



Coach's Corner:

Why smart teams make dumb decisions – and what you can do about it

Have you ever been part of a team that seemed to amount to *less* than the sum of its parts? A team of smart, experienced people unable to tap the proverbial "wisdom of teams"? I have. So, it was easy for me to empathize with my client Cassie when she shared this lament about the product launch team she was leading:

"On paper, we're a dream team: diverse in terms of gender, race, professional and educational background, and age. But that diversity isn't showing up in our discussions, which tend to be dominated by the same two or three people who make the same points over and over. Meanwhile, the team members with the most relevant experience - Krista and Li Wei - are mostly silent. Krista is an introvert who just joined us from a competitor known for its brilliant product launches. Li Wei is one of the most strategic thinkers I've ever met. Unfortunately, English is his second language and he struggles to get into the conversation. I've tried to get them both to speak up, to no avail. We're about to make a critical decision on whether to do a phased or simultaneous product launch. We need everyone's best thinking and I'm afraid we're not getting it. "

What's going on with Cassie's team?

Cassie is right to be concerned about important information not making its way into her team's conversations. This phenomenon is so common it has a name: [shared information bias](#). Shared information bias is the tendency of teams to spend most of their time discussing information that is shared by the entire team, and very little time - sometimes none - looking at data that is unique to particular team members.

You may be thinking, "But, the benefits of sharing information seem so obvious; why would team members hold back?" There are plenty of reasons. For starters, it can feel risky to share your unique information if it challenges the team's thinking. Riskier still if you're a new team member like Krista, or a non-native speaker like Li Wei who may be embarrassed by his language skills. But teams ignore unique data at their peril: think John F. Kennedy's 1961 disastrous decision to invade the [Bay of Pigs](#).

"In the months after the Bay of Pigs I bitterly reproached myself for having kept so silent during those crucial discussions in the cabinet room. I can only explain my failure to do more than raise a few timid questions by reporting that one's impulse to blow the whistle on this nonsense was simply undone by the circumstances of the discussion."

Arthur Schlesinger, advisor to president John F. Kennedy in
Irving L. Janis, "Groupthink," *Psychology Today* 5:6,
November 1971, 74

What should Cassie do?

Given the natural tendency toward shared information bias on a team, how can Cassie ensure that the unique knowledge of each team member is brought to bear on the upcoming product launch decision? One technique I've found particularly effective is *deep listening*. Here's how it works.

Step 1: Team leader states the question

The process starts by having the team leader or facilitator state the question on which views are being solicited. For example: "Should we do a phased or simultaneous product launch and why?"

Step 2: First speaker shares her view

The person to the team leader's right - we'll call her the speaker - gets a fixed amount of time to respond to the question. (Three minutes will encourage people to be succinct.) No one else may speak while the speaker is responding. The objective here is not to debate, challenge, or analyze what the speaker says. The objective is

simply to get her unique information and perspective on the table.

Step 3: Listener paraphrases first speaker's views

When the speaker has stated her views, the person to her right - we'll call him the listener - paraphrases what the speaker has said. After the listener paraphrases, he asks the speaker, "Is that right? What am I missing?" The goal is for the speaker to feel completely understood by the listener, and often at this point she doesn't. She may say, "That's not exactly it," or "You missed a part." She then repeats or clarifies what the listener has missed and the listener paraphrases again. They continue back and forth like this until the speaker feels that she has been completely understood, at which point she tells the listener, "You heard me correctly. There's nothing more."

Step 4: Listener becomes second speaker and shares his view

Now the person who has just acted as the listener takes on the role of speaker. He shares his answer to the team leader's question and the person to his right takes on the role of listener. They repeat Step 3 until the second speaker feels completely understood, at which point the person who was listening to him becomes the third speaker.

The process continues with each team member paraphrasing the answer of the previous speaker before sharing his/her own. The team leader is the last person to answer the question and is paraphrased by the very first speaker. After everyone has had an opportunity to speak and be paraphrased, the group discusses what has been shared.

Why deep listening improves team decision-making

One of the ways deep listening works is by *increasing the likelihood that unique information will be shared*. The uninterrupted speaking time makes it easier for everyone - especially introverts and non-native English speakers - to share their unique information. And the equal allotment of speaking time to each member makes it harder for high-status members to overpower their low-status counterparts.

Deep listening also *helps ensure that what is shared is actually understood*. Speakers often respond to a teammate's paraphrase of their views by saying, "That's what I said. But, now that I hear it, I realize I didn't explain it well. Let me try again." This leads to a more nuanced understanding of the person's views - and often of the very problem being discussed.

I coached Cassie on the deep listening process and she used it with her team. Here's how she described the results: "Krista talked about the problems she'd run into with global launches at her last company," Cassie explained. "She'd brought them up in previous team conversations, but one of the more senior members of the team dismissed her and she never got traction. When she was able to speak without being interrupted, the rest of the team realized that her concerns were legitimate and needed to be addressed. And Li Wei turned out to be a very effective communicator when he wasn't being interrupted. Being paraphrased helped him clarify things in the few instances where language was a problem. He got us thinking about some novel possibilities we never would have imagined on our own."

Summary

Team decision-making is at its best when it's based on all the relevant information team members possess: unique as well as shared. Deep listening improves decision-making by making it easier for team members to effectively communicate their unique information.