How to Frustrate, Thwart, and Ultimately Bring Down Any Team in 4 Easy Steps without Even Trying

By Christopher Avery

Everyone says they want to be on a winning team. And nobody ever says they want to be on a lousy team. So how come we get the frustrating teams much of the time?

Here are the steps you can take to make sure that your teams remain the worst, most frustrating experiences ever. Master each of these 4 steps and then be sure to pass them to others so they too can bring all their teams down.

P.S. These steps are especially important if you want to bring agile practices to a standstill…

Step 1: Assume someone else is responsible for team building

Never, under any circumstance, should you allow yourself to feel a sense of ownership for the quality and productivity of the whole team, collaboration, partnership, or relationship. By all means, let someone else do that, preferably someone you can despise for not having as much technical competence as you. Also, assume team building is so much black magic instead of a skill set composed of straight-forward repeatable conversations anyone can bring to any relationship any time. Repeat after me: "I specialize in 'hard' skills."

Why? Someone - anyone - regardless of their role in the team, who cares about the productivity of the team will make a huge difference in putting into motion the conversations and ideas that build the team. But when no one does, then it's completely up to chance whether the team develops effective dynamics.

Consider this: 15 years ago I had the opportunity to interview dozens of science and engineering staff in a couple of large failed programs. Everyone was a "top 10%" graduate from a "top 10" university, the crème de la crème. When asked "To what do you owe your participation in this failed program?" the #1 response was "I got put on a bad team."

Memorize that line so you can repeat it in your next review, or even earlier, maybe tomorrow.

Step 2: Resist attending to anything other than the most narrow description of your role accountability

Whatever you do, refuse all invitations to meetings, orientations, or informal gatherings where the team's overall mission might be discussed. If you do, you might get sucked into caring. And if you actually cared, then you might feel a sense of ownership, and next thing you know you'll be sub-optimizing for your own role and optimizing for the whole.

Why? The #1 point of leverage for team building and team leadership is to talk together about the larger goal. I call it the what-we-must-do-together-that-is-bigger-than-any-of-us,-requires-all-of-us,-and-none-of-us-can-claim-individual-victory-until-it-is-achieved conversation.
**Step 3: Care less whether others on the team and extended teams are winning or losing**

By all means, whatever you do, maintain a constant vigil of nonchalance about how what you do affects others on the team or beyond. This is relatively easy to master. Besides repeating the mantra "I don't care" you can also:

1. Assume the only way to motivate anyone is with the carrots and sticks of management, which peers on teams don't have available, thus you can't affect other's commitment.
2. Never ever ask "What's in it for you—beyond a paycheck—to work on this project?" That way, you can continue to not care, and you also don't have to know whether you are stepping on someone's win.
3. Also never own up to having any inspiration at all about why you come to work other than for continued employment and a paycheck. That way you can maintain low interest and commitment to most things.
4. Finally, assume that other people and departments should do what you think they should do because you all get a paycheck from the same company.

Why? Most people say they want to be on a winning team. That means actually practicing win/win/win at every level and juncture which requires some caring, knowledge and effort. And that means understanding how peer motivation works (you can understand it if you want to) and committing to generate as many wins as possible out of every decision and action.

**Step 4: Make only agreements you must in order to get others to leave you alone. Don't worry about keeping them.**

Since there is a fuzzy authority system in teams, collaborations, and partnerships, feel free to say and do anything you can to get people to leave you alone. That usually means resisting opting in and engaging until they twist your arm, and then saying whatever you must in order to end the pain and move on. Making agreements you never intend to keep is a great way to ensure continual frustration and failure.

Why? Teams, collaborations, and partnerships operate on a different frequency than the hierarchical functions of an organization. Where authority structures create the fabric of the institution, making and keeping agreements of all types, from operating rules to delivering work, creates the fabric of the team.

**All kidding aside…**

In sum, to make sure you continue to be frustrated your entire career by being on lousy, low-performing teams, then whatever you do, please don't register for or attend Knowledge Team Leadership: The Art & Science of Being Amazingly Effective in Any Team, October 21-22, in Boulder, CO. If you do, Christopher might show you how learning to get more done with others may be the single greatest thing you can do to boost your career. P.S. Seating is limited and should fill soon. Hurry.

* Christopher Avery, Ph.D. wrote the popular book *Teamwork Is An Individual Skill: Getting Your work Done when Sharing Responsibility* (which Fortune Magazine claimed is the only teamwork book worth reading), co-founded the Agile Project Leadership Network (APLN), and is the developer and Agile University trainer for Knowledge Team Leadership: The Art and Science of Being Amazingly Effective in Any Team.

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