

Achieving Breakthroughs in Executive Team Performance

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Why do intelligent, reasonable executives, when they become part of an executive team, often behave in ways that are clearly not in the best interests of the organization? Why does team-based decision-making sometimes become „group think,“ which stifles productivity and contributes to bad decisions? And, when this happens in your executive team, what can you do, as an executive team leader or member, to turn the tide?

In this article, we provide a simple language and some guidelines for helping teams get unstuck and make dramatic shifts in favor of openness, learning, and productivity.

A Simple Language

Teams, like families and other enduring groups, engage in repetitive, observable interactions that dramatically influence their ability to create results. Some of these interactions support productivity, and some of them get in the way. *You* can learn to track these sequences of behavior and see their impact on results. Furthermore, by modifying your own behavior you can help the team shift its behavior in favor of positive results.

Entrenched nonproductive behavioral sequences are almost always rooted in and/or reinforced by underlying ways of thinking and by broader organizational forces. You can track how these ways of thinking and organizational forces inhibit the team's ability to produce. And you can create shifts in these ways of thinking and in these organizational forces so that they support productivity.

Three types of forces influence team performance: face-to-face forces, social forces, and individual forces.

We call these forces, and the manner in which they interact, the team's *structures*.

Face-to-Face structures are those visible forces that operate in the room and that we experience directly with our five senses. They include the tasks the team has to perform, how the team organizes itself, and interactions necessary to get the work done.

Social structures are the broader organizational, business, and environmental forces that affect the team. Social structures include the reward system, the power structure, cultural norms, customer demands, and the pressures of the marketplace. They are less directly visible than face-to-face structures, but they significantly influence team decision-making and productivity.

Individual structures are the thoughts, feelings, and deeper beliefs that each individual brings to the table. Even though they are, by definition, the least visible of the forces at play, they exert a powerful influence upon individual and team behavior.

These aspects of team structure are very much interrelated. Each is significantly influenced by and influences the others. And each aspect of structure, when fully understood as part of the *team system*, can be used as a lever to significantly enhance team productivity.

(For more details on this overall model, please see our article „Creating Business Results Through Team Learning – A Systemic Approach“ in the Third Quarter 1995 issue of *Prism*.)

We suggest using the *structure of behavior in your team* as an entry point for enhancing productivity. A team's key behavioral structures are, in a very real sense, the *media* through which the deeper and broader forces – mental models, deeper beliefs, and organizational, business, and environmental forces – exert their influence on the team's ability to perform.

The Kantor Four-Player system, an empirically based model of the *structure of behavior* (aside from the content of the behavior) in human systems, provides a simple but powerful framework for seeing and shifting team behavior. Specifically, careful observation indicates that, when we strip complex interactions to their bare essence, team members display four types of behavior:

- A *move* initiates a sequence of behavior.
- A *follow* supports a move.
- An *oppose* opposes a move.
- A *bystand* observes and makes comments that move the group along.

All interactions in teams, no matter how complex, can be observed and mapped in terms of combinations of these four behaviors.

An effective team has several characteristics. The team has the capability to engage in all four behaviors in observable, balanced sequences, and individual team members have the flexibility to engage in more than one of

the behaviors. The team, and individuals within it, do *not* tend to get caught in repetitive, ritualized, nonproductive patterns of behavior. Furthermore, the team has an active, enabled bystander function that helps it stay unstuck, so that it can reach a successful resolution and produce desired results.

Each of the four behaviors performs an important function in an effective team:

- A *move* provides *direction*.
- A *follow* enables *completion*.
- An *oppose* creates *correction*.
- A *bystand* offers *perspective*.

In an effective team, all four behaviors are *enabled* – that is, the team system allows and encourages the behaviors to support the system by performing their functions successfully.

An ineffective team has the opposite characteristics. The team lacks capability to flexibly engage in all four behaviors in a balanced way. Individuals in the team tend to get stuck in their „favorite“ behaviors rather than moving flexibly from one to the other. The team tends to get stuck in repetitive, ritualized, nonproductive patterns of behavior. The bystander role is disabled or nonexistent and, therefore, does not help the group stay unstuck. The group is less able to reach resolution, make decisions, or produce good results.

