THE YOU IN TEAM

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This team was miserable. I knew that before I could move them from misery to productivity, I would need to understand the landmines that were hidden below the surface. So I started by interviewing each member of this Toxic Team separately.

"Tell me what you believe has lead the team to this point," I asked. Here's what I heard:

> "Maria is very manipulative and she hoards the knowledge so that she has the power. I think that woman would sell out her own mother."

> "Our team leader, Robert, just doesn't seem to notice what is going on. Because he doesn't deal with the bad behavior, people think it's OK to continue."

> "Nadi has a pretty big ego. She thinks that the way she does anything is the way everyone should do it. She's just cruising along in Nadi-land oblivious to the rest of us."

Next, I asked what they thought it would take to get the team back on track. They said:

> "I think Robert has to start calling Maria on her behavior. He needs to make it clear to her that she can't shut the rest of us out. If he doesn't, his credibility is really going to suffer."

> "I think Maria needs to stop using her relationships with people outside our team to her advantage. She makes the rest of us look like we're out of the loop."

"Nadi just needs to get over herself. She needs to think about something other than her own group every once in a while."

There's one word missing from all of these statements. No matter how long these people spent talking about what led the team to its current malaise or what it would take to fix their problems, not one of these people used the word "I."

This is almost always the first hurdle I have to clear when I start working with a Toxic Team: members of these teams don't realize that each and every one of them has played a role in creating their current dysfunction. Worse yet, because they're so focused on what everyone else needs to do differently, they almost never see the importance of changing themselves.

Maybe *you* are the closed-minded person on the team. Maybe *you* are the bully.

Or maybe you're the one allowing your ideas to be shut down. Maybe you allow someone to hold power over you.

It's possible that you aren't at the center of any of the conflict on the team. But do you allow this to become your excuse? Do you just watch these dynamics go on between others?

More likely, you play each of these roles at some point. It doesn't matter whether you're doing the wounding, allowing yourself to be wounded, or watching while it goes on around you, you're as responsible as anyone for your unhealthy team.

You could sit and wait for someone else to make it better, but you might wait forever. If you want to improve your life at work, you have the power to make your team more effective. If you change yourself, you will change your team.

Your Five Responsibilities

Any member of a team can improve the way the team works together. If you live up to these following five responsibilities, you will change your life at work.

1. Start with a positive assumption.

Do you remember the kid played by Haley Joel Osment in the movie *The Sixth Sense*? He had the power to see dead people whom no one else could see. Fortunately, I can't see dead people, but sometimes I feel like I can see the giant invisible backpacks each team member is carrying. These packs hold every nasty comment, every sideways glance, every curt email you've received. This is the baggage that team members carry with them. It slows them down. Worse, it weighs them down.

If you have one of these on your back, you have to unpack this baggage and start with a positive assumption.

What do I mean by that? It turns out that the unconscious mind can process something like 11 million bits of information a second, but the conscious mind can only handle about 40. That's great if we want to talk on a cell phone, walk and chew gum, but it's not great for creating healthy teams.

That unconscious mind where we process the vast majority of input we get from the world is the closet where we keep our baggage. When a teammate says something, we don't hear it objectively. We pass it through all our past conversations and emails and our unconscious decides how we react.

