

Deep Teams: Leveraging the Implicit Organization

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A shallow team makes inferences about explicit, tangible behavior without clarifying its accuracy; a deep team surfaces implicit, intangible thoughts and feelings, and leverages these in an effort to increase team effectiveness. We argue that deep teams will outperform shallow teams in terms of bottom-line results, because they have access to a more complete range of relevant information. The article offers an integrated framework for working with teams at a deeper level based on a review of the literature and our own experiences with teams. After distinguishing between shallow and deep teams, the article defines three levels of interaction, describes how various processes and outputs shape team development, examines the impact of stress and coping strategies on team interaction, and offers some tips for building deep teams.



A Tale of Two Teams

Two contrasting examples will help us distinguish between shallow and deep teams:

Team A

While in his first position out of college, Jim Conklin developed special expertise in the area of project planning, but since opportunities to use and further develop this expertise were limited, he applied for and was offered a challenging position with a rapidly growing, global organization. Although Jim was anxious to use the skills that landed him the new job, he soon learned that what others wanted from him was to "fit into the team." No one seemed particularly interested in his prior work experience, and he soon became swept up in team "fire fighting" and "damage control." Jim was hoping that this would only be a temporary situation, but it soon proved to be the



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team's *modus operandi*. In addition, interaction among team members was very calculated, and they were quick to pin the blame on others to avoid criticism. After six months Jim's self-confidence had been shaken considerably; he felt isolated socially and regretted having left his old job.

Team B

When Maria Cordera joined the company she didn't know what to expect. In her previous company she felt marginalized by her age, gender, and ethnicity, so she approached this new opportunity with a sense of caution. However, during her first team meeting everyone made her feel welcome and she was pleasantly surprised with the high-spirited camaraderie among the members. After introducing her, the leader explained that the team makes adjustment to accommodate new members, to ensure that the individual's unique background and abilities are understood and utilized. He further explained that while the team isn't perfect and that members occasionally get bogged down in conflict, everyone strives to maintain a climate where members aren't afraid to speak their mind. "We call ourselves on our own stuff," one member said. "We've come to believe that conflict is inevitable and that working it through in an open and honest manner is necessary to develop our potential, achieve our goals, and meet customer expectations," the leader explained. "We believe in hard work, but we also want to enjoy each other along the way."

Which team do you think will be more effective? For the purposes of this article Team A describes a shallow team, while Team B describes a deep team. Among other things, the two teams vary in level of interaction, team processes and outcomes, and coping strategies. Below we present a framework from our own practice intended to help clarify the role of these factors in creating deep teams; it is being offered as a model that might be

adapted and used by O.D. practitioners.

Levels of Team Interaction

One useful way to distinguish between teams is according to the level or depth of interaction among their members. In terms of what they disclose openly, we think of individuals in teams as functioning at three levels simultaneously: stream of consciousness, implicit, and explicit. These levels refer to differences between what people think and do, rather than distinctions between conscious and unconscious mental processes (Freud 1958).

The stream of consciousness level consists of all the thoughts and feelings a person has while interacting with others. The material here is raw, unedited, and uncensored; may include judgmental, hostile, and sexual content; and is almost always subjected to political, moral, and diplomatic scrubbing before being expressed directly. An exception occurs when, in a moment of desperation or panic, people blurt out from the stream of consciousness. We commonly refer to this as “losing it,” and onlookers are left feeling awkward and embarrassed, unless civility breaks down completely and they join in the fray. Less dramatic episodes take place when someone “reacts without thinking” and subsequently apologizes (“Sorry, I didn’t mean that; I’m just not myself today.”). The apology restores convention and people typically return to business as usual, unless repeated episodes trigger questions about underlying intent.

Teams can’t operate at the stream of consciousness level without chaos. Much of this content must be suppressed to maintain decorum and cooperative efforts toward broader team goals. The senior author was a member of a team in the late 1960s that held weekly encounter group meetings,

which was fashionable at the time. The level of candid self-disclosure and intimate sharing almost ruined several marriages and greatly disrupted team performance.

