struggling with instilling a culture of accountability with her team – people would not voice objections to decisions, but then fail to follow through on the work.

When these sorts of "malfunctions" happen, it's easy to point the finger at those "troublesome team members." However, your acts of leadership can begin to turn things around. This article outlines five common ways that teams malfunction, and what you can do as a leader that will make a difference.

Malfunction #1: Not Speaking Up

What it looks like

The most common team-related challenge that I hear about from my clients is "people don't speak up." One client called this "false harmony," and identified it as one of the top reasons that his team was struggling to meet its goals. You know how it works:

- When people disagree with what you're saying, they don't speak up.
- When there's conflict between team members or departments or site locations, people don't speak up.
- When there's a problem with the work, or the timeline, or the budget....you got it, people don't speak up.

Instead, there's the "meeting after the meeting." Over lunch, during breaks, or in the privacy of their own offices, people will say, "can you believe what he said?" or "that idea will never work," or "what are those idiots doing over there?"

Why it's a problem

There are lots of reasons why this common dynamic happens – lack of trust, fear of negative consequences, and a lack of skill in directly communicating tough messages are a just a few. Whatever the reasons, though, the fact that it happens at all is a huge drag on team performance. When team members aren't able to skillfully share what they're really thinking, a whole host of negative consequences result:

- nobody gets honest feedback about their ideas or their performance
- bad decisions get made because crucial information is missing
- meetings go in circles because people express themselves indirectly
- conflict doesn't get resolved
- there's no follow through on decisions because commitment wasn't there in the first place
- the team isn't focused on the most important work (but nobody is saying so)

Clearly, people not speaking up is a problem – for teams, for leaders, and for organizational results.

What to do about it

So, what can you do about it? How do you avoid the "meeting after the meeting" syndrome? If you believe people on your team aren't speaking up, here are some suggested action steps:

1. **Check in with people one-on-one**. If you're having a hard time getting information about what people are thinking during a meeting, having individual conversations in more relaxed circumstances may yield more feedback. Make it your goal during these conversations to listen deeply and really understand people's perspectives, not to share your own.
2. **Set aside meetings just for hearing what people think**. When time is pressing and there are decisions to be made and tasks to be done, it can be harder to switch gears into listening and inquiry. Calling a meeting with the sole purpose of hearing what people have to say about a critical topic can create the space for honest conversation.
3. **Ask people why they don't speak up**. If you get honest feedback from people outside of meetings, ask them what keeps them from sharing the same information in a meeting. Listen especially for patterns of team interaction and any behaviors of yours that contribute to people's unwillingness to speak up.
4. **Reflect on your response when people DO speak up**. Leaders sometimes unknowingly contribute to the lack of honest dialogue. You may be reacting with impatience, too quickly dismissing someone's contribution, or responding by explaining why your idea is the better one. If you're sending signals that you don't want to hear what people have to say, you can bet that they won't tell you. And they'll believe your signals much more than they'll believe your words.

Malfunction #2: Bypassing Follow Through and Accountability

What it looks like

My guess is that you've had the experience of leading or working on teams where people didn't take personal responsibility for getting things done. Instead of being accountable, people blamed others – other team members, other divisions, management, the union, competitors.

One team I worked with several years ago really struggled with accountability and follow through. They would seemingly come to agreement on a decision, or express support for the leader's direction, but then no action happened as a result. Another client was caught in a downward spiral with her managers: she would lay out her expectations, they would not follow through, she would repeat her expectations, and they would again not follow through. They had learned that they wouldn't be called to account if they let something slide.

Why it's a problem

There are many consequences for teams when people don't follow through, and then avoid having honest conversations about accountability:

- you waste time rehashing decisions
- morale suffers as people observe their colleagues not following through
- team members disengage from each other
- leaders start to micromanage

All of these things undermine a team's ability to produce results.

What to do about it

If you and your team are struggling with follow through and accountability, here are some suggested action steps:

1. **Assign one person responsibility for making sure every decision is acted on**. This isn't about creating blame or fear of consequences. And it doesn't mean one person does all the work. But without what my profession calls "single point accountability," it's easy for everybody to assume that someone else will take care of what needs to happen.

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2. **Begin talking explicitly in terms of commitments**. When the team comes to a decision, identify the action steps, assign responsibility for each of them, and then ask each individual, "Do I have your commitment to get this done?" If you hear "I'll see what I can do," or "I'll try to get that to you by Friday," let people know that's not adequate.

3. **Be willing to negotiate with people if necessary**. You need to know if you can count on your team to produce a specific result by a specific time – if they can't commit to that, then you either re-negotiate the action step or find out what support they need in order to make a genuine commitment.

