

Deborah and The Starlings – a Team Coaching Story



INTRODUCTION

Teams. Sometimes they can be awesome. Sometimes they can be just awful. High performing teams are responsible for many of the good things that we take for granted in our civilization. Ineffective teams have been and continue to be the source of incredible amounts of wasted time, pointless effort and deep frustration.

I'm going to go out on a limb here. If you are reading this then I am assuming that you have been or are currently a member of a team, perhaps several teams. Perhaps you led a team in the past or lead one currently.

Teamwork is the foundation of organizational effectiveness. Being able to turn a group of individuals into a high performing team is a key leadership skill. Over the next few weeks we are going to follow Deborah and The Starlings as they make the journey to being a high performing team. Full disclosure: Deborah will be accompanied on this journey by her colleague Jack, who just might look and sound like an Executive Coach. Grab your hikers and water bottle and let's join them on this journey!

CHAPTER ONE

Deborah sipped her latte with satisfaction. “Thanks for this Jack, I always appreciate the chance to chat with you, but you have to let me buy next time.” She gave her longtime colleague a stern look.

Jack chuckled and held up his hands in mock surrender. “OK, OK!” He looked at her curiously. “What’s going on in your world these days? You seem a bit down.”



She shook her head. “A new team has been formed and I’ve been put in charge of it. We’ve had two meetings and I’m ready to throw in the towel.”

Jack nodded slowly. “You sound pretty frustrated. What’s going on?”

“It’s more what’s not going on. We’re supposed to be getting things done and all that’s happened in two meetings is arguments about stupid things. Yesterday I got to listen to a twenty minute debate over whether we should be using the word “change” as a noun or a verb!

Jack shook his head. “That must have been painful.”

“There’s an understatement! Deborah sighed deeply. “I think I’ve mentioned before that I’m a birder and I have a habit of giving things bird names that fit how I experience them.”

Jack smiled. “Tell me more.”

“I think of this team as starlings.”

“I wouldn’t recognize one if it dive bombed me. Why starlings?”

“They’re an invasive species that gathers in large, noisy groups. Most people, like me, see them as irritating pests.”

Jack chuckled. “I won’t ask what bird name you have for me. Seriously though, this is obviously a real challenge. What are your thoughts on how to tackle it?”

Deborah paused and said quietly, “I have no clue, I’ve never felt so frustrated and out of my depth.”

Jack looked at her intently. “Would you like some help? I’ve known you a long time and I have no doubt that you are equal to this task, you just need some help in discovering how to tackle it. If you would like I’d be willing to meet with you for an hour each week and we can walk through this together.” He paused for a moment. “You’re a birder. Imagine that you are now in some foreign land looking to check some items off of your life list. Think of me as the guide that will help you get to the right spots so you can find what you are looking for.”

Deborah looked thoughtful. “You know more about birding than I realized. That sounds like a great offer. Getting this team working properly is really important. A lot of things are riding on this and I don’t want to be the reason that it fails.” She smiled, “But I buy the coffee, OK?”

Jack nodded, “Done!”



CHAPTER TWO

“Dark roast, large, black.”

Deborah smiled. “That’s pretty basic Jack, are you sure that you won’t try something more exotic?”

“I know what I like, and besides, I wouldn’t even know what else to ask for.”

They settled at a patio table, enjoying the late summer sunshine. “How have things gone this week?” Jack asked.



“I tried to take a more structured approach to this last meeting. You know, a call for agenda items, an agenda, action items, due dates - all that stuff.”

“How did that work?”

“I’m not sure. We didn’t have the endless circular debates of the last two meetings, but we didn’t seem to have any engagement either. I’m not confident that the action items we concluded with are going to get done. Frankly, by the end of the meeting I felt like everyone had just given up.”

“What leads you to think that?”

“Body language mostly. Nobody would make eye contact, people checking their watches and phones, no answers when I would pose a question. What’s going on?”

Jack scratched his chin thoughtfully. “How would you describe the level of trust in the group?”

Deborah looked puzzled. “I’m not sure. We’ve all worked with each other before in other contexts. Everyone is enthusiastic about the goal that this team is supporting. Why wouldn’t we trust each other?”

“Perhaps trust isn’t the best word. Bear with me for a moment. Humans are social creatures. For us to feel comfortable and safe in a group, we have to understand what the social rules are in that group.”

Deborah nodded, “You mean things like relational status and customs and stuff like that?”

“Yes, exactly. Until that is resolved people won’t be able to do their best work. In a new group, like yours, where the social rules aren’t established, a lot of everyone’s initial efforts will be spent shaping and developing those social rules.”

Deborah brightened, “Is that what was behind those debates about words?”

“Probably, at least in part. Hey, if I can get you to agree to use my word instead of yours then it bolsters my position in the group, doesn’t it.”

She frowned again. “So what led to the big change in the meeting this week?”

“I can only speculate, but I wonder if the way you took control of things created uncertainty in people's minds about what the social rules were. Did you share your reasons for changing your approach?”

“Only in passing. I think that I probably said something to the effect that we needed to be more productive.”

“What interpretations do you think people might have put on that?”

Deborah put her latte down and pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I guess that they might have thought that I was feeling negatively about them – which would be true. Also that I was blaming them for us not being productive – which is only partially true.”

“If you were in their seat, how would you react?”

Deborah grimaced. “My inner dialogue would not be family-friendly.” She shook her head. “OK, so what do I do?”

