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# The “I” in Team

BY ROBERT GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

“There is no ‘I’ in team.” That oft-cited aphorism makes an important point: Individuals need to put ego aside in order to accomplish team goals. And though that’s true, it isn’t the whole truth.

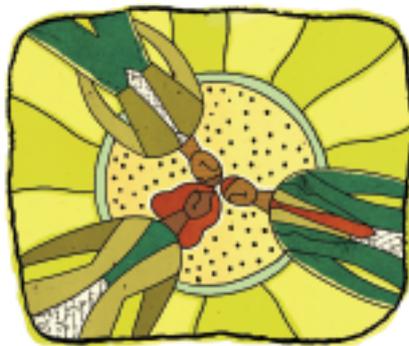
Every team functions within the context and parameters framed by its leader. Her “I-ness”—how she shows up and, most importantly, how she thinks—is unavoidably part of the team’s DNA.

If the leader shows up agitated, distracted, busy, or frustrated, his team shuts down, gets defensive, or perhaps even turns nasty. If he broadcasts anxiety and urgency, their task looms large.

Teams function best when the mood is light, when humor is present, and when calmness reigns. Human thought processes are built to generate powerful insights that facilitate seeing and doing the obvious, but optimum effectiveness requires clear-headedness. Group members must be able to listen to themselves and to others without distractions like anxious thoughts. Therefore, the leader’s first job is to monitor herself—her way of *being*—and its effect on the team’s tone.

When you are calm, quiet, focused, or feel good, such feelings will be contagious. As such, learn to check in continuously with your emotional pulse and state of mind.

Your mood fluctuates over the course of each hour, and feelings



change from moment to moment. But what’s easy to forget is that mood affects behavior, that life is lived from the “inside, out,” as it were. Whatever external factors we encounter, all stress is internal—generated by the thoughts we have in reaction to stimuli. As William Shakespeare wrote, “There is nothing either good or bad,

but thinking makes it so.”

Consider an everyday example such as taking out the trash. If we’re stressed out, in a low mood, it becomes a dreaded chore. It requires monumental effort to pick up the wastebaskets, lift smelly trash bags, open the lid on the garbage container, and push it to the curb. And while doing so, our thinking goes something like this:

“What a pain!”

“Why am I always the one who gets stuck with this?”

“Nobody appreciates what I do!!”

It takes less than five minutes to take out the trash, but lingering thoughts about it can spoil the rest of our evening.

If we feel pretty good, content, or even happy, however, we see the job as just part of living. We may even find we have a moment or two to lovingly note what our child has been playing with or to align the cans by the curb and admire the view. A good mood helps reduce a dirty job to something of no particular consequence. It leaves no lasting residue.

The key is remembering that our feelings are the window to our thoughts and that those thoughts continually come and go. We can

turn our backs on negativity and allow the mental space for a fresh thought to emerge. We can connect to insight and common sense.

The common denominator for effective team execution is seeing the invisible nature of life. As we said, each of us creates our own reality from thought, brought to life as a feeling that powers actions and behaviors. But most of us forget that we are the thinker! We forget that we can take charge of our life's chariot and hang onto the reins of its powerful horses—our emotions.

We're not suggesting that we can control our thoughts. Thoughts pop into our head nonstop, and we can't control that. What we can control, however, is if we let a particular thought run away with us. We have the freedom to choose which thoughts we take seriously enough to inform our actions. By staying alert, we can bridle our emotions and act only on the thought that's most appropriate for the situation.

Furthermore, we can count on insights showing up to offer solutions to seemingly impossible situations. Trouble is, habitual ways of thinking too often clog the flow of insight. By "habitual thinking," we mean becoming stuck in repetitive thoughts, such as busy-mindedness. "Woe is me!" goes one's mental chatter, "I have so much to do and no time to do it." Again and again, these agitating thoughts keep on coming—and with them, the emotion of feeling weighed down by the world. The mood becomes so strong that the person is tired before he even begins to do anything!

In such a frame of mind, it's hard to "hear" insight, to grasp a fresh thought. But the distance between despair and elation is literally the gap between one thought and the next. Can you measure that?

Bridging the gap is awareness—the ever-available doorway to an infinite consciousness, to the wisdom of the ages. As Socrates said, "Knowledge is simply recollection." Wake up. Wisdom is knocking on your door. You don't have to earn it, just make room in your thoughts. Have the willpower to stay calm, hard as that might feel at first. It will get easier, and those old, busy-minded, tiring images will no longer occupy much space in your working day.

Managers who recognize that we shape our reality from our moment-to-moment thinking have a gifted touch. They lead teams to great results without burning out team members or fomenting tension. They lead with grace.

These leaders' teams openly acknowledge the power of individual thinking to interfere with group effectiveness. They gain the perspective to handle the issues that get in the way: individual agendas vs. collective goals, "my ambition" vs. team purpose, etc.

When you start a team meeting, help people clear the cobwebs. Take a few moments to let participants disengage from whatever thoughts were preoccupying their heads moments ago. Sharing your own thoughts out loud is a great way to facilitate letting go of the report, the e-mails, or even the call home to the kids. Expressing appreciation for each participant at the outset is another way to establish a high-minded feeling. Remind people how much they contribute and how valuable their efforts can be. Or ask everyone to take a deep breath and be quiet for a couple of minutes. As the French philosopher René Descartes said, "All mankind's problems would be solved if we learned how to sit in a room, quietly."

Then help others connect to a purpose larger than their own. Remind them that work is about the "we," not the "me." Share your own purpose with clarity—your personal values and commitment to live them as well as your deep, driving desire.

As the work of the team progresses, pay constant attention to the invisible link between mood and results. Encourage effort when feelings are positive; ask people to stop when the mood turns sour. Structure meetings so that people aren't overwhelmed by crowded agendas. Repair rapport by fostering understanding, injecting humor, or calling time-out when team members get agitated and fall out of sorts with each other.

Most importantly, stay mentally healthy. Keep your own balance by being careful not to overcommit. Exercise. Eat well. Take 10 minutes to walk around in the middle of the day or gaze out the window. Turn off the TV at night. Hug your loved ones. Go to bed early enough to get plenty of rest.

Team energy is the most valuable resource your institution has. Use it wisely, beginning with yourself. ■

*Bob and Betsy have expanded their "Best Practices" columns in a book being published this month, On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted (Praeger Publishers). A portion of proceeds will be donated to IMA. For further information, visit [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).*

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