The implicit level is where individuals edit and censor the stream of consciousness before making it public. Like an iceberg, only a small amount of content from the stream of consciousness makes it to the implicit level. When too much remains implicit, indirect, or hidden, the time and effort spent deciphering the meaning of people’s behavior bogs down team interaction. To understand what takes place at the implicit level, it’s important to frame the broader interpersonal context within which people function. This context is characterized by what we call *permanent universal vulnerability*, which means that people are always subject to threats from the outside world (Hultman, 2007). Awareness that bad things can happen is accompanied by anxiety, which must be managed effectively in order to build relationships and meet one’s needs. Anxiety is a ubiquitous condition in relationships, varying only by degree depending on how events are perceived and interpreted. People are vulnerable in every way imaginable: physically, personally, socially, and spiritually. On the battlefield, people are preoccupied with their physical vulnerability; in the workplace, which often feels like a battlefield, people are preoccupied with their personal and social vulnerability, focusing largely on the potential threat to *self-esteem*.

We have deliberately chosen the word *implicit* here rather than *covert*, because the former conveys a broader notion of what is unspoken, whereas the latter conveys a narrower view of what is secret. The implicit level includes the deliberately hidden, but it also includes thoughts and feeling that aren’t disclosed for a wider range of reasons, such as fear of rejection, criticism, and

embarrassment.

Finally, the explicit level refers to observable behavior, usually in the form of verbal and non-verbal exchanges among team members. Only a small amount of content from the implicit level is expressed openly. The explicit level includes verbal and non-verbal behaviors that others perceive as reflecting implicit content in an indirect or subtle manner. People spend a lot of time trying to read other's intentions, and some authors contend that it is this capacity that makes us uniquely human (see, for example, Zimmer, 2003). Perceived discrepancies between the explicit and implicit are a major source of anxiety and mistrust in relationships. This is different than hypocrisy, which is a perceived discrepancy between two explicit behaviors—what is said and what is done. Hypocrisy, of course, is another major source of mistrust.

We define a shallow team as one that makes inferences about explicit, tangible behavior without clarifying the accuracy of those inferences; a deep team, in contrast, is one that surfaces implicit, intangible thoughts and feelings, and leverages this information to improve team performance. We contend that deep teams will be more effective than shallow teams in terms of bottom-line results. We must confess that we've seen very few deep teams in our experience. Many of the teams we've worked with have been superficial, calculating, and defensive. Nevertheless, we believe that developing deep teams is possible, and that the payoff is well worth the effort. Let's probe this more fully by examining a framework we call "the team input—process—output model." This model is a work in progress reflecting our current understanding of how teams function.

