

# YOU FIRST

A hand is shown pointing directly at the viewer through a hole that has been torn in a piece of white paper. The hand is positioned centrally, with the index finger extended. The paper is slightly wrinkled and has a dark red border around the edges.

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**INSPIRE** YOUR TEAM TO GROW UP,  
GET ALONG, AND GET STUFF DONE

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**LIANE DAVEY**

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WILEY

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To the home team: Craig, Kira, and Mac

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## Change Yourself, Change Your Team

### The Great Promise of Teams

“A team can make better decisions, solve more complex problems, and do more to enhance creativity and build skills than individuals working alone....They have become the vehicle for moving organizations into the future....Teams are not just nice to have. They are hard-core units of the production.”

—Blanchard

Better decisions, increased productivity, and heightened engagement: Teams promise a lot. At the best, teams make many things easier. Good teams solve problems<sup>2</sup> better than individuals. They improve quality.<sup>3</sup> Teams can increase your engagement and motivation. One study of British rowers even found a physiological advantage to teamwork,<sup>4</sup> with team members releasing more endorphins than individuals rowing the same race. *We're wired for teamwork.*

Beyond any physical benefit, teams have an intellectual advantage because they make more information available to you, help you generate more novel ideas, and give you access to more people who can identify good ideas—and weed out bad ones.

But the proof of the benefits of teamwork isn't just in the numbers. If you've experienced at least one strong team in your career, you know the feeling in your gut. Being part of a great team is electric. You feel more connected, you feel the upward spiral of ideas getting better and better. You know that a bunch of people have your back. It's easy to get stuff done. Once you've felt what it's like to be on a truly great team, you'll always want that feeling back.

That's the feeling you're trying to evoke when you plaster the office walls with cheery posters of mountain climbers, rowers, and planes flying in formation.

### The Sad Reality of Teams

For many people today, the reality of working on a team is nothing like what's shown in those posters. Teams can feel pretty crappy. Instead of collaboration, you're in competition with your colleagues. Instead of diversity of thought and breadth of ideas, there's tunnel vision. Instead of friendship and camaraderie, there's gossip and backstabbing.

And it's not as though the pain is all worth it because you're so much more productive. In many instances, teams are slower and less productive than individuals. Seriously? All that drama for nothing! Teams aren't even more accurate than individuals. And that promise of increased engagement and motivation goes out the window when lack of role clarity, mistrust, and unhealthy conflict sour your relationships. Research has even debunked the value of the cornerstone of teamwork—the brainstorming session.<sup>5</sup> *Teams are failing us.*

# Teams Are Here to Stay

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There's no going back to a world where we all did most of our work independently. Teams have multiplied as our work has grown more complicated. If you go way back to 77 AD, one man—Pliny the Elder—managed to write an encyclopedia of all that was known to mankind. Today, that's just impossible to fathom! No single person could possibly know all there is to know even in one very specific field. *We can't know enough without teams.*

The huge increase in the use of teams is also part of a seismic cultural change. Command and control organizations didn't need teams to get things done—they had *memoranda*. The boss sent out a memo and everyone got on board. “Yes, sir, right away, sir!” When was the last time you saw a memo? Today, our organizational cultures are more sensitive to engagement and buy-in. We have to use influence instead of authority to get things done. Meetings have replaced memos. *We can't get things done without teams.*

I recently reached out to human resources leaders in 50 large and midsized organizations and asked them whether teams would be less, equally, or more important in the future than they are today. Eighty-nine percent of respondents said that teams would be more (or much more) important in the future. *Teams are here to stay.*

Teams are the way work gets done in our increasingly complex, fast-paced, global world. They are the basic unit of our organizations and a critical piece of the productivity puzzle. For many of us, our work teams are also the closest thing we have to community in our urban, disconnected, two-hour commute lives. My teammates are my colleagues, my sounding boards, my friends, and even the aunts and uncles to my two daughters. For both our organizations and ourselves, there is a lot riding on our ability to make teams work.

## What I've Learned about Fixing Teams

The problems facing teams are serious, but instead of fixing the serious teamwork problems with serious solutions, most team-building sessions focus on fun or frivolous activities like cooking class or white-water rafting. I guess the idea is that if you can have fun outside the office, maybe you can recapture the fun back in the office. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

More often than not, people return with horror stories about team issues being magnified by the types of sessions. The cooking class highlights how your team can't get its act together and ends with everyone eating a cold meal just to rub their noses in it. The karaoke night widens the gap that already exists between the outgoing party types and the more hesitant introverts. The Popsicle-stick boat sink along with your hopes of building a better team. Expecting silly exercises to fix serious issues is ridiculous.