“What difference would it make if your team had a common understanding of the social rules they were working under?”

“That seems to be where we are stuck. We need to figure that out, but it needs to be done quickly. We can’t afford to spend weeks in navel-gazing!”

“How much time can you afford to spend on this?”

Deborah gave him an irritated glance. “I don’t know. We’ve got a major deliverable in four weeks. If we could be functioning like a team in two weeks then I think we could make that milestone.” She paused. “I think I know where we have to go with this. It’s about creating a Team Charter.” She sighed. “I hate being a part of producing them – it always drives me up the wall that adults have to have conversations about ‘how we will disagree with each other’ as if they were still in junior high school!”

“So how will you lead this task with integrity?”

Deborah looked angry for a moment then laughed. “I won’t. I’ll get someone else to lead this for me. Could you fit it into your schedule Jack? Next Tuesday at 2:00 p.m. I’ll buy you lunch if you’ll do it.”

Jack was checking his calendar app. “Yes, I could give you and your team an hour that day. By the way, there’s this great new Italian restaurant a few blocks away from here. Kind of expensive, but it has a marvellous lunch menu.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Thank you everyone for coming today.” said Deborah. “I would like to welcome Jack, whom I believe you all know.” “As I mentioned in my email to everyone last Friday I would like to make a space for a more intentional conversation about our team and how we want to work together. I want to



participate in this discussion as a member of the team, not as the leader, so I’ve asked Jack to come and be our facilitator for this work.”

Jack looked around the table. The Starlings (Deborah’s name had stuck in his mind) regarded him with a mix of curiosity and skepticism.

“Thank you Deborah. I’d like to begin by sharing some of my assumptions about my role and commitments here this afternoon as well as some of my apprehensions as we begin.” He took a hearty swing of the dark roast that he had brought with him. “I’m not here as a consultant to tell you what to do. I’m not here to “fix” anything or anyone.” A couple of Starlings shifted in their seats. “My commitment is to work with all of you in a way that respects your freedom of choice, including the choice to not participate in this.

He paused for a moment. “I want to share that I am coming here today with some apprehension. I am a little concerned that I won’t meet your expectations, or Deborah’s, or mine. On top of that, I am really concerned that this fear of not meeting expectations may lead me to start to subtly manipulate what we do here today to move you in a direction that I think you ought to go. If that happens, that would be the greatest failure of all. So, I’m asking for your help in drawing my attention to anything I say or do that might suggest that I’m starting to do that.” The tension in the room seemed to be lifting, although a number of Starlings still looked puzzled.

“I’d like to invite us to take a few minutes to share whatever you would like about what your experience on this team has been like to this point. You don’t have to share anything unless you want to. As well, I’m asking everyone to simply receive whatever anyone says in a spirit of learning. No response, no discussion, just receive what is offered and ponder what you hear.” Jack paused. “If anyone has questions, let’s address them now. If not, I’d like to open the floor for whomever would like to begin.”

The silence was beginning to be painful when Margaret spoke. “Um, I’m sorry if I sound negative, but I’m so frustrated I’ve come here today ready to say that I quit.” Her voice faded and then strengthened. “I have no idea what this team is supposed to be doing or what I am expected to contribute.”

Jack nodded thoughtfully and after a moment Sergei chimed in. "Who’s in charge? How are decisions made? After our first two meetings I thought that I had that figured out but then everything changed in our third meeting. I can’t work effectively if I don’t know the rules of engagement.”

Heads nodded vigorously in response to Sergei’s words. The ice had been broken and several additional contributions came in rapid succession. A long silence then ensued before Deborah spoke quietly. “I really appreciate what everyone has shared. That took courage and I want to honour that.” She shifted in her seat. “I’ll share how this has been for me, but I would ask everyone to keep in mind that I’m just describing it, I’m not blaming anyone.” Deborah took a sip of her latte. “I too have been feeling very frustrated. I’ve been ready to give up and ask them to get somebody more skilled than I to lead this team. I’m feeling the pressure of a tight schedule and challenging deliverables and thought that we just needed to roll up our sleeves and start producing. I sort of assumed that we would figure out how to work together as we went along. I think that was a mistake.”

Thoughtful silence filled the room after Deborah was finished.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Their mushroom risotto is fabulous,” Jack advised, “but if you just want something light, they do a very nice variant on a Caprese Salad. They also do a marvellous cappuccino.”

“Cappuccino?” Deborah raised one eyebrow. “How would Mr. Nothing But Dark Roast know that?”



“That’s what a friend told me.” Jack chuckled. “So, how have things gone in these last two weeks?”

“Well, first of all, I’ve been asked to pass on the team’s thanks for how you facilitated the Team Charter discussion. And let me add my thanks as well. It’s the first one I’ve been part of where I felt like we were doing something real and valuable.”

“Any thoughts on what made it that way for you?”

Deborah paused thoughtfully. “I guess it’s that you treated us like adults. You mentioned at the beginning that you weren’t there to ‘fix’ anyone and that’s how you came across. We didn’t feel like we were a bunch of bratty kids getting lectured by a guidance counselor.” She smiled. “That’s a quote from Margaret by the way, she asked me to tell you that.”

“I’m glad that it was a positive experience. Did anything else stand out for you?”