Actually, if that were true, we wouldn't be so badly off. What we really do is we pass it through our *memories* of those past interactions, memories that are badly distorted by our emotions. So while our unconscious mind is trying to help by filtering information for us, it's often a pretty lousy filter, and what comes out the other side is not always a good representation of what actually happened.
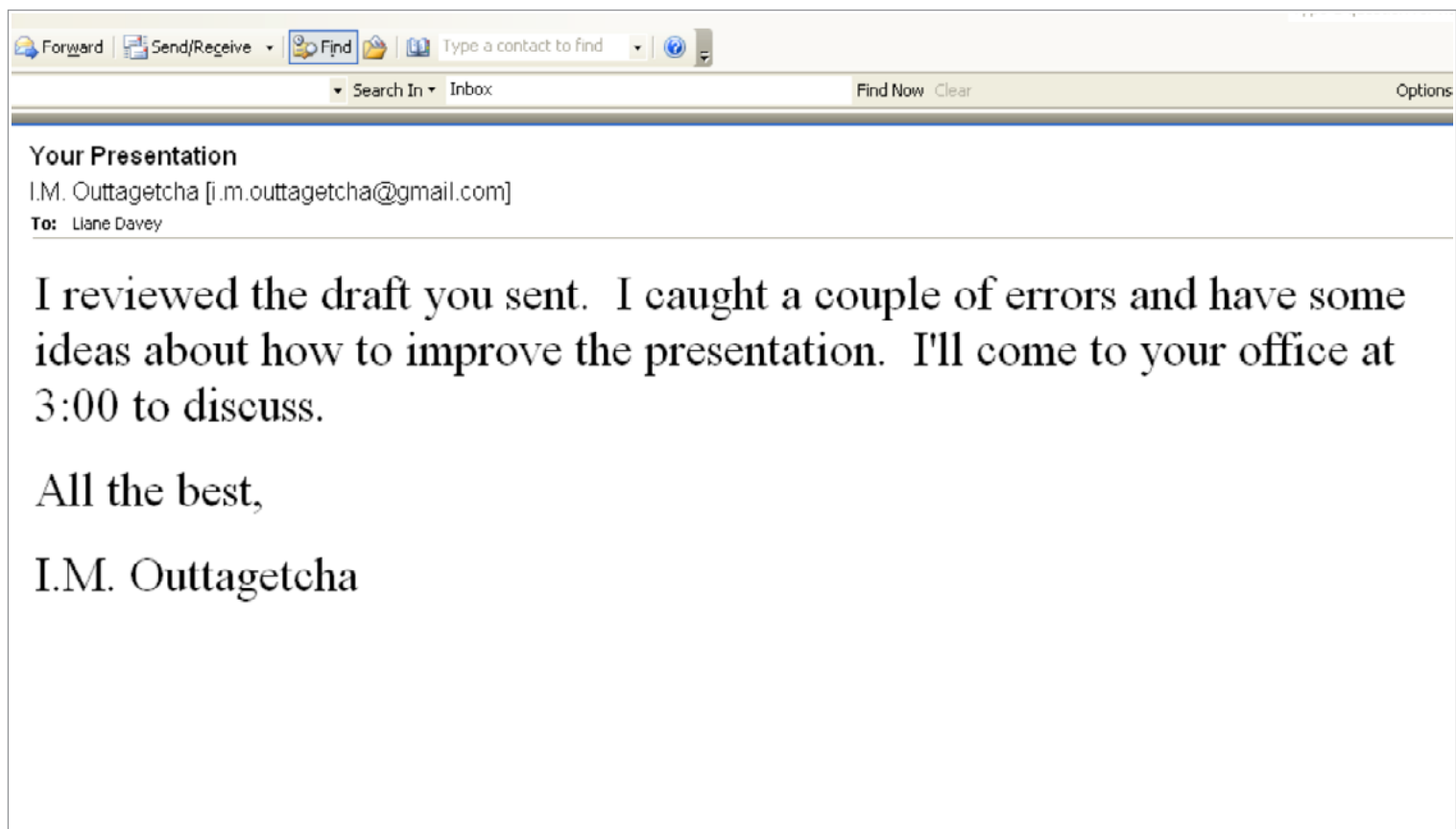
In the amazing book *My Stroke of Insight*, neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor confirms what brain research has been telling us for a while now: we decide with our emotional mind first, then find a way to justify our decision with our logical mind—not the other way around.

You react to a comment based on who it's coming from, not what they're saying. Your underlying beliefs about whether that person is trustworthy or competent cloud the content of the conversation and form the basis for your starting assumption.

"We see things not as they are but as we are."—Talmud

Let me demonstrate. Think about someone on your team who you struggle with. Perhaps this person has been very critical of your work. For whatever reason, you have never felt that this person valued you. Can you think of someone? Try to conjure up how you actually feel when you interact with them.

Now imagine it's 10:45 on Monday morning. So far, your day is going really well. You've crossed three important things off your to-do list and you're rewarding yourself with a latte when your email alert flashes in the corner of your screen. Uh-oh…it's from that team member. You take a deep breath and open the message.
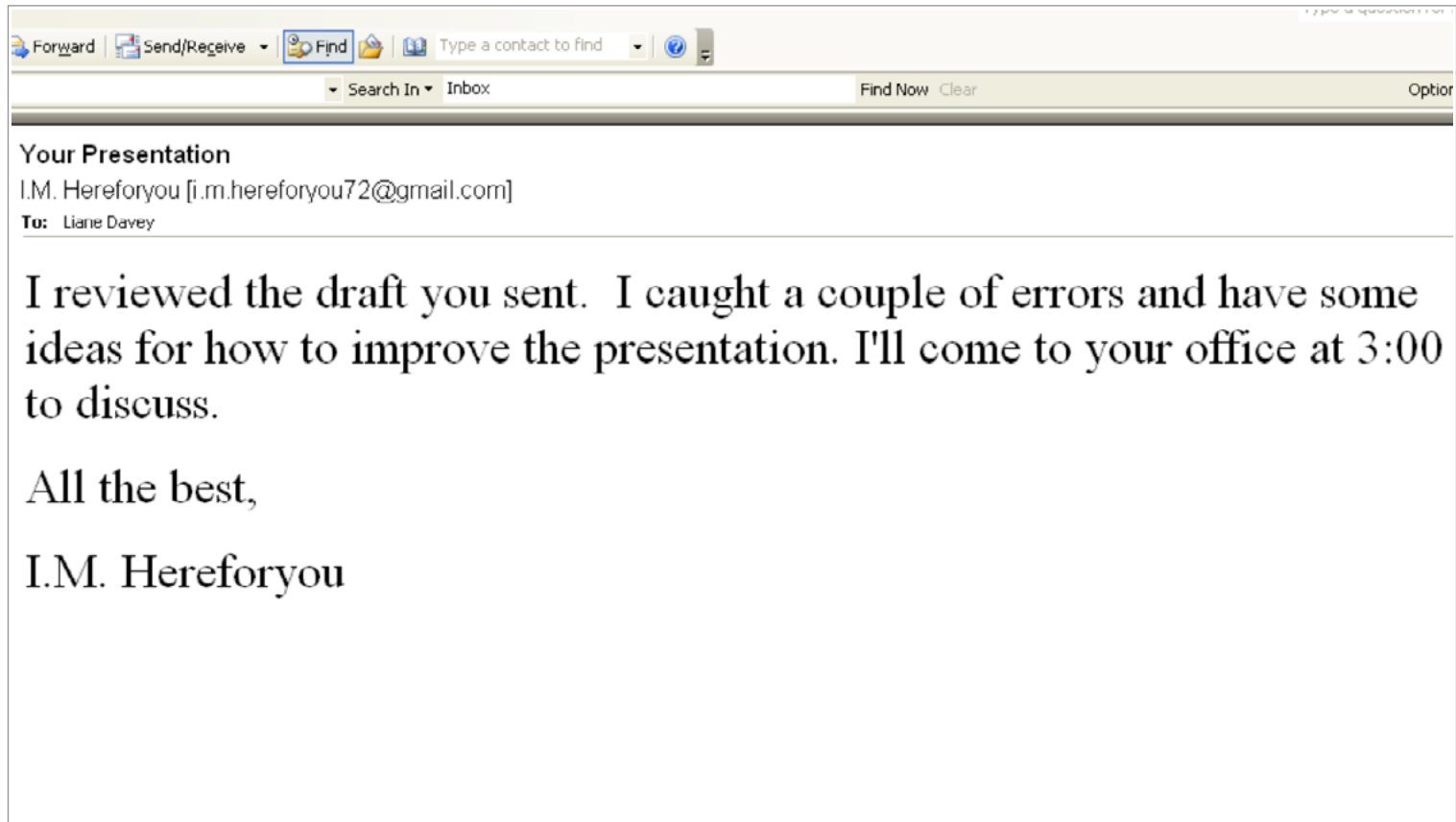
Forward | Send/Receive ▾ | Find | | Type a contact to find ▾ | |

