

EBOOK

Build a team that performs when the pressure is on

Building and leading teams that work well together is an increasingly challenging task.

To meet this challenge, there are many things we need to get right. Two are foundational:

- Getting the right people around the table
- Building their capacity to work well under pressure

Step one: Get the right people around the table.

When it comes to getting the right people around the table, The Predictive Index® is a powerful tool.

First, PI helps get *the right people in the right roles*. The software measures a person's behavioral and cognitive data to help hiring managers determine "fit" between the individual and the role. If a role requires attention to detail and planning far into the future, for example, PI identifies candidates who are a match.

Second, PI helps get *the right mix of people on the team*. The software provides a look at how existing team members are behaviorally wired to help hiring managers ensure positive team dynamics. Designing teams with the right combination of personalities, experiences, expertise, and cognitive styles is important. The strategically-designed team suffers from fewer decision-making blindspots and is better able to collaborate and communicate.

When you use the PI platform and team build according to the talent optimization discipline, you vastly increase your chance of reaching your goals. You're filling roles with people who are behaviorally and cognitively wired to do the work. You're building balanced teams to enhance decision-making, collaboration, and communication. You're making sure the people you hire are a culture fit or culture add. You're doing everything you can to set your company up for success.

Step two: Build their capacity to work well under pressure.

It's one thing to get the right mix of people around the table and to understand their differences; it's another to engage in conversations that allow you to take advantage of it all.

To build a team that can work well under pressure, there's another foundational but under-appreciated factor to consider. Even if you have the *right* people around the table and clearly recognize what they bring to the table, you still won't have a team that performs at its peak if you don't focus on building the **Conversational Capacity**[®] of the team.

What is conversational capacity? It's the ability—of individuals and teams—to remain purpose-driven and learning-focused under pressure. They acquire this ability by developing the discipline to work in the “sweet spot” in a conversation; that productive place where *candor* and *courage* is balanced with *curiosity* and *humility*. It's in this sweet spot—where the conversations are open-minded, even-handed, evidence-based, and learning-focused—where teamwork is at its best, especially when you're up against tough issues and complex problems.

It's a pivotal competence. A team with high capacity can address even its thorniest issues with a powerful combination of low defensiveness and high learning. Conversely, a team with low capacity, crippled by high defensiveness and low learning, will see its performance derailed by a minor difference of opinion.

Because it directly determines how well a team works together under pressure, conversational capacity isn't just another aspect of effective teamwork—it defines it. A team that can't talk about its most challenging issues in a balanced, constructive way isn't really a team at all—it's just a group of people who can't work together effectively when it matters.

Leaning into differences

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

— Alvin Toffler

In today's increasingly interconnected, fast-paced, and ever-changing world, collaborative learning is a critical competence. But when it comes to learning, we don't get much value from talking with people who see things the same way we do; we learn more from people who see things *differently*. "If people don't engage across the divide of their differences there is no learning," said Ron Heifetz. "People don't learn by looking in the mirror. They learn by talking with people who have different points of view."

Luckily, our teams, organizations, and communities are overflowing with differences. Some—like our functional, educational, cultural, gender, ethnic, racial, or hierarchical differences—are easier to notice. Other significant differences—such as our personalities, life experiences, behavioral tendencies, and cognitive styles—are harder to recognize.

But to generate learning, mere exposure to difference isn't enough. We need a bias for learning that's greater than our natural defensiveness to new and conflicting ideas. To learn from contrasting views, we need the discipline to approach people who see the world differently as *opportunities* rather than obstacles.

This is why high conversational capacity makes our teamwork more effective—it changes the way we respond to people who see the world differently. Low conversational capacity and our differences present a *barrier* to learning and progress. High conversational capacity and our differences present a *path* to learning and progress.

Leaning into differences (con't)

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With high conversational capacity, we're not just working to increase viewpoint diversity—we're doing it with a deliberate bias. We're [leaning into difference](#). By "leaning in," we're not just tolerating difference, we're placing a premium on it. To expand and improve our thinking, we actively seek out and explore dissimilar ideas, interpretations, and information because they're more likely to spur those "aha" moments when a blind spot in our mental map of reality is unexpectedly illuminated: "Oh, I never thought of it that way before." We recognize, in other words, that the best way to detect and correct our mental mistakes—and thereby sharpen our thinking—is to engage with people who see the world differently.