Deborah sipped her cappuccino. “You’re right this is really good. I think what stood out for me, actually others mentioned this as well, was that you refused to suggest what we should do, even when we got stuck on trying to agree on how we make decisions. You just kept asking us questions until we found an answer that worked for us.”

Jack laughed. “Hey, don’t go revealing my trade secrets! I assume that you’ve had another meeting since the Team Charter session. How was that?”

Deborah paused thoughtfully. “I’m not sure. Everyone was much more engaged but there seemed to be a lot more conflict.” She smiled. “I guess that Team Charter proved its worth. We referred to it several times in the course of the meeting to remind ourselves how we want to handle disagreements.”

“How would you describe your experience of the meeting?”

“Having the Team Charter gave me more confidence in chairing the meeting. Drawing everyone’s attention to it felt less authoritarian than simply telling everyone to calm down. I was able to keep the meeting more focused and more productive without creating disengagement.” She chewed thoughtfully on a piece of bruschetta. “I am concerned though about this new level of conflict. What if it leads to people disengaging or quitting outright?”

“Forgive my lapsing into jargon, but are you familiar with Tuckman’s Stages of Group Development?”

Deborah thought for a moment. “It’s been a while. Give me a quick refresher.”

Bruce Tuckman observed that all groups, like yours, seem to follow a consistent pattern in their journey to becoming a high-performing team. He referred to this pattern as ‘Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing.’”

Deborah nodded. “It’s coming back to me. So where are we in this journey?”

“It’s not a linear process, but my guess would be that you are well into Storming. Right now everyone is still trying to sort out the “rules of the game” which includes both how they work together and how they relate to one another. Your Team Charter work will help you to get through this stage faster, but this stage is critical in the Starlings,” he paused, looking embarrassed, “Sorry. This stage is a critical step in your group moving from being a collection of individuals who relate to each other as individuals to thinking of themselves as team members and interacting with each other accordingly.”

Deborah chuckled. “Your secret is safe with me. So what should I be doing at this stage?”

“What do you see as your “value-added” at this point?”

Deborah shook her head. “Sometimes it really irritates me that you always answer a question with a question.” She put up her hand in “Stop” gesture. “Don’t respond to that.” She paused, looking pensive. “If the outcome of this stage as you describe it, then I guess that I need to make sure that I help them to have healthy conflict and that I keep them focused on the goal that we are all working towards.”

“How will you do that?”

“People are just starting to feel safe enough to say what they really think, that’s what Sergei said. So, I need to make sure that that feeling of safety is protected and enhanced. Before you ask me how I will do that, I’ll say that I need to model the way: demonstrate integrity, consistently treat people with respect, point us back to the Team Charter when conflict arises, and make sure that they don’t lose sight of the larger goal.”

“All powerful actions.” Jack’s phone buzzed. “Sorry, this is telling me that I need to get going. I have a meeting across town coming up. Thanks for lunch.”

Deborah regarded the bill with astonishment. “You weren’t kidding when you said this place was expensive!”

CHAPTER FIVE

“Try an Americano, expand your horizons Jack!” Deborah regarded her colleague’s hesitation with some bemusement. “What might you learn if you tried something different?”

Jack shook his head and grinned. “Nice coaching question Deborah. But...I don’t think I’m ready to go there yet.” He smiled at the barista. “A large black dark roast please.”



They settled at a patio table facing the park. A crisp autumn morning had given way to a gloriously warm afternoon and Deborah sighed happily as she regarded the colourful foliage. “This has to be my favourite time of the year. You can see things as they really are.”

“What do you mean?”

“All spring and summer everything has been green. All those reds and oranges and yellows were masked under a cloak of chlorophyll. But now,” she laughed, “just look at them, it’s like they’ve stripped off their disguise.”

“You’re not just an executive, you’re a poet,” Jack observed, “an uncommon and powerful combination. Speaking of your day job, how are things going in the avian world?”

Deborah looked puzzled for a moment then laughed. “Oh, the Starlings! A lot has happened since we met last. We got our first deliverable done on time and people seem to be working together smoothly.”

“I notice that you finished that sentence looking at the table. What else is happening?”

Deborah gave Jack a sober glance. “I’m glad that I know you as well as I do. It would be very disconcerting to have someone that I didn’t trust be able to read me so well.”

“Deborah, you know that I hold everything you say in these conversations in complete confidence. What else is happening?”

“I think that we’re stuck again. We’re getting work done and people seem engaged, but I can’t help feeling that there’s something missing still.”

“Tell me more about that.”

“I just feel that with the talent and experience that we have on this team we should be doing a lot better than we are. Our first deliverable was OK, but I think that we can do greater things than we are.”

Jack nodded. “What would need to change to be able to do that?”

“I don’t know. What I have noticed is that we’re not being very creative. Actually, that was what we were told when we presented our first deliverable. If I recall correctly the words were, ‘This will work but we were hoping for something much more innovative.’” She shook her head. “I know that there is so much potential in this team, we just need to tap into it.”

“Or unmask it.”

Deborah looked puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“Your comment on the leaves. You said that their reality had been hidden and was only now coming out. What’s hiding your team’s potential?”

Deborah shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Jack put his cup down. “The deliverable you produced, I’m assuming that there were at least a few issues where there was some disagreement within the team. What did your team do with those disagreements?”

“We handled them the way we agreed to do in the Team Charter and found a compromise that everyone could live with.”

“Was the team content with settling for a compromise?”

