



## Leading Collaboration

I wrote the paper below for my final project in Collaborative Leadership with Leslie DeChurch, Ph.D. I was given significant freedom in how to approach this project, so I elected to apply my newfound understanding of team science and small group communication theories to an issue in a past workplace. Specifically, this paper provided me with an opportunity to travel back in time and diagnose one of the most dysfunctional and unhealthy teams of which I've ever been a part. After examining that team's challenges and failures, I was able to pinpoint three key strategies that will help me prevent similar occurrences and ensure optimal functioning in my own teams (and multiteam systems) moving forward.

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My first day at Anonymous Organization came just weeks before a major internal crisis. Ever since then, I've joked that I had just enough time to get acclimated to my role as Unspecified Title before the organization turned upside down and I got thrown into the deep end of a nonprofit organization in crisis. A list of priorities and other agenda items that would have felt challenging under the best of circumstances quickly became impossible as I had to lead marketing and communications for a sizeable and complex organization. A cakewalk it was not.

One particular multiteam system at Anonymous Organization proved to be one of the most dreadful experiences of my career. Anonymous Organization had recently been awarded a grant to launch New Initiative. It was a massive win for the organization, and the success was due in part to a partnership with Partner Organization, another local organization. The New Initiative team also worked closely with Consulting Company, a company that served as a consulting vendor. Unfortunately, the New Initiative team was already far behind schedule by the time I came on staff. And the hits just kept on coming.

One of the earliest and most enduring challenges faced by the New Initiative team was their lack of a clear structure (i.e., organizational chart) with identified leaders and roles. Anonymous Organization hired a Senior Director to lead the New Initiative, but their supervisor left just a few weeks later. The Senior Director now reported to the Chief Executive Officer, who was trying to lead the organization through the growing internal crisis while simultaneously shouldering the responsibilities of the recently departed supervisor. The Senior Director's counterpart at Partner Organization struggled similarly to ascertain their role in the multiteam system.

The New Initiative team faced constant leadership struggles because no one had been granted clear authority or roles by the CEOs at Anonymous Organization or Partner Organization. This team had no clear structure or hierarchy, leading to frequent power grabs and power challenges. Role confusion was pervasive throughout the team, as well; no one seemed to know who was responsible for certain objectives and/or who had authority to make certain decisions. The team would frequently rehash decisions that had previously been "settled," either because no one had ownership over the decision, or someone felt they had the right to put the issue back on the table.

In addition to a lack of structure, the New Initiative team also failed to establish a psychologically safe environment in which every member's unique skills and talents were valued and utilized. I experienced this perhaps more intensely than anyone because I was the sole marketing/communications professional on a sizeable team that consisted almost entirely of Initiative-focused professionals. This created a number of challenges – namely, that other team members would engage in "groupthink" and collectively dispute or disregard the specialized knowledge, experience, and plans I brought to our work. As a result, team members spent inordinate amounts of time and emotional energy locked in conflict that would, at times, become deeply hurtful from both professional and personal standpoints.

For example, during the process of designing a promotional website, I explained to the group that marketing best practices would dictate following certain guidelines. I cited several sources to help gain buy-in, but still spent hours going

back and forth with members of the team who felt differently. These sorts of conflicts flared up constantly, and they never ended well: I was burnt out from trying to get Initiative staff to observe basic marketing principles, and Initiative staff were angry that I wouldn't just do as they wanted. There were, in fact, correct answers to the problems before us, and this would require cooperation. Unfortunately, the team's culture did not value and utilize the unique perspective of every member. If it had, I believe we would not have experienced such a high degree of conflict over the New Initiative's marketing/communications.

Throughout the entirety of our work together, the condition that caused the most damage and resulted in the greatest process loss was a lack of trust. I can now see this lack of trust evidenced in a variety of ways:

- Team members sometimes engaged in aggressive opposition by shutting down important conversations and shooting down important questions – even with raised voices.
- Team members sometimes limited cooperation and information-sharing by ignoring emails or requests from other members.
- Team members sometimes withheld information that would benefit other members or roles on the team.

Members of the New Initiative team did not trust one another – did not have a firm belief in one another's character, strength, or truth (Merriam-Webster) – and this resulted in a significantly less productive team. Ultimately, my experience on this team was a key influence in my decision to leave my position at Anonymous Organization.

It has taken me a long time, countless hours of self-reflection, and the entirety of this course to pinpoint what exactly went wrong with the New Initiative team. I certainly knew at the time how miserable I felt working with this particular group of people, but I could never quite identify why so many things seemed off-track or out of alignment. It was awfully disorienting to be on such a dysfunctional team. However, I now have language and understanding around this team's challenges and failures. And perhaps more importantly, I now know how to ensure the optimal functioning of teams (and multiteam systems) I will lead in the future. Chief among these strategies is establishing team mental models, co-creating team norms that prioritize psychological safety, and maximizing team productivity by minimizing sources of process loss.

To start, I will focus on establishing and continually shaping the team's mental model or shared understanding of the task and the team. In the process of inviting every individual to identify with the team and be willing to work on its behalf, I will ensure they know who else is part of the team and what roles everyone will play. There will be no confusion about who leads certain objectives or sub-teams, who holds responsibility for making certain decisions, or who has authority to intervene when the team has gone off-track and needs to course-correct. By clarifying roles, I expect my team will be better positioned to coordinate their behavior and "think together" toward our shared goal or objective.

My second priority in ensuring high-functioning teams will be to co-create team norms that prioritize psychological safety. In particular, I will take care to ensure every member feels their unique skills and talents are valued and utilized. I will lead by example – modeling psychological safety in my own words and actions – but I won't stop there. I will deliberately and proactively engage the team in processes of setting and reinforcing these norms that research has shown predict team performance. I want my teams to be places where people know they can safely take risks, ask for help, admit they got something wrong or made a mistake, or even just challenge traditional thinking. But more importantly, I have the power to guide the team toward previously unfathomable successes by valuing and utilizing the unique skills and talents of every single member.

Lastly, I will maximize my team's productivity by looking out for and working to minimize sources of what psychologist Ivan Steiner called "process loss." These sources – which can include things like misunderstanding, frustration, and lack of trust – may sometimes be challenging to identify, especially if there is a lack of psychological safety on the team. However, I will strive to monitor team functioning and, if I determine the team is underperforming, investigate any sources of process loss that I'm able to remedy. This will be more effective than simply singling out one or more "underperformers" because I will have taken into account the entire system that's been created by the team. I can also take a proactive

stance by crafting opportunities for team members to build trust with one another. I expect such efforts will increase the team's synergy and ultimately result in a more productive team.

While my experience on the New Initiative team was truly one of the worst experiences of my career, I can now say that it was a leadership-defining moment. I wasn't in the best position to affect a great deal of change on that particular team; however, I now have a firm grasp of team science as well as the dos and don'ts of collaborative leadership. By focusing on building a team's collective feelings, thoughts, and actions, I can help it thrive. I hope this experience will live on in my memory not so much as a nightmare, but as motivation to co-create team experiences that exceed my wildest expectations.