

CASE STUDIES¹
from the book "GAME CHANGERS AT THE CIRCUS"
by Jean-François Cousin

ABOUT SELF LEADERSHIP

- **About self-awareness**

Here's a structured approach to expanding your self-awareness

Case-study: Andrea, Human Resources Senior Vice-President, pharmaceutical industry, USA

About Andrea's startling discoveries along her self-reflection and her 'mini-360° feedback survey'

Andrea is a dedicated Human Resources Senior Vice-President for a well-known pharmaceutical company in the USA. Her diligence and good relationships with the company's top executives got her promoted very fast along her career, all the way to this new position.

Along her coaching engagement, Andrea self-reflected and interviewed others about how they perceive her. She used my 'mini-360° feedback survey' (see how it works from page 5 to page 9 in <http://www.greatness.coach/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Self-awareness-exercises-GAME-CHANGERS-at-the-Circus.pdf> - you are most welcome to try it out, for yourself and for others too!)

Here is what Andrea found:

Who I said I am	Who others said I am
Positive traits	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Confident 2. Creative 3. Good listener 4. Perfectionist 5. Generous 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Insecure b) Creative c) Poor listener d) Too detail-focused e) Generous

¹ To protect confidentiality, the names and some details in the case-studies have been altered

Who I said I am	Who others said I am
Negative traits	
A. Impatient B. Too direct C. Disorganized D. Not strategic enough E. Sometimes too eager to please	f) Impatient g) Too direct h) Sufficiently organized i) Not strategic enough j) Sometimes too eager to please

In summary, six of Andrea’s traits were confirmed by everyone: creativity, generosity, impatience, ‘too direct’, ‘not strategic enough’ and ‘sometimes too eager to please’. As I asked Andrea to try and connect the dots, she reflected that all of those traits - except ‘not strategic enough’ - had actually helped her progress quickly in her career. People had appreciated her creativity, her inclination to ‘tell it like it is’ and even her impatience, in an environment where HR were perceived as overly conservative, slow, cautious and political. Her generous personality and her eagerness to please had endeared her to many, and led them to forgive her for her flaws.

As Andrea had interviewed people, she had gotten to realize that her weakness at long-term and strategic thinking had become critical in her new position at the head of the HR function. From that realization, she had decided to protect time in her agenda to work on important, longer-term goals and issues.

We then reflected about the traits where her opinion of herself and others’ did not match.

Andrea shared that she was initially startled that others considered her insecure, whilst she thought she was rather a confident lady. But they convinced her with some examples of her attitude in her new role. She had appeared to them as less assertive than before, second-guessing herself sometimes, or not supporting her proposal with strong enough rationale and then backing down quickly -occasionally even agreeing with an opposite view-point-.

Andrea was also surprised that what she was fond of –her ‘perfectionism’- was perceived by others as ‘too detail-focused’. Yet she was quick to recognize the thread between insecurity, ‘too detail-focused’ and ‘not strategic enough’. That confirmed she needed to step back, stop intervening in all topics, and focus more on the big picture.

Andrea also understood that her real challenge was not at personal organization level (she thought she was disorganized), but with her too narrow functional orientation.

At first, she was in denial about being deemed a ‘poor listener’. I invited her to look at the overall pattern from others’ insights. And she came to realize that her

impatience, her insecurity and her directness combined backed the probability that she may not always listen well enough.

After such an exploration, it was easy for Andrea to select what she wanted to leverage further or improve. She decided she would start with building up genuine confidence in her job, and we designed a whole action plan on this.

Andrea's decision was a great one, as her case is typical of what is called 'the impostor syndrome' where someone deep down is doubting that s/he deserves the position s/he has been offered. And the first thing to do then, is to develop oneself as a "work-in-progress" and grow the right skills and behaviours for the job.

Case-study: Bee Sin, R&D Director for an automotive company, China

The value from simply asking pinpointed feedback from your colleagues

Bee Sin had decided to gather pin-pointed feedback from several co-workers. She told them: "I am working to improve my listening. Your feedback is important to me. I'd be grateful if you could think and let me know of 3 things you see me doing sometimes that demonstrate good listening, and three things you see me doing sometimes which indicate lack of good listening." Bee Sin got a lot of valuable feedback, including –on the 'need for improvement side' - "you interrupt", "your eyes sometimes look away as if you are thinking about your reply before we are done talking", "off and on you don't pick up cues about our emotions", "occasionally you are selective about what you hear, you focus on just what pleases you or what frustrates you", "when you are upset, you avoid eye contact and we don't feel heard".

Case-study: Jose, owner of a successful advertising agency, South Africa

About letting go of limiting beliefs, and what happens next

The founder and owner of a successful advertising agency, Jose was a narcissistic workaholic, and valuing material success above all else. He was chronically irritable and his employees were terrified about his deafening bouts of anger. Staff-turnover was very high at his company.

Jose's health started to deteriorate as he reached his late thirties. It became so bad that he stayed several times for a couple of weeks at a hospital. The last time, he was almost paralyzed by a terrible back-ache.

Upon his return at work, he decided to try out coaching, following a friend's recommendation, and we met.

When I asked Jose simply why working that hard was important to him, he jolted back into his armchair with anger in his eyes. He stayed silent for a few minutes, and then started to unravel his childhood story. He told me his parents –particularly his



father- considered his brother was much more gifted, intellectually at sports, than Jose.

They regularly boasted about his sibling's achievements to family and friends, and hardly ever mentioned Jose. Jose felt hurt, deeply. Although highly intelligent and creative, he did not feel like competing at school and his scores were just good enough to go to the next class. He eventually graduated from mediocre university, without any distinction. Meanwhile, his brother had obtained a Master degree 'cum laude' from a prestigious institution, and secured a comfortable career as a mid-ranking civil servant, to his parents' delight.

Jose started his career with an advertising company. There, for the first time ever, he found an environment supportive of his talents and his personality. He gave the job all of his energy. Clients loved his work and he got to manage large accounts for the enterprise. 3 years later, Jose seized the opportunity of an assignment abroad as an expatriate, and felt even more liberated. When he turned thirty, he had amassed enough financial reserves to fund his own company. With boundless energy, he developed his customer-portfolio at break-neck speed and made his name on the market.

Although he had married and started a family in the meantime, he continued to invest almost all of his time and energy to his business. He was showering his wife and kids with expensive gifts, in the belief it would make up for his absence. His family was not impressed though, and would have happily traded the presents for more of his presence. One evening, Jose's son asked him "you are never here; are you really my father?" Strong as the shock was for Jose, it wasn't sufficient yet to cause him to stay closer to his family. Sadly, his irritability continued to grow, at home and at work.

Drawing from his burgeoning fortune, Jose offered himself a Ferrari, a luxury watch and many more flashy symbols of material prosperity. His reputation on the market became that of a brilliant but success-obsessed, emotionally unstable and arrogant guy. From that moment forward, Jose's health deteriorated quickly, and he treated people around him more and more badly.

