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# Teams Learning How to Learn: A Practical Framework for Achieving Team Learning

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## Stop Wasting Time



Have you ever been a part of a team, committee, or classroom environment where, when all was said and done, the entire process felt like a monumental waste of time? Perhaps the team never really connected. Team members argued incessantly and formed unhealthy behaviors, opinions, and cliques. Team members responded defensively to basic inquiry. When the team finally disbanded, it had never developed anything of value, and certainly nothing that could be celebrated as a success.

Most people in most organizations have experienced a similar dynamic. In fact, a 2015 Mersive survey found that only half of employees perceive workplace

meetings as productive.[1] However, it is estimated that workplace meetings take up about 15 percent of an organization's budget.[2] Taken together, these facts lead one to conclude that most workplace meetings, in their current incarnation, are not an optimal use of resources. Since leaders are in the business of maximizing organizational performance, they must make it their priority to change this all-too-common dynamic.

In the California POST Supervisory Leadership Institute, newly promoted public safety supervisors are challenged to read a chapter from a book designed to cause others to see and understand what might be wrong with their teams and organizations. This chapter reveals what happens, or more aptly, what *does not* happen during meetings that ultimately limits a team's capacity for greatness. The overarching problem is not that teams comprise those who lack knowledge, talent, motivation, or skill. Instead, these teams merely lack a mutual commitment to the one thing that can catapult them to peak performance: *learning.*



The fundamental byproducts of unaligned teams are wasted time and energy

Peter M. Senge is a graduate of the MIT Sloan School of Management and the director of its Center for Organizational Learning. Senge is a renowned expert in organizational development and is best known for his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.*[3] Chapter 11 of this book titled, "Team Learning," offers key insights on how to transform a dysfunctional group into a highly synergistic team. However, despite Senge's brilliance, his work can be challenging to comprehend. When Senge uses quantum theory to help illustrate his point, public safety professionals may be turned away from the book. Many do not have the patience or time to fully immerse themselves into Senge's complete work, let alone a single chapter. Therefore, this article aims to make Senge's framework a little more accessible and easier to understand and apply in a public safety environment and to encourage more

organizations, teams, leaders, teachers, facilitators, and learners to benefit from becoming a *learning team.*

## Out of Alignment

Think of a car with the tires out of alignment. The car struggles to stay in its lane; the driver has to work hard to keep it there, and is forced to over-compensate when turning the steering wheel in order to keep everything straight. This not only negatively impacted the wear on the tires, it also negatively affected the gas mileage, and even the driver's level of stress as he or she worked to keep everything aligned.

This is the bane of most teams that function out of alignment. Senge begins chapter 11 by suggesting the fundamental byproducts of unaligned teams are wasted time and energy.[4] Dysfunctional teams deplete their energy by wrongly focusing on the individual visions of each team member. When it comes to teamwork, it is foolish and chaotic to first empower the individual before empowering and aligning the team around the common goals of *learning, discovery,* and *truth.* This practice is why many people generally feel tired, exhausted, and hopelessly unaccomplished following a team meeting; the meeting was treated like an individualistic, competitive, and task-driven event rather than a playful and engaging process of learning and discovery. All leaders must understand that individual learning is not the same as team learning. However, if teams align themselves toward the mutually shared goal of *learning how to learn*, they will not only be more effective, but these same teams will also model and teach this skill to other teams within the organization.

So how do teams learn how to learn? Learning teams intimately understand and have mastered the art of applying two words that are often used interchangeably, but could not be any more disparate from one another.

# Discussion or Dialogue? That Is the Question

Consider and compare the two following statements that might be said by a supervisor:

*1) John, please step into my office. I want to have a discussion with you.*

*2) John, please step into my office. I want to have a dialogue with you.*

Before walking into a supervisor's office, which statement would bring a person more anxiety? Which statement seems more inviting? Which statement seems more likely to include mutual input?

Answering this might be a little challenging at first, but there is a marked difference in the tone and meaning behind both of these words: *discussion* and *dialogue.* Senge shows the reader why. There are two primary ways to engage in discourse: discussion or dialogue. Managing the differences between the two is the key to unlocking the potential learning power of teams.
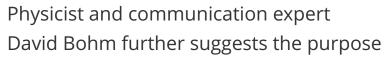


The goal of a discussion: exploit a weakness and win!

Discussion has the same root word as percussion and concussion.[5] The images conjured up when thinking of these words might be a person using a stick to beat a drum or when applied to more than one party, perhaps participating in a game of ping-pong or tennis. During this process, there is always an aggressive strike and someone or something else is on the receiving end of this strike. The receiver responds in kind and this cycle repeats itself over and over again. The objective during this back and forth process is quite simple and clear: exploit a weakness and win! During a discussion, one might briefly accept another person's argument or point of view, but only to advance one's own egocentric motives. When working as a team, this approach is entirely incompatible with achieving a common goal.

However, this is where most teams reside. Subsequently these teams waste time, waste energy, and fail.

