

# Better Teamwork

3 Mindset Shifts for Transforming  
Problems into Partnerships



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The Team Transformation Method

After coaching business and leadership teams for over a decade, we've noticed a pattern. Most team breakdowns aren't one-off issues. They're repeats: the same tensions, different projects. Marketing says Product's too cautious, Ops says Strategy's rushing, and so on. At first, we treated each clash like a fresh problem. But over time, we realized that interactions like these weren't unique. They share an underlying structure. And if you don't understand that structure, you keep treating symptoms while the real issue churns.

In Better Teamwork, we share that hidden structure and how to shift it. Not with team-building fluff, but by using the next team problem to surface stuck dynamics, make them discussable, and turn friction into momentum.

## "Here We Go Again!"

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### Sound familiar?

You're leading a meeting with your direct report team to resolve a critical issue. About 20 minutes in, it's clear they're stuck—not because they lack ideas, but because they're focused on listening to respond rather than listening to understand. Your vocal team members are locked in a heated back-and-forth, each trying to "win" the conversation by getting their solution adopted. Meanwhile, other team members sit back, disengaged, scrolling through emails, mentally checked out. With meeting time running out (and with several items on the still on the agenda), 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 vents: *"Look, I can't count on him to deliver. This project's been stuck for weeks. Can you step in?"* But, in the next team meeting, she says little to reveal her concerns directly. No frustration. Just silence and head nods, like nothing's wrong. And she's not the only one. Across the team, few are willing to say what they really think. When conflict does surface (usually because you force it), they scramble to slap on a quick fix. Anything to avoid real conflict. The real issue gets sidestepped. Left unresolved. So the same problems resurface. Meeting after meeting. And things don't move forward unless you get directly involved.

If you've ever been stuck in one of these *"here we go again"* moments, you know how draining it is. You're caught between ambitious targets and a team more focused on being right (or avoiding conflict) than getting results. Neither approach builds momentum. And now you're left deciding how to step in. You could make the call yourself. It's faster. It gets things moving again. But there's a cost: it becomes your decision. And that creates perceived winners and losers. The real risk? The losing side might check out, disengaged, with less ownership and accountability to implement your the decision.

Or, you could let the tension play out, hoping the team steps up and resolves the issue themselves. Long-term, that might strengthen their ability to collaborate, *if* they can align on a solution that everyone supports. But, from what you're seeing, there's no guarantee that they will. And while they hesitate, the clock keeps ticking. Execution time slips 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. **How they approach the conversation:** From Closed to Open
2. **How they define the problem:** From Static to Dynamic
3. **How they related to one another:** 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 happen 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.

Picture this: Sales wins a significant 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?

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

# Competing Views & Quick Fixes

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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

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Both Sales and Supply Chain are stuck in a costly trap: a close mindset. In this mode, everything is black and white, right or wrong. New information is accepted or rejected depending on whether it reinforces or threatens their existing views and priorities. With winning the conversation as the goal, each side challenges anything that undermines their position. This "closedness" 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 often subjective, the key here is expanding perspectives.

How can you help your people make this shift?

Let's say that the Supply Chain leader is on your team, and you want to help him make the shift from closed to open. Your objective is to help him broaden his perspective. That is, to search for possible truth in both views on the problem. You can do this with a three-step process: learning, challenging, and testing.

### **LEARN: Understand His Concerns**

As a first step, **start by asking yourself what could be true and right about his complaints.** Once you have an idea, check it out by stating back to him the essence of what you think he believes to be true. Play back his perspective with such precision that he could reply with "exactly!" Do not proceed to the next step until you hear that "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 your team member is concerned. Knowing that you get it, 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 more costly than it's worth?" "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 his 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, what’s the version of the story that makes Sales’ behavior justified?

Given the tension, he might struggle with this at first. And 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 scenario.

**Case Study Example:** After some prodding, your leader speculates: *“Maybe Sales is facing some shifting timelines with a demanding customer. If they didn’t do something quick, the revenue could be in jeopardy.”* Sounds plausible.

### **TEST: See if the Theory is Accurate**

Now, ask your leader to share their story 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: *“Exactly!”*

That “*Exactly!*” 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, since it lays the foundation for turning antagonistic interactions into genuine collaboration. The main obstacle? Most people come into disagreements like these stuck in a pre-decided view of the problem. Once they’ve made up their minds about what’s wrong, they lock in on a 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 on the multiple problems in play, he opens the door to 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 problem from both sides. 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 seeing Sales as a problem-to-be-solved to a collaborative partner in finding solutions.

## 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?"* Notice the marriage of concerns from both sides.

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 can buy into.

## 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. By making these three mindset shifts, conflicts actually 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

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Bob Johnson, Ph.D., is an organizational psychologist, US Army veteran 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 is to equip leaders with the awareness and skills to solve complex, cross-functional problems and ensure that those solutions stick.

Dr. Johnson's approach is unique. Inspired by the methods used by elite athletes to improve performance, he relies on video-taped performance analysis of leader behavior to create powerful learning moments. When leaders see themselves in action, they often discover critical gaps between what they think they do and what they actually do.

Dr. Johnson's work 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 shifting their behavior, creating the context for building real solutions collaboratively.

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, they start making real, lasting progress and their leaders - finally - can stop refereeing and get back to leading