As Jose disclosed his story with brave honesty to me, he understood the little boy in himself was still alive, that was hurt and bent on proving his worth 'over' his brother to his parents. He acknowledged that this outdated need was highly toxic, served no purpose anymore and had to be put away. Jose decided to fly and meet his parents that summer and talk with them. Although he did not share with them the toxic need they had –probably unknowingly- engendered in him, he did forgive them in his heart while they stayed together. Jose came back more at peace with himself and said he felt like "his back had been relieved of a very heavy burden".

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As we explored Jose's relationships with his own family and his employees, particularly his bouts of anger with them and their triggers, he found out that he was not truly 'loving himself', and therefore was not able to truly 'love' others. Jose's honesty with himself enabled him to build a solid sense of self-worth, in full awareness and acceptance of his gifts and vulnerabilities. Having let go of the need to constantly prove his 'superiority' over others, he gradually became sincere and more balanced in his interactions with others. Importantly, he started to listen more and see 'good things' and 'good intentions' in others. That shifted the dynamic of his interactions from "look how smart I am" to "let's enjoy contributing the best we can together". Jose also began to say things he never uttered before: 'I am sorry', "I was wrong", 'I don't know'... And –over time- that engaged his employees at a level he never expected.

All along Jose's development, we created and sustained the conditions for the improvement of his health -physical, mental, emotional and spiritual-. And that played a vital part in supporting Jose to move forward. In particular, Jose chose to

- spend quality time and regular short holidays with his wife and kids; he asked them to keep him accountable for this commitment, "brutally if need be"
- tell his wife and kids he loved them (which he hadn't said for ages), and then do it again; and tell co-workers they were important to him
- sell his Ferrari, to buy instead a countryside cottage for their family time-out
- attend a meditation course for beginners; he then decided to meditate 10 minutes before breakfast every morning
- ask a chiropractor to assist in improve his posture at his work-station
- take a power-nap at 1pm each day he was at his office
- ask his personal assistant to help manage his time so his concentration could be protected
- take up a martial art class
- take up bi-weekly painting lessons, a desire he had since childhood

Jose hasn't had health issues ever since. His image on the market is improving. A couple of people who had met him recently for the first time told me he came out as a "great guy".

Case-study: Gary, Factory Director, South East Asia

The huge cost of perfectionism and micro-management, and how to eventually let go of them

Meet Gary up-close and personal, a factory director and a singular gentleman: always impeccably dressed -cufflinks and designer ties - superbly organised, perfectly punctual. His office? Clean as a hospital, files on shelves in flawless alphabetical

order, and on the shiny glass-table in the middle, you will notice a rectangle lined with a coloured-tape reminding you where to place the LCD-projector's remote-control after use. Zoom-out further and visit Gary's factory, employing several thousand workers... Just like his office, it is immaculate, in perfect "5 S" order, and you will spot the dustbins parked within coloured rectangles painted on the floor. Is Gary's plant a paradise then? Not even close... if you ask the supervisors they will tell you "IT'S-HELL-HERE"! Says one of them: "operators don't volunteer for over-time anymore, and behave more and more like if they were our bosses; we are so tired of it all."

So what is really going on there? To understand, you have to know a bit of history. Gary came in two years ago, beaming with pride about his previous success at another plant (much smaller and far simpler actually), and proclaiming his ambition to make this factory the worldwide 'best-in-class' in productivity and quality for the Group. He went on to work extremely hard. And amazingly... he reached his double-goal within a year and a half!

The problem lies with "HOW" he achieved his goal and what happened next... Gary micromanaged - possibly 'nano-managed' - his direct reports to an extent they could never have imagined, and quickly they felt they had no choice but to micromanage their subordinates as well. No mistake was ever acceptable.

The time for yearly salary increase and bonus came shortly after the plant got the coveted award for best productivity and best quality worldwide. And employees perceived that both the salary increase and the bonus were far too low, given the extraordinary efforts they had made. The operators' motivation slumped first, and so did productivity and quality results. A trade union was set up and threatened to go on strike, for the first time in the whole group's history.

Can you guess what Gary did then? In permanent fear of a strike -which would ruin his image-, he by-passed managers and supervisors to get "close" to the operators, and took many "populist" measures to satisfy them in the short-term.

Now you can empathise with supervisors, squeezed between micromanaging-managers and empowered operators...

Many resignations ensued at supervisor-level, and then amongst managers. Things did not look good in the short-term... and micro-management costs a lot in the medium term:

- the company will have to pay employees well over market-rate, to compensate for their unhappiness and lack of professional growth
- the successor of a micro-manager will have a tough, long time to revive motivation, good-will and initiative amongst staff



- if micro-management makes subordinates unhappy, it will eventually make the "micro-manager" exactly that: a "micro" manager, frustrated and stuck at her or his level

When the senior management asked me to coach Gary, they were wishing for Gary to have an epiphany, turn his back to perfectionism and micromanagement, start to empower, encourage initiatives and allow failure at calculating risks (a rather tall order!). Or else he would be replaced. Gary's boss was not taking his part of responsibility, and I requested that he supports Gary throughout his coaching, particularly by allowing for a likely trial-and-error phase. That was agreed.

When Gary and I met, he candidly told me right away that he had painfully realized the shortcomings of his approach but was clueless about how to turn around the situation and the people. I shared that I was even more clueless in this matter for now, and that all we could hope to achieve together was to help him turn himself around. He got it.

As I noticed Gary appeared stressed out and fearful, I shared my observation and asked him why. He explained that striving for perfection and controlling what people do had always served him well, and –although he recognized other managers were succeeding with a more empowering leadership style- he was scared of the mistakes and problems that may happen if he'd let go. When I questioned 'why' again, he reflected and elaborated that he was afraid of not being able to handle the consequences of the issues. He realized that his lack of trust in others stemmed from a lack of trust in himself.

I proposed that - before we work on his self-trust - I gather co-workers' feedback and insights and shadow him in meetings, so we know exactly where we start from. Gary –reluctantly- agreed.

I proceeded. The results from the verbal 360 feedback were atrociously negative as respondents vented their extreme frustration and had abandoned any hope Gary could improve. Direct reports protested in unison that he was not trusting them, was micro-managing too often, and discouraging their input by his love to 'win over others' in discussions. Gary's peers confirmed he strived to appear 'the smartest guy in the room' and mentioned he was prompt to lay the blame for any issue on other members of the Leadership Team.

I could verify the accuracy of those comments myself, whilst I shadowed Gary in his meetings –even though he was on his best behavior then-.

I also sensed that Gary actually had a genuine care for his people, although his fear-based choice of behaviors did not disclose that to the untrained eye.

Gary was hurt by the highlights (or rather low-lights) of his 360 and the observations from my shadowing. I asked him which part of him would be strong enough to drive him out of the predicament. He slumped backward in his chair, seemed lost in his thoughts for a while, then exhaled deeply and whispered "my heart". Then his

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posture stiffened up a bit, he leant forward, and stated with more assurance: "I may have many flaws and idiosyncrasies, but at the core, I have a good heart. All I do is for people's good, not just for my own good. It's just that I don't trust people to be good enough, because I don't trust I am good enough to handle their mistakes in the first place, as we discussed... Surely my behaviors are controlling and it's true I love to win over others –from my education I guess-, but it's not what it seems. I just want to do what's right for others, believe me."

