My Advice for Working in Teams

By Alaina Brandt

Over the last five or so years during which time I've taught this content on teamwork, when the time of year roles around to teach the content once again, it gives me pause. I find myself reflecting on my own behaviors as a teammate and the recent successes and failures that I've had in this regard. Usually, having to review the advice and strategies that I share in this presentation helps me to reflect upon my experiences in the teams in which I work and serves as a reminder to redirect any bad habits I've developed as a team member. Mostly, the topic leaves me understanding that we're all human and that we should give one another a break.

This perspective shares advice and strategies I'd like to give for working in teams, based on my experiences working in teams in the United States and internationally. Because I'm from the United States, my point of view as I share advice here is American. My identity as a white cisgender heterosexual woman necessarily influences my perspective. In certain regards, I experience teams in terms of the privileges that my identity affords me. On the other hand, in team work, being a woman has its disadvantages.
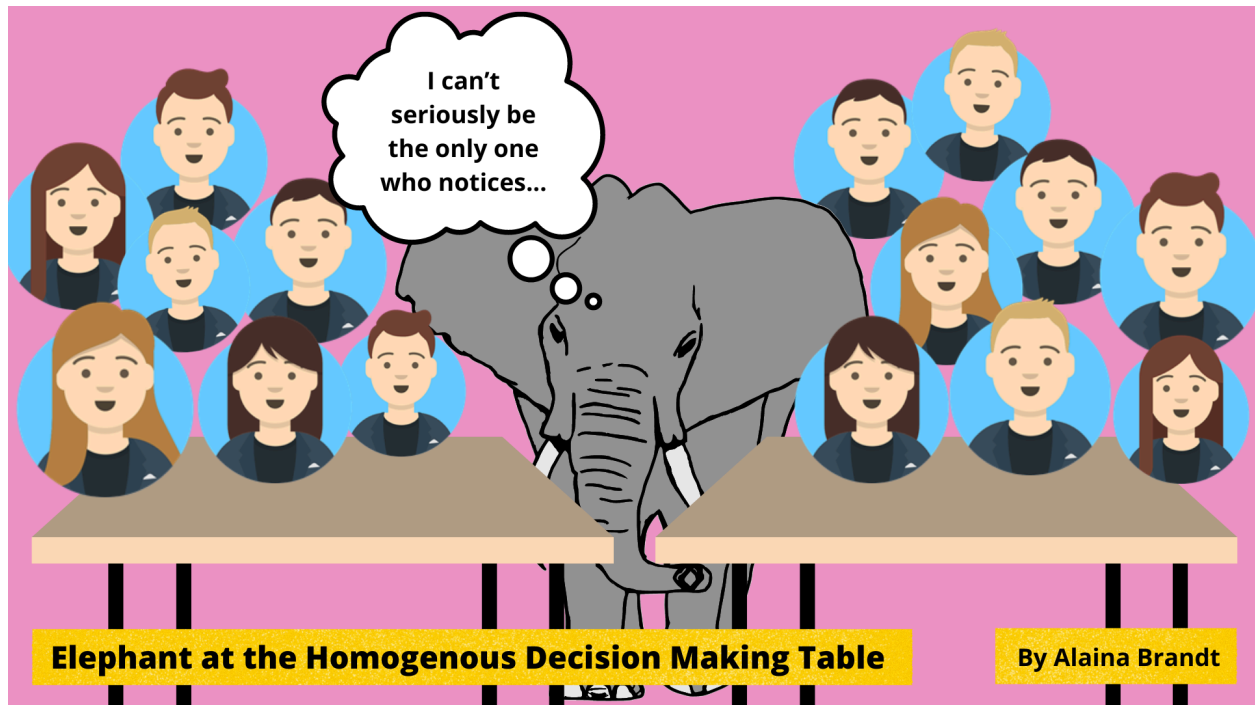
The topics covered in this presentation include diversity, team formation, cooperation, leadership, saying no, providing feedback, dealing with complaints, dividing work, and making escalations. Read the booklet all at once, or skip to the section that most interests you.

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In teamwork, there's a tendency to want to work in a homogenous team, in which we work with people who look, think, and act like us. The thinking goes that producing outcomes is easier when everyone speaks the same mother language. However, studies show that any perceived gains in communication are far outweighed by the inaccurate decision-making and lack of innovation produced by homogenous teams.

Take, for instance, the article, "Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter" by David Rock and Heidi Grant. Rock and Grant reference a study that tested the accuracy of decision-making of all white juries compared to juries with at least two black people. The study showed that diverse panels raised more facts related to the case than homogenous panels and made fewer factual errors while discussing available evidence. If errors did occur, they were more likely to be corrected during deliberation. One possible reason for this difference was that white jurors on diverse panels recalled evidence more accurately.

In the interview "The Trouble with Homogenous Teams," Evan Apfelbaum reports on a study that tested groups of Caucasians and groups of Chinese people for the accuracy of their decision-making when their teams were homogenous or diverse. Homogenous teams were more likely to feel very confident about the wrong answer, while diverse teams were less likely to feel confident about the right answer. So while you may be tempted to recruit for your team by looking for someone around whom you'd feel comfortable, be aware that homogenous teams produce less accurate and less competitive results.