On the other side of the spectrum are the “tissue issue” team builders. These are the team-building facilitators who think that if you remove the tables, sit in a circle, and have an authentic dialogue with one another that everything will be fine. These folks come prepared with their box of tissues because they don't feel like they've created a breakthrough until someone cries. These sessions can make things a whole lot worse in a hurry. It's just not acceptable that these are your only options when you want to invest in your team.

For the last 17 years, I've been studying and working with teams. I started back when I was a graduate student in psychology studying the dynamics that affect innovation in high-tech products.

development teams. That research was my first evidence of the profound connection between team effectiveness and business success. For the past decade, I've been working as an advisor to executive teams. At first, I focused mostly on facilitating strategy, but it didn't take long for me to learn that the quality of the strategy process hinged on the dynamics of the team. For the past 7 years I've been helping top teams improve their alignment to strategy, reduce their dysfunction, and fulfill the promise of teamwork in creating productive organizations.

By the time I get a call to help a team, things are usually pretty bad. Some teams openly admit the severity of the problem. But many try to downplay their distress. They say things like, “*We're a good team, and we're just trying to become a great team.*” It doesn't take long to learn that the *patient* is in bad shape. Sure, they're walking and talking, getting things done, but they've got badly blocked arteries, and the only solution is the team equivalent of open-heart surgery. That's how I spend most of my days. I wheel teams into the operating room, crack them open, and try to repair the damage. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Just like eating well and exercising every day can greatly reduce the risk of heart disease, simple healthy practices on a team can prevent or at least reduce the impact of the most common team dysfunctions. If you get into the habit of doing these small things every day, you'll prevent your team from becoming dysfunctional. These steps are more effective than gimmicky team-building programs. Going on a rock-climbing retreat to solve your team's problems is like trying to get healthy with diet shakes and a ThighMaster. Living up to the responsibilities outlined in this book will prevent your team from reaching a crisis point where you need to invest in a costly team intervention.

## There's One Catch

I sat across the table from the vice president of human resources of a large manufacturer. I had worked with his team before, but from the interviews I had done with the members, I could tell things weren't good. The team was micromanaging and spending too much time in the weeds. They were all trapped in a bad dynamic where most members didn't trust, or even like, one another. I wasn't the first expert they'd hired to help.

I met with him to go over what I'd heard in the one-on-one interviews and get ready for the session. As we sat in his office, we stared out the windows at the water in silence until he said what we were both thinking: “This has to work. We won't get another chance.”

Unfortunately, he thought that statement was about me. I was the team effectiveness expert, and I needed to fix the team. I needed to stop their yelling. I needed to cure their mistrust. I needed to make them forgive past indiscretions and move forward with a clean slate.

I can't fix a team. No team expert, no matter how skilled, can. You see, my secret weapon isn't a magic wand—it's a mirror. No matter how badly I want to cure a team, all I can do is create the conditions for the team to cure itself. I told the VP of HR what I tell every client: I'll give you everything you need to understand how and why you need to change. But you have to make the changes yourselves.

Each and every team I've seen recover from dysfunction has been led by one brave soul who looked in the mirror and didn't like what he or she saw. And instead of waiting for everyone else to change, that person decided to go first. Each and every team that got healthy had one member who would trust without being trusted. One person who would respond to hostility with curiosity. One person who would stand up for the teammate who others were shutting down.

If you are willing to be that person on your team, congratulations. If you are ready to make a change, this book will be your inspiration for why to try, your handbook for how to do it, and your measuring stick for how you're doing.

Are you ready to change your team?

## The Road Ahead

In the first half of this book, the section on Toxic Teams, you will diagnose what's going on in your team. I'll introduce the most common team diseases and share the early warning signs, the symptoms, and some things you can do—even without the support of your colleagues or team leader—to get your team back on the right path. By the end of the Toxic Teams section, you'll be tuned in to the dynamics that are at play on your team. You'll know if your team is at risk of becoming one of the following:

*Crisis Junkie team:* Stalled by unclear priorities, lack of role clarity, and political infighting, the Crisis Junkie team lurches through life in search of the next crisis that will unite it with a common goal, unlock resources, and stop the petty bickering.

*Bobble Head team:* Homogenized by shared values, perspectives, and experiences, the Bobble Head team goes with the flow but maintains harmony, at the cost of little innovation and dangerous detachment from the risks of its decisions.