This learning-focused orientation dramatically expands our ability to make informed choices, because, as Peter Elbow explained, "The surest way to get hold of what your present frame binds you to is to adopt the opposite frame. A person who can live with contradiction and exploit it—who can use conflicting models—can simply see and think more." And if our goal is to make smart choices, seeing and thinking more is exactly what's needed.

It's important to note that we're not doing all this in pursuit of agreement. We're doing it in the pursuit of *learning*. We're working with others to expand and improve our thinking to help whoever is making a choice make it with their eyes wide open.

High conversational capacity transforms how we react to people with different perspectives and information because our bias for learning leads us to see them as opportunities to expand our awareness and learn—instead of petty nuisances to be avoided or attacked. Rather than cave in or argue when someone shares a different point of view, we get curious: “What can this person’s perspective teach me about the issue we’re exploring?”


The ability to learn from difference under pressure

When this capacity is low, on the other hand, our reactions are anti-learning. We either downplay or avoid our differences, or we dismiss them or argue with them. This is why building our capacity to work in the sweet spot is so critical. When we lack the ability to stay candid and curious, people with different views, personalities, and behavioral styles are a source of weakness and dysfunction. When that capacity is high, however, those differences turn into profound source of strength and performance.

Therefore, conversational capacity can also be defined as the ability to learn from difference under pressure.

High conversational capacity makes you and your team smarter.

We all want to build, lead, or participate in smart, capable teams. But answering the question, “How smart is my team?” is not as simple as adding up the IQ scores of its members. It’s not the sum of the smarts that matters, but how well people can use their individual intelligence to foster collaborative learning. **A team with high conversational capacity benefits from a multiplier effect: The team is smarter than the sum of its parts because its members can use their colleague’s perspectives to think in more nimble and expansive ways.**



There's an important message here for individual members of a team or organization: To be effective, you need to do more than just show up smart. To contribute to effective teamwork, you must learn to participate in meetings, decisions, and conversations in a way that increases the conversational capacity of your team. It doesn't matter if you're a genius with an IQ of 200, after all, if your behavior pushes 1,000 IQ points out of every meeting.

It's not as simple as it sounds.

Sounds easy, doesn't it? All a team has to do is boost its conversational capacity and all will be well. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. In our quest to build this capacity, we face a formidable obstacle: human nature. It turns out that working in the sweet spot under pressure is one of the hardest things we'll learn to do in life because primal aspects of our nature, rooted in the powerful fight-flight response, actually work against it. When these defensive emotional reactions are triggered, we tend to drop one pole or the other. When we drop candor, we grow overly guarded and cautious—we don't speak up clearly and directly when we should. When we drop curiosity, we grow arrogant and argumentative—our minds slam shut and our mouths fly open. All too often, we see both reactions in the same meeting: When trying to explore a controversial issue, for example, some people around the table heat up and start to argue, while others shut down and begin to retreat.

The problem is that the further we get from the sweet spot, the less we're able to learn from difference. We don't learn much if candor is low and we're shunning our differences, and we don't learn much if our curiosity is low and we're squabbling. So it's important to learn to catch these knee-jerk emotional reactions when they start to throw us off balance because performance plummets any time one of them pulls us out of the sweet spot.

“Sweet Spot”



The president of a small college in Canada explained how the chronic lack of candor derailed an important project. “We blew \$20 million on a failed transfer of a student database that we had to scrap mid-implementation due to problems,” he said. “I found out later that half the IT team knew it was never going to work but were fearful of engaging with the CIO since she was the executive sponsor and this product had been her choice.”

This example illustrates the important link between conversational capacity and performance. It doesn’t do any good to have brilliant minds on your project if the way they work together produces mediocre or disastrous performance. A team hampered by low candor may provide a pleasant social experience, but it’s not likely to engage in the responsibly rigorous dialogue needed to deal with its tough challenges. In a team that lacks curiosity, on the other hand, members often push their views in a way that sparks more defensiveness and conflict than learning and progress.

Simply put, when a team slips out of the sweet spot, it wastes the learning potential of the group. It may be full of A-grade thinkers, but it can only generate C-grade analysis and action. It squanders the very thing that makes a team so valuable—the profound learning that comes from leaning into difference.

The hitch, of course, is that it takes discipline to genuinely inquire into views that conflict with our own. Opposing ideas, particularly about issues we care about, easily trigger our defensive reactions, leading us to argue our point or withdraw from the conflict.

So how do we build it?

Fortunately, there's good news. There's a discipline—a veritable conversational martial art—that allows people and teams to respond to tough challenges with greater agility and skill, and perform brilliantly in circumstances that incapacitate less disciplined teams.