4. **Set aside time for status reports at every meeting**. If you assign people responsibility for following through on action items, make sure you check in with them at the next meeting. Again, this isn't about creating blame. It's about establishing the practice of direct and honest conversation. Is the work on track? If not, why not? What support is needed to get things back on track?

5. **When someone doesn't follow through on a commitment, have a direct, clear, non-blaming conversation** that's focused on resolving the breakdown. Do this consistently, every time someone doesn't follow through, and refuse to accept excuses.

Malfunction #3: Avoiding Conflict with Triangulation

What it looks like

Triangulation is a common dynamic in organizational and team systems. When there's conflict between Person A and Person B, A talks to Person C (usually in a complaining, criticizing kind of way) instead of dealing directly with B. In other words, instead of having open, honest conversations with the person involved in the conflict, people triangulate by venting their feelings and stories with other people.

Here's how clients of mine have described it:

- "One staff person came to me with a complaint about another, and I told her that she needed to go have that conversation with the person she was complaining about. She hasn't done that yet, and now I need to follow up."
- "There's a potential problem on the horizon that I want to talk to my CEO about, but all my peers are telling me, 'don't do it. It won't do you any good.'"
- "The staff under one of my managers were having trouble with him. I learned about it because some of the them went to one of my peers, and she told me. Now she has negative feelings about my manager."

Why it's a problem

Triangulation is a pretty common human impulse – most of us want to avoid the discomfort of hard conversations – but it's also a death knell for teams and organizations. Triangulation starts a whole cascade of events that undermine trust and team performance:

- the people who get drawn into the conflict end up with a negative view of the person they heard complaints about
- the person being complained about doesn't get important feedback about how others are perceiving her
- the source of the conflict never gets resolved, and so the cycle keeps repeating
- bad feelings persist and people's perceptions and beliefs about each other harden into "truth"
- people stop being able to work well together because there's so much baggage and unresolved conflict

This dynamic creates a lot of what a colleague of mine calls "underbrush." Ultimately, when triangulation is an organizational habit, there's so much underbrush that a relatively minor event or misunderstanding can become the lit match that sets off a conflagration, burning everything in sight.

What to do about it

So, what's a leader to do? How can you cultivate a team environment where people talk <u>to</u> each other rather than <u>about</u> each other?

1. **First, be impeccable in your own conversations**. No matter how frustrated you are with someone, never talk about him to someone else in the organization. Always talk directly to anybody you've got a problem with – or don't talk at all.
2. **Refuse to tolerate people coming to you with complaints about somebody else on the team**. Send them back to the other person to work it out, with the expectation that they do so within 24 hours and update you on the result. Some leaders will actually interrupt mid-complaint, call in the person being complained about, and support the conversation that needs to happen. ("Support" is the key word here – this can be done kindly, but firmly.)
3. **Focus team development on conflict resolution and communication skills**. Support people in getting better at telling the truth skillfully enough that they can listen to each other.
4. **Get help if you need it**. As the leader, you're part of the dynamic, and it can sometimes be hard to see your own role clearly enough to spearhead changes. Find a good coach to support you and your team in breaking the triangulation habit.

Malfunction #4: Letting Communication Gaps Fester

What it looks like

About a year ago, a colleague and I did some team coaching with a client and her team. In the course of practicing one of the communication tools we introduced, one of the team members initiated a conversation with a colleague about an incident that happened two years ago, which left him feeling hurt and offended.

Two years. That's a long time to hold onto bad feelings. And it turns out that this team member's interpretation of his colleague's behavior, which led to his emotional reaction, was based on incomplete information. Sure, there were other team dynamics that contributed to the two-year silence - yet I remain struck by how significant an impact simple communication gaps can have when they're left to fester. For this person, the incident negatively affected his perceptions of his colleague and trust took a nose-dive. How well do you think these two people were able to work together over those two years?

Why it's a problem

Communication gaps like this happen all the time. Much of the time, they go unnoticed by the majority of the team, and don't ever get resolved. As a leader, you should care deeply about this. When team members experience communication gaps and aren't able to close them, misunderstandings and hard feelings can persist, leading to unnecessary conflict, factions among the team, "over-reactions" to minor incidents, and unwillingness to go the extra mile for each other. Bottom line: team performance suffers.

What to do about it

1. **The first step toward bridging communication gaps is to learn to recognize them**. Look for clues about the impact of your words and messages, and move quickly to address any gaps that open when the impact doesn't match your intent.

2. **Practice clearly describing the impact others have on you**. When someone says or does something that has a negative effect on you, don't assume that was the intent. Clearly describe your experience - what you observed, what you thought, what you felt - and ask "Is that what you intended?" The key here is to take responsibility for your own reaction, and describe it without making judgments about the other person.

