THE ART OF MOBILIZING HIGH-POTENTIAL TEAMS TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES

by Tina Doerffer

Because we are leaders, people often expect us to provide answers. When a problem seems too difficult to solve, they throw up their hands and cry, "What now?" All eyes turn to us: it's time to speak, to point the group in the "right" direction, to outline a plausible solution. But the reality is that in today's complex and increasingly interdependent business world, this traditional model of leadership, with its emphasis on unilateral decision making, is no longer effective. The success of a team can't depend on a single voice. We must find a way to fully engage our high-potential teams—with the understanding that this potential remains untapped so long as it is silent. The problems we now face require genuine collaboration if we are to solve them.

What steps can we take to encourage this collaboration?

Recent research by Google points the way. In 2012, the company launched Project Aristotle, an initiative to collect data on hundreds of different teams within the company. Their goal was to analyze what makes a team effective (or not) at working together to solve problems. They discovered that the single most critical factor in determining a team's success was something called *psychological safety.* Google borrowed this concept from Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, who defined the term in the late 1990s: psychological safety is "a shared belief [held by members of a team] that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking." It leads to a team dynamic of "trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves." The teams that were capable of discovering creative solutions to complex problems were alike in reporting a high level of psychological safety.

Though Google's study emphasized the importance of psychological safety, they did not offer concrete advice about how to implement it. So the question now becomes:

> *The success of a team can't depend on a single voice.*

As leaders, how can we generate—and maintain—an atmosphere of psychological safety for our teams?

A Practical Approach to Psychological Safety

In a leadership training workshop, I present a method for understanding and generating psychological safety. The workshop essentially serves as a case study for how to build psychological safety over the course of a single meeting. It synthesizes and expands on four different strategic approaches: (1) Google's Project Aristotle study on high-performing teams and the work of Amy Edmondson; (2) psychologist/author Daniel Goleman's application of emerging research in neuroscience to business contexts and his work on emotional intelligence; (3) the Adaptive Leadership approach by Harvard Kennedy School professor Ronald Heifetz; (4) Humble Inquiry and the art of asking rather than telling, as developed by Edgar H. Schein, pioneer of organizational culture and founder of the Organizational Cultural Learning Institute.

The workshop begins as participants gather around the installation of a contemporary artwork: 220 pounds of gold-wrapped candies, spread out on the floor in a thick, sumptuous, sparkling carpet. Made by the artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres in 1993—and presented in the workshop as a reduced-scale replica—*Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for Roni)* is a problem with no clear solution.

For our purposes, the artwork functions as the perfect vehicle for exploring how to create psychological safety in a group discussion. Placed in a novel context, participants are able to recognize dynamics that would normally go unnoticed in a familiar or habitual situation. Looking at the artwork also simulates the experience of encountering a budget, a strategy, or a product prototype that you don't know how to deal with—just as baffling, at a first glance, as this carpet of candy.

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The method for generating psychological safety works in two stages: first, you deepen your observational skills; second, you hone your ability to intervene in what you observe.

The physical material of the artwork provides an easy-to-remember acronym for the method: *CANDY.*

Create safety

Your main objective. Because it is so important to keep this goal always in mind, it is built into the acronym as the very first letter.

Analyze the problem

You begin by observing the problem—with the awareness that almost every problem functions on two levels: there is a "surface" issue (purely technical and immediately obvious) that hints at but also conceals the "core" issue (the real problem, which may be causing multiple different "surface" issues).

The artwork is a perfect illustration of this concept. The sparkling surface hides a deeper meaning in the early 1990s, in the context of the AIDS crisis. The work was inspired by Roni Horn's *Gold Field* (1980–82), a rectangle of pure gold foil spread on the floor, which Gonzalez-Torres called "a new landscape …

revolutionary." He saw the work in the company of his partner Ross, who was dying of AIDS. He later recalled how the two of them would go on long drives across the city of Los Angeles, watching everything turn to gold in the late afternoon light.

In a business context, a company may face what seems at first like a minor issue: the building manager complains that every year for the past five years, 30 percent of employees have changed their physical office space. This continual reorganization is using up company resources in what is beginning to look like a kind of musical chairs. It may be possible to address this issue directly—but more likely than not, this constant reshuffling expresses a much deeper problem.

An executive must learn to perceive and interpret surface details as symptoms that point the way to a deeper cause. Rather than wasting her energy attacking the symptoms, she must use them to help her diagnose the invisible—and often urgent—"core" problem that needs her attention.

Notice the factions

Observe the interaction between team members. The meeting may be about the problem at hand—but it's also about the group.

Part of the group dynamic in any meeting is the development of *factions*, as shown in Table 1. The members of each faction agree with each other: they "sing the same tune." The effective leader listens closely to pick out the different "tunes" that are gradually developing over the course of any meeting.

There are the *experts*: familiar with the subject at hand, they are capable of offering specific facts and deep insights. But they sometimes struggle to translate their knowledge to the group.

The bystanders: unsure about what they are seeing or what the proper response to it might be, they quickly become bored, checking their phones and silently removing themselves from the conversation.

