BURST

BURSTING THE BUBBLES
OF 5 TEAMWORK MYTHS

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FOREWORD

If you have ever suffered through a bad team meeting (especially if you were leading it) you will appreciate this book. If you’re serious about improving your team’s relationships and productivity, this eBook will help you identify five ways of thinking about teams that will actually make a difference.

Most of us who participate in and/or lead teams search for ideas that will help us build effective teams (or at least avoid another disastrous team experience).

Ideas are plentiful, but good ideas – ideas that work – are like diamonds in a coal mine.

Sadly, many of us have used ideas that sounded good until we tried them and, too late, discovered they were really bad ideas.

There are two dangers in using bad ideas. The first danger in using a bad idea is that we use a bad idea (brilliant insight? don’t stop yet, this is going somewhere). The second danger in using a bad idea is that, by default, we are not using a good idea. So instead of using a good idea and doing something productive, we use a bad idea and do something neutral (if we’re lucky) or something counterproductive or even disastrous to our cause.

In this eBook, Ryan debunks five bad ideas that teams consistently use and replaces them with five good ideas – ideas that help us build solid, productive teams.

There are two advantages of using good ideas. First, we use good ideas that genuinely help us succeed. Second, when we are using good ideas we are, by default, not using bad ideas.
Ryan has surfaced some bad ideas about teams. That’s a good idea. But he has replaced them with good ideas about teams. And that’s a great idea.

I serve on a number of teams and I want those teams to succeed. I also teach leadership and team building because I know how important it is to help students work effectively with teams. So I am voracious for ideas and practices that will help develop better teams. When I read BURST: Bursting the Bubbles of 5 Teamwork Myths, I found that five ideas I thought were good ideas aren’t so good. And I found five better ideas.

It’s often tough to clearly identify a bad idea. But it’s even tougher to find a good idea to replace the bad one. I once heard Tom Peters say that anyone can smell a rotten egg but not everyone can lay a better one. Ryan has sniffed out some eggs that many of us didn’t recognize as rotten.

That’s great insight.

But he didn’t stop after he showed us five ideas that won’t work. He took the next step and told us what will work better.

So if you’re weary with un- or counter-productive team experiences, it’s time to replace some bad ideas with some really good ones.

My thanks to Dr. Hartwig for helping us do exactly that.

**Sid Buzzell, PhD**
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Author, *Handbook to Leadership: Leadership in the Image of God*
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INTRODUCTION

WHY SHOULD I CARE?
“The chief object of education is not to learn things; nay, the chief object of education is to unlearn things.”

- G.K. Chesterton
I’m a teacher. I’m a lot of other things, too, but vocationally, I’m first an educator.²

According to Chesterton, that means I’m in the process of un-learning things, and I’m teaching my students to un-learn things. I’d like to help you do the same.

Many years ago, I remember learning that to get ahead in work (and therefore life), I needed to be the first one in any group to volunteer for an extra assignment. Trusted mentors encouraged me to be the first one to raise my hand when a superior asked for volunteers to fill a committee or task force.

When I took my first job, I followed that advice. I raised my hand a lot. And what I was told would happen, happened. I got asked to sit in on even more interesting discussions, and I was quickly offered roles normally reserved for people with five to ten years more experience. I raised my hand. I learned a lot. My career took off.

But something else also transpired. Something I wasn’t prepared for. Something my mentors didn’t warn me about.

Work consumed me.

I was so busy I didn’t have time to simply relax with my wife, enjoy playing on the swings with my kids after school, ride my bike, pursue important friendships, read a book, or get in touch with my soul. I was oblivious.

I was just doing what I had always been told to do – take advantage of every opportunity to stretch myself, develop new skills, and prepare myself for promotion.
Then I met a man named Michael. He helped me see both the good and the bad of what I’d been taught, and he helped me un-learn a well-intentioned, but deeply misleading principle.

Michael was a true friend to me, the kind Solomon refers to in Proverbs 27:5-6: “An open rebuke is better than hidden love! Wounds from a sincere friend are better than many kisses from an enemy” (New Living Translation).

Michael lovingly wounded me. He burst my bubble. In other words, he corrected my ignorant, delusional beliefs. That process was painful. I grieved what I lost over many years living that way.

Getting my bubble burst was really hard, but really good. I’m a better dad, teacher, mentor, and leader because of it. I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Now that I know the power of unlearning things, I’m into bursting bubbles. Not just for the fun of it, but because they need to be burst. I do it with my students everyday. Sometimes it’s painful. But it’s always worth it. So, I keep on bursting, day after day.