▾ Search In ▾ Inbox   Find Now Clear   Options

Your Presentation
I.M. Outtagetcha [i.m.outtagetcha@gmail.com]
To: Liane Davey

I reviewed the draft you sent. I caught a couple of errors and have some ideas about how to improve the presentation. I'll come to your office at 3:00 to discuss.

All the best,

I.M. Outtagetcha

How do you feel?

When I ask this question, most people say things like "defensive," "worried," "I'm dreading 3 o'clock," "grumpy," "angry," or "annoyed."

How will you behave at 3:00? If you're like most people, you will put up a protective barrier that will not only create an adversarial dynamic, but will pretty much guarantee that you don't hear anything of value your teammate might be trying to share.

Now, wipe that person out of your mind. Relax those tense shoulders. Take a deep breath. Imagine that teammate who has always been your confidant and supporter. The one you walk out of the team meeting with. The one you debrief with at the end of the day. The person you know has got your back. Have you got that person in your head?

Imagine that same email is from them.

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Your Presentation
I.M. Hereforyou [i.m.hereforyou72@gmail.com]
To: Liane Davey

I reviewed the draft you sent. I caught a couple of errors and have some ideas for how to improve the presentation. I'll come to your office at 3:00 to discuss.

All the best,

I.M. Hereforyou

Now how do you feel?

For most people, the response is completely the opposite: "Relieved," "grateful," "interested," "I'm looking forward to 3:00."

What IS that? I call it the mother-in-law effect. Can you relate? There are perfectly legitimate things that I wouldn't mind my mother saying to me, but if my mother-in-law said them, I would be furious.

Person #1 never had a chance, did he? Your guard was up from the moment you saw his name on that email. Because you unconsciously made a negative assumption about his motives in sharing his feedback with you based on your previous experiences with him, you missed your chance to get value from him. When the well is poisoned, it's much harder to separate the content from the sender, isn't it?

The only way to fight this is to start with a new attitude. Make a positive assumption about others. As if by magic, you'll find that when you change the way you look at others, you'll also change the way they look at you.

Assume your teammates are trying to help you. Assume they know how to do their jobs. Assume they come to work to add value.

Keep in mind that your unconscious mind controls your body language too. If you're thinking something negative, your body language will betray you even if your words don't. Your posture, your crossed arms, your furrowed brow—even your pupils will send signs of hostility. How do you think your teammates will react if that's what they're looking at across the boardroom table?

Maintaining a positive assumption will take a conscious effort from your pre-frontal cortex. But it's worth it. You'll find yourself hearing information in a new way, and taking in useful stuff that you simply couldn't before.

If you change your assumptions, you'll change your team.

2. Add your full value.

How do you show up at team meetings? Are you bringing 100% of yourself, or have you gone into cruise control? Do you catch yourself thinking "why bother?" Have you ever been about to comment when a little voice inside your head said, "Don't bother wasting your time," or "That's not my area… what right do I have to say that?"

I'm not exactly sure what is causing it—perhaps the sheer volume of work, or perhaps cynicism or a lack of trust—but I'm really noticing that people are holding back on their teams. They are showing up at meetings as pale versions of themselves. They are giving only what they must give to get by. According to Gallup, in the average organization there is more than one actively disengaged employee for every two engaged employees.

But no matter why it happens, when people don't bring their best to the

team, the whole team suffers. If you want a healthy team, you need to add your full value.

What does that mean? Most people understand that they need to bring the best of their technical capability and live up to the requirements of their roles. They assertively speak up on topics that are of direct relevance to them. But that isn't enough.

