

Mentoring Human Action



Becoming an Expert Learner Part 3B: Paying Attention to Your Team's Cognitive Biases and Shortcuts

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"The new reality is that it will take the collaborative efforts of people with different skills to create innovative solutions and innovative products. ... Creating a shared understanding is simply a different task than exchanging information. It's the difference between being deeply involved in a conversation and lecturing to a group. The words are different, the tone is different, the attitude is different, and the tools are different."

— Michael Schrage, **No More Teams!** (1989, 1995)

Understanding your individual cognitive biases and shortcuts is one step towards being an expert learner. A far more profound step is for all members of an intact team to understand their individual and collective cognitive biases and shortcuts, thus becoming experts in team learning. When several people work together, as in an intact team, their individual cognitive biases and shortcuts interact with each other to produce a quality that is called *team performance*. Whether or not that team is high performing depends on

the team members' capacity to accept that the team operates from collective cognitive biases and shortcuts, and their ability to work with that knowledge to make sure that the team is not falling prey to these cognitive biases and shortcuts.

According to Peter Senge et al., author of **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** (pp. 61-64), *The Team Learning Wheel* has four stages that correspond directly to Honey and Mumford's model of individual learning (**InfoMine**, Vol. 5, No. 3):

- **Stage 1: Coordinated action**
The entire team takes action and knows each team member's contribution to that action, as well as the effect of that action within and outside of the team.
- **Stage 2: Public review**
As a group, the entire team reflects on the action, in order to learn from what has occurred as a result of the action.
- **Stage 3: Shared meaning**
The entire team works together to draw correct conclusions, in order to make collective sense and shared meaning of the learning, and to plan to apply what it has learned to the next action.
- **Stage 4: Joint planning**
The entire team is involved in planning, in order to understand the scope of the possible actions, so that the team can make informed decisions and take effective actions.

These stages form a cycle of team learning, decision making, and problem solving. To establish a team profile, the team members' individual profiles are combined to

show a composite profile. This profile shows each individual's profile in relation to the rest of the team. Using this composite profile, the team can identify any patterns that may suggest cognitive biases and shortcuts.

For example, if there are a number of team members who demonstrate a cognitive bias in stages 1 and 4 (action stages) and only a few who demonstrate a cognitive bias in stages 2 and 3 (reflection stages), this would suggest that the team is biased towards action, rather than reflection. The team may be demonstrating a collective behaviour that places a higher value on taking action than on spending time on reflection. This may appear as the team's intolerance for gathering and reviewing information in public (Stage 2: Public reflection), and making sure that each member of the team gains shared meaning about what the team has learned and how it will use this knowledge to plan to learn in the future (Stage 3: Shared meaning). In this example, if a team member tries to slow the team down enough to spend some time in public reflection and/or shared meaning, the team may shut this team member down because he or she is operating outside of the team bias or collective standard. In other words, the team is demonstrating a cognitive bias towards action and a cognitive shortcut towards reflection.

Although this example is used to illustrate how cognitive biases and shortcuts may manifest themselves in team dynamics, it is only one aspect of a complex situation. In real teams, many factors are at play, interacting with each other to create a team dynamic that is unique to that team. To illustrate, consider the effect of power on a team. Imagine two teams,

each with a different team leader. Team leaders exert *positional power*, the power that they derive from their position as the supervisor or boss. How team leaders use this power determines how the team will respond to team learning.

In Team A, the team leader exhibits his or her power by valuing only stages 1 and 4, the action stages of *The Team Learning Wheel*. In Team B, the team leader exhibits his or her power by paying attention to all four stages of *The Team Learning Wheel*. Imagine that you are observing a team meeting that focuses on a specific phase of a project.

In Team A's meeting, the team members:

- Spend time making sure that each individual team member knows what results the team leader wants from the team (stage 2).
- Spend time assigning results to each of the smaller teams (stage 3).
- Spend time, as small teams, in planning, making decisions, and identifying main tasks (stage 4).
- Implement the decisions by taking individual actions (stage 1).

Because this team has not spent the time required to pay adequate attention to stages 2, 3, and 4, it is unable to act as a team; instead, it acts as a group of individuals. The team leader has exerted his or her power by not supporting the learning process — either consciously or unconsciously. The value is placed on the speed at which the team is making decisions and taking actions. As a result, the team follows the team leader's example, and does not pay attention to each of the stages of *The Team Learning Wheel*. The advantage to this approach is that the

team gets decisions made and takes actions faster. The team appears to be working. The disadvantage to this approach is that the team may not have made informed decisions, and, as a result, cannot take effective actions, because it did not spend the time to learn from the past. This team is likely to repeat mistakes from the past, and may pay the price in poor performance.

In Team B's meeting, the team members:

- Spend time making sure that each individual team member is given a chance to reflect publicly on what he or she has learned during each phase of the project. Other team members ask questions to make sure that they understand what is being said, in order to come to a common understanding (stage 2).
- Spend time making sure that the correct conclusions are drawn about what the team has learned, and that each team member has a shared meaning about the conclusions (stage 3).
- Spend time planning as a group, in order to understand the individual roles and responsibilities, and how individuals interact with each other. As a result of time spent on joint planning, the team can make informed decisions, because it is aware of all of the factors at play in the decision (stage 4).
- Implement the informed decisions by taking coordinated action, because every team member is aware of what is occurring throughout the team, and the impact of the team's actions on both the team and the environment in which the team operates (stage 1).

Because this team has spent the time required to pay attention to stages 2,

3, and 4, it is able to act as a team, rather than as a group of individuals. The team leader has exerted his or her power by consciously supporting the learning process. As a result, the team follows the team leader's example, and pays attention to each of the stages of *The Team Learning Wheel*. The advantage to this approach is that the team makes more informed decisions and takes more effective actions, because it is spending the time to learn from the past. This team is unlikely to repeat mistakes from the past, and is moving towards high performance. The disadvantage to this approach is that it seems as though the team is wasting time by working as a team, when it could separate the tasks to be more efficient. However, to learn from the past, teams must spend the time up front, in order to make sure that the team is making the best decisions and taking the most effective actions, rather than making decisions and taking actions based only on the most efficient use of time.

“The most powerful teams ... have representatives from all four styles. And these teams drive their members crazy. Because while A is trying to bring things to a point, B's got seventeen different ideas about how to look at it. D wants to do something ... and C has just noticed a new set of connections. The challenge is learning to value that diversity, and to help the team pace itself through the wheel ...”

— Peter Senge et al., **The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook** (1994)

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