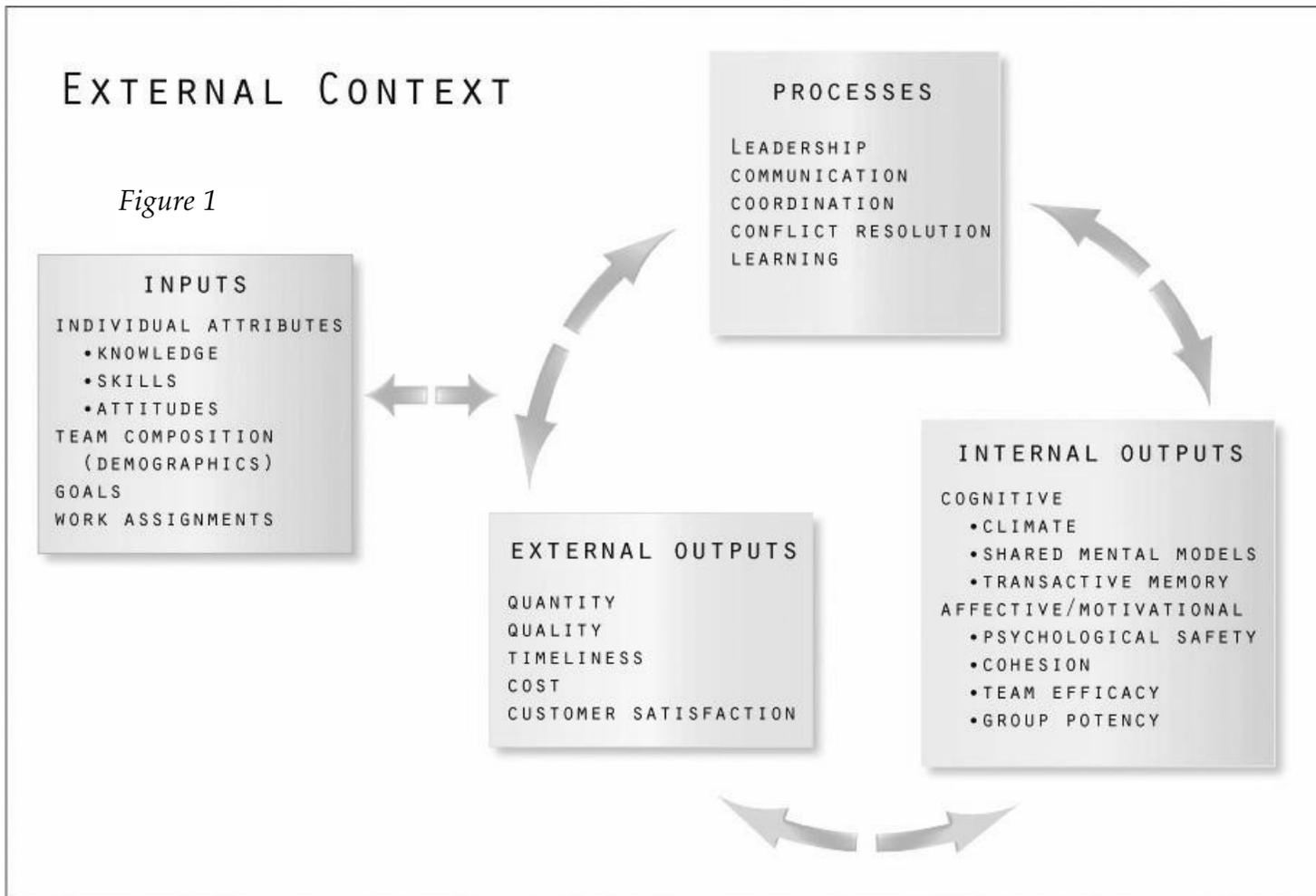
Team Input—Process—Output Model

As depicted in Figure 1, on page 15, a team functions within an overall external context, which is inclusive of the larger physical, social, economic, and political environment. The external context of a Navy tactical team in the Persian Gulf differs greatly from an IT team in Silicone Valley. Team inputs consist of member knowledge, skills, attitudes, and team composition in terms of demographics, goals, and work assignments. These inputs represent the raw materials necessary for the important team processes of leadership, communication, coordination, conflict resolution, and learning. Taken together, these processes comprise what is typically referred to as *teamwork*.

Two types of outputs emerge from teamwork processes: internal outputs which have either a positive or negative impact on teamwork, and external outputs which are the products or services delivered to the customer. Internal outputs are either cognitive (climate, shared mental models, and transactive memory) or affective/motivational (psychological safety, cohesion, team efficacy, and group potency). Team research and meta-analyses have linked these processes and internal outputs to effective team external outputs or what we often refer to as "results" (see, for example, Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Smith-Jentsch, Johnston & Payne, 1998). A brief summary of research findings is provided in Table 1, on page 16.