On the flip side, the benefits of working in diverse teams are many. According to Apfelbaum, people prepare more thoroughly for teamwork if they know that they will be presenting to a diverse group, and work products demonstrate more complex critical analysis. According to Rock and Grant, while homogenous groups tend toward the groupthink that limits their ability to imagine alternative solutions, more people contributing ideas from a wider variety of perspectives produces a broader range of potential and accurate solutions to the big challenges that teams work to overcome.

Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing
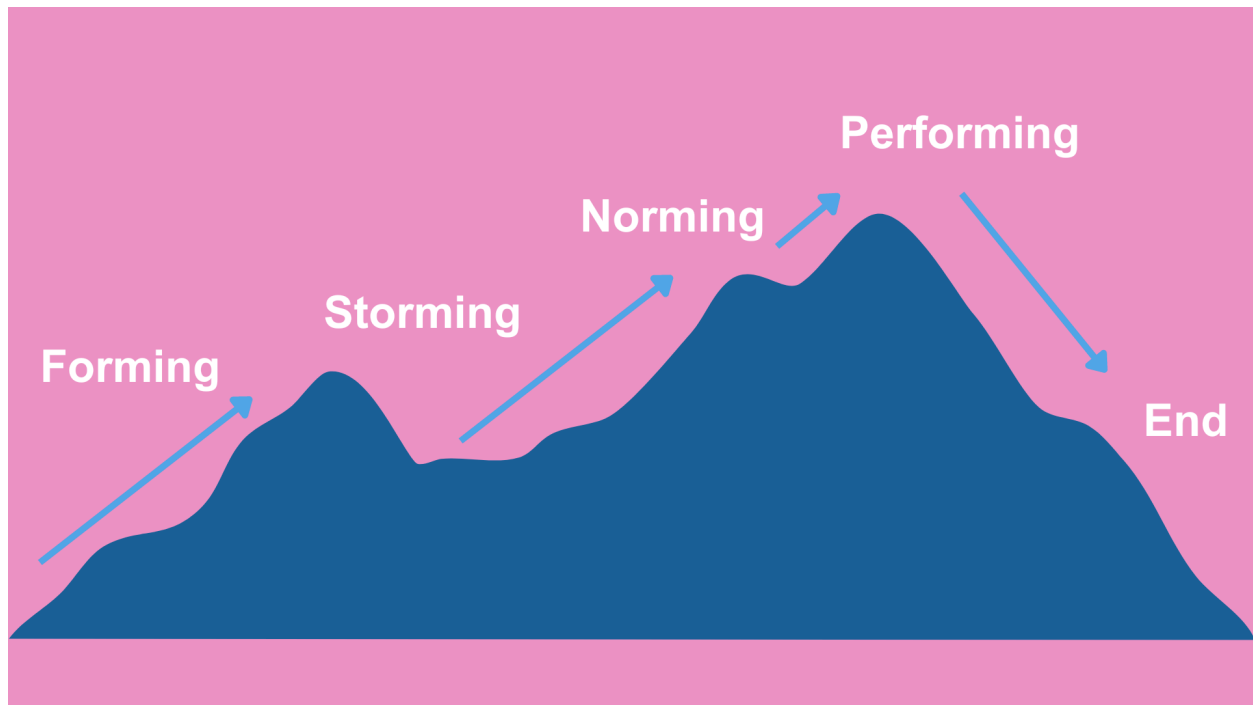
Bruce Tuckman's model on team development includes the stages forming, storming, norming, and performing. Understanding the feelings and behaviors expressed when working in teams in terms of these stages can help us to see conflict, particularly when teams are just getting started, as natural. Moreover, this can help us to move more quickly from one stage to the next. MIT's "Using the Stages of Team Development" (in English) explains what to expect during each of these stages in more detail. A summary of these expectations follows here.

- **Forming** - Team members may experience feelings of excitement and anxiety about the new project at hand. Expect a lot of questions at this stage. The primary goal of this stage is to establish a direction and to define goals.
- **Storming** - The feelings of excitement may start to wear off during this stage and feelings of frustration start coming through as differences in working styles and misunderstandings are perceived as slowing work. The primary goals of this stage are to redefine goals to match reality and to adjust.
- **Norming** - Feelings of frustration may give way to acceptance at this stage as team members get used to and indeed better at working together. The frequency and quality

of communication continues to deepen at this stage. The primary goals of this stage are to work efficiently together and to continually evaluate processes and methodologies for improvements that can be made.

- **Performing** - At this stage, team members may have built up enough trust to feel attached to and committed to their team. Team members work more fluidly with one another and attend to and anticipate one another's needs. The primary goals of this stage are continuous improvement, individual development, and hitting milestones and celebrating accomplishments.

Stretch Collaboration

Adam Kahane's book *Collaborating with the Enemy* has a flashy title. While most of us may not be collaborating with anyone we'd consider to be an outright enemy, Kahan's conceptualization of stretch collaboration is a useful way to think of teamwork. The stretch collaboration approach embraces the disagreement and disaccord that come along with collaborative efforts. He encourages teams to approach solving problems by acknowledging that they will often not even agree on what the problem is and that while they may all be working toward some sort of a central solution, they are not all starting from the same place. Kahane notes that where most see working in teams through the lens of cooperation, people are actually choosing among four strategies when they work with one another all the time. Those strategies are exit, adapt, force, and finally, collaborate. See Kahane's framework presented in a decision-tree format.

