

Better Teamwork

3 Mindset Shifts for Transforming
Problems into Partnerships



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The Team Transformation Method

Ever notice how friction in your team - or with another team - can keep resurfacing? Maybe on different projects, but the same underlying tensions? What if those recurring challenges weren't just obstacles, but also opportunities to unlock next-level performance? In Better Teamwork, we reveal the dynamics that fuel these 'here we go again' loops and offer practical strategies for turning problems like these into partnerships *and* improved performance.

"Here We Go Again!"

Does this sound familiar?

You're leading a meeting with your direct report team to resolve a critical business issue. About 20 minutes in, it's clear they're stuck—not because they lack ideas, but because they're too focused on figuring out who's responsible for the problem. A few vocal team members are locked in a heated back-and-forth, each trying to shift responsibility for what went wrong, while avoiding any ownership of their own role. Meanwhile, others sit back, disengaged—scrolling through emails, mentally checked out. You can see that no one is listening to understand—they're just listening to respond. With time running out, you're feeling the familiar pressure to step in and make the decision. You know that if you don't, they'll approach you afterward—each lobbying for their version of the story and their preferred course of action.

Or maybe something more like this:

In a 1-1 meeting, your direct report vents about another team member: "Look, I can't trust him to deliver. The project's stalled for weeks. You need to step in." But when the next team meeting rolls around, she says nothing—no mention of the concerns, no sign of frustration. She acts as if everything's fine. And she's not alone. Across the team, you notice the same pattern: people avoid difficult conversations at all costs. When they can't avoid it—usually because you've forced the issue—they scramble to slap a band-aid solution on it, anything to sidestep real conflict. The deeper issues get short-circuited, left unresolved, only to resurface later. And so, the same problems bubble back up, meeting after meeting, with no real progress.

If you've been stuck in one of these "here-we-go-again" situations, you know how draining it is. You're caught between ambitious performance targets and a team more focused on being right—or avoiding conflict—than driving results. Neither approach builds momentum, and now you're left deciding how to step in.

You could step in and make the call—it'll save time and get the team moving. But there's a downside: it'll be seen as your decision, creating perceived winners and losers. The real risk? The "losing" side may disengage, lacking the ownership and accountability the challenge demands.

Alternatively, you could let the tension play out, hoping the team steps up and resolves it themselves. In the long run, that might strengthen their ability to collaborate—if they can align on a solution everyone supports. But from what you're seeing, there's no guarantee they will. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking, and valuable execution time is slipping away.

Surely, there must be better options, right?

The Key: 3 Mindset Shifts

Through our work with 1,000+ CEOs and executives, we've learned what it takes to transform problems like these into partnerships that improve performance. Achieving the same in your organization depends on your ability to lead your people in making three pivotal mindset shifts:

1. From **closed** to **open**
2. From **static** to **dynamic**
3. From **problem** to **partner**

Let's explore these shifts by starting with a common challenge seen in many organizations.

Case Study

Here-we-go-again loops like these are likely when individuals and teams are driven by competing priorities. A classic example—seen across industries—is the tension between Sales and Supply Chain.

Sales is measured by how well they close deals, which means anticipating and responding to customer demands. In their effort to win business, they sometimes make delivery promises that don't align with operational realities. Meanwhile, Supply Chain is focused on keeping inventory lean and logistics efficient—balancing stock availability with cost control.

Now, picture this: Sales lands a big deal that requires a fast, large-scale fulfillment. For Supply Chain, this spells major disruption and added costs. Frustration brews, and you can almost hear the grumbling: "Do they think we can just move product with the snap of a finger?" When Supply Chain predictably pushes back, Sales fires back with, "Must be nice to sit behind spreadsheets while we handle demanding customers!"

As tensions rise and emails fly, it's no longer just about the deal—it's personal. Each side digs in, focused on proving their point rather than solving the problem. Why are scenes like this all too common?

