



## Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams

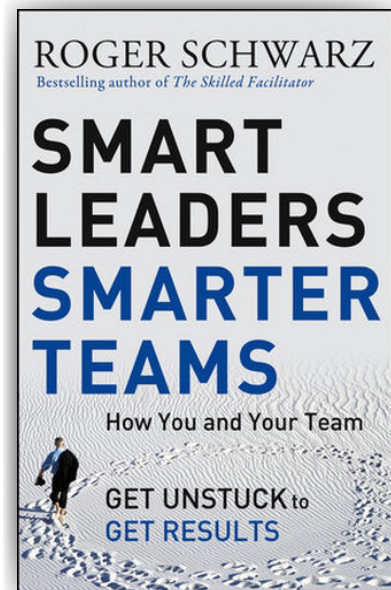
*How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results*

Roger Schwarz

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### KEY CONCEPTS

- Everyone has a mindset that drives his or her behavior, but most people are usually unaware of their own mindsets.
- Mindsets drive behavior, which then produces results.
- The two basic mindsets people use are *unilateral control* and *mutual learning*.
- When challenged, most people revert to a unilateral control mindset, which produces the very results they are trying to avoid.
- Becoming a more effective leader means changing not just behavior, but the mindset that drives it; this requires practice and feedback.
- A mutual learning mindset generates transparency, curiosity, accountability, and compassion, as well as promotes informed choice.

### INTRODUCTION

In **Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams**, organizational psychologist Roger Schwarz states that poor team performance is usually the result of leaders' mindsets. Mindsets drive behavior, which in turn drives results, and the mindsets humans have evolved with are not necessarily the best for today's business world. In high-pressure situations, people automatically shift to the *unilateral control mindset*: one forceful leader with a group of meek followers. Citing a wealth of supporting research, Schwarz asserts that a *mutual learning mindset* produces better team performance, stronger working relationships, and more satisfying and motivating work. He identifies the values that inform both approaches, examines the assumptions each is based on, and looks at the behaviors that naturally result. He demonstrates how to design teams that embody mutual learning principles and how to make the transition to the mutual learning leadership style.

## UNILATERAL CONTROL OR MUTUAL LEARNING? A TALE OF TWO MINDSETS

When pointless meetings, unproductive conflict, and stop-gap solutions waste time and money, people blame the leader. The problem is usually not the leader's personality, but his or her unilateral control mindset. Leaders who operate with this mindset may get results, but they do so at a price. These leaders shoulder all responsibility and accountability, and their team members are happy to let them do so. Whenever conflict arises, the leader arbitrates. Decisions are made because team members bow to the leader's preference, but weeks or months later, information emerges that sends the whole team back to square one. Such setbacks could be avoided if the leader allowed the team to help in the decision-making process. In the unilateral control mindset, four values shape unproductive behaviors: winning, being right, avoiding conflict, and being reasonable (agreeing with the leader). These values grow from unfounded assumptions that the leader:

- Understands the situation perfectly (disagreement signals lack of understanding)
- Is always right
- Acts from the purest of motives (dissenting team members obviously have questionable motives)
- Is the only one whose feelings and behavior are completely justified
- Is the only one who is not contributing to whatever problems arise

Behaviors these assumptions produce include:

- Stifling debate
- Withholding relevant information
- Not bothering to define important terms
- Never explaining one's reasoning or asking to hear what others are thinking
- Fighting for one's own position regardless of the interests of others
- Acting on untested assumptions and inferences
- Controlling the conversation
- Saving face on difficult issues if dodging them fails

The unilateral control approach yields disappointing results. First, the team's performance is lackluster at best. Leadership teams are supposed to produce decisions, but decisions are poor because no one has access to complete and accurate information. The focus on reaching personal goals creates a competitive atmosphere in which no one feels safe enough to test any assumptions, lest the tables be turned. Little innovation happens. Implementation is also slower because decisions made with incomplete information must be repeatedly revisited.

Second, working relationships deteriorate. Everyone's fixation on personal goals creates a low-trust working environment and saps commitment. People become defensive and prone to unproductive conflict. Honest appraisal of past performance is unlikely due to conflict avoidance, so the team is slow to learn from past mistakes and becomes a drain on the entire organization.

Third, the unilateral control model saps morale. Team members, seeing limited development opportunities, become less motivated, more stressed, and more dissatisfied with the work. In the end, unilateral control creates the very results team leaders try to avoid.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Information about the author and subject:

[www.schwarzassociates.com](http://www.schwarzassociates.com)

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The mutual learning approach, on the other hand, boosts morale, builds trust, and improves both performance and innovation because it is driven by different values:

1. *Transparency and curiosity.* All members of the team, including the leader, take the time to express (appropriately) what they know, think, and feel; they also take the time to listen to what other team members know, think, and feel. Their transparency and curiosity creates a common pool of relevant information and mutual understanding.
2. *Informed choice and accountability.* Having a common pool of information enables informed choices. The formal leader still has the right and the obligation to make decisions, but people will be more supportive of a decision they have helped shape. With informed choice comes accountability. All team members, leader included, accept their responsibility to serve the best interests of the organization. They expect their names to be publicly linked to their actions, words, or reactions, and are prepared to issue explanations.

*When your team operates from a mutual learning mindset, it can discuss difficult issues in the team without members becoming defensive.*

3. *Compassion.* Compassion is the glue that holds the other values together. Schwarz explains compassion as an awareness of the frustrations others encounter daily, the difficult decisions they must make, and the stress they endure as a result. Compassionate people suspend judgment long enough to understand others and appreciate their situations. It does not mean pitying other people or trying to fix their problems for them, nor does it replace accountability. Compassion is about listening. Compassionate behavior builds trust.