We went on to examine Gary's deeply-held fears related to 'letting go' of perfectionism and control, one by one. Along that exploration, Gary updated his self-awareness and evolved his belief system about his purpose and what success is about in a leadership role. He chose specific new behaviors to try out and we closely monitored their outcomes.

Gary sent a note to all respondents to his verbal 360 feedback, to thank them for their insights and inform them about what he was going to improve, in essence:

- *"Listen more and stop interrupting*
- *Show and build more trust with colleagues*
- *Empower others more and stop blaming for mistakes done in good faith*
- *Make my leadership style more motivating"*

In the same email, he invited them to hold him accountable for the changes he wanted in his behaviors and feed him back as frequently as needed.

Gary started to listen to others in one-on-one interactions, choosing to believe that they had something valuable to say and that his role was to facilitate their thinking. Instead of interrupting them as before -when he thought he had a better idea-, he took time to reflect upon what they had shared, and then asked open-ended questions to help them further their thinking whenever necessary, or challenged their ideas supportively. At the beginning, people perceived his questions as too 'investigative', making them feel he still wasn't trusting them, and a few colleagues dared to give him that feedback. He found truth in it and further improved his listening. Then his efforts started to get rewarded: he recognized more and more valid comments, great ideas and quality-thinking stem from his co-workers...

Gary also evolved his posture in meetings, helping others contribute at their best, instead of just contributing his best. He consciously stopped to lay the blame on others, gradually showed more authenticity and vulnerability, and started to ask for help. At that stage, he noticed other colleagues -Leadership Team members and direct reports alike- jump in and offer to help him.

A year later, his boss told Gary that he had proven he could change -"against all odds"- and play at 'the level above', and that was "favorable to his career development".

Most importantly, about a year later too, people engagement in the plant had started to rise again and middle-management turnover was decreasing. Gary had eventually found his own way, inside-out, to really do good for his people.

- **About personal and professional growth**

Case-study: Kathy, Investment Banker, USA

Connecting the activities we do in a 'flow' with our greatness potential

Kathy graduated from an Ivy League school. She aspired to work in business development and became an investment banker in the US for the first 20 years of her career. She was a highly successful at her job all along. Then, she felt the urge to pause for a year and travel around the World with the idea to discover people, their cultures and nature... Interestingly, she told me -a few years later- that she had found - in hindsight – that her round-the-world trip was really but a quest to find herself and new meaning to her life.

The moment she returned to the US, she was assaulted with job offers. A good friend of hers working for an Investment Fund offered her to head the operations of a world-wide Language School in Asia. His fund had just bought a majority-stake in it. Kathy followed her intuition and accepted almost right-away, to the surprise of her former colleagues who expected her to return to investment banking.

That is when we had a chance to work together. I supported her along her first 90 days, and then we embarked on a longer-term coaching relationship for her continuous growth as a leader.

One day, Kathy candidly shared with me that she remained surprised by two things: (1) how she had accepted the job offer in a heart-beat, given she had been a very cautious decision-maker in her first 20 years of employment, and (2) how well she was doing relative to her expectations at developing the business. We attempted to make sense of those two observations, and -at one point- we did the exercise I described above.

What Kathy found up is that she was 'in flow' when she was

- crafting long-term, strategic plans for business development, and
- figuring out the simplicity behind complexity

She talked with passion about how she would work overnight devising a strategy that would place her company ahead of trends and beat the market, strengthening her scenarios so they become robust enough to embrace uncertainty, looking for additional sources of competitive advantage, anticipating competitors' possible responses, building necessary organizational capability, etc...

Kathy also shared about how she was exulting when seeing the forest for the tree, or reaching deeper foresights about consumers' needs, or singling out areas of her business which were structurally under-performing and could tank the business...

Kathy was obviously using talents she had developed at university and across her career, and also her intuition, which had proven to be outstandingly reliable –and more and more so over time as her experience grew-.

I invited her to reflect about her intuition to take on a role at the helm of Asian operations for a Language School rather than go back to investment banking. She smiled and sighed. A couple of minutes later, she shared

- I think it was about seizing the opportunity to have more control over the definition and the implementation of growth-strategies, and challenging myself in a geography and a business model I did not know... Going back to what I had done before -with a lot more limitations to my freedom- was definitely not a match.
- I heard “freedom, growth, challenge, control”... Anything else at stake?
- Actually... yes: make a positive difference to the future of the lives and careers of our students through the mastery of foreign languages. The beauty of that became compelling during my one-year break around the World.
- From that motivation, which other shores could you allow your ‘flow’ to touch?
- I could spend more time coaching my Country Managers on their growth-strategies. In my firm, I could contribute beyond Asia. I could also teach strategy in a university or two, and get in the groove with students on the case studies I’d give them.
- And what would be the significance of that all?
- Well, I have to repeat ‘make a positive difference to the future of the lives and careers’ of more people
- How do you feel about that?
- Simply great!

Case-study: my own case

How I could -in hindsight- connect my own dreams and aspirations to my underlying purpose

Early in my childhood, I fell in love with classical music. I would ceaselessly listen to crackling recordings of Mozart’s or Beethoven’s symphonies and concerti, and gaze with admiration at the pictures of orchestras and maestros in tuxedos whilst listening to their prodigious gift of music. I started dreaming of becoming an orchestra conductor. The appeal was both in the status and that ‘magical’ ability to create beauty with others...

Pursuing my dream, I learnt to play piano, the violin, then played in chamber music groups and symphony orchestras, even studied music composition, all with delight. When I was sixteen, I took a competitive examination to enter a special school with a



curriculum evenly split between music and general studies. I failed. My skills at playing piano and the violin were not deemed good enough. That hurt, a lot.

I continued to indulge in my passion, as a hobby, addicted to that 'flow' between musicians when we are 'in the zone' creating beauty together, and propagating our passion to the audience.

I had no idea anymore about what career would fulfil me. I went to university to become an engineer -by default of any alternative idea and because -in France- being an engineer opens the highest number of doors at companies-. I was far from a stellar student, as I spent a lot less time studying engineering than embracing groups' activities on the university campus... What I enjoyed the most was my role as 'President of the European Week' there, where we brought 300 students from all 28 European countries at the time to join with our university undergrads and European leaders. It was the first time ever such reunion occurred on the old continent, just after the fall of Berlin's wall. The campus became an effervescent melting-pot of diverse talents for a few days, attracting nation-wide media coverage. The biggest joy in it for me was in managing the organizing team of volunteers, and inspiring collaboration between the (already) strong individualities of the team-members, for an outcome that delighted all participants along the event. That had the resonance of directing a symphony for me...

When I went to recruitment interviews for my first job, I told the recruiters - with the mindless arrogance of young graduates - that I was aspiring to reach a 'general management' position after my first two roles in the company...

Luckily, I got hired despite my pretention, as a junior manager in a plant in Provence, a beautiful part of Southern France. I was 25-year younger than my youngest subordinate... My team was made of employees disenchanted and very negative about 'the management'. Their motivation at work was low, to say the least. They had extraordinarily fulfilling lives outside of work, raising bulls for instance, or organizing cultural events, and contributing well to their communities... That really sparked my interest and admiration even. Our relationships strengthened. My dream was obviously to ignite their spark on the job. And fortunately it happened as we launched a few new projects which caught their interest. They saw the possibility to do new things and grow at work.