In a less effective team, one or more of the key behaviors is *disabled*, that is, the system does not allow them to operate openly and successfully. Therefore, the team lacks direction, completion, correction, and/or perspective.

Seeing and Shifting Team Behavior

In our years of working with executive teams, we have noticed recurring patterns of these four behaviors. These patterns, which we call behavioral archetypes, are actually structural dances – that is, they are repetitive behavioral sequences that significantly affect teams' ability to produce results. Happily, teams can learn to observe and shift their behavioral sequences in ways that dramatically increase their effectiveness. Moreover, they can learn to see how their nonproductive behavioral sequences are reinforced by specific modes of thinking and by forces in the organization, and they can shift or influence these broader and deeper structures in ways that support team productivity. In the following pages we discuss three of the more common behavioral archetypes: point-counterpoint, courteous compliance, and covert opposition.

Point-Counterpoint. Point-counterpoint is one of the more common patterns in executive teams.

Example: The VP of Manufacturing says, „I think we should purchase a new MRP package.“ The CFO retorts, „We don't have enough money in the FY96 budget.“ „We need the new package in order to complete the upgrade of our manufacturing process so that we can make more money,“ says the Manufacturing VP, „That's all well and good, but we cannot continue to bypass our budget planning process, especially for large purchases like this. I simply won't allow it!“ answers the CFO. The other members of the executive team sit and listen in frustration, thinking things like: „Here they go again. Ted and Bill always get locked in these conflicts, and we never get anywhere. I suppose I should say something, but it won't do any good. Besides, I don't want to get yelled at.“ The interaction continues in this vein; no resolution is reached.

Key Behavioral Sequence: Move-Oppose.

A point-counterpoint sequence is exactly as the name suggests: someone makes a move, and the next person opposes that move. The next behavior is a new move, followed by opposition, and so forth. Teamwork becomes a behavioral tennis match in which each person advocates his or her opinion. The following role and the bystander role are either absent or ineffective at bringing perspective or closure. The team does not reach resolution, resulting in frustration and energy drain.

Often, teams characterized by highly entrenched point-counterpoint structures exist in organizations that have powerful histories, organizational processes, and business processes that encourage this kind of behavior, e.g., highly competitive functions, reward systems that encourage competitive rather than collaborative behavior, cutthroat marketplaces, and/or leaders who pit people against one another. In addition, there are often deeply held beliefs and mental models about the win-lose nature of the world and the necessity of using win-lose behavior to be successful in the organization.

If you find yourself in a team that is stuck on point-counterpoint, you have several options: *You* can bystand and point out to the group, in a nonjudgmental way, what it is doing and the impact it is having. Ask the group members how they see it, so they can begin to learn to bystand themselves and break out of their move-oppose cage. For example, you might say, „It seems we're doing something we do a lot. Ted and Bill are in an overt conflict, and the rest of us are sitting silently. There may be something we can do to get ourselves out of this trap. How do other people see it?“

Alternatively, you can help the group use the move-oppose conflict as an opportunity for learning and correction: „I think Ted and Bill both have some good points. Let’s see what we can learn from the two positions and then see if we can reach a compromise.“

Or you can enable the silent bystanders. Ninety percent of the time, a significant number of the silent team members see exactly what is going on, but they are uncomfortable pointing it out. You might say, „I believe we can all contribute to helping us move forward. I’d like to hear from those of you who are not saying anything. What do you think is going on?“

Similarly, you could draw out the followers, telling them, „I know that some of you support Ted’s position. I’d like to hear your thinking.“

Additionally, the team could establish and enforce specific ground rules to mitigate the move-oppose behavior, e.g., We will not oppose a suggestion without improving on it or offering a better alternative.

Going deeper, you might help the team reflect on and change its underlying ways of thinking. For example, point-counterpoint is rooted in a win/lose mental model. Raise this possibility and suggest an alternative: „Perhaps we can find a way in which Ted and Bill both win in this situation.“

Operating more broadly, you might adjust the reward system to reinforce more collaborative team behavior and to establish organizational norms of openness. The message: Saying what’s on your mind will not be punished. It’s not only OK, it’s encouraged.