Problematic Situations

Stretch Collaboration Decision Tree based on Collaborating with the Enemy (2017) via jarche.com
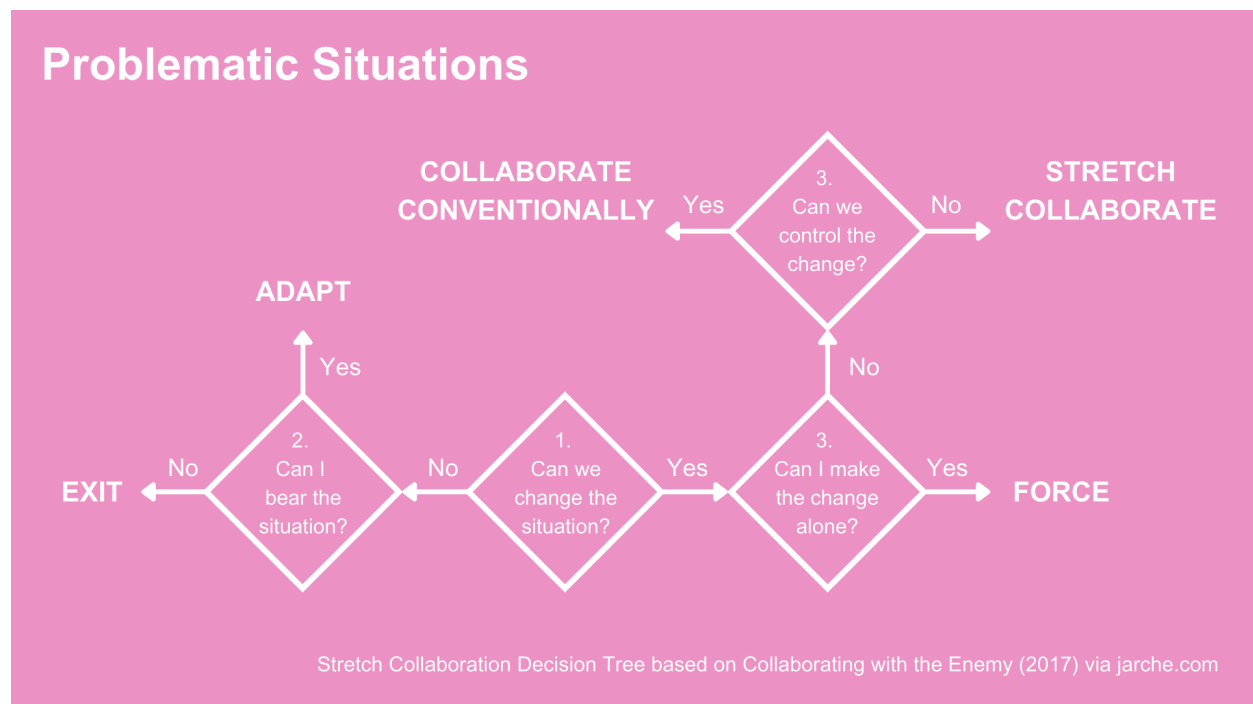
When collaborating, start by asking yourself if you can change the situation. If not, ask yourself if you can bear the situation. If not, exit if possible. If so, adapt and change yourself. If you can

change the situation, ask yourself if you can do so all by yourself. If you can, force your way of doing things. If you can't, you'll need to collaborate.

Once you have determined that a problematic situation requires collaboration, conventional collaboration can be made more dynamic if teams embrace stretch collaboration. In stretch collaboration, you'll embrace conflict and connection, experiment your way forward, and step into the game. Overall, collaborators should listen for possibility instead of growing fearful of uncertainty, according to Adam Kahane.