Think of someone on your team who only adds value in her functional role. Maybe it's the finance woman who is always talking about accounts receivable. Or perhaps your sales leader is constantly bringing up new product ideas that customers are looking for. These are important issues, but when a team member's contributions become predictable, they aren't as salient or as valuable.

Adding your full value means bringing value to the team not only from your functional role or technical expertise, but from all of your talents and experiences. You can't just participate when the content is directly relevant and then be a spectator for other issues.

Find more to add.

For example, if you used to work in a different industry, your previous experience might help you understand your current suppliers or partners. You don't even have to share information or opinions, you can ask insightful questions—they add great value.

I once worked with a woman who had moved from the retail industry to work as an EVP of Human Resources at an insurance company. She was shocked to learn that they referred to the people who bought their services as "policy holders." In fact, if you bought two different policies (such as home and auto insurance), you were considered two different people in their minds. Their systems didn't allow them to look at you as one customer.

The EVP was horrified. And in her time there, although she was one of the best HR leaders I've ever met, the best thing she did for that company was to use what she had learned in retail to help the insurance executives put the customer at the centre. Outside experience can be an incredible source of value.

Value doesn't have to come from formal work experience either. Are you a young working mother? If your organization sells consumer products, share insights about customers like you. Does your religious or charitable activity give you access to important and influential members of the community? Introduce your teammates to them. Think about all your experiences and relationships and how they might connect to the work of your team.

A colleague and I once held an executive development session with leaders from a large teaching hospital. The program required these 20 leaders to spend 7 days together over the course of 6 months, so even though many of the people in the room had worked together for years, we decided to start with introductions—but we didn't give them much direction about how they should introduce themselves.

Something very interesting happened: As we went around the room, people chose to comment on experiences that had shaped who they had become as leaders. One had been a dancer and had learned from this a level of discipline that served her well. Another was an Olympic athlete. Another ran ultramarathons (100 miles!). Some had worked in other industries; at least one had spent time in politics. What fascinated me was how many of these amazing backgrounds were unknown to their colleagues. They weren't using the full richness of their experience.

The experiences that have shaped you are probably so central to who you are that you don't think about their value to your team. You probably don't even realize how valuable they are.

Teams need diversity to be effective. Maybe you tend to focus on the practical operations side, and the rest of your team is made up of more strategic thinkers. Maybe you are more of a risk taker—many teams need someone to say that something is possible, or they'll never try anything new. Maybe your empathy helps you anticipate the impact of decisions—you may be able to help your team members influence the rest of the company more effectively.

You never know where you will be able to add value when you show up as your whole self. But you are more than a supply chain manager, an accountant, or a digital marketer. Add your full value.

If you change the value you bring to the table, you'll change your team.

3. Amplify Other Voices.

When I watch teams in action, I can tell very quickly whether or not they are healthy, productive groups. In strong teams, participation is well-balanced. That doesn't mean that the extroverts and introverts talk the same amount, but the more vocal members actually make room for and seek out the input of the quieter members of the team.

And a healthy balance isn't just about introverts and extroverts—teams need to balance the contribution of newer and older members, of senior and more junior members, and of members with core functional expertise and those who have supporting roles.

Team composition is usually driven by technical skills. For example, most leadership teams are simply made up of the ranking member from

each of the sub-units—business units, functions like finance or IT, and so on. The problem is, that leaves a lot of teams with a very skewed perspective. It's a highly operational team and there's only one person who brings a corporate perspective. It's a team full of corporate people and there's only one person with a line perspective. It's a team full of strategists and the tactics never get discussed. These teams have too many people who think alike.

This sets up a dynamic with majority and minority perspectives. In teams that are out of balance like this, dominant members often drown out the contributions of those in the minority.

In the most innocuous cases, over-exuberant members are just talking so fast that the less powerful voices can't get a word in edgewise. In more toxic teams, people with different points of view get shut down with dismissive language like "Yeah, yeah, we've heard that before," "You're always trying to put the brakes on," or "You wouldn't understand."

Perhaps the most insidious way to drown out minority voices is to use humor to deflect an important point. This is an all-too-common tactic for slick, high-ego executives who don't have the courage or the data to go after an issue head-on.

I once did a warm-up exercise with the executive team at a hospital where they broke into pairs and had to compare their team to various things, like Thanksgiving dinner, or a Ferrari. One pair had to compare their team to an operating room. Their answer: "Our team is like an operating room because sometimes you die on the table." They explained that team members tended to use extremely cutting humor to belittle people they disagreed with.

No matter how it's done, shutting out minority voices means losing the value they could be adding. The team will be less effective, because it

will only see the opportunities the majority members can see. The team will find it harder to innovate, because the majority tends to represent the status quo and the way the team has traditionally worked.

At worst, ignoring minority voices is a dangerous precursor to groupthink—when excessive group cohesiveness leads teams to disconnect from the outside world and feel a false sense of invulnerability. Teams like this pay for their sins with a reduced ability to identify and mitigate risk. I shared examples of groupthink in my eBook "Toxic Teams."

Pay attention in your next team meeting. Is anyone on your team being ignored? Are all team members taking up roughly the same amount of "space" in your meetings?