Of course, team members may be so entrenched in the point-counterpoint structure that they see any behavior on your part, even a bystand suggestion, as a move that they must oppose. In situations this extreme, the desired action is to call a break and/or constitute a smaller, more balanced group to handle the issue and report back to the whole team.

Courteous Compliance. Courteous compliance is a very common archetype in some organizational cultures.

Example: An executive team comes together to discuss whether or not it should purchase a small competitor. The CEO makes the opening move by saying, „It’s very clear that we have to buy ACME to increase our market share. Let’s figure out how we want to go about it.“ The Marketing VP says, „Well, we could start by putting out some feelers through our informal contacts.“ Another executive says, „Yes, and in parallel we should assess their fair market value and the benefits to our firm.“ The COO is thinking, „Gee, I thought we were going to discuss *whether or not* to buy ACME, not how. Oh well, Jim (the CEO) already has his mind made up anyhow.“ The conversation continues as above.

Key Behavioral Sequence: Move-Follow.

In this pattern, someone makes a move and the rest of the team dutifully, courteously follows. The conversation is characterized by polite, rational conversation with very little controversy or push-back. No one points out to group members that they continually operate within the framework of assumptions handed to them – often by the formal leader of the team.

Courteous compliance produces results, but they are rarely exceptional. Courteous compliance results in „doing things right“ rather than „doing the right thing.“ Creative opposition, exploring a wider range of options, and learning about the team’s functioning typically do not occur. Also, people may support the outcome politely, but not deeply – prejudicing not only the quality of the decision, but people’s commitment to it and their ability to fully implement it.

Courteous compliance is often a characteristic of traditional, hierarchical cultures in which pushing back on the formal leader is not customary. In teams with entrenched courteous compliance sequences, there are often very deeply held mental models about „team play“ and „loyalty“ – which, to them, looks like going along to get along. Opposers are seen as „disloyal“ and „not team players“ and are often ostracized. These mental models are sometimes reflected in organizational and business processes that smooth conflict, sweep unpleasant data under the rug, and avoid the truth about negative issues.

If you are the formal leader or tend to be the initial mover in a courteous compliance pattern, notice and change your behavior. Start the conversation with a true inquiry into the issue rather than with a conclusion or narrow framing.

Also, bystand and point out to the group what it is doing and the potential impact of the behavior on results. Ask the group how they see it, thus helping them learn to bystand themselves: „It seems that we always operate within the assumptions we are given, rather than exploring issues more broadly. We may be inhibiting our ability to have rich conversations and make the best possible choices. How do you see it?“

Strengthen the creative opposition and bystander functions within the team. Encourage people to offer creative alternatives. Ask members to point it out when they see the team limiting itself by not exploring a wider range of

options. Suggest that the team set a norm determining that „loyal opposition“ is not only permissible, but also a creative contribution to the work. Finally, modify organizational and business structures, norms, and processes that may support the courteous compliance structure.

Covert Opposition. Covert opposition resembles courteous compliance on the surface. However, in covert opposition there is very real, but hidden, opposition.

Example: The COO of a pharmaceutical company is championing a major change project intended to flatten the organization, further organizational learning, and more effectively integrate marketing, strategy, and product development. The Steering Team for the change effort consists of the division managers whose organizations will be most directly affected. In one Steering Team meeting, the COO says, „The design teams for our new initiatives will take 30 percent of each team member’s time.“ Division managers listen, and some nod their heads. „Since team members will come from your organizations,“ the COO continues, „you need to go back and negotiate priorities with your line managers so that people’s time can be freed up. As far as I’m concerned, this change effort is priority one.“ A lengthy conversation ensues about the amount of time needed to complete the negotiations regarding people’s time. A couple of people observe that the team is spending lots of energy talking about the negotiations. Several of the division managers are thinking, „My managers will never go along with this. Everything is priority one around here. Freeing up 30 percent of someone’s time is a joke!“ However, only one person voices his concern about being „beaten up“ by his subordinates. The division managers leave the room having overtly agreed to complete the necessary negotiations within two weeks. A month later, design team members report that, in reality, none of their time has been freed up. Instead, the 30 percent design team responsibility has been added to their already overloaded schedules.