Deborah shook her head. “I’m not sure what you mean. We’re supposed to be working as a team, you helped us build a Team Charter that says how we’ll resolve differences.” Her voice tightened slightly. “Isn’t that what you wanted us to do?”

Jack said nothing.

After a minute Deborah looked thoughtful and said, “You know, there are some really capable people on this team with lots of experience and lots of great ideas. As individuals they have done amazing things yet for some reason when we come together it’s like all of that gets lost.”

“How would you describe the team’s skill in dialogue?”

“We’re all good communicators. We’re using the conflict resolution process that we agreed to. I’d say we are pretty good.”

Jack shook his head. “That’s laudable, but that’s not what I’m talking about. How good is the team at being able to leverage all of these different perspectives and experiences to be able to create something entirely new?”

Deborah looked thoughtful. “Based on what I’ve seen and the feedback we received, I’d have to say that we’re not there.”

“Not there yet,” Jack replied. “You know, this is something that I confess to having strong opinions on, but I believe that nothing boosts team performance more than enhancing their skills in dialogue.” He laughed. “Peter Senge thinks so too, so he must be right.”

Deborah smiled wryly. “Well, I’ve heard you suggest on several occasions that we all tend to assess a person’s brilliance by how much they agree with us. So, how do we turn a bunch of Starlings into giants of dialogue?”

Her phone and Jack’s buzzed almost simultaneously. Jack stood up. “It sounds like we are both being called away. How about I send you some reading material, just a few pages, and we can dig into this question more next week?”

Deborah was typing furiously. “Sounds like a great idea Jack, and in the meantime, why don’t you do some research into caffeinated beverages?”

CHAPTER SIX

“You will NOT order a dark roast today Jack!” Deborah wagged an admonishing finger at her colleague.

“Of course not,” Jack gave her a mock-wounded look before turning to the barista.

“Antonio, una tazza grande di caffè tostato scuro senza latte o zucchero per favore.”



Deborah beamed. “Well, you obviously did your homework – I’m impressed.”

They settled into a corner booth and sampled their beverages with satisfaction.

“Speaking of homework Deborah, what did you glean from that material I sent you?”

“It was eye-opening, to say the least. I had always assumed that dialogue and discussion were the same thing.”

“That’s a common assumption. Did you see any application to the team that you are leading?”

Deborah nodded eagerly. “Absolutely! We’re pretty good at discussion. Thanks to your work with the Team Charter we’re able to analyze and defend the different views and ideas that people bring without getting paralyzed in disagreement.” She paused. “What I had not realized is that dialogue is something very different.”

“How would you describe the difference?”

Deborah looked thoughtful for a moment. “It seems to me that it springs from a fundamentally different way of relating to each other. Discussion seems to be rooted in advocacy and an individual mindset. Dialogue,” she paused, “I’m not sure that I’m expressing the idea very clearly, but it seems to me that you have to prepare the soil for dialogue, that you can’t have it until people are coming to the table prepared to learn together rather than to be proven right as individuals.”

Jack’s eyes widened slightly. “That’s one of the most insightful summaries of the topic that I’ve ever heard.”

Deborah smiled. “Thank you. I must confess that your “executive summary” intrigued me so much that I spent a couple of evenings reading all of the sources that you cited.”

“So what would it mean to your team if you could learn to dialogue?”

“I think that it would change everything! I mentioned before that it seems to me like so much individual creativity gets suppressed in this group. If we could learn to dialogue, really dialogue then I think that we could unleash all of that potential.”

Jack smiled at Deborah’s obvious enthusiasm. “What would it take for The Starlings to ‘become giants of dialogue’, to use your words?”

“We need to learn some new skills. Your summary talked about a “Learning Mindset”. I think that’s is what we need, how do we get there?”

Jack paused thoughtfully. “To be honest Deborah, there is no recipe for this. If I may mix my metaphors, Team Learning, which is what we are talking about here, is more like playing jazz than doing a paint-by-number. Someone can teach a group the basic skills and coach them to a certain level of proficiency in them but the results achieved depend completely on the group’s willingness to learn how to learn as a team.”

Deborah nodded. “I also noted that one of the prerequisites is that the members of the team regard one another as colleagues. That creates a problem for me. How can I lead this team and at the same time interact as a colleague?”

“That’s a real challenge. I’m assuming that you have dealt with similar problems in the past. How did you deal with those?”

Deborah rolled her eyes then smiled. “Thanks. I not only buy the coffee, I get to do all of the hard work.” She paused for a moment then spoke slowly. “It seems to me that the problem is bigger than what I just mentioned. I can’t teach skills that I don’t have myself. Furthermore, even if I had the skills, I suspect that putting myself in a teacher role would undermine my ability to act as and be seen as a colleague.”

“So what could you do?”

Deborah looked out the window at the autumn rain. “One of the references you cited talked about the value of having a skilled facilitator. Once upon a time I had a colleague do something like that when we needed to put a Team Charter together.” She looked Jack in the eye. “Will you help us?”

Jack nodded. “By happy coincidence I have some spare capacity right now. However,” he paused, what if this was a choice that the team made of their own accord, what difference would that make?”

Deborah nodded vigorously. “I think that would really start us off well. Would you be willing to come to our team meeting next week and talk to us about the idea?

“I’d be happy to. This will cost more than lunch you know.”

“Given the prices at that restaurant you chose last month I’m not sure how to respond to that. Can we have a chat about that after the team meeting next week?”