Babble Bias & Team Leadership
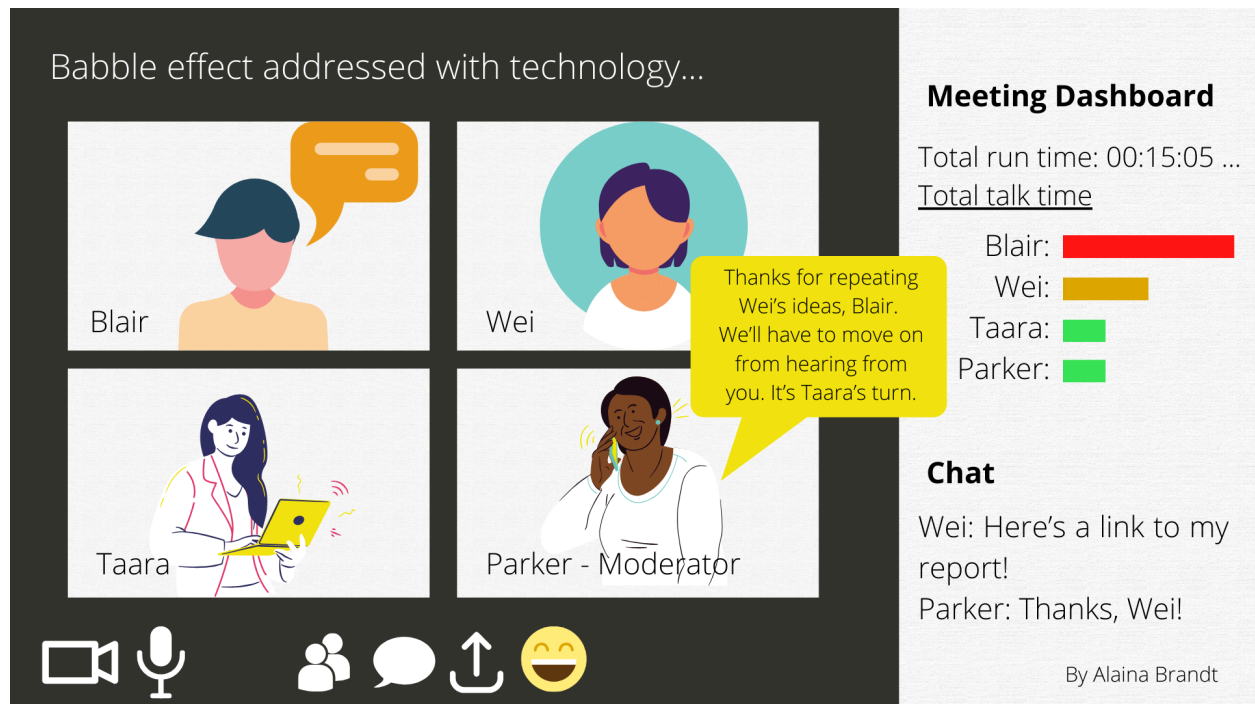
Once people get into teams, we work to establish our roles, including leadership. The babble bias, or equating leadership with the quantity of time a person speaks rather than the quality of their contributions, is a form of bias that often manifests when establishing leaders in teams. That is, extroverts are more likely to be seen as leaders than introverts regardless of intelligence and expertise, within systems in which white European and white European American expectations about leadership dominate.

The babble bias does not benefit all genders equally. In the book *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg notes that those who are identified as women are perceived as having talked too much when groups get together, even if they've talked about the same amount of time as those who are identified as men. In the book, Sandberg recommended that women speak up less in order to avoid this misperception, advice that hardly seems fair.

Additionally, when promoting team members to team leader positions within a U.S. context, generalizations based on societal values lead to harmful stereotypes and discrimination around leadership. Equating different societal values with a lack of leadership is not only inaccurate. This leads to systematically racist promotion practices as well.

To overcome the babble bias, people who are more extroverted would ideally speak a little less and leave pauses in discussions to give people who are introverted time to form their thoughts and speak up. Being aware of the babble bias is unlikely to make extroverts who want to be promoted to leadership roles talk less in meetings. That said, introverts who want promotions need to learn to talk more in meetings. Ideally, people and organizations would learn to embrace many styles of leadership.

Questions for Consideration

- Personality styles in the U.S.A. are thought of in terms of the dichotomy of introversion and extroversion. How are personality types conceptualized in other parts of the world?
- A business case for not solely equating leadership with extroversion is better leaders and therefore better performing teams, yet the babble bias persists. What prevents people from understanding that there are many ways to be a leader? How can this tunnel vision be overcome?

Setting Boundaries & Saying No

Nedra Tawwab's book *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* addresses a common issue in human relationships. Sometimes people do not communicate their boundaries to the co-creators in their lives, then become hurt, frustrated, and overwhelmed when a need that they have not communicated is not being met.

When setting boundaries, Tawwab reminds us it's perfectly normal that people will test or forget your boundaries, so we all need to get used to reinforcing our boundaries. That is, if we want people to respect our boundaries, we should be consistent. We'll have to get comfortable with repeating ourselves, per Tawwab. Sometimes people who are afraid of setting boundaries will "go with the flow" of what everyone else on the team wants to do. It's great to be flexible, but also remember that going with whatever your co-creators want to do without considering, expressing, and fulfilling your needs too is being passive, not flexible.

Then again, Tawwab also recommends being able to identify when repeating yourself over and over again is not going to change a situation. There's no need to over explain and repeat yourself to people who aren't going to listen. In these cases, here are some simple phrases from Nedra Tawwab that you can use to say no. Remember, when saying no, this is a complete sentence: No.

- No.
- No, thank you.
- I think I'll pass.
- I'm not taking on new things.

