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BUILDING SHARED UNDERSTANDING

TAKING THE TEETH OUT OF TEAM TRAPS

BY ALAN SLOBODNIK AND KRISTINA WILE

Have you ever worked as part of a team that was truly stuck, unable to move forward on a project? Have you seen negative team dynamics actually destroy a group's potential? Consider the following scenarios:

- There is one team member who always seems to be "the problem."
- You find yourself thinking, "Why are we having this argument *again*?"
- You have a sense of déjà vu when team members say they will do something that you know will never happen.
- You find yourself becoming increasingly passive in the face of the group's growing inertia.
- No one seems to have the courage or energy to initiate a discussion about obvious process problems.

These are just a few of the symptoms displayed by teams that are trapped in a predictable dynamic of rising interpersonal turmoil and falling productivity.

The vast majority of us have experienced one or more of these "Team Traps"; that is, vicious cycles of unproductive behavior that undermines group performance. The affected team can be a family system, a small work group, or any kind of business team—from an executive-level task force to a product-development group. In such situations, team members often feel frustrated and helpless. These feelings can lead people to take drastic actions, such as giving up on the project or even sabotaging it, which further escalates the group's level of tension and inability to take effective action.

There is no shortage of books on teams or team problems. Yet most of the descriptions of, and proposed solutions to, dysfunctional team behavior focus on the *task* or *event* level of team performance. These resources offer little insight into the underlying structure of *relationships* that is driving the complex human interactions. For instance, much of the literature stresses the need for teams to agree on a charter and to clarify roles that the members will play. However, the same books offer little analysis of the dynamics that may prevent groups from reaching these kinds of agreements. Even books on conflict resolution tend to focus on the "how-tos of negotiation" rather than on the emotional dynamics that can undermine the negotiation process.

Because teams are complex systems, any attempt to "fix" them without understanding the structural

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TEAM TRAPS

1. **False Consensus:** Lack of real buy-in
2. **Inability to Reach Closure:** Ineffective problem-solving and decision-making
3. **Rigid Hierarchy:** Operation by power and control
4. **Weak Leadership:** Inadequate direction from the top
5. **Uneven Participation:** Under-utilized human resources
6. **Calcified Interactions:** Rote patterns of behavior
7. **Lack of Mutual Accountability:** Absence of evaluation and consequences
8. **Unrealistic Expectations:** Burn-out
9. **Forgotten Customer:** Too insular an approach to the marketplace
10. **Left-Out Stakeholders:** Lack of support by key players
11. **Unresolved Overt Conflict:** Personality conflicts
12. **Undiscussed Covert Conflict:** Underground conflict

INSIDE

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causes of their problems runs the risk of becoming a "Fix That Fails." In such a case, the intervention may be unsuccessful or may create unintended consequences that are even more challenging than the original dilemma. This article describes how the application of systems thinking and human systems concepts can yield a robust "picture" of a team's underlying structure and pattern of interpersonal dynamics. This perspective can help us to effectively predict and correct—or better yet, avoid—common Team Traps.

Structure in Social Systems

The structure of any complex system is made up of the relationships among its various components. In the case of a business, which is a kind of social system, these elements include flows of people, money, information, and material, as well as employees' goals, performance, and emotions.

The only effective way to change a team's behavior is to identify and modify this web of relationships and interconnections. To do so, we can approach surfacing the root causes of a team's dysfunction the way a physician diagnoses a patient's illness—by analyzing symptoms and drawing conclusions about the underlying disease or condition causing those symptoms. In a person—an individual "human system"—the doctor might intervene by prescribing medication to help the body overcome the ailment, recommend dietary changes to eliminate nutritional elements that have negative effects, or recommend new habits—such as regular exercise—to set into motion reinforcing loops for health.