Jack nodded and drained his mug. “Of course.”

Deborah stood up. “What was it that you ordered again?

“Caffè tostato scuro. It’s Italian.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The atmosphere in the room was different, Jack thought. On his first visit he had sensed skepticism and defensiveness. Bright smiles and happy greetings told him that The Starlings were seeing him in a very different light today. He glanced around the room. Deborah, Sergei, Margaret, Carlos, Harshad and Rosemary - the entire flock was present. He shook himself mentally. Deborah's avian metaphor was stuck in his mind like a burr on his golden retriever's tail.



“Jack,” Deborah began, “We met earlier this week and had some discussion about where we are at and what we would like to be different. We’re all keen to learn more about how you might help us.”

Jack nodded. “Thanks for that offer, but I’d rather start by hearing what everyone is experiencing in this current reality and what they would like to be different. Can we use the same ground rules as before? I will receive whatever you say with a learning mindset and without offering any response. I invite everyone else to do the same. Also, could I ask everyone to give just two sentences, one to describe your current experience, one to describe your aspiration for his team.”

Everyone nodded. They had experienced the power of this approach in their last meeting with Jack.

Rosemary spoke first. “I feel like we each lose 25 IQ points as soon as we come together. I’d like us to start bringing out the best in each other.”

Carlos spoke quietly but intensely. “I feel that we’ve got a first-string bench playing a third string game. I’d like to see us go all in as a team.”

Margaret nodded. “I sometimes don’t share ideas because I’m afraid that people won’t take them seriously. I’d like to feel freer to take chances in this team.”

Harshad nodded. “I feel much the same way as Margaret.”

Sergei was red faced and rocking vigorously in his chair. “I’m frustrated. I ask people if they have better ideas and get silence. Then people complain that they aren’t being listened to. I’d like it if we would start sharing our real thoughts and ideas with each other in our meetings and not with third parties in the hallway afterwards!” He took a deep breath and shook his head. “Sorry, I guess that was more than two sentences.”

There was a long pause and then Deborah spoke. “I feel that we are wasting too much time and effort playing defence – with each other. I’d like to see us able to redirect that energy to doing greater things.”

“Jack,” Margaret said, “when we discussed this earlier this we we all agreed that it would be great to work with you – we were really impressed with the way you guided us through the Team Charter work. What I don’t understand is how you would help us.” Five other heads nodded in agreement.

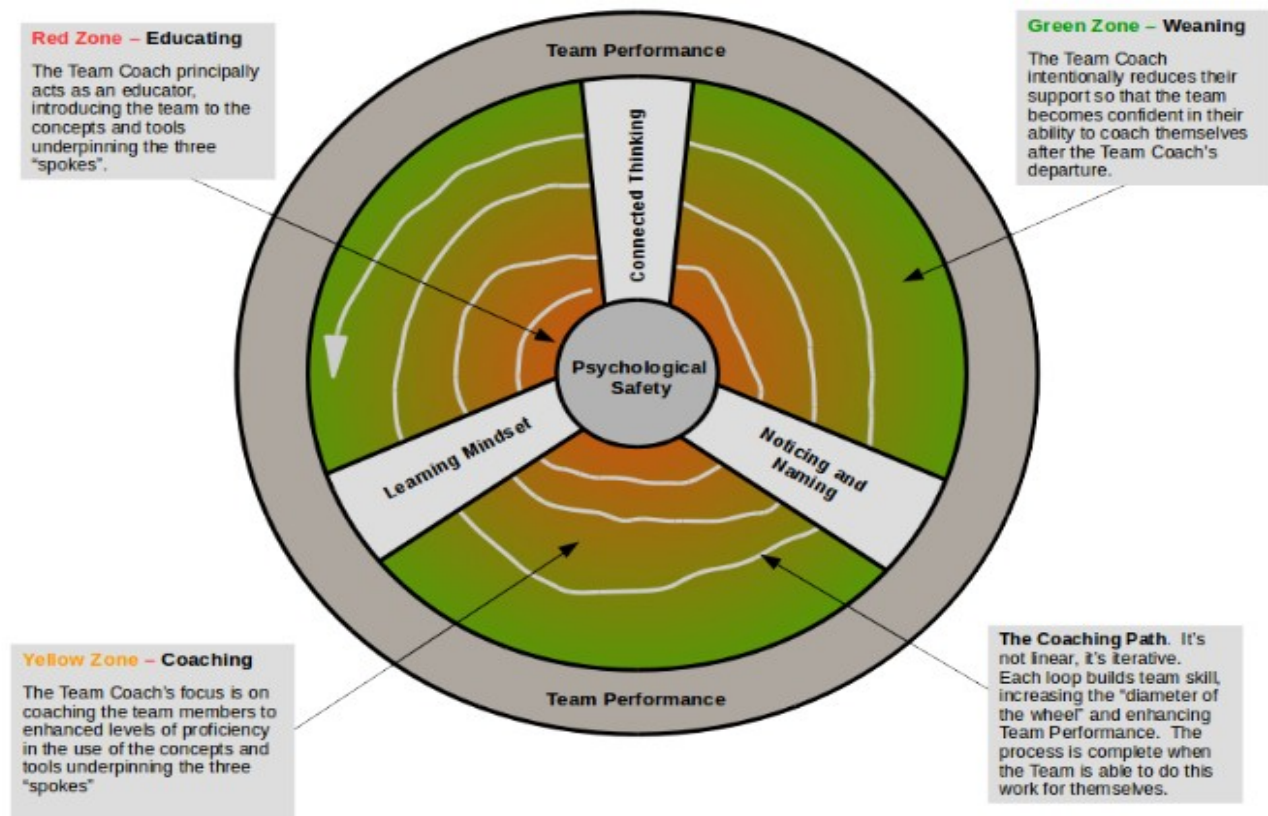
Jack took a hearty swig of his *caffè tostato scuro*. “Let me share a visual aid with you.” He passed around copies. “I work from the assumption that if teams are able to have real dialogue with each other then they are well equipped to solve pretty much any other problem that they face, including how to make the changes that they want to see in the way that they work internally and externally.”

