

The Straight Talk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Teams That Work: Thought Catalysts, Change Agents and Facilitators

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Teams are increasingly called upon to address complex challenges to create and sustain organizational growth. As a leader who is aware of the expanding importance of teams, you deliberate carefully when building and staffing one. You look for a breadth and depth of functional expertise. You thoughtfully weigh skills and motivations. So why do some teams fail to deliver significant results? Why do team members engage in unproductive conflict?

In our experience, it is because there is a different prism through which to understand team dynamics. Functional expertise and motivation are important, but recognizing, understanding and strategically using your own and each team member's natural change leadership style is a powerful tool for creating and managing high performing teams.

Change Leadership Styles

Within the context of team dynamics, people gravitate to one of the following styles:

◆ Thought Catalysts lead by stimulating broader and deeper thinking, new perspectives and creative solutions. They enjoy engaging in "competitive brainstorming" and take pride in having their ideas recognized

and adopted.

Thought Catalysts help accelerate the pace of a team's learning and change. Yet they can also get stuck in brainstorming mode or push too hard for their proposals, excluding other relevant concerns such as priorities and feasibility.

"Good management is the art of making problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them."

**~ Paul Hawken, author,
"Natural Capitalism: Creating
the Next Industrial Revolution"**

◆ Change Agents take pride in fostering constructive change. They are committed to continuous improvement and believe that a new approach's success depends on the quality of execution. Change Agents lead with "emotional intelligence" (Will the solution inspire others?) and management skills (How will it work best?).

They excel at ensuring constructive, effective change, especially when new solutions must be implemented with tight deadlines or resistance is anticipated. However, when Change Agents impose "reality checks" too soon or too frequently, they can stifle the creative thinking that generates bolder, more original proposals.

◆ Facilitators lead by bringing the right people together and leveraging their talents to arrive at the best ideas. Skilled at building cooperation, Facilitators negotiate win-win solutions by drawing out others' abilities. They apply interpersonal and communication skills to keep the team's efforts on track.

Facilitators pride themselves on helping a team achieve the most effective results. Yet those who are overly process-driven or too quick to push for consensus may limit the speed or quality of innovation.

Understanding and recognizing these distinct change leadership styles can provide the key to significantly improving team dynamics – and defining the most appropriate role for a leader. Although some leaders may be comfortable in all styles (or can learn to improve in them), most people have stronger and weaker styles, or even blind spots.

A leader who understands her own change leadership style can enhance a team's success immensely by carefully deciding when she is best suited to take the helm. Alternatively, she can hamper the team by insisting that she must lead regardless of the circumstances.

From Conflict To Results

Intra-team conflict is inevitable and desirable, and something to manage productively for better solutions and more effective implementation.

Disagreements in pursuit of optimal solutions are inescapable because the goals of each change leadership style will occasionally clash. For example, when a Thought Catalyst presses for a new idea, a Change Agent is likely to challenge its workability.

The art of collaborative problem solving is to orchestrate the interplay between Thought Catalysts, Change Agents and Facilitators and their different goals to achieve a common purpose. A leader who responds to conflict by clarifying the team's mission, and honoring the inherent value of each member's style and expertise will create more engaged and invested team members.

One of the best ways a leader can do this is to acknowledge and apply his natural style appropriately, and respectfully defer to others' change leadership styles throughout the process. Indeed, a leader who takes center stage and then gracefully surrenders it demonstrates that he recognizes and appreciates each style's strengths, which encourages other team members to follow suit.

Matching Styles to Circumstances

There are many opportunities to put other team members in charge, because, as the chart illustrates, each change leadership style offers greater value at various points in a team's "problem-solving" lifecycle.

	Stating the Problem	Identifying Root Causes	Defining Solution Criteria	Brainstorming ideas	Selecting the Best Solution	Planning for Implementation
Thought Catalyst		X		X	X	
Change Agent			X		X	X
Facilitator	X		X		X	

An effective leader can significantly enhance a team's accomplishments by tapping the "right" leadership style at the "right" time, and transitioning the helm from one individual to another as the team's needs and challenges evolve.

This is more easily said than done. Many leaders find it difficult to relinquish control, even temporarily. Combat this tendency by recognizing that knowing when to leverage your strengths by leading and when to overcome your limitations by delegating is a defining characteristic of successful leadership.

Sharing team leadership is most effective when the following rules are enforced.

1. The team must have a clear, compelling goal.
2. StraightTalk must govern every team interaction, along with respect for each participant's role, perspectives and ideas.
3. The team must be unwilling to settle for compromise or "symptom-only" solutions.
4. Team members must share a strong commitment to achieving the best results through collaboration.

Finally, watch for signs of **lock-in**, which occurs when conflict intensifies and is not managed productively, or when a new challenge emerges during the process. Lock-in describes team members' insistence on satisfying their personal style goals to the exclusion of others', and involves individuals over-

utilizing and over-emphasizing their roles' importance to achieving the end result.

For example, Facilitators may push so heavily for accord that they rush to a compromise. Locked-in Change Agents may become so focused on implementation details that they actually resist change, while Thought Catalysts may insist that not even the smallest element of their idea can be modified.

Breaking lock-in requires insight to recognize it and a forceful hand to refocus the team on using the strengths of each other's styles respectfully and effectively.

As the challenges of building an organization become more complex and dynamic, successful leaders will increasingly rely on teams to address them. When you convene a team, start by looking for the right mix of Change Agents, Thought Catalysts and Facilitators. Then assess individuals' expertise and motivations.

As the process evolves, try transferring control to different team members with different change leadership styles. Although it may feel uncomfortable at first, you will find that you are consistently creating and managing the high-performing teams you have been seeking – teams that are capable of generating innovative solutions and effective implementation strategies to tackle ever more challenging opportunities. [HK](#)

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