For example, Raymond, a disillusioned employee close to retirement and a wonderful man, got excited about learning to enter data into a computer (whereas he had spent his work-life painstakingly pencilling them in hefty notebooks). It was no easy feat as Raymond's fingers were really very big as compared to the PC keys, but it was worth it for him: his grand-children were amazed that their grandpa could use a computer too, and had become a curious learner. I was humbled by all the 'beauty' inside that my subordinates could liberate. That whole experience certainly enhanced my belief

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that there are vast untapped resources in everyone, and that it is an important part of a manager's duty to unleash more of them. We all fought our tears when I left them to move to my next assignment in Singapore, with the same corporation.

Strikingly, the third role I was offered happened to be... in general management, as a country-head in Thailand and in charge of an additional business in China. My initial infatuation with the prestige of the position evaporated the very first morning I took the job, when I felt the weight of the responsibility and of others' expectations, and recognized that I was actually going to be serving all companies' employees and clients...

Once I became comfortable in the assignment, I sensed –once again- the vibes I imagine an orchestra conductor feels. I just was just directing sales, marketing, manufacturing, supply chain, IT, Finance and HR instead of strings, woodwinds, brass, percussions and key boards. The outcome was growth and contribution instead of beauty. But it required exactly the same dedication and team-work from all contributors, and the boss' inspiration made it or broke it. I realized my childhood dream was fulfilled, and fulfilling. And I was still fascinated by people's potential, and finding great meaning in helping them unleash more of it. Not just the already 'high-flyer' Directors I managed, but everyone I could engage, one conversation at a time. Mind you, it was not out of selfless generosity, it was out of a passion that happened to serve them *and* my career very well.

One role later, at the head of strategic planning in head-quarters, and enjoying every bit of the job, I started to reflect about what I wanted to focus on along the next decades of my Life. It happens to most of us when we get near 40 years of age... And I recalled my earlier dreams and aspirations.

As a child, I was magnetized by conductors' status and their 'magical' ability to create beauty with others. As I reached general management positions, the appeal of the 'status' was replaced by that of the responsibility to serve. Yet the attraction of supporting teams to create greatness in a flow of inspired collaboration remained. What also manifested along my journey was my additional passion about seeing 'beauty' and seeds of greatness in people and helping them to unleash more of it. Doing that was immensely fulfilling and meaningful for me. And I decided to invest the next decade(s) of my career into it. Hence I went 'back to school' to train as an executive coach, and went on to support the growth of talented performers and inspiring teams to collaborate for great outcomes. It was just a logical choice. Interestingly, my former colleagues told me in unison –when I left the company- that they were amazed at how 'courageous' my choice was. The truth is there was not an ounce of courage on my part in leaving an exciting corporate career with a great company, there was just a burning desire to do more of what I loved the most.

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ABOUT RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP

- **About openness**

Case-study: Elizabeth, CFO for an oil & gas company in Latin America

Forgiving and letting go of the past

Elizabeth chose to 'forgive' her CEO, Ronaldo, for never thanking her about the efforts she was investing in delivering completely reliable financial statements, despite enormous challenges in the environment. She had grown considerable resentment against Ronaldo for this, to the point of loathing meetings with him. Elizabeth and I brainstormed about her healthiest way forward in this matter, and she decided to tell him: "Ronaldo, I want to share with you I have been accustomed over the years to being acknowledged for my work. At first it worried me that you did not praise anything I did, and then it kind of hurt me. That may have impacted my responses to your requests, at times. Then I reminded myself that we are all different and have distinct ways of relating to others. Now I am okay with that, and it helps me move forward to have shared this with you. Thank you for having listened to me." Elizabeth delivered the message as planned. Ronaldo did not answer a word. He simply nodded. Although the apology she was still secretly expecting did not come, she left the meeting deeply relieved. That was the whole point. In that particular case, there was an additional bonus though: the next time they met, Ronaldo mumbled a shy 'thank you', and –overtime- came to utter more words of appreciation, to Elizabeth and others.

Case-study: Martin, CEO for a paper company in Europe

Proving you care

Martin raised the question '*what was the highlight of your weekend?*' to Daniel, his VP Sales. The first Monday, Daniel said it was his 'round on a championship golf course, where [he] won over friends with a lot more experience'. As the conversation deepened about the topic, Martin got confirmation that Daniel thrived on competition, and that his self-esteem got a boost from winning. The next Monday, Daniel shared that his best moment was reading a book about 'CEOs' best strategies to win in the market'. And Martin understood that his subordinate was an eager learner, in addition to being focused on winning. The third Monday, Daniel disclosed that he revelled in a long trek alone in a national park, to let go of the pressure and

just enjoy being alone.

When I asked Martin how he would show genuine care to Daniel, going forward, he told me "I will make sure I offer him further opportunities to learn by involving him in additional strategic-projects, and give him proper recognition and visibility for his wins. I will also check how he is handling the pressure, to avoid he burns out. And we will chat about sports when we lunch together!"

- **About helping others grow**

Case-study: Apinya, Sales Director, Pharma industry, South East Asia

Letting go of paternalism and growing team-members' autonomy and performance

Khun Apinya, an endearing Sales Director in Thailand for a multinational pharmaceutical company, is a very considerate leader. She grew up in a loving family, and she believes a leader has to care deeply for her people, 'pretty much like a mother cares for her kids'. She throws a small party for staff birthdays every month, she enquires about how their families are doing, including parents and grand-parents. She attends her employees' weddings, their house-warming parties and the funerals of their closest relatives. Her employees love her back, as a 'big sister' they say. And when the going gets tough in business, they go out of their way to help. All good? Not quite actually. Khun Apinya's employees always refer to her for solutions to their problems, and she is happy to sort things out for them. It is a comfortable scenario for all, in the short-term. Yet, as a result, their critical thinking is under-developed, and so is their autonomy. When Khun Apinya was pressured to sharply improve the performance in her department, she stressed out. We met and she realized quickly that she was over-using her 'caring' strength to the point of being 'maternalistic'. Her interactions with her subordinates were of the 'parent-child' type, not adult-to-adult, and consequently, her employees were not growing fast, and stayed dependent on her. They did not take full responsibility for their job scope. Evolving the relationship patterns from paternalistic towards caring still but also empowering and holding employees accountable was a steep departure from everyone's comfort-zone. Yet it had to happen. Hence Khun Apinya explained to her staff that "the need for performance enhancement [was] a major opportunity for them to enhance their 'value' as professionals". She added that her objective was that "they gain autonomy and become together the best team in their business". She

concluded that the “new game would require them to take more initiatives, and occasionally fail, but then [she] would regard failure as an investment in their development”, etc...

We then developed a concrete action plan supporting Khun Apinya to instil more responsibility and independence in her team-members.

The ensuing 6 months were uneasy, but she managed to steer away from ‘paternalism’ whilst still caring for her people, as ‘adults’. The performance of her Department soared.