He shot a quick glance at Deborah. “What I would do is to help to equip you to become ‘giants of dialogue’.” “That would start with my teaching you about some helpful tools and techniques, then coaching you individually and as a team to increase your proficiency and confidence in their use. Finally, I will position you to be able to do this for yourselves on an ongoing basis without my support.”

Sergei looked pensive. “How long would this take?”

Jack shrugged. “How long does it take to learn to play piano? It depends on what you want to play, how well you want to play it and how much effort you are prepared to put into learning to do it.” He looked around the table. “I can introduce you to the foundational skills in a day or two. However, the skills are only a start. Authentic and effective dialogue is rooted in habits of being and relating. I can coach you in learning those habits, but it will be your choice, both individually and collectively, how you use them or if you use them at all.”

Harshad, looking intently at the diagram that Jack had provided, spoke up. “Jack, can you talk a little more about these three spokes in the wheel?”



“Certainly. I refer to these as the three key characteristics of a team that can dialogue well. Put simply, Noticing and Naming refers to our ability to notice in real time what is going on in ourselves and in the group and to be able to describe what we are noticing in ways that enhance understanding. Learning Mindset refers to our own posture towards failure and learning. Connected Thinking refers to an approach that recognizes complexity and interdependence and is able to leverage those realities in a creative way.

Rosemary pursed her lips. “I assume that you are not doing this just out of the goodness of your heart. We don’t have a very big budget.”

Deborah spoke up quickly. “I’ve been able to secure the additional funding necessary to engage Jack for this work. Actually, my boss jumped at the chance.” She paused for a moment. “I’m asking this as a colleague and not as the leader. Are we interested in having Jack coach our team?”

Five heads nodded vigorously.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I love a good curry,” Deborah remarked, expertly scooping up the last of her *dal makhani* with the remaining *pratha*. “This place is amazing!”

Jack nodded distractedly in agreement, his attention being largely focused on the last of the *dahi vada* on his plate. “I could not agree more.”



Deborah sipped her tea contentedly. “I thought this would be a great opportunity to compare notes on the work that you have been doing with the team over these past weeks.” She paused for a moment. “I realize that the conversations that you have had with us as individuals are held in confidence. What I’m interested in is how you are feeling about our progress as a team in learning to dialogue.”

Jack smiled. “Since you know that I’m going to answer you with a question, let me come right out and ask it. What are you noticing?”

“The tools you’ve given us are amazing. The Ladder of Inference, the Left Hand/Right Hand Column exercise, the Life-Frame, Polarity Mapping, Double Loop Learning, we are using them all of the time now. I’m constantly surprised how powerful each one is and how they reinforce one another.”

Jack nodded. “Can you give me an example of how they have helped all of you to move from discussion to dialogue?”

Deborah thought for a moment. “Hmm, there are a lot of examples that I could use. Here’s one. Remember that session we had last month, the one where we were stuck trying to figure out how to respond to a change in strategic direction?”

Jack nodded. In that meeting the Starlings had been as acrimonious as he had ever seen them.

“After you left Harshad suggested that we take 15 minutes to go through a Left Hand/Right Hand Column exercise as individuals and then come back together and walk collectively through a Ladder of Inference exercise as a team.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “That’s a powerful combination.”

“It worked!” Deborah’s eyes sparkled at the memory. “When we started walking through the Ladder of Inference together I opened by sharing some of the assumptions and judgments in my Left Hand Column - even some of the stuff that I was a little apprehensive about sharing.”

“May I ask for an example?”

“For example, the fear that this whole team coaching thing was going to prove useless and that my credibility and reputation as a leader were going to be ruined.”

“That took courage,” Jack acknowledged, “what happened after that?”

“It seemed to open a door for everyone else to get real. We were able to share our deeper concerns about what we were facing and our potential responses. We came to realize that we were each responding to our own individual assumptions about what we were facing. When we were able to move “down the ladder”, to use your term, and work with the objective facts of the situation we all seemed to be able to think more creatively. We were able to come up with some new ideas that we were all enthusiastic about.”

“I’m very glad to hear it.”

“Oh, and another thing,” Deborah went on, “we’ve had this tension from the beginning between what I call the creative thinkers and the project planners. You know what I mean. The creative thinkers want to keep exploring possibilities and the project planners want to get everything nailed down as soon as possible.”

“That’s a common issue on teams. What have you done about it?”

“After you gave us that presentation on Polarity Mapping we realized that what we were facing was a textbook example of a polarity.” Deborah shook her head at the memory. “We worked through a Polarity Map of the issue. It helped us to realize that there was no right answer and it gave us a way to think about and dialogue about the issue. We refer to it all the time whenever the issue arises – which is about once every two weeks or so.”