Drowning out minority voices has real costs. You've probably seen the kind of style tools that categorize people into one of four categories—often with some sort of people versus task orientation on one axis and direct versus indirect or introvert versus extrovert on the other. Here are the results from one team I worked with:
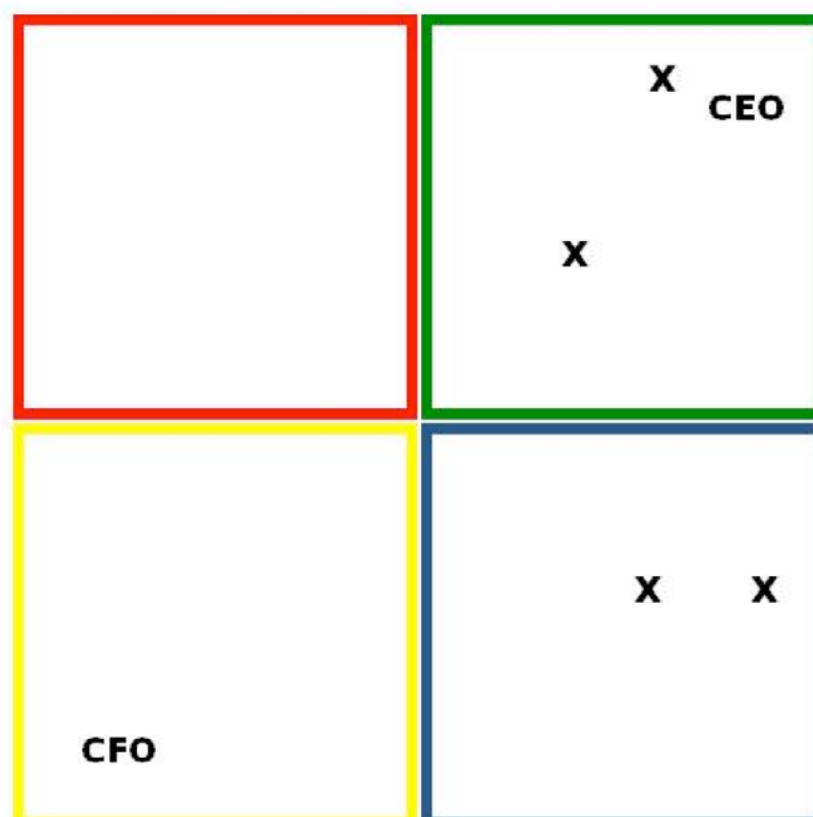
This is a portrait of the leadership team of an academic institution. Five of the six members of the team were exactly what you'd expect—big ideas people—they were visionaries and influencers, but they didn't pay much attention to how to make those great ideas a reality.

When I started working with this team, the CFO, down in that left corner, was basically a pariah. Imagine how it felt to be her, watching the team circle at 30,000 feet. Every time you try to bring the conversation back down to reality, they dismiss you. Eventually, it's just easier to say nothing.

On the other hand, imagine how it felt to be one of the five in the majority. It felt great! There are lots of big ideas—just what you love. When the CFO tries to rein you in, you have four people setting you free again. You are constantly validated.

The problem for the team and for the organization was that that minority perspective was critical. Thankfully, once the team saw this picture, they started to see the value the CFO brought. In fact, they started to see her as the key to bringing their big ideas to life. They started making room for her, even soliciting her opinion. Finally they were reinforcing her points instead of shutting them down.

Recent [research out of MIT](#) corroborates the case for balanced participation. Teams with dominant members or "teams within the team" are much less effective. The great news is that the author of the study suggests that teams aren't destined to fail if they don't have it right at the outset. Just like those big-idea academics did, team members can learn new patterns to increase team effectiveness.

As a member of a team, you have a responsibility not only to add your full value, but to make sure that others can add theirs too. When I work

with teams on this issue I ask team members to "amplify other voices"; to help the team access the value of the minority perspective. You can do this in your next team meeting:

1. **Make sure everyone has a chance to speak.** If not, use your "turn" to give the floor to someone who has not yet spoken. "Mary, we haven't heard from you, and I'm curious how this issue is landing with you."

2. **Don't let others block out or brush off different points of view.** If someone does belittle or downplay a comment, counteract their impact. "Actually, I think we haven't spent enough time talking about that. Mary, can you tell me more about that?"

3. **Use the agenda to assist you.** Many teams I work with have a standing agenda where the same item (and usually the same person) gets short shrift at every meeting. Propose changing the agenda order periodically so that the team has enough time to hear from everyone.

4. **For an advanced challenge, use the above techniques in a situation where you disagree or are uncomfortable with what the person is saying.** "Mary, I'm not sure I agree with that just yet. Help me understand where you're coming from." When you can "lean into" your discomfort with a minority point of view, you have really mastered the practice of amplifying other voices.

You'll probably find that lending your credibility to a less powerful member of the team has lasting effects. Their confidence will increase and your support will become less necessary over time. Discussions may at first feel more difficult, but your team will benefit from more diversity of thought.

You will see new opportunities to innovate. You'll be more aware of risk. You'll probably even build better relationships while you're at it.

If you change the way you deal with different points of view, you'll change your team.

4. Know when to say no.

Most of us have internalized the idea that good team players say "yes" when they are asked to do something. Really good team players step up and volunteer without even being asked—we praise their initiative. We've socialized workers to stretch themselves to the breaking point, all in service of "taking one for the team."