In a social system, the dimension of the human mind adds another layer of complexity. Individuals' perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and emotions all play a role in team dynamics by affecting the actions that people take and the results that they achieve. For this reason, no diagnosis of the "disease" plaguing a human system is complete without an understanding of the emotional drivers at work. But in business organizations especially, we often disregard these important factors. Exploring feelings in a work setting can be threatening and frightening to those of us steeped in a work ethic that calls on us to "suck it up" when things go wrong. When a team fails to fulfill its mission, we focus on refining the task or adjusting the team's make-up, not on surfacing the interpersonal dynamics that disabled the group's performance. Nevertheless, it is precisely those situations where emotions remain unexplored that devolve into intractable and disheartening team experiences—what we call "Team Traps."

Team Traps: "Archetypes" of Social Systems

In our study of team performance, we have identified 12 common structural dynamics that teams easily fall into—and that interfere with a group's ability to achieve their purpose. Each of these Team Traps tends to stop groups from doing productive work (see "Team Traps" on p. 1). These dynamics occur often enough to be considered "archetypal"; in some cases, they are variations of the classic systems thinking archetypes. Most dysfunctional teams tend to get mired in two or three of these Team Traps at any given moment.

The Team Traps were identified and tested based on empirical research over a 30-year period. They have been cross-referenced with other human system models, such as stages of group development and Kantor's system types, which are explained below. Teams generally fall into these traps while deciding on a common purpose, managing internal and external boundaries, resolving conflicts, making decisions, assigning accountability, and other important process steps. The Team Traps concept highlights how these process issues affect task issues, and vice versa. For example, a team stuck in escalating conflict between two key members either grinds to a halt on its deliverables or develops an elaborate "work-around" that limits the amount of interaction the combatants have, also slowing down the task at hand.

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At a moderate level, the symptoms of the Team Trap dynamics include frustration by group members, or frantic but unproductive efforts to achieve the stated goal. At a severe level, teams caught in these traps become disabled; that is, they are no longer able to work together as a group to fulfill their common mission. The long-term effects of these dysfunctional patterns of behavior can

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THE SYSTEMS THINKER™ explores both the theory and practice of the learning organization, with particular emphasis on systems thinking as the cornerstone of the five disciplines (as outlined by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline*). Articles by leading thinkers and practitioners articulate the challenges and issues involved in creating learning organizations. We encourage dialogue about systemic issues and strive to provide a forum for debating such issues. Unsolicited articles, stories, and letters to the editor are welcome.

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prove even more destructive than merely undermining the current project—they can corrode or even destroy team members' confidence and level of trust well into the future.

So, how can we escape from—or, even better, avoid—these quagmires? Because each Team Trap involves both task and relationship issues, we have found that using a combination of tools from the fields of systems thinking and human systems can be a potent force for altering these common structures.

Integrating System Dynamics and Human Systems

Although they share a common ancestry, the fields of human systems and system dynamics have remained relatively separate since the 1950s. The major work in human systems has been carried out in anthropology, psychology, and family therapy. System dynamics has its origins in the "hard" sciences of physics, mathematics, biology, and later computer science. The systems thinking movement has begun the process of integrating the two fields through the five-disciplines model introduced by Peter Senge. By analyzing team behavior on a structural level with causal loop diagrams and using human systems tools and concepts to frame and explain those loops, we hope to carry that integration one step further.

Using causal loop diagrams, we can map the interplay of task and emotional processes. For example, in the Inability to Reach Closure Team Trap, as the amount of work the team completes (task) goes down, frustration (emotion) increases (see "Inability to Reach Closure Loop"). As frustration increases, the number of actions that individuals take outside of the team framework (task) grows, which interferes with focused team action (task), and further decreases the amount of work being accomplished. Causal loop diagrams provide a richer understanding of human systems than an event-level analysis that focuses only on tasks, and can help us uncover the role that emotional factors play in perpetuating the system.

Causal loop diagrams also provide a testing ground for potential solutions. Using an agreed-upon representation of the dynamics, managers, team leaders, and facilitators can explore why intuitive solutions don't work, and test exactly what approaches might be successful and why. For instance, a common reaction to the Unresolved Overt Conflict Team Trap is for one team member to plead with the two adversaries to "be reasonable," to notice how their behavior is destroying the team's ability to accomplish anything, and to compromise. Although this intervention may seem appropriate, it seldom works, because it does not address the emotions underpinning the harmful behavior.

