

Insight Paper:
Discussions That
Tell You If You're
Heading Uphill
or Downhill



THE MINDSET DIFFERENCE

Better discussions. New answers. Extraordinary results

Overview

When you're wondering whether meaningful discussions and great performance go hand in hand, seeing the linkage more clearly helps.

The terrain of the downhill slope

As a team sets out to resolve problems it's easy to move into action swiftly and believe they're doing what's best to turn a situation around. But often what feels like it propels them uphill, can take them in the opposite direction. The challenge is to recognise when this is happening.

In his book *How The Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins charts the different stages of deterioration leaders and their organisations can move through on the downhill slope to capitulation and irrelevance. In essence he suggests there are 4 stages on route to oblivion:

Characteristics...

1. Hubris born of success

A leadership team believes they've got the right answers and so their success is deserved. Their need to be inquisitive reduces, they're 'sorted' and the role luck plays has no part in the success to which they now feel entitled.

2. Undisciplined pursuit of more

Having cracked it, it makes sense to grow as fast as possible. Picking all the low hanging fruit and expanding quickly so as to capitalise on their success is the order of the day.

3. Denying risk and peril

When difficulties arise, and they always do, teams can enter a denial stage. Here what interests them is amplifying the positive so as to discount the negative. Much blaming of others or external circumstances is another symptom of denial.

4. Grasping for salvation

This final stage before capitulation involves quick fixes done in haste or big reorganisations introduced with much fanfare about their radical nature. Collins suggests in the absence of results to support it, this is hype that leaves people feeling cynical and confused.

Uphill can mislead you

Knowing when you're on the downhill

If you just watched a team move through the four downhill stages, without having an open discussion with them, it's easy to misread what's actually happening.

For example, rather than heading downhill a team could easily think it's heading uphill. Its members and external observers might see behaviour they consider to be very positive as the table below shows:

Knowing whether you're in the midst of an uphill or downhill trajectory can be confusing.

But what makes it less so are meaningful discussions that get to the heart of what is going on and what people are really thinking. These contrast with those that only go part of the way.

These downhill stages...

Can appear as....

1. Hubris born of success

...confidence and passion for what a team does, not hubris

2. Undisciplined pursuit of more

...boldness and bravery in seeking new opportunities, not undisciplined growth

3. Denying risk and peril

...being focused and paying attention to what really matters, not denial

4. Grasping for salvation

...decisively ripping up the old ways and ushering in the new: anything but being in the last chance saloon

Two types of discussion

Contrast these two types of discussions that may affect what you and colleagues talk about in your teams:

Limited discussions

Meaningful discussions

Level of openness	You filter what you say so as to please or sound clever or avoid offending someone. You might also put spin on an idea designed to get people to only hear one thing and not another.	You can be open, saying whatever you need to say in a safe environment, knowing that you won't be judged. You don't need to check yourself before speaking.
Level of listening	You know selective listening happens: people only hear that which suits their particular agenda. So you respond by selectively speaking too.	You trust you'll be fully heard on important issues: that's as vital as what you have to say, because it helps you get clearer about whatever's going through your mind.
Disclosing feelings	Feelings and the role they play in shaping people's behaviour is misunderstood. You and colleagues don't go too deeply into them, you stay with what's logical instead.	You're comfortable feeling vulnerable in these discussions: you risk saying what you've not publicly aired before. You use Brené Brown's idea to guide you: <i>'vulnerability is your most accurate measurement of courage.'</i>
Blame and advice	Blame is not far from the surface: conversations search for right vs. wrong, good vs. bad. Advice is abundant: it takes the form of telling colleagues what to do. Some of this helps but not all. Judgement is high, a silo mentality can form.	Blame is absent: you believe it's a force that inhibits learning. Getting advice is not the main objective either. Increasing understanding of how you and others are thinking and feeling and what lies behind that is most important. This holds the key to changes in behaviour and performance.
Mutual understanding	Discussions focus on behaviour only, you rarely delve beyond that, into what drives it. Mutual understanding exists only to the extent colleagues see 'what' each other does, not 'why.' This is insufficient when performance is under pressure and the need to adapt quickly arises.	The depth and quality of discussion sheds light on why colleagues behave the way they do. If things go well, you learn why they're are in full flow, communicate well, are creative, laugh a lot and adapt when problems arise. Equally you see the thinking that causes performance to go awry.