Khun Apinya commented eventually that she realized her new way to care for her staff was “more beneficial to their well-being and their future”, and that -in hindsight- her previous approach appeared somewhat ‘self-centred’ to her.

Case-study: the leadership shift of a well-known maestro

How a famous orchestra conductor decided to shift from micro-management to empowerment, as he was riding a horse... and what impact it had on his career.

Private jet? Yacht? Castles? This multi-millionaire had them all, and much more... What’s so surprising? It is that the gentleman, Herbert von Karajan, was an orchestra conductor, and such a job – although it is glamorous- does not pay much usually. Karajan passed away at 81, and his obituary in The New York Times described him as “probably the world’s best-known conductor and one of the most powerful figures in classical music”. Why was he so special?

He started his career in the 1930’s with prodigious skills, hard-work and ambition, but that’s not what made him a multi-millionaire Super-Star. What made him achieve unparalleled greatness in the world of classical music is the amazing standard of Leadership he attained.

At the beginning of his career in the 1930’s, he was a highly-demanding and “directive” conductor, explaining in great details to his musicians how he wanted them to play, and then rehearsing dozens of times the difficult parts of symphonies and operas. Extreme hard work²...

While he was still young, Karajan started to learn how to ride horses. One day, his trainer told him “tomorrow, you will learn how to jump obstacles with your horse”. Karajan did not sleep the whole night, as he could not figure out how to have such a huge animal take off in the air and pass over a 1.5 meter-high hay... The next day, he rode his horse towards the obstacle, literally paralyzed with fear... The horse just jumped over the bar... all by itself. Karajan realized in that the moment that the horse

² Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6R-rV2VWhK0>

simply wanted and liked to jump. Just as his musicians want to produce beautiful music together. The lesson Karajan learnt was of tremendous importance for his career: "There is so much an orchestra can do if you trust it to go for it all the way; the conductor really has only to manage 2-3% of the time."³

And indeed, the vast audiences watching Karajan conduct in the second part of his career were amazed to see him so restrained in his gestures⁴.

Musicians were also surprised at the beginning... Traditionally, brass players are the 'loud mouths' in orchestras, and once, in London, a trumpet player dared to ask him: "Maestro, with all due respect, when should I start playing my tune?", as Karajan's gestures were limited and rather imprecise... And the Chef just answered "when you can not hold it anymore"...

Journalists were also mystified. And one questioned Karajan: "Maestro, why don't you give precise indications to your orchestras?" Karajan finally shed light on the apparent magic: "because that's the worst damage I could do to them: then musicians would not listen to each other."

While fully empowering his orchestras, Karajan remained highly demanding all his life. But he knew really well how to thank his players for the extra hard-work he commanded, with sincerity and wit⁵.

A poignant testimony to Karajan's exceptional leadership is his last concerts, when he was extremely weak already (he passed away shortly thereafter). Although his body could hardly move, the orchestra played a music that all critics deemed divine...⁶

Karajan once said: "those who have achieved all their aims probably set them too low." This could be an invitation to you, as you reconsider your aims in Leadership, to try and figure out:

- how much more you can get from your team by doing less yourself?
- what you can do to have your team-members listen more to each other and play as a team?
- how you can motivate them to take more initiatives?

You may like to share your intentions up-front with your team first. And start with small steps, keeping in mind what Patton said: "Don't tell people *how* to do things, tell them *what* to do and let them surprise you with their results".

Your rewards? Maybe not a private jet, a yacht and castles... in the short-term at least! But most certainly more time to focus on what matters most... to achieve

³ Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjLhOnWzP0I>

⁴ Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaGkyeL82xA>

⁵ Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mGXgi0DNUA>

⁶ Watch <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tV9v9EGqqxo>



Greatness, all whilst demonstrating genuine care for the growth of your subordinates and teams.

Case-study: Sheila, head of Marketing for a well-known FMCG⁷ company, North Asia

Train your colleagues at uncovering opportunities in challenges, until you embed the habit in them.

Sheila took over from a micro-manager and found her team to be pessimistic in its outlook and overly conservative.

To shift their mindset from problem-focused to solutions-focused, she decided to routinely ask her subordinates bringing problems up: 'what are two opportunities for our business you can find behind the problem you discovered?' They first gave her blank looks... But over time, they produced more and more valuable ideas...

A little later, a competitor launched a fierce price-war to gain market-share, and Sheila was delighted to observe her team putting together quickly an enhanced value-proposition for the customers, including bundled-sales, at similar costs, that the rival company could not offer.

Sheila's team actually ended up growing their market-share by 2% and profit-margin by 3%.

ABOUT TEAM LEADERSHIP

Case-study: A dysfunctional team in the FMCG industry puts the past behind and comes together

About how team-members hostile to each other chose to become authentic and defined how they would work together effectively

Summary

CEOs appointed in countries they hardly know are usually in for surprises and quite an adventure. Pitfalls abound. Getting and giving effective feedback across cultures is a challenge. Understanding the underlying dynamics of their team takes time. Finding the keys to unleash their team's ultimate performance may be even more difficult... In this story, we investigate the case of an Indian CEO assigned to lead a large business in Thailand, and share how executive coaching accelerated his learning and firmly

⁷ Fast Moving Consumer Goods, such as food, home care or personal care products



helped him take his team towards the next level of achievement and fulfilment. We review practical exercises and tools that proved very useful, and report experiences about building trust, enabling productive conflicts and strengthening accountability in his multi-cultural executive team.

Most of the lessons we learnt along the way seem applicable Asia-wide and well beyond.

The *amazingly* smooth start of a new CEO's adventure...

"What's the most important topic we should discuss today?" I ask Rajesh, as we meet in his spacious office at Nariman Point, Mumbai, for another serene conversation... despite the incessant honking from the busy street below.

"Guess what?" he replies, beaming with excitement. "I have just been promoted to head our operations in Thailand". "Hey! Congratulations! Thrilling! How do you *feel* about it?" I question.

"Well, honoured, first. Thailand is the flagship of our business in South-East Asia. And exhilarated by the opportunity!" "And...?" I pull. "Hmm, a bit scared I suppose... but then who wouldn't? I guess fear comes with the responsibility, hey?... What do you think?" As I remain silent, Rajesh elaborates: "the situation is our business in Thailand has been growing at an unbelievable 20% per annum over the last 5 years, and it may be a tough act for me to follow. It's like a make-or-break career opportunity."

"What is your vision of success, 5 years from now?" I question. We pursue our conversation, gradually zooming from a 5-year horizon down to the first 3 months, until Rajesh defines a robust action plan for the first 90 days in his new job.

Two months later, we meet again, in Bangkok, for a "celebration-dinner" in a beautiful Thai restaurant alongside the Chao-Praya river, with sumptuous views of golden temples and... the crackling noise of long-tail boats racing by. Rajesh is all smiles. "Achchaa! I could not imagine a better first month into the job. My Thai employees extended the warmest welcome I ever had anywhere, and they go all the way to accommodate my needs, even before I realize them. Thais have just so much empathy, it is amazing. And they are hard-working too. Yet the best is: I have world-class executives. 6 Thai and 3 foreign directors -American, British and Singaporean-. Awesome go-getters, all of them, with splendid experience. And my family is settling down smoothly; kids are happy with their new school and have made new friends already." "Did you get any feedback on yourself yet?" I prompt. "Sure did, and it's

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rather positive, I must say. My assistant told me I am perceived as sharp, energetic, easily approachable, ambitious and kind.”