In stark contrast to the word discussion, the word dialogue comes from the Greek word *dialogos. Dia* means through, and *logos* means word, or more broadly, the meaning.[6] In other words, meaning is discovered through conversation. Therefore, unlike the process of discussion, the objectives of dialogue are more selfless and noble: discovery, insight, learning, and truth.

*In dialogue, the depth of learning, creativity, and understanding achieves something far greater than that of any one individual.*

Physicist and communication expert David Bohm further suggests the purpose of dialogue is to reveal the incoherence of one's thought.[7] Dialogue goes far beyond any one person's understanding. During dialogue, nobody is trying to win —when done correctly, everybody wins. The dialogue process is conducive to achieving a common goal. In dialogue, the depth of learning, creativity, and understanding achieves something far greater than that of any one individual.

## Achieving Effective Dialogue

Effective dialogue takes a lot of practice. A learning team that effectively engages in the art of dialogue exercises a tremendous amount of self-discipline and an intentional awareness of both individual and team thinking.

Senge and Bohm offer three conditions that must exist for effective dialogue to occur:

1. Suspending assumptions

2. Colleagueship

3. Facilitation[8]

## Suspending Assumptions

Usually when people think of suspending something or someone, they imagine casting it aside or temporarily putting it away. For instance, this might happen when a student is suspended from school or an employee is suspended from work. However, when it comes to dialogue, suspending assumptions is something much more challenging, even threatening, to the default setting of human beings. Senge urges team members to take their thoughts, beliefs, biases, and conclusions, and rather than set them aside, bring them forward and hang them up (suspend them) to be examined and questioned by the other members of the team. It is only through such reflection that one can become fully aware of the incompleteness of his or her own individual thought. It is only through this contemplation that one can work toward a greater degree of intellectual fairness and integrity. It is only by such consideration that one can become aware of other thoughts and ideas that were not attainable by a single individual. This process can be challenging because the suspension of assumptions requires personal vulnerability, submission, and risk. These three characteristics are not typically encouraged and embraced in a public safety context. Furthermore, this process naturally breeds defensiveness. When people decide they unequivocally know how things are, the flow of dialogue is blocked. To reduce this level of anxiety and to create an environment of personal and psychological safety, everybody on the team must verbally agree and commit to suspend their assumptions and commit to learning, not defending.

## Colleagueship

During a discussion, hierarchy and positional power are paramount. Hierarchy is used to gain the upper hand. Consider the above example where the supervisor asked the employee to come into his or her office for a discussion. Both positional

authority and the strategically chosen location of the meeting give the supervisor a distinct advantage in trying to get the employee to see things his or her way. If title, position, and rank are not left outside the walls of learning, effective dialogue cannot occur. It is vitally important in a team learning environment that high-ranking individuals explicitly surrender their power and authority. These teams must eliminate the use of formal titles. Focusing upon and fearing those with positional authority inhibits not only the sharing of ideas, but also the capacity for deep listening to occur. In dialogue, teams must view each other as friends and infuse a spirit of playfulness, even experimentation. This playfulness increases the willingness of others to engage in the suspension of assumptions, which is so critical to the art of dialogue. Furthermore, playfulness and humor patterns during meetings result in positive socio-emotional communication and the identification of new solutions.[9] This type of camaraderie and colleagueship does not mean team members must agree or share the same views. On the contrary, true camaraderie and colleagueship is the ability to see and value opposing viewpoints.

## Facilitation

Without a skilled facilitator, dialogue fails. It is easy for a conversation to slip into a discussion. For humans, it is natural to seek out threats and either avoid or overcome them. Therefore, dialogue is neither a natural nor default human setting. Dialogue takes practice—lots and lots of intentional practice. The Spanish word for easy is *facil*, from the Latin root *facilis* (also meaning easy). This is essentially what a good facilitator does; he or she eases the complex process of dialogue. The facilitator keeps the conversation focused and moving forward. A facilitator holds the team of learners accountable to the mutually agreed upon goal of learning. The facilitator encourages the suspension of assumptions, points out when defensiveness is occurring, and reinforces the spirit of colleagueship by keeping the overall environment playful and loose—but ever committed to learning, discovery, and truth. The facilitator must walk a fine line between being knowledgeable and helpful. The facilitator must not be viewed as all knowing or

relied upon as an expert or a savior. This perception would shift the attention toward the facilitator rather than where it belongs: upon the collective knowledge, experience, and development of the team. In essence, the facilitator's behavior must model and embody the dialogue itself.

## Is Discussion Bad?

After all this talk about the benefits of dialogue, one might conclude discussion is inherently bad. On the contrary, discussion is the necessary and balancing counterpart of dialogue. Dialogue is used so discoveries can be made and explored. Discussion is used when decisions must be made. Dialogue can be infinite since its process of thinking is divergent. Dialogue does not seek convergence or conclusion. Dialogue seeks to understand, not decide. Dialogue can lead to the development of action, but, when action must occur, it is discussion that will enable the team's decision-making.