Causal loop diagrams let us identify the high-leverage areas for successful intervention. For instance, in our example of Unresolved Overt Conflict, the first step might be to acknowledge the disagreeing parties' underlying fears—which are usually that they are not being heard—and try reversing the process that evolved to make them feel disrespected to begin with. Only after each team member feels that the others hear and value his or her perspective and experience can the group resume its original work.

In system dynamics, possible structural interventions include adding a link, breaking a link, and changing a delay. An example of adding a link to a social system like a business would be to create a measurement system to track work completed. Another new link might be to develop a forum for talking about underlying fears that may be fueling conflict. An example of changing a delay would be to establish periodic status meetings to decrease the gap between actual project progress and perceived project progress. Finally, instituting meeting rules that disallow overt challenges to ideas might constitute breaking a link. The knowledge generated by these kinds of systemic interventions can powerfully advance team learning.

Part of the challenge for intervening in social systems lies in identifying the kinds of structural changes that might be effective. It's easier to simply react to the situation as an individual than to figure out what is causing the collective team behavior. It's also much easier to talk about the work to be done than to honestly explore pivotal emotional issues that are holding up progress. As mentioned above, we have found that applying human system tools in tandem with systems thinking tools creates tremendous synergy. The human system approaches provide an additional framework for diagramming social systems and for identifying possible high-leverage actions. Two human system tools by the family systems therapist David Kantor are particularly valuable: The Four-Player Model and System Types.

Four Player Model: Intervening Systemically

In this context, we call Kantor's Four-Player Model the Four Team Roles (for more detail on this model, see "Dialogic Leadership" by William N. Isaacs in V10N1). According to this model, every sequence of interactions can be described as the interplay of people filling four roles: Mover, Opposer (or what we call Challenger), Follower (or Supporter), and Bystander (or Mirror). A meeting or conversation begins with an initial action by the Mover. Other people either support or challenge the action, or call attention to the process (Mirror).

This framework is useful for analyzing team behavior, identifying variables in causal loop diagrams, and

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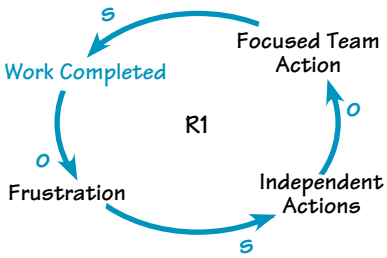
INABILITY TO REACH CLOSURE LOOP



As the amount of work the team completes goes down, frustration grows. The number of actions that individuals take outside of the team framework rises, which interferes with focused team action, and further decreases the amount of work being accomplished.

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designing solutions to the Team Traps. How does this work in practice? Let's look at one particularly disabling Team Trap: False Consensus. False Consensus is characterized by the following list of symptoms:

- People silently nod their heads in support of an initiative even though they don't really agree with what is happening.
- A lack of discussion results in faulty decisions.
- Controversy is discouraged out of fear of slowing down the process.
- People say one thing but think or do another.
- Team members undermine the decision after the meeting.
- Because participants don't really "buy in," they don't follow through on assigned tasks.

In a False Consensus scenario, someone, usually the team leader, wants something to be done to address a problem or exploit an opportunity (R2 in "The Dynamics of False Consensus"). Fearing repercussions if they question (Challenge) this action, the rest of the group gives a "head nod" to the leader, resulting in false agreement and consequently poor follow-through. Because no one actually takes action to implement the leader's idea, the original problem intensifies, resulting in stronger "moving" by the leader. Notice how the causal loop diagram includes both task and process variables, and how emotion (fear of repercussions) drives the behavior (head nodding) that ultimately worsens the situation.

The team members' fear of repercussions and the strength of their conviction that the Mover's actions are wrong-headed make them angry. These emotions quickly find expression in covert conversations around the water cooler and in the hallways, which legitimize the inaction and lack of productivity (R3). Not only does this behavior exacerbate the original problem, but it also isolates the team leader, again increasing his or her level of frustration and tendency to push for action (what Kantor refers to as a "Stuck Mover").