*Spectator team:* Fragmented by members who check out of discussions, the Spectator team loses the benefit of diverse perspectives and sinks into apathy that ensures the whole will never be greater than the sum of its parts.

*Bleeding Back team:* Plagued by underground conflict and back-channel decision making, the Bleeding Back team nods its head in public and puts up a fight in private, causing a perpetual loop of one step forward and two steps back.

*Royal Rumble team:* Scarred by vicious attacks, screaming fits, and personal agendas, the Royal Rumble team fails to harness passion and instead spends all its time going back and forth and none of its time moving forward.

In the second half of the book, you'll learn the daily regimen you can use to keep your team healthy or to start fixing your team if it's broken. No single tactic will cure a Toxic Team, but if you live up to each of the following five responsibilities, you can cure every one of the different dysfunctions. Each of the responsibilities is simple in theory and difficult in practice. When applied, each will have a profound impact on your team and on you. It doesn't matter where you sit at the table; every team member can and should live up to these five responsibilities:

*Start with a Positive Assumption:* Short-circuit your biases, unpack your baggage, and truly appreciate the value that your teammates are bringing.

*Add Your Full Value:* Show up, get off cruise control, and bring the benefit of your experiences, your relationships, and your personality instead of just doing what is in your job description.

*Amplify Other Voices:* Loan your credibility and your airtime to teammates whose minority perspectives are usually shut out of the discussion.

*Know When to Say “No”:* Retrain yourself when and how to say no to the things that would dilute your focus, stretch your resources, and slow you down.

*Embrace Productive Conflict:* Tap into the value of different points of view by disagreeing about

the issues in a way that promotes understanding and reduces defensiveness.

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## Change Your Team

Teams are the way we get work done. Organizations need teams to live up to their promise instead of getting mired in dysfunction. Getting teams healthy will pay off richly in terms of productivity, innovation, and risk management.

But productivity, innovation, and risk management all pale in comparison to the true reason we need our teams healthy. Unhealthy Toxic Teams make our working lives miserable. Stress in the workplace costs our economy billions of dollars, and it's costing you what are supposed to be the best years of your life. You know what it's like: two hours into the team meeting and that one guy is droning on and on without listening to anyone, and you want to strangle him. You're spending hundreds of dollars on pain relievers and massages just to deal with the tension.

And it's almost impossible to leave a Toxic Team at the office. You carry the stress and anxiety with you when you walk through the door at home. You are distracted at dinner, quick-tempered with your partner, and harsh with your kids. It has to stop.

I'm passionate about teams because I have experienced the misery of working on a Toxic Team. Early in my career, I was a member of a Toxic Team. I kept on downplaying the effect our team leader was having on me until one day I saw a speech given by Dr. John Izzo. I am eternally grateful to him because he gave me the kick in the pants I needed to get out of that environment. He said, "Every day everywhere you go, you spread a virus. You decide if that virus is positive or negative." I realized that the toxic environment on the team had poisoned me. Just walking into the office made me grouchy. I spent more time complaining than making things better. I was spreading a negative virus.

Twenty-six days later, I submitted my resignation. It took me about two months to really appreciate the terrible toll that team had taken on me. I realized I had been wasting all my energy trying to protect myself from the team leader's wicked accusations, and I had no energy left for anything else.

I hadn't been doing my best work. I hadn't been the kind of colleague and mentor to my team that should have been. Worse, I had carried the weight of the day home with me at night. My daughter would ask to walk to the park or ride her tricycle, and I would tell her I was too tired and switch on the television to placate her, something I had sworn to myself I would never do.

Since that moment eight years ago, I've been committed to doing my part to end the misery of bad teams. I've learned that Toxic Teams are inefficient, they waste resources, and they leave people feeling unproductive, disengaged, and exhausted. No one deserves to feel that way.

I left my Toxic Team, but you don't have to. You can change your team from the inside. One person—no matter where you sit—one person can change the trajectory of a whole team. Starting to behave differently, to unpack your baggage, and to disagree positively will make it easier for your teammates to do the same. Good behavior from you will encourage good behavior from others, and you'll be amazed how much better things will be. If you have the courage, you can change your team.

*If you change yourself, you will change your team.*

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# Chapter 2

## Toxic Teams

I was sitting at my desk, working away, when the phone rang. It was the CEO of a small financial organization.<sup>1</sup> He'd called a week before to ask about our work on team effectiveness, and I'd sent him some material on our Team Inoculation® program. We designed this program to help get new teams off on the right foot. We affectionately refer to it as the *flu shot* for teams because it's meant to immunize teams against common dysfunctions.