“Anything else?” I ask. “I guess you are probing for negative feedback; sorry I did not get any, although I pushed for it” Rajesh says.

First challenge: getting comprehensive feedback across Cultures

We then discuss possible obstacles to getting feedback on “areas for improvement” in an Asian context for a boss, and explore Geert Hofstede’s ‘cultural dimensions’ (read <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/>) for India and Thailand. Both countries score high on ‘power distance’, with India at 77 being much above the World average of 55. Hofstede defines ‘power distance’ as “the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally”. We then compare India and Thailand scores on ‘masculinity’, associated to assertiveness (‘feminine’ behaviour being more related to ‘caring’, according to Hofstede). While Thailand has the lowest ‘masculinity’ ranking amongst Asian countries surveyed, India has a ‘masculinity’ rate of 56, the world average being just slightly lower at 51. The last dimension we consider is “individualism”, for which Thailand scores a rather low 20, which hints to a predominantly collectivist society. In contrast, India scores around 50, 10 points above the world average.

“Hey, I did not really expect that much of a cultural shock in a neighbouring country!” comments Rajesh. “It seems that getting comprehensive feedback from my Thai subordinates is going to be an up-hill battle!”. We then brainstorm on ways to get such feedback, and Rajesh decides several actions. One is to launch a 360-survey two months later.

He is a firm believer in 360-surveys, and even reminds me of Eric Schmidt –Google CEO- sharing the “best advice ever” he received, which is simply to “get a coach”; says Schmidt: “every famous athlete, every famous performer has somebody who is a coach, somebody who can watch what they are doing and say ‘Is that what you really meant?’ And give them perspective, for something people are never good at: seeing themselves as others see them. A coach really really helps!” (watch Schmidt here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1O5bNTkpoU> and here too:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jexofFN0DjQ&list=PL6320942CC0FB9B41&index=52>)

Second challenge: pitfalls in the 'amazing' Thai workplace

In 'Amazing Thailand', the first 90 days can be quite a maze for expatriates; their learning curve to excel there is rather sharp.

In 2009, we conducted a large survey -with Chambers of Commerce- on cross-cultural management in Thailand, involving 120 companies. When Thais were asked to rate expatriates on several management skills, they gave low scores on 'motivation skills', 'emotional control', 'listening', 'conflict management' and -more surprisingly- 'decision making' and 'problem solving'. A drill-down into the survey results identified insufficient consultation and ineffective communication as the root-causes of the negative perceptions on foreigners' ability at 'decision making' and 'problem solving'.

I discuss this with Rajesh and share with him some of the main pitfalls for new expatriates in the Thai workplace identified by our survey:

- Rush to change things before understanding the situation
- Ignore Thai cultural values
- Misinterpret a « Yes » or a « smile »
- Be impolitely too direct
- Lose self-control
- Publicly blame or express disagreement with a Thai colleague
- Compare Thailand with other countries
- Rely on monetary motivation alone
- Be perceived as arrogant / underestimate Thais' capability
- Lack flexibility

We also reflect on some of the 'pearls of wisdom' I gleaned for new-comers from conversations with senior executives in Bangkok, such as:

- "When you start your new job here, have one-on-one sessions with your direct reports, not so much on work, but rather to understand each of the persons, what is their background, what they like, what they don't like, what they find interesting in their job, what they think the company should do; after a week, you will understand much more your team and your priorities for the first 100 days" (Mr. Makjumroen, former Chairman and CEO of Philips)
- "Pay a lot of attention to building confidence and trust in you as a leader; Thais will accept you as a boss and try to please you from the beginning, but

to get real trust, it will take at least 6 months. (...) If you think you can leapfrog that period, it will cause a lot of trouble later on." (Mr. Swinkels, former Vice-President for Finance of Unilever)

- High-achiever, self-reliant profiles are most at risk of failure: "a lot of high-flyers who have achieved a lot elsewhere in the West come here with a different attitude: *'let's-get-things-done-fast'* and then they find they hit a wall." (Mr. Sethi, former President and CEO of ING Life)
- "In Thailand, people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." (Mr. Yongvanich, former Managing Director of SAP for Thailand, clearly inspired by Peter Drucker)
- "One of the most common mistakes Foreigners make is to assume that if there are no questions, then everybody understands what they are saying." (Mr. Sethi, former CEO of ING Life Thailand)
- "Sometimes, when Thais say yes, it will not be exactly the 'yes' that you (Foreigner) understand, so you need to pay more attention to whether what you mean is really understood or not." (Dr Pisit, former Deputy Finance Minister)
- "When you deal with Thai people, you have to work like a friend; if you can buy their heart, they will work for you for a lifetime." (Mr. Tarab, former ING Funds Managing Director)

Rajesh decides to intensify his networking efforts, and we schedule a few meetings with fellow-leaders in Bangkok. In his conclusion, Rajesh evokes this picture: "better adopt the flexible strength of the *bamboo* than the rigid strength of an *oak*... to avoid burn-out."

Third challenge: enhancing executive-team engagement

"Sri Lankan pepper-crabs and drunken prawns at East-Cost, 8pm". We agree to get our hands dirty... after an impromptu phone call from Rajesh, an afternoon when we coincidentally both work in Singapore. Our dinner starts with sharing our fond memories of living in Singapore. Then I ask Rajesh the permission for a direct feedback. Permission granted. "Rajesh, you do look tired to me, tonight; are you?" "Well, it's just been another gruesome day with the regional guys, ever so demanding and always adding complexity to our operations." "What exactly is bothering you, Rajesh?" "I am just not in the mood to take on more weight on my

shoulders." "Tell me more." "I have been in the job for close to 3 months now, launched a number of initiatives with my executive team, we just have our plate full! Just like us here and now" Rajesh sparks with a smile. "Is everyone in the team getting their hands as dirty as we do, here and now?" "Funny you ask that, I just have a feeling that... maybe not." As I let Rajesh reflect on his words, he takes a moment to scan the vast sea-panorama, lit with hundreds of super-tankers' and other boats' night-lights, from North to South and slowly backwards. Then decides: "time for our first 360, definitely."

Reality-check: 360-survey interviews and their insights on the team dynamics

Two weeks later, I am conducting a 360-survey interview with Pramet, the talented Marketing Director. As always, we go through the positive comments first: "Rajesh is the most impressive CEO we have had since I work here. He diagnosed our business strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within 4 weeks of his arrival. Spot-on. He has so much ambition and drive, he thinks so fast, comes up with new ideas all the time -he's larger than life-; plus, he really cares about people too."

A while later, I change the interview course:

- Khun Pramet, let's now step back and consider your executive team. What do you see as its heaviest burden this year?
- Easy! We have too many goals, it feels like everything is important and urgent
- How come you have so many priorities?
- Well, we've made history in our business here, we want to succeed going-forward, maybe that's the price we have to pay
- You said 'maybe'?
- Can we achieve more by doing less?