Three views of meaningful discussions

One, they're wasteful

There's often a nervousness about meaningful discussions such as those described in the table above. For people who are not used to them they can seem non business-like. Though it's changing, topics such as why people think and feel the way they do have not traditionally been what business people talk about.

The nervousness is also rooted in the fact many are not used to articulating what they feel. To do so, to them, might seem exposing.

Another concern is **people worry that conversations will become 'difficult to manage if they get out of hand.'** Some find it easy to give and take offence when discussing differences for example.

Consequently one view of meaningful conversations is that they add up to no more than a 'chit chat' or 'time wasting' in a 'talking shop.' Rather than reach decisions jointly and own them collectively, people with this view prefer to be do their own thing or be told what to do. They have little energy for meaningful discussions.

Two, they're vital for high performance

An alternative view is meaningful discussions, on the important issues facing a team, are vital to high performance. Differences of opinion are therefore welcomed because it's through exploring what they're based on that innovation occurs. Seen this way **differences are never a reason to give or take offence, they're more a fillip to clarity.**

There is also an understanding that when colleagues feel heard and have space to tell it like it really is, they take ownership of the circumstances they're in more readily. This accelerates the speed at which they adjust their thinking and adapt. Far from becoming more reliant on colleagues, the opposite is the case.

Meaningful discussions may or may not be swift. But they save time in the long run. This is because issues get resolved as people fully engage and take ownership. The repeated revisiting of problems doesn't happen. Quality conversations also keep a team intact: the principle of collective cabinet responsibility rules. The team is a team in more than name.

Three, they help teams adapt their course as needed

Meaningful discussions reveal with much greater clarity whether a leader or team is heading uphill or downhill. Without them topics like hubris, the pursuit of more, denial and grasping salvation-like solutions may never get on the agenda. They're issues people might ordinarily feel vulnerable talking about. But keeping shtum and delivering high performance don't mix well.

Better discussions also make it easier for teams to embrace the inevitable complexity and uncertainty their leadership encounters. This prevents them falling into the trap of being so certain about a course of action they become closed to alternatives, as the Captain of this US aircraft carrier discovered:

Americans: *Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.*

Canadians: *Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to the South to avoid a collision.*

Americans: *This is the Captain of a US Navy ship, I say again, divert YOUR course.*

Canadians: *No I say again, you divert YOUR course.*

Americans: *This is the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln, the second largest ship in the United States' Atlantic fleet. We are accompanied by 3 destroyers, 3 cruisers and numerous support vessels. I demand that YOU change your course 15 degrees North, that's one five degrees North, or countermeasures will be undertaken to ensure the safety of this ship.*

Canadians: *This is a lighthouse. Your call.*

References

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We help leaders achieve results that exceed expectations.

Our tailor-made programmes are built around a specific, and often persistent business challenge that needs to be resolved.

They are for leaders and teams wanting to raise their game to the next level, recover from a difficult period or set off on a sound footing soon after they've formed.

We help people understand how their often unnoticed mindsets work.

This helps them uncover new answers that remove what once felt like recurring blocks to higher levels of performance.

We make it easier to overcome obstacles that lessen commitment to new ways forward.

During implementation, we support leaders as they deepen learning and sustain breakthroughs.

There are many development approaches aimed at improving or refining leaders' skills. Others offer ready-made solutions to your challenges.

Ours is different.

We help leaders and teams realise for themselves the difference their mindset makes as they work on getting whatever needs doing done well.

This has four important benefits:

- It ensures existing skills get deployed more effectively and, if needed, new ones acquired more easily.
- It helps leaders uncover new answers and reach their own solutions.
- It increases levels of engagement and commitment to agreed actions.
- It develops leaders and teams more quickly.

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