“It seems that the team is getting comfortable with using the tools for themselves. That’s a good sign. How would you describe the team’s mindset compared to where it was when we started this journey?”

Deborah put down her tea cup and looked thoughtful. “When we started we were definitely showing up as individuals advocating for our own views and positions. The more powerful personalities tended to dominate the discussion. Looking back I realize that my biggest fear was that people would just walk away, so I spent most of my time trying to keep everyone on board.” She paused. “You asked once why we were willing to settle for a compromise. Compromise seemed like success because I didn’t think it was possible to have anything better.”

Jack nodded. “What are things like today?”

Deborah smiled. “It’s not perfect by any means. There are days when we fall back into that old way of doing things. But now we know that it is possible to show up differently so as to have more. We’ve been facing a lot of challenges but because we’ve been able to dialogue about them we’ve been able to find ways to deal with them.”

Jack smiled. “Music to my ears. Remember that diagram I showed everyone, back when we had that conversation about whether or not the team wanted me to work with them?”

“Yes, I refer to it regularly.”

“Do you remember what the last phase is called?”

“No, wait, is it ‘Weaning’?”

“Indeed it is. So, I’m thinking that next week’s session might be our last one.”

CHAPTER NINE

“So what I’ve just recounted,” Jack concluded, “should give you confidence that you are ready to leave the nest, as it were. You are skilled in using the tools that I’ve introduced you to. More importantly, you have shown a consistent commitment to working with each other as fellow learners.” He paused. This was always a bittersweet moment for him. “That means that the day has come that you don’t need me here to teach, facilitate or coach you. You are able to do that for yourselves.”

The Starlings regarded him sombrely.

“If you are willing,” he went on, “could we take the rest of our time together to reflect on our journey. It would be valuable for my own learning to hear from you what you are taking away from our time together and what difference it makes in terms of your experience on this team.”

“Received in a spirit of learning without response or comment?” asked Margaret with a smile.

“Of course.”

There was silence for a few moments then Margaret spoke again quietly. “As I’ve told this group before, I felt very intimidated coming on this team. I thought that since everyone seemed to be so much more educated and experienced than I am my role must be just to do what I was told.” She smiled and her voice grew stronger. “But I now understand that those were just my assumptions. Thanks to what we’ve learned with you I feel more confident naming and sharing my assumptions with this team. That has opened a door to me being able to contribute in ways that I never thought would be possible or welcome.”



Rosemary nodded. “I feel that I have gotten better at being able to ask questions in ways that don’t make people feel threatened or defensive.” She paused for a moment. “Jack, the way you modelled what you call a ‘Learner Mindset’ made me realize that my approach was creating defensiveness and impeding learning, even though I intended the exact opposite. I am now more aware of my tendency to do that and,” she chuckled, “I’m more willing to have that pointed out to me when I get into my ‘gotcha’ mode.”

Sergei spoke up. “Before this I didn’t realize that I tend to be a very ‘black and white’ thinker. I’m still not always comfortable with grey and I’ll confess that I can get a bit intense with what I see as fence-sitting. But,” he paused for a moment, “the concepts of polarities and polarity management have expanded my horizons incredibly.” He pointed across the table. “Harshad and I have opposite views on just about everything. But because we are better able to recognize polarities when they arise, we have a way of looking at the problem that gets us out of ‘win/lose’ thinking.”

Harshad laughed. “I agree with both statements! I also feel that I’m now better equipped to understand my own thinking. I use the Left Hand Column/Right Hand Column exercise all the time. After all,” he smiled wryly, “if I don’t understand my own thinking, why should I expect anyone else to?”

Carlos chuckled. “I can’t point to any one thing, but I know that,” he paused, his brow furrowed, “I guess I would say that my attitude has changed profoundly. In the beginning I felt very frustrated because it seemed that we were performing far below our potential. In my heart I was looking at everyone else and blaming them. One time when I was venting to you you asked me ‘Carlos, where are your fingerprints on this?’ That opened my eyes to the fact that I was part of the problem, and potentially part of the solution.” He smiled, “I find that I ask myself that question a lot now in all kinds of situations.”

Deborah seemed to be studying her latte closely. “My concept of team leadership has shifted, maybe I should say matured, a lot. Everyone knows how I was approaching things when we started. We had a dialogue about team leadership and collegiality in one of our meetings a few months ago, looking at it as a polarity, It gave us a new framework for thinking about the issue.” She looked up and smiled, “I am still accountable for this team’s performance, but I no longer feel that I have to carry the responsibility for the team’s performance all by myself. It’s very liberating!”

Margaret stood up holding a gift bag. “Jack, we’d like to give you a small token of appreciation for your work with us. A while back Deborah told us excitedly about how she was able to finally convince you to try something new in the beverage line. I was visiting family in Tuscany last month and picked up some genuine Italian *caffè tostato scuro*.” She passed over the aromatic package. “I hope that you enjoy it,” she winked, “the proprietor said that this is his finest dark roast blend.”

“Why thank you,” said Jack, “how very kind of you!”

“Jack,” Deborah spluttered, “are you trying to tell me that your fancy ‘*caffè tostato scuro senza latte o zucchero*’ was just a black dark roast by another name?”

Jack gave her an innocent look. “Deborah, I never told you anything. What assumptions were you holding?”