In my experience as a manager, I find the compulsion to say yes is so strong that new employees will take on more and more work and stop only when they finally (and inevitably) drop the ball. The result is a difficult, embarrassing episode, which can have a devastating effect on the team. For a brief period of time, they might avoid saying yes to a few things. But before I know it, my really keen team members are back saying yes to everything.

Alarmingly, this tendency to take on more and more work doesn't lessen much even with time and experience. The same talented, aligned, and engaged people keep saying yes to too many things. The result is a team with chronically poor execution, little confidence in one another, and levels of stress and anxiety that make the whole team a powder keg waiting to blow.

It's not just the over-eager team member who is to blame. Team leaders must take responsibility for the role they play, too. Failing to prioritize

and make tough decisions about what is more—AND LESS—important leaves team members seeing no alternative but to add something else to their already full plates. Often, part of the problem is that the team leader doesn't have the courage to manage up. They grudgingly accept more and more work from above without asking for prioritization.

I once worked for a boss who left her employees in tears because of her expectations that they say yes to everything. One afternoon around 3:00, our Executive Assistant came to me in a terrible state. Her husband was picking her up at 4:30 for an appointment and she had just discovered a pile of five items left on her desk by the boss. Each item had a sticky note on it with the word "urgent." When she explained that she had to leave and asked for prioritization, the boss' response was, "They are all urgent." No one on our team (except perhaps the boss) was surprised when the Executive Assistant resigned three weeks later.

We have got to get over the idea that good team players say yes. "Yes" drives us nuts, reduces our effectiveness, and results in poor quality work. We have to learn when to say "no."

There are things that you just need to delete from your task list. These are things that don't add value for you, for the team, or for the organization. For me, this includes lots of meetings that I'm only invited to as a courtesy. Once it's clear that I'm not adding value—or that the role I'm playing overlaps with the role of someone else in the room—it's better for me to make the tough choice to say no to that meeting. To identify opportunities to delete, ask yourself: "Is this still relevant?" "How are you using these outputs?" "What would happen if we stopped doing this?"

Although I call this responsibility "Know When to Say 'No,'" it really should be when and how to say no. We've all heard someone say "no" in

a way that makes us feel shut down or devalued, but there is a better way. Here is how to say "no" without alienating people:

1. **Help the person question whether the work needs to be done at all.** Ask some good questions to help the person assess whether or not the work is necessary. For example, if someone asked me to speak at an industry event that I didn't feel was an effective use of my time, I might ask, "Who is the target audience for the event?"; "Are the people there potential buyers of our services?"; "Where would this event fit in relative priority to the other three we are thinking of sponsoring?"

    If they come to the same conclusion as you, that it can be deleted, you're done. If not, go to step #2.

2. **Tell them what you are saying yes to.** If you have gone through a process of determining your priorities and defining your primary value in the organization, share that with them. For example, if I had to turn down a consulting opportunity, I might say, "Thanks so much for thinking of me. This looks like fun work. Right now I've agreed with the Managing Director that my focus is on working with Financial Services companies and I feel like if I take this assignment, then I am diluting my focus and taking opportunities away from others on the team."

3. **Give them another way to accomplish their goal.** If step #1 has made it clear that the work needs to be done and step #2 has made it clear that you won't be the one doing it, help them figure out who will. For example, if I had decided not to attend a sales meeting with a potential customer, I might say, "What will it take to win this

assignment?" "For whom on the team is this really the sweet spot?"; "Who would be thrilled to get this opportunity?"

People will find it refreshing when you have an authentic conversation with them about what you will and won't take on. It's much better than saying "yes" to something that you will never get around to. Just remember, you need to give the same courtesy to the people who say "no" to you.

Of course, sometimes you can't just delete a task. In the Knightsbridge team effectiveness process Vital Teams™, we also use three other ways to say no when an outright deletion just isn't appropriate:

Delay: Sometimes you need to delay action. People's panicked reactions to new problems can create crazy amounts of extra work. It's important to assess the core issue and wait for the flailing to stop before jumping into knee-jerk action. I'm often reminded of this when I'm traveling on business and I pick up a day's worth of messages at the same time. I'll get one message recorded in the morning that says "urgent" and asks me to do x, y, and z and then another two hours later saying, "No need to worry, we've handled it." They got the job done and I didn't add to the mêlée by trying to get involved.

Distribute: Some work is best done by someone else. Taking on work that you could do, but slowly and with questionable quality, just doesn't make sense. If someone else will do it more efficiently, distributing the work to them is better than doing it yourself. As a senior member of our consulting team, I'm often one of the go-to people for meetings with new clients. But I'm often not the best person to represent the team, given the issue at hand or the industry of the client. What work do you do that would be better distributed to someone else?

Diminish: Perhaps the most valuable strategy for saying "no" is not to say it outright. The diminish strategy pares work back to its core to reduce the effort required, without losing the essential elements. This technique often works for reporting. A lot of my clients seem to spend more time reporting on the results they achieve than they do on actually achieving them. To diminish work, ask questions like, "What are you trying to achieve?"; "What is the most important part of this?"; "How can we make this more manageable?"