- It doesn't sound like the right fit.
- I'd rather not, thanks.
- That doesn't work for me.
- I appreciate your consideration, but no thank you.
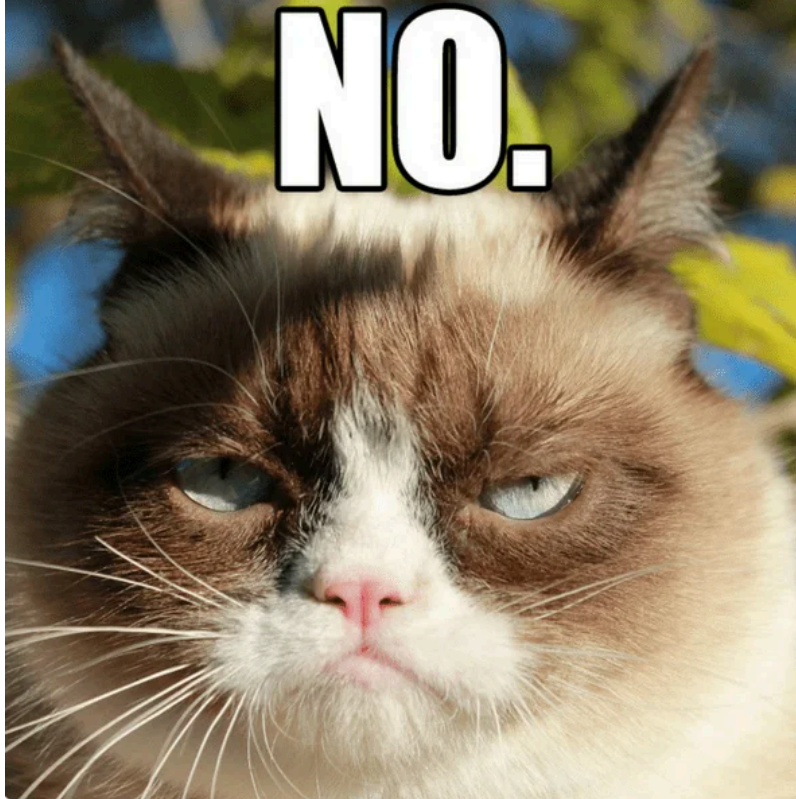
Question for consideration
- What are appropriate ways of saying no in cultures besides the United States?

## Feedback & Constructive Criticism

Teamwork requires ongoing communication, and management requires the ability to give constructive criticism, yet providing constructive criticism can feel icky. Sometimes people who feel new to a particular area may lack confidence about providing feedback too. If people who are new to an organization can overcome that lack of confidence, their feedback can be very valuable. Typically, people who have practiced in an area for a long time are set in their ways, and their comfort prevents them from seeing obvious shortcomings or ways of doing better. But newcomers may hesitate to speak up. After all, if something is so obvious, surely someone would have mentioned it before.

To overcome discomfort and lack of confidence about communicating feedback, try thinking about feedback in terms of Kim Scott's framework of *Radical Candor*. Scott reframed her thinking about feedback to see not providing feedback as a lack of personal caring since not

providing feedback doesn't give a person a chance to improve and can lead a whole team to fail.

The Radical Candor Framework consists of four feedback cells that exist on crossing axes of caring personally or not giving a crap, and challenging directly or being silent.
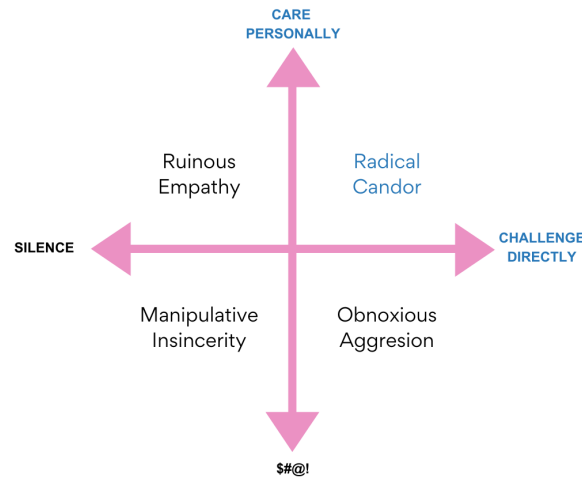
Kim Scott's Radical Candor Framework

The [Radical Candor website](#) gives these definitions for each of the feedback styles of their matrix.