We explore that question for a while, then come back to the "too many goals" statement, with a candid question:

- Khun Pramet, have you discussed the issue with the number of priorities in an Executive Committee meeting?
- No.
- Why not?
- Hmm... It would be awkward.
- Like what?

- If I bring up the issue, what will others think? It's like showing weakness. And Rajesh would not appreciate this, as he is the one adding new priorities... almost on a weekly basis!

As we probe those statements in-depth, I start to distinguish -beyond Rajesh's 360-survey- the executive-team interactions' shade taking shape.

Yu Ming –the Supply Chain Director, from Singapore- greets me with moon-cakes the next morning. It's Mid-Autumn festival time and his sister has just sent him a mouth-watering assortment. Your choice of 'mung beans with mango', 'Chestnut lotus with custard' and 'low sugar red beans with champagne truffle'... A "definite temptation", as labelled on the box, and a great start of the day! We go through the 360-survey interview and then expand:

- Yu Ming, it's Lantern festival; if you had a lantern to shed light on the weakest point of the executive team, what would I see?
- *Jia-lat man!*... OK, no talk. I mean we don't really talk, we don't really discuss issues. We avoid conflict.
- So what?
- So we go for half-good ideas, too many of them.
- One example?
- Our *below-the-line* marketing! Promotion after promotion after promotion. We discount way too much for the sake of growing market share. I just wonder when we'll throw a 'buy-one get-TEN-free' campaign!
- Yu Ming, whose responsibility is it to start a debate on this issue at the Executive Committee?

Yu Ming frowns, obviously disliking my question, then replies:

- Hey, it's a team-thing!
- What could be one good reason why it would not start with you?
- I don't want to corner a colleague in a tough spot.
- Why is that?
- Because 'never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself'.
- Yu Ming, I fully respect Confucius' words of wisdom. At the same time, you hinted about negative consequences for the business. Do we have a situation here?
- Sure.



- Do you have the same at home with your family?
- No way.
- Why?
- Because we know each other, we trust each other... AHA. OK, got it, we have a trust issue in the executive team.
- Yu Ming, just how much do you know about your colleagues?
- Well, the basic stuff, family, some hobbies, where they live...
- That's it?
- Kind of.
- How come so little?
- Five years ago, we had a great trip, all Executive Committee members *with* families, to Along Bay in North Vietnam. Five days on a Chinese-style junk. We cooked, bathed, ventured around together. Wow, that was *real* team-building. I can tell you, when we came back, we almost knew each other like brothers and sisters. Since then, zip, nil, nada, niente. Just the yearly run-of-the-mill away-day in a 5-star beach-resort in Phuket or in the hills around Chiang Mai. Come to think about it, we experienced such a fantastic thrust out of that junk-thing... (we laugh) And we did work superbly together the next 3 years, basically until some of us left the Company and our team-spirit gradually vanished.

A team-meeting reveals so much about the dynamics at play

Next day, I silently observe an Executive Committee session dedicated to "Performance Plans", the newest head-office initiative, all about raising the bar for performance company-wide and formalizing highly complex improvement plans. In the meeting, a number of good practices are at play: all participants are focused – no computer or BlackBerry distractions-, they seek clarity, have good laughs regularly, write-down their actions, take decisions... And when Rajesh questions those who don't say much, they provide valuable opinions.

On the negative side, the meeting drags on and on, well beyond the time allocated, with many more exchanges on form than on substance. As if it were more important to do the exercise to perfection in headquarters colleagues' view, rather than completing it in the best interest of the local business.

Another issue: Rajesh speaks 40% of the time, 2 other executives about 15%, while the rest hardly contributes, unless prompted.

Most strikingly, there is no real group-discussion and no confrontation of different

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opinions. Most of the exchanges are guarded and one-to-one.

Rajesh concludes: "I know this is creating a lot of extra work for all of us; please let me know if it isn't humanly possible to do it within the deadlines." No one says anything. But the silence weighs heavily.

"Rajesh, may I give you candid feedback on this meeting and your executive committee, now?" I ask. "Please shoot!" "The good news is: you have a brilliant collection of dedicated executives. The bad news is: you don't have a team. Your guys' degree of interpersonal trust seems low. They don't engage in healthy group-discussions. They don't talk about the elephants in the room (as examples: the growing number of priorities and the quest for perfection). However, I believe you can overturn the situation quite fast." Rajesh requests me to elaborate and then decides to embark on a team-building exercise focused on trust, productive conflict and accountability.

Exploring the "5 dysfunctions of a team" and preferred conflict modes

We choose to leverage Patrick Lencioni's approach in his book "the five dysfunctions of a team": five steps to build a highly effective team. First, establish trust amongst members, the kind of trust which makes people comfortable to disclose their weaknesses and ask for help. The second step is to engage in unfiltered, productive conflict, rather than preserve artificial harmony within the group. This suppresses ambiguity and generates healthy decisions, to which people can genuinely commit (third step). The fourth step invites team-members to be accountable to each-other for their performance and "call their peers on actions and behaviors that seem counterproductive to the good of the team". The final step - "attention to results" - requests team-members to place the collective goals of their peers-team above their own interest or their subordinates' team benefit.

Note: read more at

https://www.isasw.org/uploaded/calendar_icons/Conference_Resources/2016_June_Heads_Meeting/FiveDysfunctionsofaTeamPatrickLencioni1.pdf

Rajesh and his executives read Lencioni's book and complete its team-assessment questionnaire. Unsurprisingly, the team scores low on 2 particular points:

- *"team-members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them";*

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- *"team-members call out one another's unproductive behaviours".*

Another assessment the executive team undertakes is 'Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument' (TKI), which categorizes people's approach to conflict along two dimensions: assertiveness (the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns) and cooperativeness (the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns).



Note: The Thomas-Kilmann (TKI) Conflict Mode Instrument is a highly regarded assessment of people's conflict management preferences.

Here is an overview of it: <https://workshopbank.com/thomas-kilmann-conflict-mode-instrument> and here is the way to complete the assessment

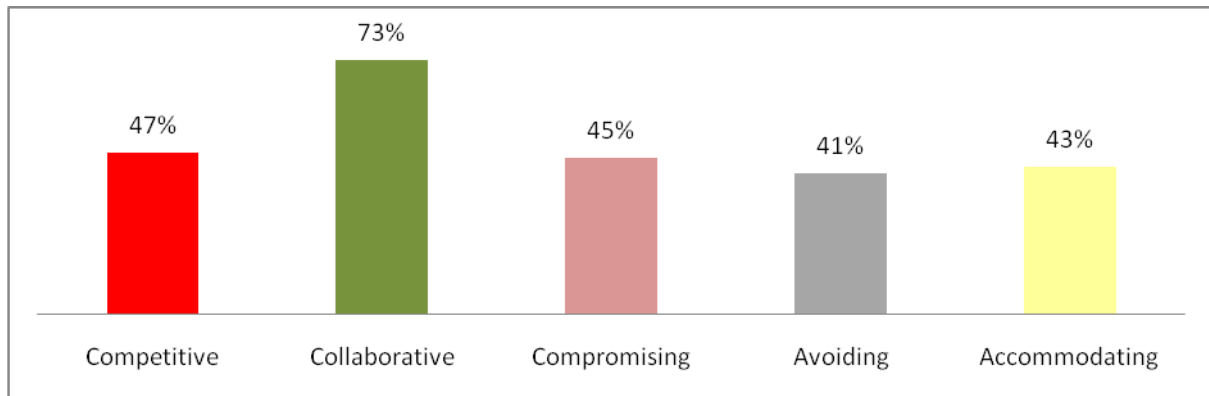
manually: <https://www.uscg.mil/Portals/0/seniorleadership/chaplain/5%20types%20of%20Conflict%20Styles%20Questionnaire.pdf?ver=2020-01-16-150312-330>.