A friend of mine was the VP of IT for a division of a large computer company. His people were constantly complaining to him that they were stretched too thin, that they didn't have time to add the value they wanted or to think proactively about the business. The culprit: a list of 18 monthly reports to head office. He stopped sending one report each month until someone noticed. How many months do you think it took before anyone noticed? Nine. Getting rid of eight reports freed his team up to focus on the work they really needed to be doing.

Saying "yes" is important when it's the right work and you're the right person. But every new "yes" is also a "no" to your other priorities. And when you say "no" to the right things, you also re-commit to your existing priorities.

If you change what you say yes to, you'll change your team.

5. Embrace Productive Conflict.

Most people think I spend the majority of my time working with teams who have too much conflict. And sometimes I do work with these teams. When the call comes in, they want a referee to help manage conflict that has become vicious and personal. It's so bad that they can't see a way out.

Half the team is yelling and pounding tables (the "fight" side) while the other half is pushing away from the table or looking at their smart phones (the "flight" side). Clearly, no one is living up to the four responsibilities I've just talked about—no one has had a positive assumption in months.

If your team engages in destructive conflict, try assigning a rotating Chair for the meeting. Use small-group breakout discussions to change the tone and to elicit issues from the more reserved team members. Do something to reframe the discussion and refocus on the issues.

So, yes, I do work with teams who engage in ugly, personal, loud conflict. But more often, I work with teams where the problem is not enough conflict. These are the teams that don't even want me to use the word "conflict." Just like the crowd who always replace the term "weakness" with "developmental opportunity," many people try to convince me to use euphemisms like "disagreement," "difference of opinion," or "debate" instead of coming out and saying the dreaded word "conflict."

Unfortunately, people often become unwilling to talk about conflict because they're also unwilling to admit that they can't deal with it. Conflict, which I define as "uncomfortable friction between differing points of view," is absolutely necessary for a healthy team. If there isn't enough conflict around the table, I start looking for one of two problems:

Problem #1: No Conflict at All

Some teams just don't have any conflict at all. And yes, that is a problem. Why is there no conflict? Maybe all team members are perfectly aligned. Or maybe they don't like to rock the boat. That means the team's learning curve is very flat. Teams without diversity of thought aren't very creative. Worse, they're not very aware of risk.

If you're not having conflict, give yourself a shake. Find a way to broaden and deepen the discussion. You're missing something—time to find out what it is before it bites you.

Problem #2: Hidden, Unproductive Conflict

In some teams, there is conflict, it's just hidden. During meetings, heads nod and people agree. Then, offline, the conflict emerges. Maybe one person quietly shirks his commitments and fails to take action. Maybe multiple team members gossip or betray each others' trust. Sometimes the team leader is complicit, allowing team members to use back channels to revisit decisions that have already been made.

If your team is engaged in passive-aggressive behavior, get the conflict on the agenda. Give legitimate dissent a place to surface. Don't forget that the really juicy stuff always comes out with only 20 minutes left in the meeting—so be willing to make time for the important discussions.

The people who don't want me to use the word "conflict," the ones who think of themselves as good, nice, people are just as likely to be at fault in unhealthy teams as are their aggressive, combative colleagues. That's because these people shy away from open, healthy conflict about the issues.

If you are conflict-avoidant, you are probably not living up to your responsibility to add your full value. If you think you're "taking one for the team" by not speaking up, you're deluding yourself.

The most important idea to get your head around to create healthy, productive conflict is that you can be in conflict with someone without invalidating their opinion. You do this by expressing your contrary opinion as an "and." Just because you're right doesn't mean the other person is wrong.

Try saying something like this: "I hear that you think we need to leave room in the budget for a customer event, AND I'm concerned that we need that money for employee training. What are our options?"

For example, I worked with a global bank where the head of international business got into it with the head of risk management, saying, essentially, "We have got to invest in country A. We need 200% growth in 18 months. You have no clue!"

The head of risk management came right back with, "We can't invest there. We can't take on that much risk. YOU have no clue!"

This debate over growth versus risk management was set up to be adversarial from the start. When two people act like only one of them can be right, they spend most of their time going back and forth—and little time going forward. That's not a very productive conversation.

There's another way. Instead of assuming there is only one truth, name two truths (or three, or four). In the case of this bank, they could say, "We need to grow AND we need to manage risk." Two truths.

By naming both issues as true, everyone can relax and focus on coming up with a solution. If your team is stuck in a one-truth conflict, try writing the two truths on a white board. (It's amazing how writing something down makes people feel validated.)

Here's what this looks like: A non-profit I worked with was locked in conflict. The head of fundraising was saying, "We have to show the Board the projected deficit for next year. They need to understand the urgency of fundraising." Meanwhile, the head of finance was saying, "Are you crazy? We can't show a deficit, we have a fiduciary responsibility to balance the books."

By acknowledging both things as true, they found a simple solution. They would show the size of the projected deficit and then show the items they would have to remove from the plan to save enough money to balance

the books. That meant the Board would feel that sense of urgency over all the great programming that was being sacrificed, but still see the staff knew how to make the tough decisions required to balance the books.

Two truths, one solution. Productive Conflict.

Here are some other quick tips for embracing productive conflict:

1. **Use hypotheticals.** If you don't feel comfortable being assertive, try asking your teammates to imagine a different scenario. "I hear your concern about getting the right sales people to pull off this campaign. If we could get the right people…what could the campaign look like?"