He didn't waste any time getting to the point on this second call. "Thanks for sending the material on the flu shot," he said. "I don't think that's going to cut it. Do you have a *rabies shot*?"

I immediately imagined a team of executives sitting around the table frothing at the mouth. It wasn't quite that bad, but it was pretty horrible. Members of the team had stopped trusting one another and communicating all but the most necessary information.

Before the first session, we interviewed the CEO, the board chair, and the entire executive team. They painted a pretty bleak picture. The organization used to be listed as one of the nation's best employers. Now engagement had plummeted. The most recent internal survey asked employees to agree or disagree with the statement "Our organization has the leadership we need to be successful." Not a single employee agreed. Not *one*!

No surprise that the business was in a downward spiral. Thanks to internal squabbles, the team couldn't deliver the tools the sales force needed to keep up with the increasingly tough competition. Sales had been falling for three years. There was no time to waste in getting this team back to health.

We had our first session at a really nice hotel surrounded by stunning views of a forested section of the city. Things inside weren't quite so picturesque. As members of the team arrived, they said hello to my colleague, Bryan, and me, but ignored each other, burying their heads in newspapers or their smartphones.

We took it slowly for the first day. We knew we'd need to build trust before we could get at what was really going on. We started by talking about the purpose of the organization because it was something everyone felt strongly about and could agree on. They came to some valuable conclusions about what their team should be focused on. By the end of the day, they were comfortable enough to express some of their frustration: "*This was all well and good, but we didn't talk about what's wrong. We need to talk about what's not working.*" They wanted to point fingers, to blame someone, to unleash their emotions. But they weren't ready to do that without making things much, much worse.

In our second session, we used an assessment tool to help the team understand the feelings behind their coworkers' behavior and set them up for the difficult conversations they needed to have. By session three, we were ready to delve into the issues. And boy, were there issues. The members of the team were walking wounded.

Everyone on the team had significant grievances. They felt wronged, and they wanted to see public trials for the offending teammates. I think most of them were expecting Bryan and me to pronounce judgment on the offenders right there in the session. The alleged crimes varied. Some had been caught

telling people that their teammates didn't know how to do their jobs. One vice president had instructed her direct reports to ignore instructions from one of the other VPs. Another refused to share an important document with a colleague because she didn't trust her with the sensitive material. Even the CEO was in on the action, asking the board to let him terminate the CFO without addressing the issue directly with him.

We saw anger, frustration, and distress. And not just in the boardroom. The executive team's direct reports took the brunt of the conflict when they were asked to ignore or question their peers and thus spread the misery in the organization. Of course, this dysfunction affected team members' sleep, appetite, and health. Their relationships and their families suffered. The whole situation had become toxic.

**Toxic Teams:** A team where the lack of alignment and the poor dynamic are a threat to both the productivity of the organization and to the engagement and well-being of individual members.

Toxic Teams are like cancers: The exact cause of the disease and the prognosis can vary widely. When you take diverse individuals and combine them into teams, you get infinite permutations of dysfunction. Some teams are dysfunctional from the start, thanks to immature, abusive, or conflict-avoidant individuals. Other teams work well until something sours the quality of their member interactions. Even small changes in the membership or the context of the team can turn a normally healthy team into a dysfunctional one.

You know you're on a Toxic Team when:

- you dread going to work on Monday mornings (and Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays)
- you work your butt off but face the same issues and problems time after time
- you go to the washroom on another floor to avoid Gossip Central
- you copy the boss and the boss's boss on every e-mail to cover your backside
- you're embarrassed to tell people which team you're on

Teams turn toxic when something goes wrong in one of two dimensions: the alignment or the dynamic.

## Alignment

You know your team is aligned when you're focused on things that are important to the organization, you are each clear about your roles, and those roles complement one another instead of conflicting. Without alignment, it feels like you're just spinning your wheels.

You'll find yourself in a Toxic Team if there is too little alignment because you'll either be dropping balls (“That wasn't my responsibility”) or stepping on one another's toes (“That's MY turf!”). A team with poor alignment wastes a lot of energy running off in all directions. If you often find yourself reworking and reworking projects or putting out fires, that's a sign that alignment is broken somewhere in the chain.

Okay, so a quick meeting to review the team's purpose should clear up any problems, right? Wrong. Your team can also turn toxic if there is too much alignment—when alignment becomes uniformity. When your team is too tightly aligned, there isn't enough diversity of thought to trigger innovation or expose underlying risk. At the extreme, every team member is thinking exactly the same thing. You might as well just have one person work on the problem alone. You might be surprised how often over-alignment is the problem on teams.