Expert	Bystander	Skeptic	Participator
The most knowledgeable person in the room on whatever subject is under discusion (there's at least one in every meeting)	Silent	Challenges authority	Asks questions
Can get sidetracked trying to resolve minor technical issues that have little bearing on the main issue	Does not share his/her opinions; either has no ownership in what is at stake, or does not feel safe enough to engage	Verbally attacks the group leader, the other participants, and even the subject under discussion ("I don't see why we're talking about this")	Listens carefully to what others say and asks for clarification when needed
Can get "stuck in his/her own head"	Claims to have no expertise in the subject (and therefore, nothing of value to contribute)	Acts out of frustration, rather than taking the time to listen carefully	Willing to share preliminary impressions and ideas, even when unsure about where those ideas are going/what the end result will be; open to interpretation from others
Uncomfortable speaking on anything he/she does not already know the answer to	Passively signals that what is happening is not of value (does not listen; checks his/her phone; gets involved in unrelated work)	Aggressively signals that what is happening is not of value (the meeting is "a waste of time")	Tries to preserve a shared space of psychological safety

TABLE 1. GROUP DYNAMICS IN EVERY MEETING: THE FACTIONS

The skeptics: like the bystanders, they are unsure about what they are seeing; but rather than becoming passive, they become aggressive, channeling their uncertainty into anger and contempt. They lash out, often rejecting the subject at hand and trying to derail discussion.

And finally, the *participators*: curious, asking questions, willing to entertain different ideas, they help create the space for honest communication and exploration.

The goal of the leader is to move the group in a productive range by *encouraging communication among individuals and across factions.* You may not be able to change the factions, but you can change how they interact with each other.

You can *translate* for the experts: if they offer a very specific piece of information, place it in its broader context or offer an interpretation of it, so everyone can understand why the information matters. *Engage* the bystanders: sometimes this can be as simple as letting them know that their voices are missed. *Embrace* the skeptics: remember your goal is not to shut them down, it's to hear them out. If you simply silence them, you lose a potentially valuable voice. *Support* the participators: if they ask a question, draw the group's attention to it.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that people will communicate only if they sense that their contributions are valued. A major component of psychological safety is ensuring that everyone in the room feels both the desire and the safety to share their insights. The leader's role is to affirm, at times even very explicitly, that every person's voice deserves to be heard. In fact, every person's voice *does* deserve to be heard: though it may seem counterintuitive, a negative or dissonant response can have positive value for the group.

Diagnose yourself

You may be the leader of the group, but you are also a part of it—and part of one of its factions. Observe yourself. Ask, *Where do I fit in?* It's important to recognize your own role so that you can direct your energies in the most productive way. The same ideas apply here: you can *translate, engage, embrace,* or *support* yourself. Just as you affirm the value of the reactions, ideas, and comments offered by other members of the group, you need to affirm the value of your own.

Acting as the leader of the workshop, I diagnose my own reactions to gain a better understanding of what is happening at any given moment. To take a single example: it can be tiring to lead discussion. At times, it feels like walking through a desert, hoping to find an oasis. I'm waiting for an insight, listening for a connection, that will help the group move forward. I notice my own fatigue and impatience: I feel thirsty for a quick solution. This serves as a source of information. I know that if I am feeling this, others must be feeling it too. And this knowledge affects my behavior. I sometimes choose to acknowledge what we are all feeling (an action that by itself provides relief), or I decide that it is time to intervene in the discussion, ask a question, reveal new information—I give the group another impulse of energy, to help "shake them out of it."

Being sensitive to your own reactions is just as crucial in a business context. Charles Duhigg's 2016 *New York Times Magazine* article on Project Aristotle ended with a description of how a team leader sensed her own discomfort and acted on it. After making a mistake in a meeting, she sent out an e-mail explaining her plan to remedy the problem. One of her team members responded with a sarcastic one-liner. Although she could have ignored it, she noticed that she was feeling hurt, so she wrote back directly. This defused the tension; with one quick exchange, they were able to resolve the misunderstanding—which may otherwise have impeded their ability to work together effectively.

Diagnosing yourself can be difficult. Though it may be tempting to brush aside your own reactions, remember

Diagnosing yourself can be difficult.

that they are an important signal, often pointing you toward dynamics you might otherwise overlook.

Ask Y

At this stage, it's time to translate your observations of the problem, the team members, and yourself into effective interventions. The best way to do this is to *ask questions*: hence the final letter of the acronym, *Y*, which is easy to associate with the question word "why."

Asking questions, rather than providing answers, may be painful at first—both for you and for the people you are working with. Our general tendency as social beings is to avoid uncertainty, especially in group settings. But when everyone turns to you and asks, "What now?," don't reassure them with a solution. The group has arrived at an important moment: they have recognized a real problem; they don't know how to solve it; they are frustrated and they want to give up responsibility, sit back, and listen as someone else tells them what it all means. Your role at this point is to encourage them to tolerate that feeling of uncertainty. Ask them to continue engaging directly with each other in order to find a solution.