Closer examination of Figure 1 and Table 1 offers clues about how teamwork processes and internal outputs shape team depth. This is where we can expect to find key differences between shallow and deep teams. When individuals begin forming a new team or join a pre-established one, a heightened awareness of vulnerability and the accompanying anxiety compel them to assess their psycho-

COMPONENTS OF TEAMWORK



logical safety. To a large extent this assessment is shaped by team leadership and communication processes. Factor analysis has consistently demonstrated a relationship between certain leadership behaviors and positive team results: encouraging open communication where people aren't afraid to speak up; providing and accepting feedback in a manner that focuses on learning; and providing and accepting assistance and support (see for example, Smith-Jentsch, Johnston & Payne, 1998). The leader models the expected team behaviors by being open, asking for and accepting feedback and help. These actions lower

anxiety, allowing team members to be more candid and focus outwardly on achieving mutual goals.

When these team leadership and communication processes are absent or displayed in an ineffective, inconsistent, or ambiguous fashion, pressure to appear competent and to avoid being blamed for mistakes keep anxiety high. Team members are less candid and focus inwardly on self-protection. Of course in actual experience these distinctions are never black and white, and any particular team is somewhere on a continuum between

Table 1.

Factors Associated With Team Effectiveness

Processes

- o **Leadership:** Leaders create a climate conducive to the open exchange of information, feedback, and support (Cannon-Bowers et al., 1995; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).
- o **Communication:** Communication is clear and unambiguous, information is provided before it is needed, input is openly sought from others, and help is both offered and accepted (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Smith-Jentsch et al., 1998).
- o **Coordination:** Members coordinate their effort toward the achievement of broader team goals (Salas et al., 1992; Kowsloski et al., 1999; Marks et al., 2001).
- o **Conflict resolution:** Conflict focuses on tasks and not on interpersonal relationships (Simons & Peterson, 2000; De Dreu & Weigart, 2003).
- o **Learning:** Members grow by seeking performance feedback, sharing information, experimenting, asking for help, and discussing errors openly (Argote et al., 1995; Smith-Jentsch et al., 1998; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Ellis et al., 2003)

Cognitive Internal Outputs

- o **Climate:** Members share a common mission and vision (Kozlowski & Hults, 1987; Schneider & Bowen, 1995).
- o **Shared mental models:** Members possess a common understanding of team expectations (Minions et al., 1995; Mathieu et al., 2000).
- o **Transactive memory:** Members know who knows what (Liang et al., 1995; Moreland, 1999; Austin, 2003).

Affective/Motivational Internal Outputs

- o **Psychological safety:** Members aren't afraid to speak up (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson et al., 2001).
- o **Cohesion:** Members remain united to reach a common goal (Gully et al., 1995; Beal et al., 2003).
- o **Team efficacy and potency:** Members share a belief in the team's collective capability to achieve goals (Gully et al., 2002; De Shon et al., 2004).

the positive and negative conditions described. Even under favorable circumstances, however, an individual's sense of vulnerability never goes away completely. Teams are dynamic, ebbing and flowing in perceived psychological safety depending on people's actions and reactions. A team that seemed safe yesterday may not appear that way today and vice versa. We can gain a fuller understanding of the differences between deep and shallow teams by examining the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and level of team interaction.

Stress, Coping Strategies, and Level of Team Interaction

Richard Lazarus (1966) defines stress as a transaction between individuals and their environment. This transaction is framed by a person's cognitive appraisal of the environment. Lazarus distinguishes three types of stress based on one's appraisals: harm, threat, and challenge. *Harm* refers to damage or loss that has already taken place. *Threat* refers to the anticipation of harm in the near future. *Challenge* refers to demands that the person feels confident in handling. While this is a well-known and useful framework, there is

one caveat: if everything from loss to opportunity is stressful, the term can lose its meaning by becoming synonymous with “work” or even “life.” For our purposes, the word *stress* is more narrowly focused on people’s appraisal of their social or interpersonal vulnerability. Therefore, individuals may be said to experience stress when encounters with fellow team members are appraised as threats to self-esteem.