Getting alignment right means finding that sweet spot where everybody's thinking independently.



but still working toward a common purpose. Each of the Toxic Teams that I will describe in the following chapters has gotten this balance wrong somehow. Two team types in particular have alignment issues at the heart of their dysfunction. Too little alignment is the fundamental problem of Crisis Junkie team, and too much is the issue for Bobble Heads.

## Dynamic

The other major issue is how your teammates interact with one another. You know you have a healthy dynamic when team members communicate openly, candidly, and respectfully. This contributes to high levels of trust and makes your team a mature and positive place to be. But a good dynamic isn't just valuable for its own sake; you'll see the impact of the dynamic on creativity, decision making, and execution. That's why a good dynamic is critical to the health of the team and the success of your organization.

A healthy dynamic has to be more than skin deep. I have heard many, many people claim to be on wonderful, healthy teams, only to find that the smiles mask serious problems. The desire to maintain harmonious relationships can make your team avoid difficult topics and gloss over issues that require hearty debate. If you're engaged and cheery but unwilling to go beyond a superficial view of the world, your team is as much of a risk to your organization as the team that devolves into fistcuffs. A counterproductive dynamic is a factor in every Toxic Team. It's a hallmark of a Spectator team, where there is too little conflict, and a Royal Rumble team, where there is too much.

## How Sick Is Your Team?

You might already be reacting to the language I'm using to describe unhealthy teams. “*Sure, we might not be up for Team of the Year, but I don't think I'd say we're toxic!*” The term *toxic* makes a lot of people squeamish. Toxic doesn't mean your team is doomed!

Think about the word *toxic* and the idea of toxins. You're surrounded by toxic substances every day. They're usually not concentrated enough to knock you out. But you become less and less healthy as those toxins build in your body. The same is true of your team. Maybe your team isn't obviously sick yet, maybe you're still functioning fine, but are the toxins building up? Is it time to clean up your act so your team can stay healthy and productive for years to come?

Read the first half of this book with an open mind. You might not see a mirror image of any of the Toxic Teams when you look around your meeting room, but do you see hints that your team is starting to deteriorate? If you understand the origins of Toxic Teams, you can spot a problem before it really hampers your team.

If you do see your team reflected in the descriptions of the Toxic Teams, don't fret. Admitting that your team is unhealthy is nothing to be ashamed of. Few teams become dysfunctional intentionally, even knowingly. Your dysfunctional behavior is a natural response to the pressure you're under: the pressure to drop everything when a crisis strikes, the pressure to get along, to act civilly, to be engaged and passionate. You're expected to be all these things while your work is getting more complex, more interdependent, more urgent. The operative word is *more*. More, more, more!

## Coping

So if you are like most of the team members I work with (heck, if you're like *me*), you make little compromises just to survive the day. You drop your opposition to an idea because the boss seems so committed to it. You let a nasty comment slide because the guy will ignore what you say anyway. You lob a personal attack at a colleague because it will scuttle their idea faster than trying to make a rational case. You take out your stress by gossiping with a teammate over coffee—what happens at Starbucks stays at Starbucks.

The first time you do any of these things, it's understandable and forgivable. You're under so much pressure, you're inevitably going to lose your temper or let something slide at some point. Give yourself some slack. It's what you do the second time and the third time that matters. The second time you use a coping strategy, it's a pattern, and you need to get serious about doing the right thing instead of taking the easy way out. The third time, it's a habit, and you're already in trouble. The good news is that there is a way back.

It's time to dive in, figure out what's really going on, and start making it better. Here's how to do that.

In the following five chapters, I will take you on a tour of the most common types of Toxic Teams. We'll peek in the windows of their meetings, hide out behind their water coolers, and even listen in on the voices in their heads. You'll spot the normal, even desirable motives and behaviors that can actually set your team on a path to dysfunction. Then you'll see the peril that lies ahead if your team becomes toxic—the costs to your organization and to you personally. By that point, you might start to recognize some of the descriptions.

For each Toxic Team, there is a quick diagnostic quiz. Does your team have a full-blown version of the disease or just a few of the early warning signs? If you reflect on how your team behaves, can you confidently say that there is no risk of developing a particular problem? As you complete each diagnostic, tally your scores and get a sense of just how bad it is. You can feel good if you're only checking off one or two items in the Early Warning section. If, on the other hand, you're checking off the Moderate to Extreme symptoms in the lower sections of the quiz, you need to act quickly.