There was a pause and then everyone, including Deborah, laughed.

CHAPTER TEN

Jack was puzzled. Several months had passed since his last meeting with Deborah and her team. His working philosophy was “no news is good news” so things must have been going well. Or so he had thought. Last night he had received an urgent call from Deborah.



“Jack, I’m very sorry to bother you after working hours, but something has come up. I don’t want to give the details over the phone, but we really need you to meet with us tomorrow afternoon for an hour.”

The address that Deborah had given him was not the previous one. What had happened, he wondered. A reorganization?

The door was locked, but Carlos was waiting for him, looking somber.

“Hi Jack, good to see you again.”

“Good afternoon Carlos, what’s up?”

“There’s a big announcement today that’s really going to impact the team. I can’t say any more, Deborah wants to tell you in person.”

They went down a long hallway into a large room filled with tables. Jack recognized a number of people there. Carlos guided him to a table near the front where the Starlings were seated. They seemed somber and subdued, in contrast to the happy chatter around them.

“Deborah, what’s going on?”

She smiled bleakly, “You’re about to find out.” Jack opened his mouth and Deborah made a “Shh” gesture.

The giant video screen at the front of the room flickered to life, showing a face that everyone in the room immediately recognized.

“Good afternoon, everyone. I’m very sorry that I can’t be with you in person today. Unfortunately, travel restrictions did not permit it. However,” she paused, “what I have to share is so important and so timely I thought it better to do it this way rather than wait until it was possible to be with you in person.”

The room was filled with expectant silence.

“As you know, this past year has brought many challenges. New challenges, difficult challenges. It’s been hard for all of us. I want to thank everyone for their dedication and hard work. We’re not out of the woods yet, but there is cause for optimism.”

“Boilerplate,” Jack thought grumpily, “get to the point.”

“One of the reasons I am optimistic is the wonderful, creative work that is being done to help us respond to the challenges that we face.” She paused. “I know this is not when or how we would normally do this but this afternoon I would like to present a special achievement award to a team that has consistently awed us all with their performance. Deborah, would you please come up and say a few words.”

Jack looked stunned, the Starlings roared with laughter and the room erupted in applause.

“Thank you everyone,” said Deborah. “and Jack, what was it you said to me once about assumptions?”

The Starlings laughed again. Jack shook his head and joined them.

“I’d like to tell you a bit of a story,” Deborah went on, “I’ve shared this with the team already and they’ve given me permission to share it with you.”

The Starlings, who had obviously all been in on the joke, were breaking out party hats and putting one on Jack as well.

“When I was given responsibility for this team, a little over a year ago, things didn’t start very well. I gave them a nickname in my mind. Starlings. Annoying, noisy, intrusive pests. After a month I was ready to quit.” She shrugged dramatically and grinned. “I was so desperate I asked for help. Really, it was that bad!”

Sergei was doing something with his laptop and a picture of a group of starlings squabbling over something appeared on the video screen.

“Thank you Sergei. Yes, that was the sort of the image that I had had in my mind at the start. So I got help, we got help. We agreed as a team to hire a coach. With our coach we learned how to learn together. We learned how to think about our own thinking, and how to share that with each other. We did the hard, uncomfortable work necessary to get real with each other, even when it was scary. In short, we learned how to dialogue instead of each of us just fighting to convince everyone else of our own rightness.



We learned that it's possible to have more than just," she made air quotes, "a 'compromise that everyone can live with', that real creativity comes when we come to the table ready to learn together.” She paused. “We all learned a new approach to teamwork and I learned a whole new way of thinking about team leadership.”

Sergei elbowed Jack in the ribs. “Nice job, Jack.”

Deborah continued. “We still call ourselves The Starlings, but for a whole new reason. You may not know this, but starlings as a group are amazing. Have you ever seen a murmuration? Its a group of hundreds, even thousands of starlings. They fly these incredible, complex, beautiful aerobatics together. Nobody really understands how they can do it. My guess is that they have had a good coach.” She smiled at Jack. “So, I’d like to invite the rest of us Starlings up here to take a bow.”

Sergei tapped his laptop quickly as he left his seat and the video screen changed to a mesmerizing video. Hundreds of starlings wheeled and soared and swung in complex and beautiful patterns.

Once again the room erupted in applause. Jack leaned back in his chair, took a sip of dark roast and tried to get it past a sudden lump in his throat.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for being a part of this adventure. We all love a story and I trust that following Jack, Deborah and The Starlings has been an enjoyable way to learn a bit about Team Coaching.

Of, course, life is more complicated than can be told in a short story.

Every team is different and has different factors that can impede their performance. One example is matrixed teams - ones formed by representatives from independent or quasi-independent organizations – which have become very common. Bringing such a team to a high level of performance can be exceedingly difficult if the organizations represented are not “on the same page” - but it can be done!

Jack is an amalgam of myself and several Team Coaches that I know and have observed in action over the years. Jack and I share two characteristics: a love of good dark roast and a conviction that, all else being equal, a team skilled in dialogue will always outperform a team that limits itself to discussion and debate and settles for a “compromise that everyone can live with”.

Teams: sometimes they are just awful but every team has the potential to be awesome. A high performing team does not “just happen”. It is the product of a lot of hard work that can sometimes be quite uncomfortable. However, the results are always worth the effort. If you are interested in learning more about Team Coaching, contact me at www.fortifico.ca and let's talk about it!