*Other examples include Quality and Production, Product Development and Support, or NPI and Engineering.

Competing Views & Quick Fixes

In a situation like this, it's easy for both to see the other side as "not getting it." Sales thinks Supply Chain is rigid and disconnected from the messy realities of customer demands. Meanwhile, Supply Chain sees Sales as reckless, making unrealistic promises they can't deliver.

Now, to a degree, they're both right - the other side *doesn't* get it. What they often miss, though, is that they also have some valid concerns. Operational discipline is critical, as is customer responsiveness. The problem is that each team, locked narrowly into their own goals, turns to quick fixes that only fuel the other's frustration. Supply Chain tightens process controls, while Sales finds ways around them. When these fixes inevitably fail, mistrust deepens and negative perceptions harden.

The off-ramp? It begins with making the first mindset shift.

Mindset Shift 1: From Closed to Open

Both Sales and Supply Chain are stuck in a costly trap: a closed mindset. In this mode, everything is black and white—right or wrong. New information is accepted or rejected depending on if reinforces their view or threatens it. With winning as the goal, each side challenges anything that undermines their position. This rigidity blocks the flexible thinking needed to solve problems and scale effectively.

The off-ramp? Shifting to an open mindset. This shift helps people engage with new information, especially when it contradicts their beliefs. Since "right" is subjective, the key here is expanding perspectives.

How can you help your people make this first shift?

Let's say that the Supply Chain leader is on your team, and you want to help him make this shift. Your first move is to help him broaden his perspective - searching for truth in both perspectives. You can do this with a three-step process: learning, challenging, and testing.

LEARN: Understand His Concerns

As a first step, **ask yourself what could be right and true about his complaints.** Once you have an idea, check it out by stating back to him the essence of what you think he believes. Articulate his perspectives and concerns with such precision that he could reply with "Exactly!" Do not proceed to the next step until hear "exactly" or something close to it (e.g., "yes," "sounds right," etc.). That's because "exactly" is a sign that you "get it" - at least as far as he's concerned. As a result, he'll stop trying to convince you that he's right (and the other side is wrong).

Case Study Example: *"So, you're worried that this large order will throw off your whole department for days, plus the shipping costs are going to increase dramatically....making the whole deal just not worth the aggravation?" "Exactly!"*

CHALLENGE: Develop A “Good Guy/Gal” Theory About the Other Side

By earning that “exactly” from your leader, you’ve established trust. He knows you’re not here to attack or correct him, which means he’ll be far less defensive when you challenge her perspective. Now, the goal is to **help him suspend his assumptions about Sales and develop a plausible explanation for their motivations and behavior**. In other words, how might Sales be justified in their concerns?

Given the tension, he might struggle with this at first—that’s okay. Your job is to guide him toward an explanation that could earn an “exactly” from Sales. Keep exploring together until the theory makes it possible for Sales to be something other than the villain in the story.

Case Study Example: *After some prodding, your leader speculates that Sales may have been facing some shifting timelines with a demanding customer. If they didn't do something quick, the revenue would be in jeopardy.*

TEST: See if the Theory is Accurate

Now, ask your leader to share the theory with Sales—not to find solutions, but simply to test its accuracy. The goal? Encourage him to get the coveted “Exactly!” from Sales. If that doesn’t happen right away, that’s okay. The conversation becomes a chance to listen, learn, and uncover which assumptions were off—and why.

Case Study Example: “Sales, I’m thinking you made this commitment either because the customer's timeline had shifted... or because you needed to match a competitor that was threatening the business?” Sales: “Both!”

That “Both!” signifies that the first mindset shift is complete. Move to the second shift.

Mindset Shift 2: From Static to Dynamic

This second shift is pivotal—it lays the foundation for turning antagonistic interactions into genuine collaboration. The main obstacle? Most people come into disagreements like these with a fixed, pre-decided view of the problem and the solution. Once they’ve made up their minds about what’s wrong, they get stuck in on the solution that eases their pain.