You see, our intellectual bubbles – our implicit theories and beliefs about how the world works – constrain us. The way we think affects what we do and how we do it. Our bubbles shape the way we see the world, how we think about the world, and how we interact with the world. Now, one might argue: “Ryan, I’m a boots-on-the-ground kind of guy or gal. I’m interested in practice. Enough about this thinking stuff – sounds too much like theory to me.” Fair enough. I am, too, actually.

But, we don’t practice from nothing. Our thoughts drive our practice. We all hold implicit theories of how things work in our heads.
The way we think about something affects how we practice that thing.

The way you think about vocation affects how you practice your vocation.

The way you think about leadership affects how you practice leadership.

The way you think about teamwork affects how you practice teamwork.

Fortunately, we can learn to think differently. We can burst our bubbles.

In this short eBook, I want to burst five bubbles regarding teams. They are not the most mundane myths about teamwork (like teams are always best for every circumstance), but they address deeper issues that are often at the cause of troublesome teams. Bursting these bubbles helps us to get great value from teams and other collaborative work arrangements while minimizing the frustration, slow-movement, and ineffectiveness experienced by so many.

In our post-industrial, information-rich, uber-connected world, collaborative organizational structures, teams, and work groups aren’t going away. No matter how frustrating we find it to work together, collaboration is essential for individual and organizational success. In today’s world, no one lives upstream. What each of us does affects others. We must learn to work better together.

While many of us think that teams inherently stink, they don’t. In reality, we just need to improve at working well with others. The problem is not the structures that force us to work together. The problem is that we are not very good at working well together.
Why? Is it just that we are autonomous at best, or selfish at worst, always preferring to do only what benefits us? Is it because we don’t possess enough drive? Is it because we simply never learned how to get along with others? I don’t think so.

I venture that we work poorly in teams precisely because we think poorly about teams and teamwork. Much of what is taught about teams is pure hogwash, but we repeat it over and over again, because it is what we’ve been taught over and over.

And somehow we’re not surprised when our team experiences are fraught with frustration and ineffectiveness. We do the same things over and over again but expect different results. That’s the definition of insanity. Our teamwork practices are insane!

But we can think differently. And we can work differently. We can work better together!

Think differently, and you will do differently.

In this short eBook, I’ll do my best to burst the bubble of five pervasive teamwork myths:

- Bubble #1: Teams are best built on trust and relationships
- Bubble #2: You can empower others
- Bubble #3: Teams need to establish a leader
- Bubble #4: Conflict indicates a lack of unity
- Bubble #5: Teamwork requires people to set aside their self-interests
I hope to burst your bubble in two ways.

First, I want to burst the bubble regarding what you thought was true about working well together. Here, I hope to correct some untrue or delusional beliefs.

Second, I want to burst the bubble that constrains your ability to achieve great things with your team. As you replace troublesome thinking with better thinking, you’ll be able to accomplish far more as you work with others.

This process might be a bit painful, but remember, I’m your friend.

I want to help you rethink effective teamwork practices so that we can truly function as the body of Christ, working well with others and succeeding in building the Church.

Enough with the introductions. Let’s start bursting.

As you read on, remember: **think differently and you will do differently.**
BUBBLE #1

TEAMS ARE BEST BUILT ON TRUST AND RELATIONSHIPS
Trust is overrated. Team-building activities are largely a waste of time. Building relationships and cultivating trust is vastly overemphasized in teams and small groups.

Now, I’m not saying trusting relationships are unimportant, just that they are overrated.

**We need to put more emphasis on building teams around purpose and mission, and less on building teams around trust and relationships.** Let me explain.

Often, leaders believe that trust is the foundation for team performance. Build your team on trust, many suggest. After all, trust is the foundation of Patrick Lencioni’s triangle from the *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. While I agree that trust is important, the assumption that comes along with such an emphasis on trust early in a team’s development is that, somehow, once the trust is built, your team will be able to achieve anything.

When I talk with pastors and ministry leaders about their priorities when building a team, I usually hear something like the following approach for building a team:

> My team or small group must be built on trust. The reason is simple: if I can’t trust the other members, and if they can’t trust me, we’ll fail to achieve unity. Eventually, our team, group, ministry, or church will split. Therefore, we must focus first on being able to trust one another. Of course, to do that, we need to hang out together, build relationships, go on team-building retreats, and so on. Then, once the relationships are established and the trust is built, we’ll get on with casting vision, clarifying our purpose, and setting some goals for our work together.

Sound familiar?

Note the order here: first comes trust, then comes purpose.
However, trust by itself doesn’t translate into effective teamwork. No matter the trust level, without articulation of and commitment to clear vision, purpose, and performance challenges, a team will not gel.

This is a classic case of a correlation-causation error. When we see two properties – in this case trust and an effective team – operating together, we seek to understand the relationship. Often, though, we confuse the relationship, mistakenly thinking that one thing caused the other thing to occur. In this case, we think that trust causes effective teamwork, but that’s a wrong interpretation.