In conjunction with stress, Lazarus (1984) discusses the importance of *coping*, which refers to people’s efforts in thought and action to manage demands presented by the environment. In teams individuals are vigilant, sometimes even hyper-vigilant, implicitly drawing from an arsenal of coping strategies that have worked previously to ward off perceived threats. Lazarus distinguishes between *problem-focused coping*, where people attempt to change person-environment realities behind negative emotions and stress, and *emotion-focused coping*, where people inwardly attempt to either reduce negative emotions or reappraise stressful situations in a more positive light. The major problem with emotion-focused coping is that feelings can create tunnel-vision and interfere with rationale problem-solving and decision-making processes. While it’s tempting to assume that problem-focused coping is more constructive than emotion-focused coping, however, in actual practice it’s more effective to evaluate specific strategies by their results.

Coping strategies are conceived at the implicit level before being manifested explicitly. In a very real sense, the implicit level is largely a coping level, where people decide when and how to behave around others. Coping strategies may be triggered by either external input from others (“I’m starting to hear rumors about layoffs.”) or internal input from the stream of consciousness level (“That jerk set me up on purpose.”). By fur-

ther dividing problem-focused and emotion-focused coping into active and passive strategies, the authors have been able to distinguish four types of coping strategies. Some examples are given in Table 2 for illustrative purposes only; in actual practice virtually any response (or lack of a response) can function as a coping strategy.

Some additional information about the nature of coping strategies would be useful at this point. As with needs, values, beliefs, and feelings, coping strategies are psychological constructs internal to a person. Teams as such don’t have coping strategies, but it’s possible for the coping strategies of individuals to be shared in varying degrees. Simply because coping strategies are shared, however, doesn’t necessarily make them constructive. Well known examples of shared unconstructive coping strategies include *defensive routines*, which are institutionalized, ongoing, mixed message about which discussions are taboo (Argyris, 1990); *groupthink*, where pressures to conform inhibit the expression of contrary views (Janis, 1972, 1982); the *Abilene Paradox*, where team members collude to take actions against their actual wishes, defeating the purposes they’re trying to achieve (Harvey, 1988), and *covert processes*, which are hidden dimensions of organizational change (Marshak, 2006). A common example is when people go along with decisions because they don’t want to “make waves.” Such coping strategies are usually symptomatic of high levels of perceived threat, shutting down the open exchange of ideas, feedback, and help.

In other cases, instead of shared unconstructive coping strategies, team members behave as if they’re on their own to guard against others. Except for cliques and sub-groups with a shared, often hidden agenda, the individuals feel left to their own devices. Team meetings are characterized by second-guessing, attempts to read

Table 2
Coping Strategies

	Active	Passive
Problem-focused	Seeking and giving information Seeking and giving suggestions Seeking and giving feedback Seeking and giving help Checking understanding Confronting Acknowledging contributions Giving recognition Expressing empathy Providing support Debating options Using facts selectively	Advance preparation Conducting research Listening Pondering alternatives Rehearsing
Emotion-focused	Attacking/threatening Intimidating Accusing Justifying/rationalizing Criticizing Finding fault Ridiculing Appealing to fear Dramatizing Openly blaming others Begging/pleading Apologizing Lying/distorting facts Sabotaging Starting or fueling rumors Offering reassurance or empathy Rejecting reassurance or empathy	Not following through Collusion/pretending to agree Procrastinating Feigning ignorance Withholding information, suggestions, help, or support Silently blaming others Wallowing in self-pity Minimizing Avoidance Denial Letting others fail Drinking, smoking (most addictions are coping strategies)

between the lines, jockeying for position, and the hedging of bets—an atmosphere more commonly associated with a poker match than a team. Under these conditions, individual coping strategies are often subtle, competitive, and counter-productive. All of this intrigue ultimately consumes time and energy that could be channeled into more productive team pursuits. Unconstructive coping strategies, whether shared and unshared, are indicative of teams operating primarily at the explicit, surface level with little understanding of their underlying, implicit processes and their impact, i.e. shallow teams.