For example:

- If Supply Chain defines the problem as “unrealistic promises,” their solution will always be more structure and control (“Tell the customer ‘no!’”).
- If Sales sees the problem as “bureaucracy,” they’ll push for flexibility and responsiveness (“C’mon, just this once!”).

The key to mindset shift two is helping your leader break free from that one-sided view and adopt a more holistic problem definition. By expanding his perspective, she opens the door to real common ground—the kind that’s big enough for both teams to stand on.

To do that, he'll need to add more "real estate," so to speak, to the shared problem space. After his initial conversation with Sales, coach him to see the larger, more complex issue at play. Only then can he start opening up to solutions that could earn buy-in from both sides.

To help your leader broaden his view, ask questions like:

- *"Based on what you've learned about Sales, which part of the problem matters most to them?"*
- *"Is there an underlying need that, if addressed, would offer Sales the greatest relief?"*
- *"What specific pain point would you need to solve to gain Sales' support for a solution?"*

These questions push your leader to confront the legitimacy of Sales' concerns, shifting him from a rigid "right/wrong" mindset to a more balanced understanding. He begins to see the full scope of the problem—both the need for structure/order and the need for customer responsiveness.

This voluntary step away from "I'm right" thinking, while difficult, is a very hopeful move. It positions him to make the third critical mindset shift—from problem solver to collaborative partner.

Mindset Shift 3: From Problem to Partner

By navigating the first two mindset shifts, your Supply Chain leader has reached a new place. He's no longer stuck in blame and has moved beyond pushing for simple, familiar solutions. Now, still responsible for solving the problem (since you aren't stepping in to do it for him), he's asking a new, more complex question: "How can we be responsive to changing customer needs while also maintaining efficiency and control?"

He knows his expertise lies in operational efficiency and control. And while he may have opinions on customer responsiveness, he also recognizes that Sales is the true expert in that area. This recognition shifts the dynamic—Sales is no longer a "problem to fix" but a partner with essential expertise.

With this new relationship, the two leaders—and their teams—are far more likely to generate solutions that (1) neither could have developed alone and (2) both are invested in supporting.

Conclusion

Over 20 years of working with teams, we've learned that the "problem" is rarely the problem. The real issue is how people approach it. Through the lens of these three mindset shifts, conflicts like these become opportunities for stronger partnerships and better performance.

Coaching your people to make these shifts is the key. As they learn to open their minds and understand others' needs, their narrow problem definitions will "break," forcing them into a larger, shared problem space—one they can't solve alone. This shift transforms rivals into partners.

These mindset shifts are the unlock for helping your teams solve the right problems—and keep them solved. With this capacity in place, they'll stop relying on you to referee their conflicts, freeing you to focus on the strategic priorities that matter most.

Wouldn't that be a far better use of your time?

About the Author

Bob Johnson, Ph.D., is an organizational psychologist and team consultant who specializes in breaking recurring, costly team conflicts—those draining 'here-we-go-again' loops that stall progress and sap energy. His mission? To equip leaders with the awareness and skills to solve complex, cross-functional problems—and ensure those solutions stick.

Dr. Johnson's method stands out. Inspired by the performance analytics used by elite athletes, he leverages video-recorded performance analysis to create powerful learning moments. Leaders see themselves in action—raw and unfiltered—revealing the critical gap between what they think they do and what they actually do.

This isn't just about raising self-awareness—it's about transformation. Leaders realize they're not passive bystanders or victims of recurring conflicts; they're active participants. And with that sometimes uncomfortable insight comes a new hope: by owning their role in the problem, they can start building real solutions.

Armed with this awareness, leaders quickly adopt the three mindset shifts outlined in this article—shifts that unlock significant improvements in team dynamics and performance. The result? Teams stop pointing fingers and start making real, lasting progress.