An extensive body of literature indicates that when team members focus on accomplishing a clear, compelling, and consequential purpose, they will begin to experience productive teamwork and trusting relationships.

Note the order now: **first comes purpose, then comes trust.**

You see, teams form around meaningful vision and clear, consequential, and compelling purpose. When they do, team members realize they must trust one another to accomplish that purpose. Trusting one another requires relationship building.

A team that focuses first on purpose will get both achievement and trust.

Focusing first on trust is a classic case of putting second things in front of first things. As C. S. Lewis wisely noted many years ago: “You can’t get second things by putting them first; you can get second things only by putting first things first.”

If you start by building trust, team members will quickly lose enthusiasm to stay together because there is no reason – vision and purpose – to invest in getting to know one another
and cultivating trust. Most fundamentally, people join together to do something they otherwise could not accomplish alone.

People engage in teams and small groups to accomplish some purpose, to pursue some compelling vision, not to build relationships and trust.

The takeaway is simple: **Start by building trust and you’ll get neither relationships nor mission. Start with mission and you’ll be able to accomplish your mission AND build great relationships.**

In their great book *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach and Doug Smith highlighted the importance of focusing on team performance: “No team arises without a performance challenge that is meaningful to those involved… A common set of demanding performance goals (think purpose) that a group considers important to achieve will lead, most of the time, to both performance and a team.”

The implications of this principle are huge for ministry teams, leadership teams, discipleship groups, mission teams, Bible study groups, and even social support groups. Here are a few:

1. Relationship building before articulating the performance challenge for the group is counter-productive.

2. Icebreaker or team-building activities should only be done after the team understands its purpose, and how the skills, attitudes, or knowledge developed through the activities will help accomplish the purpose.
3. Relationships form in the midst of people working together. It’s best for a team simply to get to work.

4. A clear, compelling purpose is crucial for a team or group to develop trusting relationships. Without it, the team/group will quickly disband.

Commit yourself first to mission, and then, and only then, focus on the relationships and the trust required to accomplish it.

Just like our friend C. S. Lewis noted: put first things first and you’ll get both the first and the second things.
Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Be honest. When you first come together with a group, what do you focus on first? Are you seeking high levels of trust among team members or a commitment to accomplishing something wonderful together?

2. What motivates the members of your team or group to fully pursue your team’s purpose?

3. How could you renew or strengthen your focus on accomplishing your team’s purpose?

4. What are the implications of this principle for initial team/group kick-off meetings or events?
BUBBLE #2

YOU CAN EMPOWER OTHERS
Leaders of all shapes and sizes seek to “empower” their followers, team members, and employees. Empowerment is one of the greatest buzzwords in leadership circles. These leaders somehow believe they can actually give people power, or sanction them with some sort of authority, because those people don’t have enough already.

In this view, empowerment involves, “sharing of power, whereby a hierarchically superior leader gives some of the authority and decision-making latitude previously in his or her purview to one or more followers, thus expanding the follower’s sphere of influence.”

By this definition, you might say God is the ultimate empowerer. Though he could do it all, He invites us into the process of redeeming the world to Himself.

But for the rest of us, such a view assumes that the “empowerer” holds the power and/or has the formal authorization to vest people with authority all by him or herself. This view of empowerment relies on a bureaucratic system, one in which rules, offices, and hierarchy define the system’s interactions.

Empowerment starts at the top of an organization and then trickles its way down. The CEO empowers the leadership team, which empowers those under them, who empower those beneath them, and so on. In this view, empowerment is something done by someone to another person.

But, there are three problems with this view of empowerment:

1. In today’s organization, formal bureaucratic power and authority are elusive. Even those at the top of the organizational charts lack such authority, and those laboring at the bottom rarely possess such formal authority. Many who have empowered themselves over the years, such as the Civil Rights or Women’s Rights movements,
held no formal authority. Instead, they knew they had power inside themselves and they leveraged it to make major change.

2. Dominant hierarchical relationships are reinforced. In this view, some have power, and others don’t. If that’s the case, those with power must give this power to those without. But is anybody truly without power? Unfortunately, many believe they have no power and sit around until someone tells them they can act. Here, those with power take on too much responsibility while those “without power” fail to contribute fully, waiting for someone to grant them the ability to act.

3. If empowerment is a gift of power or formal authority, someone must receive the gift! But, what if someone doesn’t want the power or the authority? Can a leader still empower him or her? No, she can’t. You can’t either.

Empowerment is something I must do for myself, and you must do for yourself.

Empowerment is not to be sought out, but is to be discovered within.

No one else can empower me. And no one else can empower you. Nor can you empower someone else. Stop trying!

