

## THE “I” IN TEAMS



How a leader behaves and, more important, how he/she thinks is an inescapable part of team DNA.

"There is no 'i' in teams." That oft-cited aphorism makes an important point: that individuals need to put ego aside in order to accomplish team goals. It is true; but it's not the whole truth.

Every team functions within context and parameters framed by its leader. Her "I-ness" – how she shows up and, most important, how she thinks – is unavoidably part of the team's DNA.

If the leader shows up agitated, distracted, busy, frustrated, his team shuts down, gets defensive, perhaps even turns nasty. If he broadcasts anxiety and urgency, the task looms large.

Teams function best when the mood is light. When humor is present. When calmness reigns. In other words, human thought processes are built to generate powerful insights that facilitate seeing and doing the obvious. But optimum effectiveness requires clear-headedness; group members must be able to listen to themselves and to others without such distractions as anxious thoughts. Clear-minded processes can't operate when people are tired, stressed, angry, worn out. Therefore, the leader's first job is to monitor herself, her way of being, and its effect on team tone.

When you are calm, quiet, focused, feeling good, even happy, eager to begin the day or the meeting, such feelings will be contagious. Count on it. So learn to check in continuously with your own emotional pulse, your state of mind.

You already know that you have good days and bad. Your mood actually fluctuates over the course of each hour; your feelings change moment-to-moment. But what's easy to forget is that mood affects behavior. That life is lived from the "inside, out," as it were. Whatever external factors we encounter, all stress is internal, generated by the thoughts we have in reaction to stimuli. As William Shakespeare wrote: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

Consider an everyday example: taking out the trash. If we're feeling stressed out, in a low mood, that job becomes a dreaded chore. It takes monumental effort to pick up the wastebaskets, lift smelly trash bags, open the lid on the garbage container and push it to the curb. And while the task is being accomplished, our thinking goes something like this:

- "What a pain."
- "How come the family can't be neater?"
- "Why am I always the one who gets stuck with this?"
- "Nobody appreciates all that I do. What a pain!!"

It takes less than five minutes to take out the trash. But lingering thoughts about it can spoil the rest of our evening. If, however, we feel pretty good, content, or even happy, then we see the job as just part of living. We may even find we have a moment or two to lovingly note what our child has been playing with, or to align the cans by the curb and admire the view. A good mood helps reduce a dirty job to something of no particular consequence. And leaves no lasting residue.

The key is remembering that our feelings are the window onto our thoughts, and that those thoughts continually come and go. We can turn our backs on negativity, allowing the mental space for a fresh thought to emerge. We can connect to insight and common sense.

The common denominator for effective team execution is seeing the invisible nature of life. Again: each of us creates our own reality from thought, brought to life as a feeling that powers actions and behaviors. But most of us forget that we are the thinker! That we can actually take charge of our own life's chariot, hanging on to the reins of powerful horses, our emotions.

We are not suggesting that we can control our thoughts; far from it. Thoughts pop into our minds continuously; that is the way humans are wired. But we don't have to let a particular thought run away with us. We have the freedom to choose which thoughts we take seriously enough to inform our actions. As long as we remain alert, we can bridle our emotions and channel their power by acting on the thought that is most appropriate for the situation.

Furthermore, we can count on insights showing up to offer solutions to seemingly impossible situations. Trouble is, habitual ways of thinking too often clog the flow of insight. By "habitual thinking" we mean becoming stuck in repetitive thoughts. Busy-mindedness, for example. "Woe is me!" goes one's mental chatter, "I have so much to do and no time to do it." Again and again, these agitating thoughts keep on coming, and with them, the emotion of feeling weighed down by the world. The mood becomes so strong that the person is tired before he even begins to do anything!

In such a frame of mind, it's hard to "hear" insight, to grasp a fresh thought. But the distance between despair and elation is literally the gap between one thought and the next. Can you measure that?

Bridging the gap is awareness, the ever-available doorway to an infinite consciousness, to the wisdom of the ages, to the knowledge that spiritual advisers, prophets, mystics, philosophers keep pointing out. As Socrates said, "All knowledge is just remembering." Wake up. Wisdom is knocking on your door. You don't have to earn it, you don't have to, as poet Mary Oliver says, "walk on your knees for a hundred miles across the desert, repenting." Simply make room in your thoughts. Have the willpower to stay calm, hard as that might feel at first. It will get easier. And those old, busy-minded, tiring images will no longer occupy much space in your working day.

Managers who recognize that all of us are shaping our reality from moment-to-moment thinking have a gifted touch. They lead teams to great results without burning people out, without fomenting tension. With grace.

Such leaders' teams openly acknowledge the power of individual thinking to interfere with group effectiveness; they gain the perspective to handle the issues that get in the way. Individual agendas vs. collective goals. "My ambition" vs. team purpose. So when you start a team meeting, help people clear the cobwebs. Take a few moments to let participants disengage from whatever thoughts were pre-occupying them moments ago. Sharing your own thoughts out loud is a great way to facilitate letting go of the report, the emails, or even the call home to the kids. Expressing appreciation for each participant at the outset is another way to establish a high-minded feeling; remind people how much they contribute and how valuable those efforts can be. Or simply ask everyone to take a deep breath and be quiet for a couple of minutes. (As the French philosopher Rene Descartes said: "All mankind's problems would be solved if we learned how to sit in a room, quietly.")

Then help others connect to a purpose larger than their own. Remind them that work is about the "we," not the "me." Share with clarity your own purpose, your personal values and commitment to live them; your deep, driving desire. As the work of the team progresses, continuously pay attention to the invisible link between mood and results. Encourage effort when feelings are positive; ask people to stop when the mood turns sour. Structure meetings so that people aren't overwhelmed by crowded agendas. Repair rapport, by fostering understanding, injecting humor or simply calling "timeout" when team members get gripped and fall out of sorts with each other.

Most important: stay mentally healthy, yourself. Keep your own balance by being careful not to over-commit. Exercise. Eat well. Take 10 minutes to walk around in the middle of the day, or just to gaze out the window. Turn off the TV at night. Hug your loved ones. Go to bed early enough to get plenty of rest.

Team energy is the most valuable resource your institution has. Use it wisely. Beginning with yourself.

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