This discipline is composed of three interrelated things: *Awareness, mindset, and skills.*

- **Awareness:** Building our awareness, especially of our defensive emotional tendencies and the effect they have on our behavior, is essential. We need to strengthen our ability to notice when we are drifting out of the sweet spot so we can retain or regain balance—and help others do the same.
- **Mindset:** To stay firmly grounded in the sweet spot, we must adopt a mindset that places learning above being comfortable or being right. The hallmark objective in this mindset is to orchestrate learning in order to make more informed and effective choices. And if our quest is to make more informed choices, there's no substitute for actually being informed. So with a clear focus on smart decisions, we seek out, prefer, and lean into people with different views, information, and ideas—not because we enjoy being uncomfortable or wrong, but because if we want to expand and improve our thinking, it's the people who see things differently that provide the most insight. “I have a view of ‘reality’ in my head,” we basically say to others, “and you have a view of ‘reality’ in yours. Let's put them together to see what we can learn about the problem we're trying to solve.”
- **Skills:** Next, we must adopt a set of skills for putting this mindset to work. There are four basic skills: The first two bring structure to our candor; the second two balance it with curiosity. Combined, they produce a user-friendly framework for crafting conversations that are simultaneously candid and curious.

- Candor skills:
 - » Stating our clear **position**—where we currently stand on an issue
 - » Explaining the underlying **thinking** that informs our position—how we arrived at our position
- Curiosity skills:
 - » **Testing** our perspective by inviting people to help us detect and correct any errors, gaps, or blindspots in our current point of view
 - » **Inquiring** into the perspectives of others to understand both their current *position* and the *thinking* that informs it.

If the mindset is what we're thinking in a disciplined conversation, these four behaviors are what we're doing. With the balanced use of these four behaviors, we're candidly expressing how we see things while simultaneously working just as hard to curiously explore how others are looking at the same issue. We're neither arguing nor shutting down because we're less concerned about being right or comfortable and more focused on what counts: Working with our team to generate a better understanding of the issue at hand so we can make the smartest, most informed choices possible.

Deceptively simple in concept, these skills are remarkably challenging in practice. That's why I refer to it as a discipline, for that's exactly what it takes to master habitual tendencies and remain centered and learning-focused in tough conversations.

A conversational martial art

I describe conversational capacity as a martial art. But there's a risk in framing it this way. Some people might be tempted to think they can use it against their colleagues. But in this martial art, the person with whom we're talking, the issues we're trying to address, and the context in which it's all happening are not our opponents. These factors merely provide the mat on which the bout takes place.

In this martial art, our opponent is our own ego. If we want to stay in the sweet spot, focused on learning, we must take our ego to the mat.

Seen this way, improving how we converse with others offers a path to personal growth, a way to become less ego-driven and more purpose-driven. It provides a new way to think about teams and teamwork—as opportunities to become more balanced human beings—simultaneously forthright and authentic, yet humble and open-minded.

Capacity building: A game-changer

A primary task for leaders, therefore, is building your own conversational capacity and that of your team. It's a game-changing ability. It unlocks the learning potential in our relationships, meetings, teams, and projects, enabling us to think smarter, faster, and together in difficult situations. It strengthens our ability to make smart decisions, solve tough problems, take advantage of new opportunities, and manage change in a more agile way.

To sum up, a high-functioning team is an impressive thing to behold, but it's not an easy thing to create. And as our world grows increasingly turbulent, complex, and unpredictable, it's more important than ever to get the right people to join our cause. But we must also create a disciplined culture that enables our people to work and learn together in a consistent, purposeful, and highly productive way. It doesn't do any good to have the right people around the table, after all, if we can't put all their intelligence and experience to full use.

This is why The Predictive Index and Conversational Capacity make such a powerful combination. Impressive tools in their own right, when combined, they create a formidable advantage. PI helps us make better choices about getting the right people in the right role and recognize the distinct tendencies and traits individual members bring to the team. Conversational capacity allows us to leverage those differences for learning and to deliberately foster group dynamics that support our culture and our strategy.

Combined, our work helps people dramatically improve not just how they work, but how they communicate, collaborate, influence, and lead.

Craig Weber

Craig Weber is the best-selling author of **Conversational Capacity: The Secret To Building Successful Teams That Perform When The Pressure Is On** (McGraw-Hill, 2013) and its sequel **Influence In Action: How To Build Your Conversational Capacity, Do Meaningful Work, and Make a Powerful Difference** (McGraw-Hill, 2019).

For more information visit conversationalcapacity.com