Quit trying to empower people!¹⁰

There is something you can do, though.

No matter your place in the organization, you can create space and design structures into which people, empowering themselves, step forward, leverage their personal power, and
meaningfully contribute to your organization’s mission, your team’s purpose, and their personal calling. How?

Here are seven ways to create an environment that encourages personal empowerment:

1. **Establish a structure for success.** Design meeting practices that offer space for people to empower themselves. For example, structure a meeting agenda such that each group member must contribute in a meaningful way at least once.

2. **Shut your mouth.** For example, if you’re a team leader, allow silence to permeate the air in your meetings, and wait for your talented team members to speak up, offer ideas, and move the conversation forward.

3. **Don’t be a “perfect” leader.** For example, if you’re a small group leader, allow the food preparations to be less than ideal, let the conversation awkwardly stall, and wait for people to step forward, challenge one another, and move the group toward health. In essence, be “strategically incompetent.”

4. **Take a humility pill.** If you think you’re better at most things than others (be honest with yourself, you know who you are), realize that’s likely not true. There are other people who can do things far better than you. Allow them a shot.

5. **Provide education, funding, space necessary for others to proceed.** Focus on gathering the kindling necessary for others to start and build a fire.

6. **Collaboratively develop a compelling direction.** Involve others in clarifying the direction of your team or organization, and let aspects of the strategy to get there remain murky. This kind of strategic ambiguity can reap huge rewards.
7. **Resist the urge to take over and control situations.** Instead, step back, don't answer every question that comes your way, and encourage others to make decisions, take risks, and offer their best.

When you do these things, you’ll foster an environment where people can empower themselves.

**The biggest obstacle to personal empowerment is too much leader activity, not too little.**

If you want to create space for people to empower themselves, perhaps the best thing you can do is to *strategically not do*.

Then, you’ll create space where people choose, of their own accord, to leverage their personal power to make a meaningful difference – and that’s empowerment!
BUBBLE #2 – YOU CAN EMPOWER OTHERS

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How as your view of empowerment actually hindered the empowerment of people under your span of care?

2. How have your actions as a leader shut down personal empowerment?

3. What can you do this week to create space where people can empower themselves?

4. How can you more clearly develop your group/team/organization vision and purpose so that people can use their personal power to pursue it with full force?
BUBBLE #3

TEAMS NEED TO ESTABLISH A LEADER
One of the first tasks most groups take up is selecting a leader.

We’ve listened to John Maxwell. We agree that “everything rises and falls on leadership,” so we assign someone to be the leader. In so doing, we demonstrate our belief that leadership is something that an established leader does. But that’s a delusional belief – a bubble that needs to be burst.

*Leadership* is behavior that leads, not something that set leaders do. Thus, anyone can lead.

Though anyone *can* lead, not every “leader” always leads. And, certainly, not everyone who holds a leadership position is a leader.

You see, there is a world of difference between being deemed the “leader” and actually exercising leadership.

Thus, teams need good leadership more than they need to identify set leaders.

They need people who will help the team to grow, move forward, and succeed, whether or not they hold a particular title among the group.
Here’s why this distinction matters, especially in the context of the church:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When we think of team leadership as something that is done by established leaders:</th>
<th>When we think of team leadership as influence toward goals:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>The leader comes first; the leader’s behavior comes second.</em></td>
<td><em>Behavior that leads comes first; identifying a leader comes second.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>“Leaders” lead; followers follow.</em></td>
<td><em>Anyone can lead; “leaders” aren’t the only ones who can lead.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Everything the “leader” does is seen as leadership.</em></td>
<td><em>Only behavior that leads is called leadership.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>One doesn’t have to lead to be called a leader.</em></td>
<td><em>One is identified as a leader as s/he leads.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Being in a leadership position = having God-given authority.</em></td>
<td><em>God-given authority is recognized as the fruit of one’s leadership.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>People covet leadership positions. The mindset goes like this: “First I’ll get the position, then I’ll lead.”</em></td>
<td><em>People lead. Then, those people who lead are asked to assume leadership positions.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The church has a lot of people in positions of leadership (because they’ve started their own churches, ministries, clubs, etc.) who have never successfully led much of anything, and who don’t have the character, credibility, or competence to hold positions of leadership in the church (I Timothy 3 and Titus 1).</em></td>
<td><em>The church is full of people who do not associate being a leader with holding a position, but rather see leadership as humbly positively influencing others toward God’s vision for a local community of believers.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Leadership is constrained to those in leadership positions. Thus, the church has far fewer leaders than it could.</em></td>
<td><em>Leadership is opened to all those who lead. Thus, the church has many more leaders.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The contributions of non-“leaders” are discounted.</em></td>
<td><em>The contributions of every member who leads are appreciated and celebrated.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>“Leaders” take on way too much stress and strain. They put on their shoulders what they, alone, weren’t intended to realistically handle.</em></td>
<td><em>The whole team shares the responsibility for leadership.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Team members wait for “leaders” to act, fail to bring their best efforts to the task, but then criticize their leaders when the team fails.</em></td>
<td><em>Team members are encouraged to bring their best to the task and must look in the mirror when the team fails.</em></td>
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</table>
When we focus less on positions of leadership and more on what leaders actually do, we’ll realize that formal leaders are not really all that important.¹³