Here's an example, drawn from the workshop, of how a leader can mobilize a team:

CHRIS: *(frustrated)* It's so *fake* looking.

LEADER: Why do you say that?

CHRIS: I don't know, it just is. I don't see why we're spending so much time on this. The artist didn't even make anything—he just spread a bunch of candy on the floor.

LEADER: But why do you think you responded to it with the word 'fake' specifically?

CHRIS: *(sighs, shrugs)*

LEADER: *(addressing the group)* Does the word 'fake' in this context mean anything to anyone else?

[*pause*]

JUAN: I wonder if it has something to do with the fact that candy isn't like real food? It's just sugar. There's something fake about it, artificial.

ALICE: OR maybe, you could say it's fake because all the candy looks like beautiful gold, but of course, it's not real—it's just plastic wrappers.

JUAN: Like fool's gold …

Between them, Juan and Alice (both *participators*) are on the track of an important idea. In fact, the artist used the word *placebo* in the title of the piece: *Untitled (Placebo-Landscape-for Roni).* A placebo is a fake: something that lacks intrinsic value and replaces something real (in this case, the artist's lost partner). So the feeling of "fakeness"—which Chris (the *skeptic*) hit on—is woven into the very DNA of the piece.

Let's explore how this interpretation began to emerge. The skeptic, in an attempt to disrupt or possibly even end discussion, made a statement that explicitly devalued the artwork. The moderator neither confirmed nor denied his assessment. She tried to get him to elaborate on his criticism (remembering that there are opportunities even in negative feedback). Once again, the skeptic rejected the subject at hand—this time including not only the artwork, but the discussion itself, in his attack ("I don't see why we're spending so much time on this"). And again, the moderator gently but firmly stuck to the point. Here the skeptic became too frustrated to respond. At this delicate turning point, the moderator continued to value his contribution, just by continuing to talk about it—a subtle but important way of recognizing him and affirming the value of his statements to the group. And *for the third time in a row*, she refused to "solve the problem." She turned his criticism into a question. When she didn't receive an immediate response, she waited. The other members of the group, realizing that they weren't going to receive the "right" answer from the "boss," began tentatively engaging with the artwork. They trusted their own associations and ideas, and in doing so, they began to develop *a group solution*—something no single person could have arrived at on their own.

Conclusion

The *CANDY* method supports a new model of leadership focused on the group rather than on the leader, as shown in Figure 1.

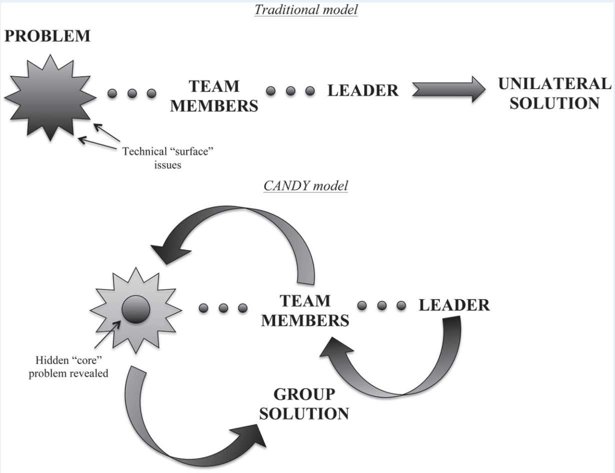

FIGURE 1. TWO LEADERSHIP MODELS: TRADITIONAL VERSUS *CANDY*

In a traditional leadership model, the flow of information in a meeting follows a linear and essentially one-way path. A problem sparks reactions from team members, who share information with the team leader, who provides a final solution. Responsibility for figuring out what to do next rests solely with the leader; the team members, apart from transmitting information about the problem, are passive. The main limitation of this approach is that in a room of ten people, only one (the leader) is actively engaged in solving the problem. Her isolated and unilateral decision may alleviate the problem—or it may lead to a dead end.

Using the *CANDY* method allows a new pattern to develop. In this second leadership model, the leader is not a boss as much as a moderator: she facilitates and fosters communication. When information reaches her, she does not respond with a ready answer; instead, she channels the energy of the group back toward the problem. Building on each other's insights, the team begins to perceive and explore the "real" problem concealed beneath the "surface" or technical issue that opened the meeting. Rather than remaining passive, they activate their own problem-solving abilities, transforming from a high-*potential* into a high-*performing* team. And together, they generate a sustainable solution for a complex issue.

Using the CANDY method allows a new pattern to develop.

This kind of deep engagement can take place only in an atmosphere of psychological safety. The leader's fundamental responsibility is to *create this safety*. Next time you're in a meeting, just remember: *CANDY*.

Tina Doerffer taps into fifteen years of experience in management and consulting, having worked in the private, public, and not-for-profit sectors in ten different countries. As founder and CEO of the Doerffer Leadership Group, Doerffer works with C-level clients across Europe and the United States on executive and team development. Author of three internationally acclaimed books, she regularly teaches graduate sessions at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. She speaks five languages (German, English, French, Polish, and Spanish) and loves contemporary art.