> "**Manipulative Insincerity** is praise that is insincere, flattery to a person's face and harsh criticism behind their back. This is the worst kind of feedback fail. **Ruinous Empathy** is what happens when you want to spare someone's short-term feelings, so you don't tell them something they need to know. This is also a feedback fail. **Obnoxious Aggression**, also called brutal honesty or front stabbing, is what happens when you challenge someone directly but don't show you care about them personally. **Radical Candor** is caring personally while challenging directly. At its core, Radical Candor is guidance and feedback that's both kind and clear, specific, and sincere."
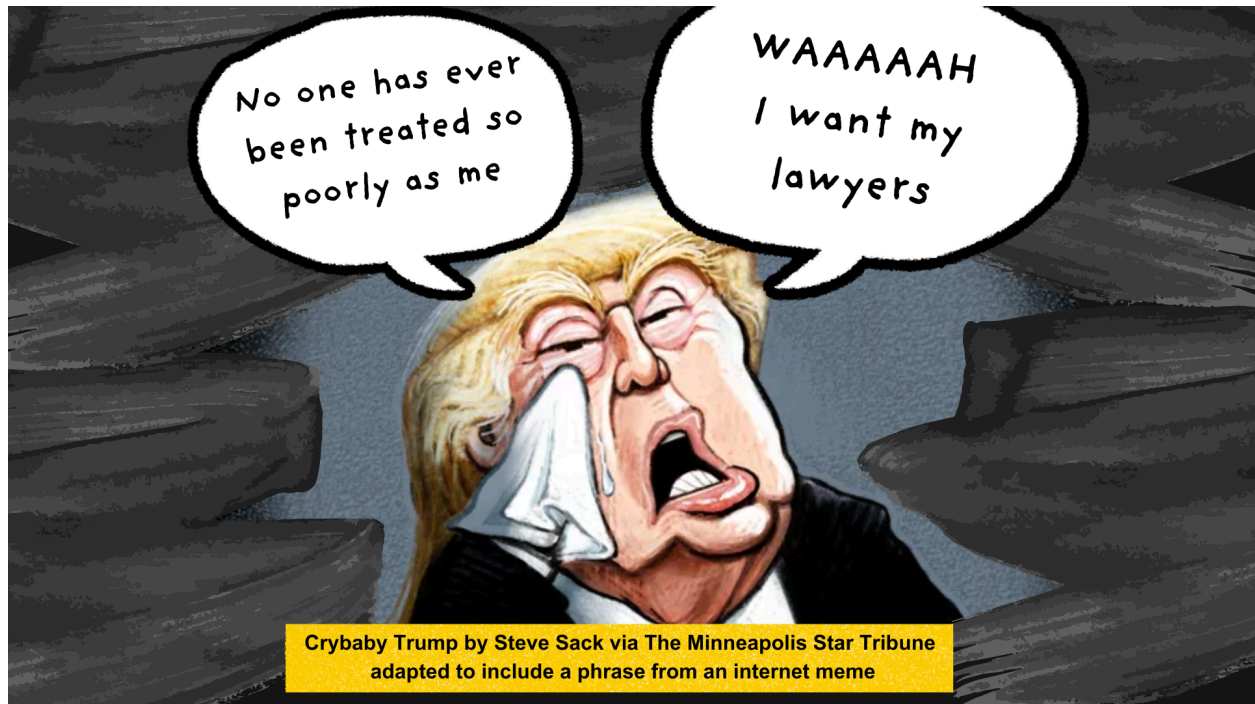
Per Scott, people should try to achieve a ratio of 90% positive feedback to 10% negative feedback. That is, recognize and reinforce attitudes, behaviors, outcomes that you admire most of the time, since if positive attributes are not reinforced, they can quickly become dimmed in environments that focus primarily upon identifying flaws. We need to be specific in the positive feedback we give too.

Then again, giving negative feedback 10% of the time may still be way too much. In "[The Feedback Fallacy](#)," Buckingham and Goodall note that people are not reliable judges of other people's performance and that criticism is not a good motivator. For better results from providing feedback, focus upon identifying strengths and successes and encouraging people to replicate that.

Crybaby Trump by Steve Sack via The Minneapolis Star Tribune
adapted to include a phrase from an internet meme

As a leader in a multicultural environment, it is important to be able to sit with both so-called positive and so-called negative emotions (Chiu). In management, it's important to be able to express empathy while also being resilient so that what you perceive as negative emotions do not disproportionately affect your equilibrium too.

The article "Go Ahead and Complain. It Might Be Good for You" Marini Higgs notes that complaints can often uncover needs that aren't being met. That said, while we shouldn't avoid negative emotions, we need to be careful that our complaints don't shift from venting to ruminating or gossiping since these latter behaviors have a negative impact on everyone's well-being, and each of our reputations as a team member, especially if we get caught. When we feel the urge to gossip about what someone else should be doing, we should remember that changing someone else can be nearly impossible and that changing ourselves is often the place to start.

When working in teams, be aware of how bias affects how you interpret one another's communication too. In the book *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla Saad, tone policing is defined as focusing on the tone of a message rather than the content within a message. In the context of the United States, which is built upon systemic racism and sexism, people of color and women who do not conform to the expectations around positivity, for instance, are much more likely to be harshly labeled, which causes them to have to spend more time tone policing themselves. This can effectively silence them in their environment. That being said, in team communications it's best to focus on the content of the message rather than the tone.

Division of Work

In an ideal world, the workload and credit for teams would be completely equal all of the time. Reality is not so clean-cut. That is, our contributions to our teams should be approximately equal to our peers. However, we'll all have periods in which we need to cover for our team, and we'll have periods in which we need our teams to cover for us too.

Providing and receiving support are great benefits to working in teams, and values like trust and equality are central to healthy and mutually beneficial exchanges of support. One way to avoid wasted time, a sense of drudgery around work, and a lack of clarity around who will do what is by incorporating cycles of brief backs and after-action reviews into team communication. The article "Learning in the Thick of It" by Marilyn Darling, Charles Parry, and Joseph Moore applies to the business environment the cycles of brief backs and after-action reviews carried out by the U.S. Army's Opposing Force, commonly known as OPFOR, when they simulate combat.

The authors advise that professionals restate the objectives of tasks at hand as they understand those objectives to check for understanding and address any lack of clarity before completing work - the brief back, and then reflect on and document successes and areas for improvement after tasks have been completed - the after action review. These reviews are completed at regular project intervals so that knowledge gained of risks, for example, can be incorporated on the fly into jobs. This allows teams to respond to changing environments with more agility rather than saving all reflections for the very end.