Once you complete it, you can go to this page for help in interpreting it: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265565339_Thomas-Kilmann_conflict_MODE_instrument

Rajesh's executive team members have very different TKI profiles. Some often resort to 'avoiding' or 'accommodating' behaviours whilst others primarily use the 'competing' mode.

A good news is that the team's TKI compounded-profile shows 'collaborative' as the

preferred approach to conflict overall. Typically, a 'collaborative' person explores a disagreement with a view to learn from each other's insights or/and try to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.



The **core challenge: embracing trust and personal vulnerability**

Team-building time has come. The 10 members of the Executive Team are enjoying breakfast by the beach under a giant banyan tree. It's a peaceful and sunny Friday morning in the South of Thailand. The sea is mirror-like, just slightly wrinkled by the wakes of colourful fishing-boats cruising towards the nearby harbour, after a night of hard-work.

We gently embark on our own hard-work, with a music-video from Heather Small⁽⁶⁾ who questions: "what will you do today to make you feel proud?"

I remind all about what we want to achieve by the end of the day regarding inter-personal trust, productive conflict and accountability, and present the team's scores of the "5 dysfunctions" assessment. Strikingly low for "*team-members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them*" and "*team-members call out one another's unproductive behaviors*".

The first dive is for everyone to share "3 outstanding and unique things about her/him ... that no-one else knows in the executive team, good and/or not so good!" (participants had been invited to prepare this sharing a few days before, so it comes as no surprise).

Rajesh had shared with me his own 3 points ahead of time, and is ready to go for authentic disclosure first. Yet –surprise! surprise?-, Apinya, the most guarded executive, raises her hand first and speaks out. In summary: outstanding academic awards, dedication to family and adventurous moments abroad... She seems relieved after her statement, oblivious that she just wasted her opportunity to genuinely

open-up to her peers...

I am about to 'activate' Rajesh, to 'lead by example' everyone into real 'disclosure' zone, when Panupong, the charismatic manufacturing director, volunteers with his usual self-confident grin. "First, I probably failed more times than anyone here! I had a head-start with low grades at school. Had much more fun with outdoors activities. As a freshman at university, I continued to do just enough to pass exams, as life was so good to enjoy. Until my Father abruptly died. Devastating shock. I felt I was reborn overnight as... a man, with responsibility (...)"

Now we are getting the right spin.

Jantima, the glamorous, ambitious and distant sales director, follows suit: "You don't know that I come from a poor family, I mean *really* poor. My mother ran a small laundry shop and my father left when I was 4. So I developed a sense for survival early and money quickly became important. My first job was cleaning my relatives' houses when I was 9. I will always remember the moment when I got my first 5 Thai Bahts salary! (...)"

This sharing exercise works out very well -with proper preparation of participants and clear expectations upfront-, simply because everyone benefits from more trust amongst team-members.

The next activity has everyone writing down the one thing he/she appreciates the most about each of his/her peers, on their individual "Certificate of Appreciation". So simple, yet so positive! Many people actually keep that certificate preciously in their desk...

Certificate of Appreciation

presented to:

Then we raise the bar, and everyone has to share candidly (A) her/his greatest value-added to the team, in just one word, *and* (B) the one thing she/he wants to improve, to be a better contributor to the team. Our harvest is rich again: 'clarity', 'assurance', 'positive energy', 'understanding', 'vision', 'consistency'... amongst others, on the value-added side. On the self-improvement side: 'more empathy in interactions with you' (says Jantima), 'more systematic thinking', 'more listening', 'ask for help', 'stop *krengjai*' (which is an important Thai trait, roughly translated as 'being considerate of others, at your own expense').

Engaging in productive conversations in a team-building across Cultures

In the same spirit, we spend the afternoon working on productive conflict, role-play after role-play, and that's actually when... we laugh the most, which helps push inhibitions aside.

We also take a look at the team's TKI profile and the variety of (un-named) individual profiles. Pramet asks: "Why don't you show our names besides the individual profiles?" "Because that is personal information I can't share, unless everyone here asks me to." I reply. "We could interact with each-other a lot better if we'd know!" supports Robert, the British IT Director. All agree in an outburst of "Yes!" Another milestone along our way!

Then we practice Susan Scott's 'Confrontation Model', from her remarkable book "Fierce conversations" ⁽⁷⁾ -where 'fierce' -she says- stands for 'robust, intense, strong, powerful, passionate, eager, unbridled', not for 'aggressive' or 'threatening'-. Her 'confrontation model' helps engage in genuine conversations on tough issues, and drive effectively to resolution:

1. Name the issue
2. Illustrate with 1 or 2 specific example(s)
3. Describe your emotions about this issue
4. Clarify what is at stake
5. Identify your contribution to this problem
6. Indicate your wish to resolve this issue
7. Invite your partner to respond
8. Inquire into your partner's views
9. Identify conditions for resolution
10. Make a new agreement and determine how you will hold each other accountable for keeping it

As a 'treat', team-members get to walk on the beach, two-by-two, to hold two such 'fierce conversations', on the two most important issues they share. They return invigorated and all smiles.

Our work on 'accountability-to-the-team' ends with one more personal disclosure: everyone asks others to keep him/her accountable for something new he/she wants to do.



Apinya –who had wasted her opportunity to open-up to others that morning- doesn't miss her second chance, as she comes out with the shortest amongst statements: "be me."

Panupong –the charismatic- volunteers: "I propose to be the team's 'conflict-miner'." (in charge of extracting buried disagreements within the team)

Jantima –the distant sales director- throws in: "I'll start building empathy into all interactions."

Rajesh goes for: "focus strictly on what matters most; and talk less!"

The next day is dedicated to 'practicing' productive team-conversations on most important issues, and starts with agreeing on a short-list of... the 'elephants' in the room. Rajesh is in for a number of surprises... Panupong excels in his role of conflict-miner, and reminds all -at three tense moments- that "this hurts a bit, but it's better we go all the way."

That evening, as Rajesh is about to dive in the swimming-pool, he smiles: "I still can't believe what happened; that was the toughest day in my career so far, and the very best one."

Conclusion

At year-end, Rajesh shares with me:

– You know what makes us happiest and proudest as a team, when we look back at this past year?

I notice Rajesh has relinquished the 'me' for the 'we'. He pursues:

– It's not that we surpassed our 20% growth target, it's why: we discuss the undiscussables and every single time we gain strength as a team.

I am delighted to hear that, Rajesh! Thanks for sharing. Now tell me, what's the next frontier?

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