You might find that your team is particularly vulnerable to one toxic pattern. You might see some aspect of each of the Toxic Teams. Your team's dysfunction may vary depending on the particular situation or issue you're dealing with. There are as many ways for teams to be toxic as there are views through a kaleidoscope. And each shift in the world, the organization, or the membership of the team changes the picture.

This book isn't just about Toxic Teams; it's also about how to build healthy ones. Although the second half of the book will show you how to cure your team's dysfunction, you won't have to wait that long to get started. In each of the Toxic Team chapters, you'll find instructions for how to triage your situation and administer some emergency medicine. If you are the team leader, or if you've got your boss on board, you can make some formal and structural changes to hardwire good behavior.

Unfortunately, based on conversations with thousands of team members, I know that expecting your boss to be aware of and willing to do something about the issues might be overly optimistic. If you're on a team where the boss is contributing to the problem or at least determined to stay blissfully ignorant of it, each chapter provides some steps you and your teammates can take to make things better even without the help of the team leader. You'll be amazed how much you can do if you band together.

But what this book really promises is that you can change your team even if not another soul is in with you. And so in each and every Toxic Team chapter there is advice to anyone who has to go

alone. If that's your reality, don't give up. I have seen many teams turn around because one determined person decided to stop wasting time and energy on a dysfunctional team. It's inspiring to watch one person choose to take the high road and to see how uncomfortable and self-conscious it makes the bad actors. Slowly, it becomes much easier for them to step up than to continue acting like children. And boy, does it feel great to be the one who said, "No more."

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# Chapter 3

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## The Crisis Junkie Team

In early March 2003, a 78-year-old woman boarded a flight in Guangdong Province in China en route to her home in Toronto. What she didn't know was that before she left, her lungs had been infected with a new and deadly virus: severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). Back in Toronto, she succumbed quickly to the disease and died quietly at her home. Tragically, before she died, she infected her son. When he got sick, he took himself to the local hospital. He, too, fell victim to the disease, but only after infecting other patients and several members of the staff. A crisis had begun.

Before public health officials really knew what was going on, grieving families and unsuspecting bystanders had spread the disease throughout the city. Carriers who didn't realize they were sick spread the virus to healthy individuals through contact at doctors' offices, church services, and even a funeral home. Even after the virus had been identified, at one hospital alone nine staff members were infected in a single day as they worked to save the life of a SARS patient.

Hospitals plunged into emergency mode. After staff members who'd followed all safety guidelines got infected, it was clear that typical protocols and standard-issue face masks wouldn't stop the highly virulent disease. Hospitals locked down. Staff members at every door filled out detailed accounts of people's movements and took everyone's temperature before allowing them into the building. I was working with three hospitals at the time and I remember going through extensive screening and sanitizing just to get into the executive offices.

Each hospital had its command center, with teams working around the clock to track and isolate the disease. Surgeries were cancelled, and friends and families were restricted from visiting loved ones—only the closest family members could be present, even for births or deaths.

Toronto was in a panic. People were wearing surgical masks on subways and airplanes. The World Health Organization recommended people avoid traveling to the city. Restaurants and theatres were empty. Before the crisis was over, 33,000 Torontonians had been quarantined, 375 people had been infected, and 44 people had died.

Three years later, I stood in front of the executive team of one of the hospitals that had been at the epicenter of the virus. The team was discussing the SARS outbreak and how well they had performed during this defining moment. They talked about the weeks of sleepless nights and stressful, high-stakes decisions. But they also talked about their laserlike focus on what mattered—keeping the staff, patients, and community safe from further infection.

The crisis had given them something they hadn't been able to achieve for themselves. When the virus arrived, the team united around one crucial priority. Everyone knew what role they would play in solving the problem. People set aside personal conflicts and political agendas. Any resources needed were available immediately. Boring or intractable long-term issues vanished from the boardroom. Meetings shrank and focused only on updates from the staff and instructions from government public health officials. Everyone focused on the task at hand, and each person was clearly accountable for what he or she needed to get done. Those without direct responsibility were eager to help in any way

possible.

The crisis allowed them to get things done. Once it was over, the team struggled to recapture that feeling. They were back to making tough decisions about which project to prioritize. They were back to stereotyped divisions between doctors and nurses, researchers and clinicians, health-care workers and accountants. Crisis was easy. Normal was hard.

Crisis Junkie team: A team that needs an urgent and immediate threat to come together and get things done.

## The Value of Crisis

It's not just in our teams. In our organizations, our governments, and our society, a crisis helps us do things that don't otherwise seem possible. Crisis gives us purpose and motivation. We love to rally and demonstrate our steely resolve when called by a higher purpose.