Because brief backs and after action reviews as carried out by OPFOR are cyclical in nature, these activities require a disciplined approach that pays off in the end. OPFOR consistently beats better resourced opposing forces.
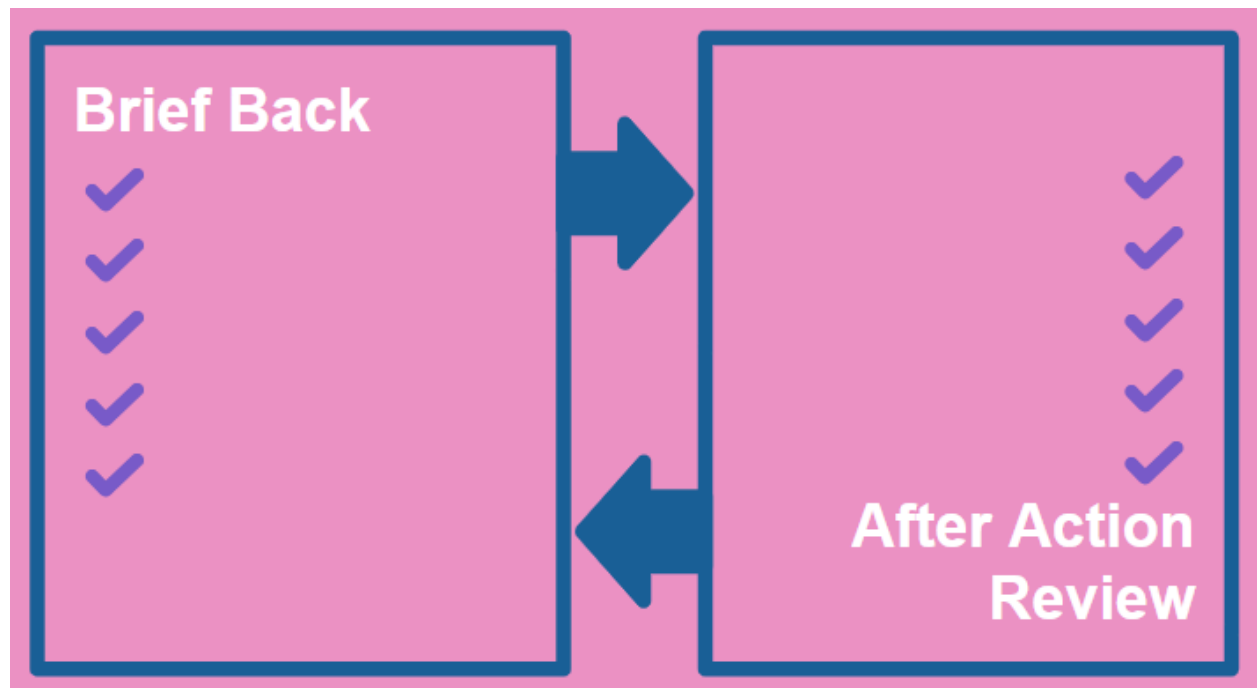
Making Escalations

While being able to constructively solve problems within teams without much outside intervention is a crucial business skill, escalations are a natural part of work and should be exercised as a means of stakeholder management to keep collaborative efforts moving forward productively. Escalations are used in instances in which unforeseen issues pose high risks to collaborative efforts or when an individual practitioner does not have the authority to implement a solution for a problem unilaterally. To make successful escalations, know the facts, use an appropriate method for communication, and include relevant stakeholders.
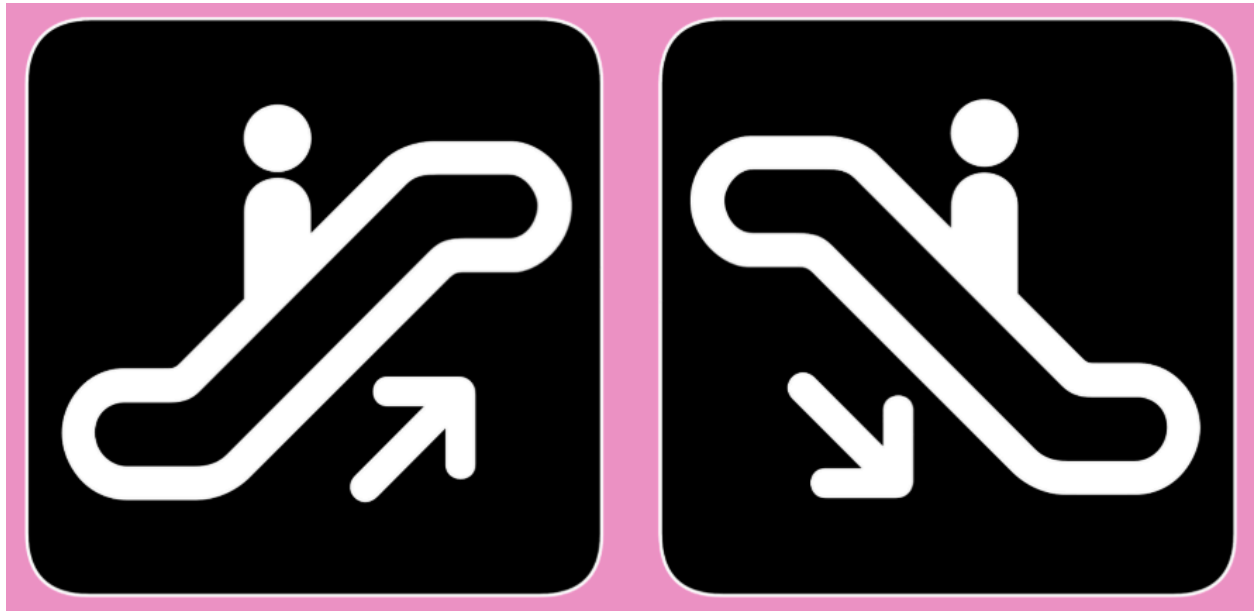
Within projects, it's a good idea to escalate the following kinds of issues to managers: A teammate who is not contributing and has taken credit for work they did not do for two weeks on a project or more. This needs to be escalated as soon as possible so that the teammate can receive help if they need it and so that everyone else can receive fair credit for their work. When getting into the practice of making escalations, a good general rule of thumb is to over-communicate rather than under-communicate. Many times escalations are not made until it's already too late.