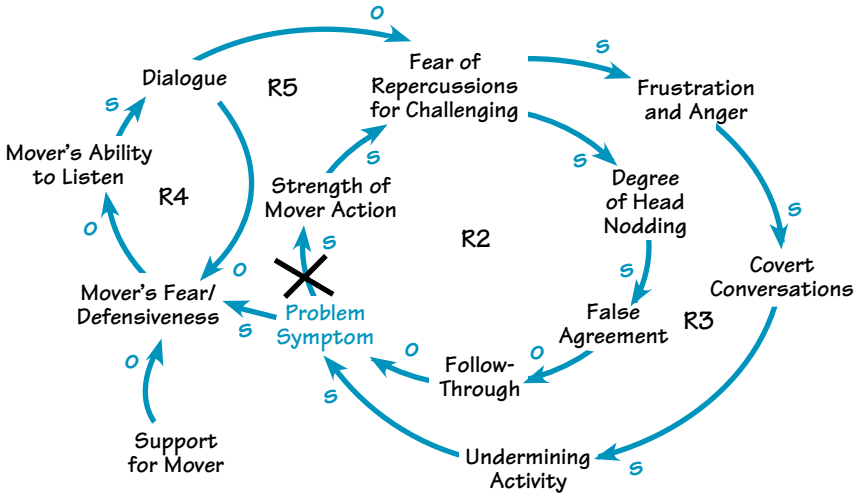
At this point, the entire team feels stressed. Certain individuals may try to solve the problem by approaching the Mover to discuss the situation. However, the longer the issue persists, the more defensive the team leader may feel. This defensiveness can stymie any attempts to initiate a dialogue (R4). Because the team members do not feel that they can overtly challenge the leader, they continue to resist the plan covertly (R5).

The leader can push and push, but the problem won't be solved until the team alters the underlying structure that is leading to the "stuck" pattern of behavior. Notice how the group's continued resistance to the Mover's plan perpetuates the basic reinforcing loop. By studying the causal loop diagram and understanding the four different team roles, we find that one way to alter the dynamic would be to support the Mover instead of challenging him or her. This action breaks the link between Problem Symptom and Strength of Mover Action by making the Mover feel that someone understands the problem and is on his or her side.

Supporting the Mover may seem counterintuitive, even for experienced facilitators. In addition, team members may have difficulty forgiving the Mover for his or her heavy-handedness in pressing for action. Nevertheless, we have seen numerous breakthroughs achieved when a team member or an outside facilitator validates a Mover's motives. After all, the Mover is at least trying to solve the perceived problem or capitalize on the opportunity. Validating his or her intentions makes the Mover feel understood, which lessens the need to push for action.

Validation also opens the door to the possibility of a new solution to the ongoing challenge. It makes the Mover more able to hear others' perspectives and to consider alternative solutions to the problem. This openness in turn sets the stage for a dialogue about the emotions—such as fear of repercussions—that have been fueling the process. In such cases, creating a causal loop diagram and using insights from human systems can lead to a new understanding of both the problem behavior and the structural solution.

THE DYNAMICS OF FALSE CONSENSUS



The Mover wants something to be done. Team members' fear of repercussions leads them to appear to accept the mandate, but they fail to take action (R2). These fears find expression in covert conversations, which legitimize the inaction and cause the leader to feel defensive (R3). This defensiveness stymies attempts to initiate a dialogue (R4). Because the team members do not feel that they can talk to the leader, they continue to resist the plan (R5). Leverage lies in supporting rather than challenging the Mover.

System Types: Differing Vulnerabilities

David Kantor and later Larry Constantine have postulated that all

human systems fall into four types: Closed, Random, Synchronous, and Open (see "System Types"). Each system type has its own characteristic set of mental models, behaviors, operating rules, and feedback systems. For instance, Closed systems are classically hierarchical, and Random ones are individualistic. Open systems stress collaboration, while Synchronous ones emphasize values and alignment.