Key Behavioral Sequences: Move-Follow/Oppose Move-Bystand/Oppose

In this pattern, someone makes a move, and people publicly, overtly, follow or bystand. Underneath their overt moves, however, people are actually skeptical of or against what is being proposed. Covertly, offline, back in their areas, people are at best skeptical and, at worst, resistant to the mover’s initiative. All the while, the mover believes that the team supports his or her move.

In this pattern, widespread commitment never develops, so implementation is, at best, spotty. In the extreme, results are totally undermined.

Covert opposition occurs in several types of cultures: hierarchical systems that prohibit open opposition; organizations that tend to avoid direct conflict, e.g., „nice“ cultures; and highly relationship-oriented cultures in which people believe that they cannot be successful if they alienate anyone. In all three cases, underlying mental models include deeply held fears about what will happen to the opposer and the opposed if a real difference surfaces publicly. Finally, covert opposition is often prevalent in large, complex, bureaucratic systems subject to numerous competing forces that are beyond most individuals’ direct control. In these systems, a frequently held mental model is, „Why should I risk opposing openly? In all likelihood, things will change in a few months anyway. And if they don’t, I can still jump on the bandwagon, because I haven’t alienated anyone by opposing openly.“

When you observe covert opposition, bystand and help the team see the structure and how it affects its ability to produce results: „In our meetings, everyone agrees to the next steps, but then very little happens. Do people agree with this perception? What do you think is going on?“

Additionally, you could legitimize the covert opposition. Ask people to feel free to voice it in the interest of providing creative input: „I know that a number of you probably have serious doubts about the initiative I have proposed. I understand, given the history of our system, why you would want to keep those doubts to yourself. However, I’d like to invite you to say what you really think. I believe that is the only way we can move forward.“

Teach movers how to receive opposition as creative input, and teach opposers how to offer it as such. Reinforce interactions in which overt, clean, creative opposition occurs: „Bob, I think Susan was legitimately trying to enrich our thinking by proposing an alternative. Can you entertain her suggestion in that context?“

Explore underlying mental models about conflict, opposition, and the futility of fighting the system: „What are people’s underlying beliefs about creating change in our system? Is it possible? Is it worth the effort?“ Then, „Are there other ways to think about our system? What are the risks of not acting?“

Establish ground rules that encourage opposers to speak up. Call the team back to the ground rule when it gets stuck: „Remember our agreement that, for each major decision, we will explore at least one very different approach. Who can suggest one?“

The overarching stance in shifting covert opposition is to help the team reframe its experience of opposition from a dreaded, destructive, and/or useless act into a caring, creative act of learning.

Guidelines for Action

Understanding the behavioral archetypes outlined above can be a very powerful tool for enhancing team performance. At the same time, it is important to remember that these archetypes – and our suggestions for managing them – are guides to inform your understanding and action, not cookbook recipes. A particular team situation may resemble, but will never look exactly like, one of the archetypes. In addition, the set of behavioral archetypes is by no means complete. Once you learn the four-player language and understand how team behavior reflects other aspects of structure, you can identify patterns of behavior, mental models, and organizational influences particular to your team. Furthermore, you can learn to see how these behaviors are reinforced by underlying ways of thinking and by forces in your organization, business, and/or environment.

Remember that your most powerful instrument is yourself. Start by looking at your own behavior. How do you contribute to the team's nonproductive patterns? How can you shift those patterns by changing your own behavior and ways of thinking?

It is almost always helpful to enable the bystander function in your team. Help the team learn to look over its own shoulder and gain perspective on how it operates.

Similarly, there is usually room to make opposition a more creative force in your team. First make it permissible to oppose. Then help the team learn to offer and use opposition as a creative, corrective, learning opportunity.

Finally, if you really want a change to last, make parallel shifts in at least three levels of structure. For example, modify nonproductive move-oppose behavior, think together about how to create win/win solutions, align the goals in team members' job plans so that they are motivated to work in the same direction, and reward people accordingly.

By applying these guidelines, you can help your team engage in ongoing learning for continually enhanced performance.

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