Worst case scenarios

Despite your best efforts, sometimes you may encounter people who just don't want to work with you and who may even go out of their way to cause you intentional harm. When this person is your boss or a group of people on your team, the frustration you feel at work and the effects on your quality of life can be troubling. If you don't have an effective line of escalation, the harm caused to you can go way too far. Though the advice that follows isn't meant to constitute legal advice, here are some ideas for steps you can take to protect yourself if you ever find yourself in that kind of a situation, though I hope you never do.

1. **If you can manage it without violating any non-disclosure or data handling agreements that you've signed, back up your emails, work, and overall data on your own systems**. Do this before you ever find yourself in a situation where you need help. You never know when your employer will cut you off from their systems. Layoffs happen all of the time, so if you have good data backup methodologies in place you'll never find yourself in a situation in which you've lost access to communications that would corroborate your side of a situation or your hard work. If you eventually do find yourself in a harmful situation and you lose access to your work data, it's unlikely that you'll ever get access to that data again unless you go through a very expensive legal discovery process.

2. **Talk to people you are close to early and frequently about what you are experiencing.** This communication serves at least a couple of purposes. First, dealing with people at work who won't go out of their way to help and even want to harm you can be an isolating experience, which can impact your overall mental health. Second, should you eventually reach the point where you're going through mediation or bringing a legal complaint forward, you'll need to have people who can step forward and corroborate your experiences. So it's even better if you communicate frequently about your experiences via text messaging with those you trust to have a written record.

3. **Document any spoken exchanges you have with the folks who are treating you unfairly right away.** Sometimes people say one thing when speaking to you, and then they'll deny ever having said such a thing later on when confrontations take place. Again, this documentation serves at least a couple of purposes. Memories get fuzzy and less reliable over time, so you'll want to get what you heard down on paper as soon as possible after you hear it. You can document exchanges by sending meeting notes after a meeting to everyone involved, even if this unfortunately adds more secretarial work to your job duties. These notes should be objective and prevent bystanders from backing out from corroborating what you heard later. Or you can just send an email to yourself.

4. **Consult your own attorney about what you are facing.** Unfortunately, most HR departments in the United States work toward the objective of preventing legal action rather than reducing harm. Employers are unlikely to admit responsibility for harm caused because that admission can come with bad legal consequences if representatives of their organization are breaking civil rights law for example, at least in the context of the United States. If your employer wants you to work through their attorneys to address harms, remember that their attorneys represent them, not you. Getting the opinion of your own attorney may seem like an expensive option, and it is. However, an attorney can give you clarity on the law and the legal legitimacy of your claims, not to mention that they can get you out of the bubble of gaslighting that you may be experiencing when dealing with representatives of your employer.

5. **Despite the risks, and if you are able, do speak up about manifestations of systemic racism and sexism that you see in your work environment anyway.** Unfortunately, people still get away with discriminatory practices all of the time, at least in the society that has been built upon highly embedded and nearly invisible systemic racism and sexism in the United States. Even if people can and do get away with it, systemic racism and sexism can't be undone unless people are willing to speak about

the manifestations of those systems that they've encountered in their work. For all of the people who you may encounter who are not invested in addressing these big problems, by speaking up, I hope you can always find people who are willing to help you do this good and honest work.

Conclusion

To conclude, the pandemic and other global disasters like ongoing genocides have only heightened the need to recognize each other's humanity. When pressure is running high, it may not help if we assume that there are bad intentions behind anyone else's actions or decision-making. Issues do need to be addressed, of course, but it is usually safest to assume good intentions when someone makes what you perceive to be a mistake. Work from a foundation of good intentions to identify root causes and fix issues, not people.

I hope that the attitudes and methodologies for communication and teamwork that have been outlined in this lesson allow you to move from storming to norming and performing in a harmonized way that equally acknowledges and makes room for everyone on your team.

I'll conclude with a couple of last pieces of advice for teamwork based on my experiences. If everyone at the table is a dog playing poker, be a dog playing poker.

And if you're feeling like everyone is out to get you, you could probably get some sleep and/or something to eat.

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