Theory and practice indicate that there is no one "best" type of system. Each has its own strengths and vulnerabilities, and each may be especially prone to certain Team Traps. For example, Open systems may try too hard to build consensus and therefore can fall prey to the Inability to Reach Closure Team Trap. The high degree of flexibility and lack of emphasis on leadership shown by Random and Open systems also make them vulnerable to Overt Conflict. With their inherent rigidity, Synchronous and Closed systems may be overly hierarchical and experience a surplus of covert activity. Random and Synchronous systems, with their lack of cohesion, may forget to include customers and stakeholders in their decision-making, or may fail to ensure adequate communication and participation throughout the organization.

Moreover, because of their differences, each system type may require a unique solution to the same problem. For example, accountability issues can be resolved more easily in Closed systems, in which people are already familiar with policies and procedures, than in Random systems, in which members find the concept of evaluation alien. Similarly, Open systems, which value direct communication, can resolve Overt Conflict more quickly than can Synchronous systems, which tend more toward indirect communication.

Knowledge of the Four Team Roles can help facilitators track human interactions on the behavioral level. Causal loop diagrams can analyze the Team Traps on the structural level and provide a testing ground for proposed interventions. The System Types provide additional data on the potential vulnerabilities of the group to certain Team Traps, and the types of interventions that might succeed in that context.

Unspringing Team Traps

Addressing the Team Traps concept at the structural level can provide real, lasting solutions to previously intractable problems. An awareness of the most common team disablers, guidance for a structural intervention, and an understanding of the Four Team Roles and the System Types provide a powerful toolbox for teams in trouble. This multifaceted approach to the Team Traps can also help groups learn to work *on* the system, not merely in it, which is generally the most effective way to improve group dynamics. Perhaps even more important, familiarity with these common traps can help participants and facilitators anticipate a team's tendency toward one or more of the Team Traps and diffuse negative patterns of behavior before they become entrenched. The highest leverage actions may not always be the easiest to implement, but they are likely to be the most effective over the long run. ◘

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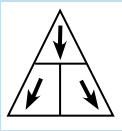
SYSTEM TYPES



Closed

- Hierarchy
- Policies & Procedures
- The organization comes first

Functional (Enabled) Version

- Clear chain of command
- Strong leadership
- Quick decisions
- Efficient work processes
- Predictable service
- Effective performance management
- Clear roles and responsibilities

Extreme (Disabled) Version

- Tyrannical leadership
- Disempowerment
- Secrecy
- Fear
- Resistance to change
- Lack of innovation and creativity

Random

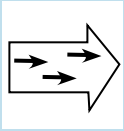
- Individuality & Autonomy
- Creative Excellence
- The individual comes first

Functional (Enabled) Version

- Entrepreneurial
- Responsive
- Competitive
- Flexible
- Respectful of individual needs

Extreme (Disabled) Version

- Chaotic
- Conflict-ridden
- Duplication of effort
- No mutual problem-solving
- Crisis-oriented
- Hard to get closure
- Lack of direction



Synchronous

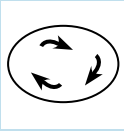
- Alignment
- Vision Driven
- The value comes first

Functional (Enabled) Version

- Strong purpose and vision
- Aligned values and beliefs
- Harmonious interactions
- Low maintenance
- Safety and acceptance
- Efficient and effortless teamwork
- Roles implicit and understood

Extreme (Disabled) Version

- Cult-like
- Inbred
- Individual differences discounted
- Minimal communication
- Low tolerance for ambiguity
- Uninvolved and disconnected from each other
- Set in ways



Open

- Collaboration
- Teams & Consensus
- The process comes first

Functional (Enabled) Version

- Inclusion
- Diversity
- Empowerment at all levels
- Trust
- Direct communication

Extreme (Disabled) Version

- Can't make a decision
- Reaches a false consensus
- All talk, no action
- Members frustrated
- Only vocal few reach "consensus"