Building Deep Teams

Pulling together our discussions about levels of interaction, teamwork processes, and coping strategies will allow us to highlight the advantages of deep over shallow teams more fully. Previously we described how leadership and communication processes favorable to the open exchange of information, feedback, and support serve to deepen team interaction. This is important because deeper interaction can be expected to have a positive effect on team cognitive and affective/motivational internal outputs, allowing mem-

bers to grow continuously as individuals and as a unit. These outputs, in turn, improve team inputs, processes, and external outputs to the customer in a reciprocal fashion, closing the gap between actual and potential effectiveness. This is what Chris Argyris (1974) refers to as *double-loop learning*. Table 3 compares the anticipated internal outputs in deep and shallow teams.

Because of their greater psychological safety, deep teams have potential for expediting the growth process by surfacing implicit coping strategies, discussing their implications for team processes and internal outputs, and agreeing on shared coping strategies. For example, if a team tends to blame other departments or wallow in self-pity when plans don't work out as expected, members can decide ahead of time to avoid such commiserating. Team self-correction includes agreeing on

how perceived discrepancies between intentions and behavior will be handled. Discretion is required to determine how this should be done. Sometimes it's better to raise issues with the entire team; at other times it's better to raise them privately.

If teams fail to take actions such as these, individuals will tend to fall back on their own individual strategies, or collude with sub-groups in a manner that hinders the larger whole. Teams lacking in trust must first identify and resolve underlying issues, before individuals could be reasonably expected to make implicit coping strategies explicit. Leaders perceived as having hidden agendas or as being hypocritical will find it especially difficult to foster greater openness.

Table 3
Team Differences in Internal Outputs

	Deep Teams	Shallow Teams
Climate	Members share a common mission and vision.	Members fail to develop a common mission and vision.
Shared mental models	Members possess a common understanding of team expectations.	Team expectations are divided by self-interest and hidden agendas.
Transactive memory	Members focus on leveraging each other's knowledge and skills.	Members focus on who can and can't be trusted.
Psychological safety	Members aren't afraid to speak up.	Members are cautious about what to say.
Cohesion	Members remain united to reach a common goal.	Members are divided by individual goals.
Team efficacy	Members share a belief in the team's collective capability to achieve goals.	Members lack confidence in each other.

It's commonplace nowadays for teams to go through structured exercises to establish norms. There are times when shallow teams use exercises like these as an indirect ways of increasing psychological safety. In either case the process of arriving at consensus about norms is typically superficial, requiring only minimal risk-taking. A candid discussion about coping strategies and their impact is much less common. Even teams with high perceived psychological safety almost never initiate such discussions on their own. It usually takes a skilled facilitator to know when it would be useful for a team to bring coping strategies to the surface, and then guide the team toward a positive outcome.

While an open discussion of team coping strategies could be a helpful way of improving team effectiveness during routine times, the payoff is even greater during times of conflict, pressure, or stress. Agreements about acceptable and unacceptable coping strategies would help the team maintain its sense of psychological safety during these times, enhancing cohesiveness, team efficacy, and other internal outputs. After explaining the dynamics of stress and coping strategies, you could help a team deepen its interaction and agree on coping strategies by asking such questions as these:

- How does the team deal with stress?
- How does the team deal with conflict?
- What coping strategies does the team use currently?
- How does the team "blow off steam"?
- How does the team use humor?
- What's the impact of your current strategies?
- What strategies do you want to keep?
- What strategies do you want to eliminate?
- What new strategies do you want to add?
- How will you hold each other accountable if unacceptable strategies are used?

How will you review and update your strategies?

Conclusion

Deep teams establish a climate conducive to psychological safety, where members can surface and discuss relevant implicit thoughts and feelings. This is accomplished primarily through leadership and communication processes favorable to the open exchange of feedback, assistance, and support. These processes provide deep teams with an opportunity to agree on coping strategies that will and won't be used. Agreeing on coping strategies bolsters psychological safety and allows deep teams to continuously improve their processes and internal outputs, resulting in greater fulfillment for members and better external outputs for customers.

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