I know this hurts, but the literature is clear. Studies indicate that formal team leaders often account for only a small part (as little as 15% in one study) of team performance. The merging of all members’ contributions and how the entire team works cooperatively accounts for much more variance. Too often, a leader’s actions have very little to do with that.

In fact, Harvard social psychologists Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman termed the phenomenon of overemphasizing leadership as the *leadership attribution error*.

Sorry to burst that bubble, formal leaders.

So what really counts as leadership?

Here are 10 things great team “leaders/influencers/impact players” (choose your favorite term) do:

1. **Structure the team for success.** Team leaders cannot force a team to become great; rather, they can help put the pieces together and encourage greatness. Great team leaders focus on structuring and facilitating productive group communication.

2. **Establish a clear, compelling, challenging, and consequential vision and purpose.** Effective teams commonly aim toward a North Star. Good leaders facilitate processes to cast and clarify both vision and strategy.
3. Get the right people on the team. Great team leaders take team membership seriously, but not too seriously. Getting the right people on the bus won’t solve all your problems, but it will help. Usually, the right people possess essential skills and abilities related to the team’s purpose (in a balance with others), a strong desire to contribute to the vision, and the capability to collaborate effectively. Leaders evaluate the strengths and skills of potential team members to find the right mix of skills the team needs.

4. Facilitate goal setting in pursuit of the team’s vision. Great leaders break down lofty vision into manageable chunks by setting specific, time-bound goals.

5. Set priorities and focus on achieving team goals. Great leaders don’t play politics, don’t focus on relationships at the expense of task accomplishment, don’t make everything a priority, and don’t drown the team in a bunch of unimportant drivel. They laser-focus on accomplishing goals.

6. Ensure a collaborative climate among the group. Teams must work together effectively. Leaders help that happen. Leaders help set team ground rules (norms), encourage (and demand, at times) other team members to act cooperatively and work out their differences, recognize and reward collaborative behaviors, and facilitate honest and respectful discussions.

7. Unleash talent by allowing others to do real work. Great team leaders recognize that team members possess strengths they don’t, so they step back and allow members to exercise those strengths. This isn’t giving power away, or empowerment. It’s self-control.
8. **Do real work themselves.** Great leaders don’t just supervise, coordinate, or delegate tasks. They do real work for which other team members can hold them accountable. Remember, much of what people learn is “caught, not taught”. What are others “catching” from your leadership?

9. **Employ thoughtful, careful procedures for solving problems, making decisions, and innovating.** Great leaders realize that unstructured, free-flowing discussion is problematic. Thus, they design intentional, structured conversations when making decisions or generating and vetting new ideas (which may, sometimes, be totally free-flowing by design).

10. **Manage performance.** Great leaders hold team members accountable to team goals and norms. They require results by making performance expectations clear, review results by giving constructive feedback and resolving performance issues, and reward results by recognizing superior performance.

Anyone on a team, whether a designated leader or not, can do any and all of these 10 things.

So, the next time you start with a new group or team, don't worry so much about establishing someone as “the leader.” Instead, focus on doing the things that constitute effective team leadership, even parsing those duties out to multiple team members.

When that happens, all the team members will fulfill the essential functions of leadership.

**Remember, the way you think about leadership affects how you practice leadership.**
BUBBLE #3 – TEAMS NEED TO ESTABLISH A LEADER

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the benefits of thinking of leadership as actually leading rather than holding a position of leadership?

2. How has your view of leadership limited you from influencing your group or team?

3. How can you better lead your group/team, no matter what your position is on the group or team?

4. Which of the 10 functions of effective team leaders/influencers/impact players could you do to enhance your positive influence on your team?

5. How might your team benefit from sharing leadership duties among all members of the group, rather than placing them on the one, set leader?
CONFLICT INDICATES A LACK OF UNITY
“A ministry without conflict is destined for mediocrity.”

- Pete Wilson

Our infatuation with unity and trust in teams has contributed to a general hatred of conflict. We contend that conflict in a team or group is an indication of trouble, a sign that unity lacks. We label those who offer dissenting ideas as “trouble-makers.”

So, we shut down conflict before it destroys our teams and churches, or we set up structures so that conflict can never arise. We do it in the name of unity. But we produce anything but unity.