You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.

—Rahm Emanuel, 2009

Crisis lets us do and say things that didn't seem possible before. Somehow there is something sacred about a crisis. Who would have thought that one week before the 2012 U.S. presidential election, in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, Republican governor of New Jersey Chris Christie would be seen parading around with Barack Obama? But even politicians know to behave like mature, nonpartisan adults in a crisis.

Think about this: We can't waste a crisis, but somehow we've come to terms with wasting all the noncrisis days we get. That's so backward!



## Origins of a Crisis Junkie Problem

Most good teams are great in a crisis. That's not strange. It's not even a problem—it's a good thing. But a Crisis Junkie team *needs* a problem to move forward. Crisis Junkie teams lurch from crisis to crisis, only able to get work done when there's a proverbial gun to their heads. In fact, they may even

create crises to feel that sense of purpose.

Why do they love the stress? Well, when the situation isn't critical, life on one of these teams pretty demotivating. Do you recognize any of these warning signs on your team?

## **Lack of Role Clarity**

On Crisis Junkie teams, you don't have clarity about your role and the interdependence between you and your teammates. In some cases, you have overlapping accountabilities, so you get stuck because you're afraid of stepping on toes or because you can't agree about the way forward. In other cases, gaps in accountability mean that no one feels responsible for moving an issue forward. Unclear roles are a common cause of Crisis Junkie problems.

## **No Clear Priorities**

Crisis Junkie teams lack clear priorities. Here's one scenario: You work away at tasks, filling the day with activity that isn't really in service of anything. You're just going through the motions with no connection to why your job matters. With no real priorities, pressure, or stress, the output from your team is low. You need a crisis to shock you back to life.

Here's a more common scenario: Your team doesn't need a defibrillator to get you going—on the contrary. You're run ragged with a long list of priorities you're scrambling to accomplish. Unfortunately, this can also create a Crisis Junkie problem because it gradually takes greater and greater urgency to register on the team's Richter scale. If everything is urgent, then nothing is. The pressure keeps rising. At first, it only takes something important to get your attention, but soon you can only focus on critical issues, then desperate ones, and eventually it takes a crisis before you even lift your head.

## **Insufficient Resources**

The lack of priorities leads to another common cause of a Crisis Junkie problem: never having enough resources to do the work that needs to be done. The reason you don't have enough resources is that without priorities, you can't figure out where to spend your time and money. You can't get anything done without a crisis because you are trying to spread scarce resources across too many priorities. If you're trying to boil the ocean, you're probably not going to have enough heat. There can never be enough people, tools, or dollars to accomplish your work. So you wait for a crisis to loosen the purse strings, on one issue at least.

## **Politics and Infighting**

Another cause of a Crisis Junkie problem is the petty squabbles and disagreements that emerge when the pressure isn't high enough on your team. I've already mentioned that Crisis Junkie teams suffer from a lack of role clarity, and that means unresolved sandbox issues often exacerbate the normal interpersonal tensions that even healthy teams have to contend with. If your teammates are constantly questioning one another, you'll never overcome the resistance to change unless there's a crisis to light a fire under everybody.

Each of these precursors makes it clear that a Crisis Junkie team is primarily, if not exclusively, the failing of your team leader. Sometimes your leader cannot, or will not, translate the organization's

strategy into clear direction and priorities for your team. In other cases, your leader avoids conflict and lacks the courage to make tough decisions about what needs to be done or who gets to do what. If you have this kind of weak leader, a crisis will take the place of leadership on your team—the situation starts dictating priorities because your boss won't.

Imagine that you are on a team like this. Or maybe you don't have to imagine. You aren't sure about your role. You're trying to do way more work than is possible, especially with the limited resources you have. And every time you try to move forward, someone objects and you go back to square one. A crisis is the only thing that can clear the way for you to get something done. Maybe it's not the most important task, but at least it's something!

Fighting something (or someone) else is a welcome change from fighting one another. Using a common enemy to rally the troops is a centuries-old technique. It's a cheap, short-circuit way to create alignment, instead of doing the hard work of defining a rational, predictable purpose for the team. Unfortunately, in these situations, weak leaders learn that a crisis does the dirty work for them. Over time, they may even learn to manufacture crises as a way of aligning the team so they don't have to answer difficult questions themselves.

Crisis Junkies may look like heroes when they save the day, but wouldn't it be better to manage well enough that there weren't so many crises in the first place?