2. **Talk about the impact of actions.** Rather than disagreeing with the plan, help your teammates think through the consequences by asking good open-ended questions about the impact. "OK, we're contemplating launching this product to only our U.S. customers. How is that going to land with our two big customers in Latin America?"

3. **Ask about the underlying issue.** If you disagree with a proposed action, start a discussion by trying to understand the rationale. If you understand the reason for the action, you might be able to find another way to accomplish the same goal. "I'm surprised you suggested we release the sales figures to the whole team. What is your goal in doing that?"

Having conflict—presenting a different point of view—is critical. Diversity of thought on a team leads to innovation and growth. It also helps identify and mitigate risks. If you find yourself shying away from conflict, use one of these techniques to make it a little easier.

If you change the way you disagree, you'll change your team.

It's Time for a Change

I started by sharing my frustration that team members are far too quick to blame dysfunction on others and far too slow to identify how they can make the team healthier. I hope this eBook has helped you find some opportunities for you to be a better team member. Remember, one person really can initiate profound change in a team. You just have to change yourself. I've seen it happen.

On the last two pages of this book, you'll find a worksheet to help you start that change. Pick one thing you can do differently as a team member to make your team better. Do you need to unpack some baggage and start with a positive assumption? Do you need to step up and add your full value? Do you need to make room for other points of view by amplifying other voices? Do you need to start saying no? Do you, like so many others, need to embrace productive conflict?

Once you know what your first step is, you need to find a way to raise this issue with your team. You can bring the idea up with the whole team, or you can have a private conversation with one person. The important thing is that you signal to them that it's time for a change. That it's time to make the team better, to be more productive in executing the strategy. And to achieve results in a way that's less painful. It's time to make it healthier, for everyone's sake.

Make no mistake; this is not easy. That's why they call it teamWORK. But it's up to you and the other members of the team how you want to live your lives at work. We spend too much time in teams for them to be toxic. You can change your team.

PERSONAL ACTION PLAN

1.   Where could you focus your energies to be a more effective member of the teams you are on?

   i) Starting with a positive assumption
   - [ ] I will listen more completely before judging
   - [ ] I will show greater confidence in my teammates' capability
   - [ ] I will start fresh with one or more members of my team
   - [ ] BONUS POINTS: I will separate the person from the message
   - [ ] Other: _____

      _____

   ii) Adding your full value
   - [ ] I will participate in more of the interactions on our team
   - [ ] I will contribute more of my knowledge and experience
   - [ ] I will add more of my personal strengths
   - [ ] BONUS POINTS: I will use insightful questions to add value
   - [ ] Other: _____

      _____

   iii) Amplifying other voices
   - [ ] I will encourage differing points of view
   - [ ] I will help my teammates be heard by the team
   - [ ] I will speak up when someone shuts down an unpopular idea
   - [ ] BONUS POINTS: I will encourage input from someone with whom I disagree
   - [ ] Other: _____

      _____

   iv) Knowing when to say no
   - [ ] I will get clear on my highest priority accountabilities
   - [ ] I will be deliberate about saying "no" to lower value activities
   - [ ] I will help my team identify low value activities
   - [ ] BONUS POINTS: I will ask my boss to support me in saying "no"
   - [ ] Other: _____

      _____

v) Embracing productive conflict

- ☐ I will disagree openly where issues can be addressed
- ☐ I will discourage teammates from gossiping with me
- ☐ I will frame conflict as "two truths"
- ☐ BONUS POINTS: I will confront someone with whom I have "baggage" to move forward
- ☐ Other: _____

2. What will you do differently after today? I will…

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

3. How will you signal to your team that you are ready to change?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

4. How will you know it's working? What are your success measures?

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Liane Davey, Ph.D.

Liane Davey, Ph.D. has figured out how to put profound thinking about strategy together with deep insight into teams. It's a formidable combination, and one based on 17 years of consulting experience. Too many teams have some combination of dysfunction, lack of clear direction, or both. Liane developed the highly successful Team Inoculation program for Knightsbridge and is a Principal and National Lead, Strategic Initiatives with Knightsbridge Leadership Solutions in Toronto.

She works with executives at some of North America's leading financial services, consumer goods, high tech, and healthcare organizations.

Liane is a dynamic keynote speaker who has presented at numerous conferences and management retreats and has written a number of articles for trade and academic journals. Liane's first book, *Leadership Solutions* (Jossey Bass), co-authored with David Weiss and Vince Molinaro, was released in Fall 2007. She is currently at work on her second book, *Healthy Teams*.

Liane has served on the executive of the Canadian Society for Industrial/Organizational Psychology and as an evaluator for the Ontario Psychological Association Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards. She is currently a member of the Board of Trustees of the Psychology Foundation and is Chair of the Foundation's Diversity in Action project promoting mental health in immigrant communities. She holds a Ph.D. in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from the University of Waterloo.

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Knightsbridge helps organizations strengthen the capability of their people to deliver results. Knightsbridge works with organizations to help them seamlessly execute their strategy through people. Teams of experienced specialists in Leadership & Talent Development, Executive Search & Recruitment, Career Development & Transition, and Workforce Management provide integrated solutions to deliver on your human capital needs. Learn about us at www.knightsbridge.ca

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