We set up teams where only one person – usually the leader – makes all the decisions. We set meeting agendas that simply focus on aligning resources or strategizing how we’ll get something done. Discussing what to do is simply too problematic. It invites too much conflict. And so we shut it down. We demand “yes-men” and “yes-women” because anything else is simply unacceptable. Anything else destroys unity.

Unfortunately, doing sohamstrings our relationships, groups, teams, and organizations from being as productive as they could be. In all these contexts, when we shut down conflicting ideas, people take their ideas (and talents, skills, and strengths) elsewhere and we fail to benefit from their perspective, insight, and skill. And when we demand unity without allowing challenging, conflicting ideas to surface, we harvest artificial commitment that doesn’t stick.

When we shut down conflict, bad things happen.
When we shut down constructive conflict in our relationships, we become dissatisfied and one of two scenarios unfolds. We either shove conflict down while alienating ourselves from others, or we become so angry that our conflict combusts and major problems ensue.

When we shut down conflict in groups and teams, we suffer from groupthink and settle on inferior decisions. We miss out on opportunities for innovation and collaboration. We limit the vision to what only one mind can envision. And as we do, group members grow dissatisfied in the group or team’s work and their relationships with others, often resulting in alienation or combustion (as above).

When we shut down conflict in organizations, we reinforce the dominant status quo, waste the diversity that exists among organizational members, and fail to change. After all, new and better ideas (which always cause conflict) are the impetus for any organizational growth and change.

We need conflict. Conflict is vital.

In relationships, conflict propels us on toward greater relational depth and personal maturity. Just think of who you’d be if no one ever got in your way, never confronted you. We grow because we experience conflict with the way we’ve always been.

In groups and teams, conflict enables the group to grow and develop. As group development theorists suggest: No conflict, no growth. Engagement conflict is a natural occurrence as groups deal with the tensions they face and develop structure, norms, roles, and ways of doing things. In addition, any democratic or shared decision-making structures require a variety of ideas, which prompts conflict.
In organizations, conflict is essential to develop new vision, strategies, and opportunities. We change because what we are doing is not as effective as something else.

You see, conflict is really good.

Therefore, we should say “yes” to conflict when it:

• Catalyzes personal growth
• Encourages group/team effectiveness
• Promotes democratic decision-making processes
• Creates positive change

As Pete Wilson eloquently stated: “Conflict doesn’t destroy teams. Not knowing how to handle conflict is what destroys teams.”

We should embrace conflict, but require conflict to be approached in particular ways.

Conflict can be constructive when communicators:

1. **Frame conflict as an opportunity to discover or journey toward something new and greater.** When we see conflict as positive rather than negative, part of a journey toward a better solution, we can harness the transformative power of conflict.

2. **Engage conflict regarding ideas, beliefs, and values rather persons.** Personal conflict is always negative. But idea-oriented conflict is crucial for team success. We should challenge each other’s ideas, interrogate one another’s beliefs and values, and willingly offer different perspectives while refraining from attacking others in the process.
3. **Adopt a collaborative, we-orientation rather than a competing, winner-take-all orientation.** Seeing conflict as war creates enemies. Enemies don’t make good teammates.

4. **De-escalate rather than escalate situations.** Sometimes level heads don’t prevail in conflict, especially when personal attacks begin. When that happens, we need to remember that the team members share a common purpose, and take steps to downgrade rising emotions.

5. **Employ a cooperative and supportive communication style rather than a dominating and competitive style.** Cooperative teams realize their individual success depends on team success. As such, there should be no competition among team members.

Here’s the bottom line. Conflict on your team just might mean that your team members are serious – really serious – about accomplishing the team’s purpose and pursuing its vision. **They care too much to put artificial harmony above true unity.**

In other words, they **fight to maintain unity** and pursue excellence.

Great teams fight for unity around their common purpose and vision so that they can avoid mediocrity and become great.

**I encourage you to make “fighting” a regular part of your team meetings.** You might be amazed by the results.
BUBBLE #4 – CONFLICT INDICATES A LACK OF UNITY

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How have you shoved down potential conflict in the name of preserving unity?

2. In what areas does your team or group experience artificial harmony? How can you help your team/group to move from artificial harmony to true unity?

3. What scares you about embracing conflict?

4. What ground rules (think of the five characteristics of constructive communication) could you establish to facilitate constructive conflict among your team or group members?
TEAMWORK REQUIRES PEOPLE TO SET ASIDE THEIR SELF-INTERESTS
Teamwork has been defined as: “People with different views and perspectives coming together, putting aside their narrow self-interests, and discussing issues openly and supportively in an attempt to solve a larger problem or achieve a broader goal.”