## Impact of Being a Crisis Junkie Team

At first blush, a Crisis Junkie team can look and feel like a healthy, dynamic group. Your team may even have been rewarded by superiors for “coming through” or “saving the day.” There's nothing like getting an award for narrowly averting a crisis of your own making. We have got to stop reinforcing crisis management. The costs to your organization, and to you, are too high.

Crisis Junkies use the increased arousal and narrowed focus of crisis mode to get things done. For basic, even primal reasons, when we get into a crisis situation, our brains shut out extraneous details and focus intently on the threat we're facing. When you go into crisis mode, you're less likely to access the thinking brain (the neocortex) and much more likely to rely on your animal brain. That's fine in a real life-or-death situation—there's no point in stopping to think about the cleverest way to evade a lion if the seconds spent pondering make you become its lunch.

But if you're in crisis mode at work, you'll narrow your attention to only the most critical issues, limit yourself to tasks that are required to get the job done, and censor any information that contradicts consensus or makes it more difficult to reach a decision quickly. And that means the decisions your team makes in crisis mode will be shortsighted.<sup>1</sup> These decisions fall into two groups:

*Knee-jerk reactions.* Because you're relying on your primitive brain in a crisis, the most likely thing you're going to do is rerun a scenario you've survived before. If you're working in a big retail chain and sales for the first three days of the Christmas season are disastrously low, you might reflexively slash prices and order an expensive TV ad to broadcast the sale, because that's what you did when sales slumped in 2008. But maybe this slump wasn't driven by a financial meltdown like the one in 2008. Maybe bad weather in a couple of key markets kept shoppers out of the store, and if you'd been patient, they would have come back in droves. If you let your animal brain take over and don't stop to think about what's wrong and why, you might overreact.

*Risky decisions and shoddy solutions.* Oversimplifying can also make you miss important information, leaving your team and your organization vulnerable. If your team doesn't take the time

think the situation through properly, something's probably going to come back to bite you later. Even if you do make the right decision, a solution created in crisis tends to be the “duct tape” version, held together by the force of will—and not much more. Anyone who has survived the airport striptease required after the Shoe Bomber or the Underwear Bomber knows that crisis solutions aren't usually sustainable.

Crisis Junkie teams also suffer from two other problems:

1. *Deteriorating relationships with other teams.* The problems aren't restricted to those inside your Crisis Junkie team. Other teams will be infuriated by your team's inability to get things done and its habit of manufacturing faux crises. Confidence in your team will wane and your connection to the rest of the organization will be weakened. Once trust is eroded, other groups will be far less likely to collaborate with your Crisis Junkie team. Has another team in your organization ever washed its hands of dealing with you?

2. *Failure to execute strategy.* In the end, the biggest problem with Crisis Junkie teams is that they fail to execute strategy. Crises make you focus on the urgent things at the expense of the important things. Proactive, growth-oriented opportunities seldom come in the form of a crisis. Instead, the team focuses on threats. Trying to keep the worst from happening means your team misses opportunities to make sure the best *does* happen. While you're lurching from one emergency to the next, the competition is quietly using the opportunity to launch an ambitious new strategy.

Being on a Crisis Junkie team isn't just bad for your organization; it's bad for you too. Harmful effects of Crisis Junkie teams include:

*Stalled career.* In the short term, a crisis can be a great learning experience. In the long term, spending too much time on a Crisis Junkie team will detract from your growth and development. Crisis mode doesn't leave much time for feedback, coaching, or reflection. When things are desperate, if your finished product isn't good enough, the boss grabs it, fixes it up, and gets it out the door—without bothering to tell you what you needed to do differently. Because the next crisis is just around the corner, you never get a postmortem to learn what worked and what didn't. When your team is perpetually in crisis mode, you don't get a proper chance to learn.

*Stress and burnout.* Repeated crises take a huge toll on you. The urgency of the situation, whether warranted or not, forces you to go to heroic lengths to avoid catastrophe. This means late nights, skipped meals, interrupted sleep, and a whole host of other unsustainable behavior. And if you're on a Crisis Junkie team, I won't even ask about the last time you made it to the gym. Not only is this stressful bad for you; it's also terrible for your family and friends, who suffer the fallout when the scales of your work-life balance tip too far toward the office.

## Diagnostic

Your team won't just wake up one morning with an extreme Crisis Junkie problem. The early signs of a problem might surface long before the effects become critical. Use the simple diagnostic test in [Figure 3.1](#) to see the level of risk on your team. If you want to use this test with your teammates, along with the other tools from this book, is available at [www.ChangeYourTeam.com](http://www.ChangeYourTeam.com).

[Figure 3.1](#) Crisis Junkie Team Diagnostic Test



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