

## 5 Principles to Boost Open Dialogue



By Robert Paul Schwippert

*'I am not sure how to explain this clearly' – John – a 52 year old seasoned executive -sighed when he took a seat at his office. Having held previous positions in financial firms in London and Stockholm John was recently appointed as Internal Audit Manager of a global firm based in Amsterdam. Talking about his new team he continued: "Individually they are highly talented professionals, but it seems I cannot get them to work together properly. It feels like we are lacking an open atmosphere and the ability to trust each other. I get the impression not all is said in the open and there is a lot of second guessing and side conversations going on... Surely I have dealt with cultural differences before, but this time..."*



Often we have conversations like these with team leaders who see opportunities for their team, but for some reason the team does not seem to grasp these. It could be related to the dynamics between the leader and the members, e.g. a new leader that brings a more empowering style in a team that is used to a more directive approach. Or it could be a tense relationship between certain members of the team. Situations like these often decrease the ability of the team to have mature conversations. It may make team members unsure of their expected behaviors and fuel anxiety. This in turn may cause them not to speak out openly and instead engage in bilateral side conversations. In this case facilitating an open dialogue is key to getting to high performance.

The literature on teams such as Lencioni, Tuckman etc. mostly suggests to use interventions that focus on building trust, role clarity and common goals. We agree and would like to add that recognition and appreciation of the diversity in the team is another enabler for honest and open conversations. From our experience working with teams, we derived five key principles that are key to establish connection between team members and facilitate open dialogue, which we believe are required for successful collaboration.

**1. Bring the system in the room.** It is an essential pre-requisite to have all the elements of the (psychodynamic) system present in the sessions. This may even extend to sponsors or stakeholders that are not directly part of the team – key is whether they are part of the systemic environment. Often we encounter situations where one key party is missing, leading to incomplete conversations. Transformational dialogue can only occur when the system is complete.

**2. Focus on individuals versus roles.** Taking a broader view and zooming in on the participants identity beyond their task allows building a different connection between them. E.g. sharing personal stories, showing yourself and allowing vulnerability often helps building mutual trust. However for some this is easier than for others and as facilitators we have an important role in providing a safe and respectful environment.

**3. Appreciate differences.** Although a team may be considered as one unit, it consists of unique diverse individuals who bring different skills, perspectives and ideas to the work. Tools such as Belbin (team roles), Insights (psychological preferences) or intercultural models such as Trompenaars can help

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to uncover these differences. It is important that differences are seen as complementary – not rivals. Key in our approach is to go beyond merely understanding different point of views, but take the next step to respecting each others viewpoints and see how these different viewpoints can be integrated into a new creative solution.

**4. Learn from the past.** By structurally reviewing earlier experiences in an appreciative manner we can explore where each team member's energy is regarding topics such as team collaboration, leadership expectations, mutual trust etc. By having the team members reflect on their personal extraordinary experiences and define the key critical factors that were involved in creating success, we help to uncover the ingredients for success that are already present. With this we foster self-confidence and decrease (unconscious) dependency patterns that may exist.

**5. Engage around a common future.** Once unique individual characteristics are clear, we look to the future. If we could use our strengths and apply them as a team – what would be possible to create in the future? What could we achieve together and how would this look in terms of image, vision or description in words. Often we engage in a creative exercise to 'build' the teams vision or target in a playful and lighthearted way. We end with the requirements to reach the future state and what can be the actions in the first hours, days, weeks and months – the first steps towards an implementation plan that is supported on a broad level.

We have applied our principles to many team sessions, supporting teams on their development journey. In the case of John's team, we were also able to help them to become a more mature, open team, whose members appreciate each others' contributions and engage in courageous conversations when required.

Since each team is unique and each situation calls for a different approach, the emphasis on one element may be more than another. However, in the end we are trying to help teams create the space for open dialogue, which we believe is the heart of effective team collaboration.