While that sounds good on the surface, this definition (offered, by the way, by some of my favorite team communication scholars) misses a fundamental part of the human condition. We NEVER really set aside our self-interests.

Sure, we can be altruistic to an extent, but we always care for ourselves, too. We drink water, eat nourishing foods, step out of the way of oncoming cars, change diapers, develop spreadsheets, and join small groups and teams because doing so attends to our self-interests.

We are self-interested people. It’s part of how we stay alive.

Now, that’s not to say we are selfish or unable to care about others. It’s just to say we can never fully set aside our self-interests, even though our notions of teamwork somehow require us to do so.

It’s time to burst that bubble and replace it with some better thinking - thinking that can help us to experience effective, joyful teamwork.

Here’s the deal:

1. People fundamentally come together in groups, teams, and organizations to accomplish something they can’t accomplish on their own.
2. People bring their own agendas and desires to teams and groups; they don’t put aside their self-interests in favor of a team’s purpose.

3. A lack of commitment to the team and its purpose is the leading problem facing most teams.

Thus, people commit to and give their best to a team when they clearly understand how accomplishing the team’s purpose helps them reach their own individual goals.

Think about it: are you wholeheartedly serving on any team that does not help you achieve your personal goals and/or God-given calling? I doubt it.

Teamwork doesn’t require you to set aside your self-interests. Instead, it requires that you join teams and groups whose purposes align with your personal interests and calling.

And it requires that you, if you have the ability to develop team purpose, identify a team/group purpose that allows for people to accomplish their individual purpose and calling as they pursue the team or group’s purpose.

As such, effective teamwork rises and falls on a team’s purpose. So, for the team you are on, or for the team you lead, take a few minutes to assess your team’s purpose. Is it:

- **CLEAR**: Does your team’s purpose paint a clear picture of value?
- **COMPELLING**: Does your team’s purpose address something that truly matters, drawing people into it?
- **CALLING-ORIENTED**: Does accomplishing your team’s purpose help your team members accomplish God’s calling on their lives and pursue their goals?
• CONSISTENTLY HELD: Do the members of your team truly know the team’s purpose and work towards it with fervor?

Take stock, and stop thinking that you need to dismiss your own goals and desires in favor of team/group goals. You can’t, but when you try to do so, you quickly find a reason to leave the group or team for another one that better fits your personal goals. It’s all about integrating personal goals with the team’s goals.

And if you are leading a team or group, find a way to invite people to accomplish what God has put on their hearts through committed service on ministry teams and/or participation in small groups. Too often, church leaders try to recruit people to fill “holes” in their ministries, neglecting the callings that God has placed on peoples’ hearts and lives.

One burned-out church volunteer19 said it so well:

Please help us find and discover the most well-suited ministry positions for us, not for you. I know church leaders have “holes” in their ministries, but I don’t want to fill a “hole.” I want to impact the world. Please don’t use me to make your job easier, and call that “equipping.” Help me discover what I’m uniquely gifted to perform, then provide me with an opportunity to perform that thing. I promise you—if you help me discover where I fit, and if you love me well, I won’t burn out.

Remember, people commit to and give their best to a team when they clearly understand how accomplishing the team’s purpose helps them reach their own individual goals.

Leaders, please help others find that place! They’ll be happier and your group and organization will benefit, too!
BUBBLE #5 – TEAMWORK REQUIRES PEOPLE TO SET ASIDE THEIR SELF-INTERESTS

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What teams or groups have you left because you felt they didn’t offer you opportunity to pursue your own goals, desires, calling?

2. How can you establish a group or team purpose that allows for members to pursue their personal callings while accomplishing the group or team’s mission?

3. Why does your group or team exist?

4. How can you further improve your team or group’s mission so that it is clear, compelling, calling-oriented, and consistently-held?

5. How can you align your “holes” in ministry with God’s calling on peoples’ lives?
CONCLUSION

NOW THAT THE BUBBLES ARE BURST!
"Dispositions eat knowledge and skill for breakfast."

- Anthony Mohammad
For too long we’ve tried to improve our work in teams by learning the right things to do and the right ways to do them. In some ways, we’ve improved our knowledge and skills.

Yet, at the same time, we’ve believed things about teams that simply aren’t true.

It’s time we burst our bubbles.

Sometimes I think of my role as a *practical academic* as a bit of sand that finds its way into an oyster. I have to work hard to get in. I irritate. I irritate so much that the oyster has to do something with me. And then, the oyster uses that little piece of sand to make something strikingly beautiful.

It produces a pearl that *shines*.

**Bursting bubbles is not going to earn me a lot of friends.** Conversely, it irritates.

I understand you might be a bit annoyed at me for attacking what you’ve always believed to be true about teams.