3. **Get in the habit of clarifying your own intent**. Be explicit about what you are trying to achieve with any communication. Often, when people hear that what they thought was intended wasn't it at all, they're able to let go of the impact and move on.

4. **Support your team members in recognizing and closing communication gaps themselves**. If you notice a misunderstanding between two people, acknowledge it and facilitate a conversation between them that resolves the breakdown. The faster gaps get closed, the more effective the team will be.

Malfunction #5: Fixing the Wrong Problem

What it looks like

When teams go off track, the most common human response is to blame somebody. We tend to assume that if only Fred got his act together, everything would be fine. Our next favorite explanation is interpersonal conflict, or style differences: "well, Mary and Sally have never gotten along." When these are our explanations for team breakdowns, our solutions tend to focus there as well. Maybe we send Fred to training, or bring in an outside mediator for Mary and Sally.

And yet, even with training and mediation, team problems persist. This is because, while ineffective individuals and conflicted relationships can certainly cause teams to stumble sometimes, the vast majority of the time there are other reasons for the team going off track. The most typical reasons have to do with structure, alignment, and group process. For example:

- goals and roles are not clear and/or agreed upon
- specific responsibilities and expectations are not clear
- there's no mutual accountability
- the decision making process is ineffective or unclear
- communication patterns among team members don't support learning or problem solving

No matter how much you mediate a conflict between two people, that conflict will continue to brew if it is rooted in the fact they have different understandings of their respective roles.

Why it's a problem

Focusing on the wrong problem when teams go off track causes all sorts of problems in and of itself:

- identifying individuals (rather than the system) as the source of the breakdown creates a culture of blame
- other team members can avoid reflecting on how they contribute to the pattern
- underlying issues (e.g. role clarity) don't get addressed, and so continue to fester, even as specific individuals transition off the team
- the team doesn't learn how to diagnose and resolve breakdowns

In short, fixing the wrong problem can leave you worse off than doing nothing at all.

What to do about it

The good news is that the more common structural and process-related reasons for team breakdowns are much easier to address than ineffective individuals or conflicted relationships. Here's what you can do as a leader to avoid fixing the wrong problem:

1. **Whenever there's a conflict between team members, check to make sure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined and mutually understood**. This one step can save you hours of meeting grief.
2. **Get people on the same page about the goals you are trying to reach**. When teams go off track, it's often because people are assuming that everybody has the same goal in mind, when in fact they don't. For example, what looks like a disagreement about strategy can really be the result of a difference in goals.
3. **Clearly communicate the decision making process for every decision that needs to be made**. Are you looking for input from your team and then you will make the call? Are you delegating to another individual? Will it be a majority vote of the team? What tends to happens is that team members get into heated conflicts as they try to convince each other of their points of view. Providing clarity about the decision making process will help them focus instead on who needs what information in order to make a good decision.
4. **Keep your focus on patterns, rather than individuals**. Patterns involve the whole team (including you). Naming them raises awareness without blaming individuals. For example, assume there's one person on your team who often will talk at length about things unrelated to the meeting's agenda. An individual-focused response might be, "Joe, stop wasting so much time." But the pattern is that when Joe starts talking, everybody checks out, which makes him try harder to get his point across, and nobody is saying anything about the meeting being off track.

So, Where Do You Go From Here?

This article outlines 5 common ways that teams malfunction. Which of them are familiar to you? And, what action do you want to take? One place to start is to pick one team behavior that you would like to change. Get crystal clear about what you would like to be different about how your team operates, and what YOU need to do differently in order to elicit that new behavior. Then use the relevant action steps from the article above and do them for one whole month. See what happens.

A second action step, if you want to investigate more fully how you can change the way you and your team do business, is to call me and schedule a complimentary Strategy Session. During this session we'll talk about your current team-related challenges, how you'd like things to be different, and the business results at stake, and explore how the services of Still Point Leadership might be able to support you. You can expect that this session will run between 60 and 90 minutes, in person or by phone. You can reach me at (206) 783-0515 or karen@stillpointleadership.com. I look forward to hearing from you!

About Karen Kane

Karen Kane is a certified leadership and team coach, and works with leaders and leadership teams in the non-profit and government sectors who are not getting the results they need and want to perform at a higher level. She has been the Principal of Still Point Leadership, Inc. for the past 13 years, and in that time has helped clients from front line supervisors to executives, in a wide range of organizations, lead their teams more effectively. Karen brings a results-focused orientation to her work, and through a combination of 1:1 leadership coaching and team coaching she helps clients build teams that communicate directly and openly, manage conflict skillfully, engage in highly productive meetings, and deliver great results. Karen is a Professional Certified Coach through the International Coach Federation, and has an MA in Applied Behavioral Sciences from the Leadership Institute of Seattle.