Exceptional teams master the movement between dialogue and discussion

Exceptional learning teams not only know the differences between discussion and dialogue, they also have mastered the movement between both skills. They know when they are falling into discussion and can skillfully return themselves to dialogue. Failing to distinguish between discussion and dialogue causes teams to become powerless and unproductive. Being armed with this knowledge but failing to put it into action is the antithesis of power. The byproduct of a team that can appropriately see and apply these distinctions is a team that performs with influence and integrity. A comparative list of the differences between a discussion and a dialogue can be found in Figure 1.

| The Dynamics of Discussion | The Dynamics of Dialogue |
|---|---|
| The Goal: WIN | The Goal:   LEARNING, DISCOVERY & TRUTH |
| No listening: What will I say next? | Deep listening |
| No facilitator | Uses a skilled facilitator as a guide |
| Hierarchy is strategically and advantageously used | Deal with each other through colleagueship and camaraderie |
| Defensive of one's position | Suspension of assumptions |
| Discussion is our natural human default | Dialogue takes a lot of practice |
| Seeks immediate convergence | Is patient and embraces divergent thinking |
| To be used when making a decision | To be used while discovering and learning |
| It is task driven | It is playful |

# Dealing with Conflict and Defensive Routines

There is often a misconception that effective teams do not have any conflict. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is often during times of conflict when the team can be most productive. In fact, Senge reminds his readers that one of the most reliable indicators of team learning is conflicting ideas.[10] What makes a learning team great is not the absence of conflict, but rather *how* the team manages conflict. The art of dialogue is the vehicle through which conflict is managed. Conflict is most likely to occur as teams struggle through their visioning process. The more profound the vision, the more uncertain people will be on how to achieve it. Therefore, allowing a free flow of conflicting ideas is essential when it comes to creative thinking. Creativity is a hallmark of team learning—it is through the creative thinking process that teams become synergistic and reach optimal levels of performance, thus maximizing their time and energy. On the other hand, dysfunctional teams ignore conflict and create a façade that no conflict exists, which can result in teams becoming disjointed and polarized. The mismanagement of conflict leads to defensive routines that will cause the team to implode. The following are some typical defensive strategies one might easily recognize:

*Pandering:* "That's an interesting idea," (yet, there is no real intention on following up on the idea)

*Confrontation:* "That's a horrible idea" or "that could never work" (this immediately shuts down the person who generated the idea and dissuades anybody else who might be thinking of offering one)

*Sheltering:* "For your sake, you might not want to bring that up right now" (this creates the illusion of protecting someone from criticism, but, in reality, participants are just trying to protect themselves from having to deal with challenging issues)

A highly functioning team of learners will reject these defensive measures because they know dysfunction begets dysfunction. Senge reaffirms this sobering reality by explaining that all people are carriers of defensive routines and all organizations are hosts. Once organizations become infected, they also become the carriers of defensiveness. Dialogue is the antidote to this contagion.[11]

Although recognizing defensiveness is important, this alone will not suffice. Telling people they are acting defensive often results in the response, "I am not being defensive. You're being defensive." Therefore, the key to managing defensive routines is not by explicitly pointing out another's defensiveness. A more effective approach is through self-disclosure. This might sound something like, "I notice that I am feeling threatened by this idea. Perhaps you could help me see why?" or "The idea makes total sense to me, but maybe I am seeing it from the wrong perspective. Maybe I have not considered all the facts. I would like to hear from you as well."

When it comes to managing defensive routines, it is critically important that teams share a common vision toward learning and truth: this shared commitment gives a team the power to surface and acknowledge its own tendency toward defensiveness.

## The Courage to Learn

Far too many teams are out of alignment simply because they are not operating with the courage to learn as a team. Team learning requires personal risk, vulnerability, and cognitive and emotional perseverance. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great,* suggests that great leaders are those who are willing to "confront the brutal facts."[12] Far too many teams are unwilling to face the challenging nuances of team learning. Such teams are polluted by self-centered and incomplete thinking and personal agendas, rather than a noble devotion to collectively achieving something far greater than one's self. This is a level of team

performance that can only be achieved by seizing upon every moment for what it really is: an opportunity for teams to learn.

## Notes:

[1]Mersive, "Mersive Publishes 'The Truth about Meeting Culture' Survey Results: Survey Finds Content and Mobility at the Heart of Meeting Productivity," press release, April 16, 2015.

[2]Linda R. Shanock et al., "Less Acting, More Doing: How Surface Acting Relates to Perceived Meeting Effectiveness and Other Employee Outcomes," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 86, no. 4 (December 2013): 457–476.

[3]Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]David Bohm, *On Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

[8]Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*; Bohm, *On Dialogue.*

[9]Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock and Joseph A. Allen, "How Fun Are Your Meetings? Investigating the Relationship Between Humor Patterns in Team Interactions and Team Performance," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 99, no. 6 (2014): 1278–1287.

[10]Senge, *The Fifth Discipline.*

[11]Ibid.

[12]Jim Collins, "Confront the Brutal Facts (Yet Never Lose Faith)" in *Good to Great:*

*Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 65–89.

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