But, you can use what has been irritating to build something beautiful that shines the light of Christ in this world.
You can burst the bubble on your teams by taking into account the converse of the five bubbles I’ve burst.

Bubble #1: Teams are best built on trust and relationships.

   Truth #1: Teams are best built on vision and purpose.

Bubble #2: You can empower others.

   Truth #2: You can’t empower people, so stop trying. Instead, create space where others empower themselves.

Bubble #3: Teams need to establish a leader.

   Truth #3: Teams need people to exercise leadership.

Bubble #4: Conflict is a sign of a lack of unity.

   Truth #4: Teams fight to maintain unity.

Bubble #5: Teamwork requires people to set aside their self-interests.

   Truth #5: Great teams are full of people fulfilling their personal calling as part of a team.

That’s it. Five truths about teams that enable you to think well about teamwork, and therefore practice great teamwork.
In sum, I hope that you’ll:

1. Focus your team’s interaction on its vision and purpose far more than on building trust.

2. Stop trying to give people power, and instead put your efforts into creating space where others empower themselves.

3. Lead in your team and don’t just wait for the leader to lead. You know what needs to be done, so get to it. Empower yourself to lead.

4. Embrace conflict so that your team can achieve excellence and unity among team members.

5. Build teams that embrace peoples’ callings and succeed as people thrive in living out their goals and aspirations.

Hopefully, I’ve found a way into your shell. Hopefully, I’ve burst some bubbles.

Now, it’s your turn: **go on perfecting your pearl.**
INVITATIONS

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ABOUT DR. RYAN T. HARTWIG

Ryan T. Hartwig, PhD is a practical academic reframing the collaboration conversation in the church. Through research, teaching, writing, and coaching and consulting, he’s trying to help church and ministry leaders create effective, healthy leadership and ministry teams, design collaborative organizational structures, lead with excellence, and facilitate life-changing small groups.

Ryan serves on the faculty at Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles, California. He teaches classes in group communication, organizational communication, leadership, research methods, public speaking, and persuasion.

He earned a PhD in Group and Organizational Communication from the University of Colorado at Boulder, a MSEd in Higher Education Administration from Purdue University, and a BA in Communication and a BS in Interdisciplinary Studies from Colorado Christian University.

Prior to becoming an academic, Ryan led, trained, and developed leadership and ministry teams focusing on community development, discipleship, missions, leadership development, fund-raising, and marketing, for roughly 15 years in universities and churches.

Ryan journeys through life with Jill and 3 daughters – Halle, Alia, and Katelyn. They enjoy a full family life with lots of pool time, trips to Disneyland, crazy family soccer matches, and good times with family and friends.

Learn more about Ryan.
THANK YOU...

… to my many teachers, colleagues, and students over the years who have helped me think deeply about these issues and many others, bursting my bubble more times than I can count.

… to Alexis Kupratis, Leslie Horrisberger, and Amie Komae (senior communication studies majors at Azusa Pacific University) for their excellent editorial support and project management on this eBook. I can’t believe I get to work with such fantastic students everyday.

… to my family and friends, all of whom make me the most blessed man on the planet!

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ENDNOTES ON FOLLOWING PAGES...
I teach group, organizational, and leadership communication courses at Azusa Pacific University in Los Angeles, California.

For a great book on the new organizational landscape and what we should do about it, see Josh Allan Dykstra’s new book Igniting the Invisible Tribe: Designing An Organization That Doesn’t Suck.

I’ve written this book primarily for leaders in the church and ministry organizations, though the insights can be applied in any setting.

See Seth Godin’s post on confusing correlation with causation.

For a great summary of group development as it relates to team performance, see Creating Effective Teams by Susan Wheelan.

See “First and Second Things,” in God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics, p. 280.


See Lynn Offerman’s chapter on “Empowerment” in Leading Organizations: Perspectives for a New Era (2nd Ed.)

By the way, I remember when one of my grad school professors challenged by view of empowerment (the traditional one I’m arguing against here). As he prompted me to think about the practice more deeply, I felt like a fool. But, then, I realized how liberating a different understanding of this term could be. Just know I feel your pain as you work through this bubble bursting process.

Sid Buzzell, PhD teaches his students this concept as a way to generate greater involvement among team members.


For a summary of the problems with free group discussion, see Sunwolf & Frey’s chapter on “Facilitating Group Communication” in The Handbook of Group Research and Practice.

See his post.
For a great summary of group development as it relates to team performance, see *Creating Effective Teams* by Susan Wheelan.

See Cloke and Goldsmith’s excellent book: *Resolving Conflicts at Work*.

See Frank LaFasto and Carl Larson’s *When Teams Work Best: 6,000 Team Members and Leaders Tell What it Takes to Succeed*.

See the original blog *post* by an unnamed church volunteer.

See *Transforming School Culture*. 