Like the unilateral control model, the mutual learning mindset makes certain assumptions. It assumes that all team members, not just the leader, have useful information. It assumes that everyone will have a slightly different point of view, and that disagreeing with an opinion is not proof of shady motives. Most important is the acknowledgment that anyone, even the leader, could be contributing to difficulties encountered.

These values and assumptions naturally lead to certain behaviors:

- Stating views candidly and asking genuine (not rhetorical) questions
- Sharing all relevant information
- Using specific examples and defining important terms
- Explaining reasoning and intent
- Focusing on interests rather than positions
- Testing assumptions and inferences
- Jointly designing next steps
- Discussing the undiscussable issues

Teams that operate from a mutual learning mindset perform efficiently. Sounder decisions are made on the basis of shared information. Since those decisions are made after testing assumptions, they also tend to be more innovative. Working from full information also

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Roger Schwarz** has worked with global companies, federal government agencies, and nonprofit organizations to help leaders and teams become more effective, innovative, and successful, while honoring the best of who they are as human beings. Schwarz served as a tenured associate professor of public management and as assistant director at the Institute of Government, both at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is currently founder, president, and CEO of Roger Schwarz & Associates, which offers diagnosis, consulting, training, facilitation, coaching, and measurement to leaders and their teams. He is author of the bestselling book *The Skilled Facilitator*.

means a shorter implementation time, as potential pitfalls have been identified ahead of time. Not having to rethink decisions lowers costs.

Mutual learning teams enjoy better working relationships. Trust and commitment are increased, teams are better able to learn from mistakes, people are less defensive, and conflict is more productive. Team members rely appropriately on others.

Finally, team members find the whole team experience more satisfying than frustrating. Doing the work itself is motivating and enjoyable because team members can use a range of skills, exercise autonomy, and see their contributions in context.

*If team members learned nothing more about mutual learning than the need to test out their inferences firsthand, they would make huge improvements in the results they get and the relationships they build.*

Unilateral control is still needed in emergencies, but the best leaders are those who engage in debriefing—fully discussing what was done and why, and what should be done the next time. In other words, mutual learning occurs once the emergency is over. This is pragmatic mutual learning, not dictatorship.

In order to reap the full benefits of the mutual learning approach, team members must all be on board, that is, ready to embrace the core values and exhibit the logically resulting behaviors. The entire team must be willing to identify unilateral control assumptions in others and acknowledge them in themselves. Unfortunately, the most common fixes for poorly performing teams focus on behaviors, not mindsets. This almost guarantees failure. The entire team, including the leader, must explicitly agree to expect mutual-learning behaviors from each other, and to be called to account when individuals fail to exhibit such behaviors. They must agree on feedback in the moment, whether working as a team, a subgroup, or one-on-one.

### MUTUAL LEARNING IN ACTION

Mutual learning in practice consists of eight key behaviors, each driven by the core values discussed above.

1. *State views and ask genuine questions.* This is what transparent and curious people do. They may state their opinions as passionately as they like, as long as they are just as passionately curious about what others think.
2. *Share all relevant information.* Transparency means creating a shared pool of relevant information so the team can make fully informed decisions. Since research has shown that all decisions have at least some emotional component, feelings are relevant. Relevant information is also timely.
3. *Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.* This may mean naming names because hiding behind vague expressions like “Some of you” is likely to create unnecessary conflict, confusion, and defensiveness. It is also worth defining terms. Hours of meeting time can be wasted otherwise. Specific examples are crucial to understanding.
4. *Explain reasoning and intent.* Explanations, especially of reasoning and intent, reduce or eliminate the need for guesswork. In guesswork, people make up their own explanatory stories, which are often inaccurate, negative, and almost always taken for factual by their creators.
5. *Focus on interests, not positions.* People generate solutions that address their own concerns because those are the concerns they know about. Unless others feel that *their* needs are being addressed, they will reject that solution. People may disagree over solutions, even when their underlying needs are the same. Focusing on interests rather than positions allows people to express the underlying needs and arrive at decisions everyone can commit to.
6. *Test assumptions and inferences.* People are wired to make meaning, to explain. They may draw a conclusion based on partial information (make an inference), or they may take something for granted with no information at all (make an assumption). This is normal behavior. The trouble comes when people take their assumptions and inferences for fact.

7. *Jointly design next steps.* Joint design enables transparency and curiosity and encourages informed choices. It raises the chances of arriving at a workable solution to which people can commit. Joint design works for any next steps. The main thing is to involve others early enough so that whoever is making the decision can base it on accurate assumptions and information, while meeting as many stakeholder needs as possible. The more commitment needed from the team, the more team involvement and accountability is needed.
8. *Discuss undiscussable issues.* Undiscussable issues are the topics that affect the team's work but are never addressed in the team (the only place they can be resolved). They are the issues that people feel must be ignored out of compassion, or because discussing them is sure to produce conflict. Avoiding the undiscussable issues may have negative, even cruel, side effects. Such issues—poor performance, for instance—must be discussed, or people are denied the chance to change their behaviors. Not discussing them is, in effect, withholding information and damaging the team's working relationship and its performance. Although the emotional temperature is higher with such issues, the process for handling them is the same: state views, ask genuine questions, share relevant information, give specific examples, test inferences and assumptions, and jointly design next steps. The most important thing is to approach the discussion with compassion and avoid premature and negative judgments.

The purpose of these eight behaviors is to put the mutual learning mindset into action. People who attempt to apply the behaviors without the mindset simply find another way to be unilaterally controlling.

## MAKING IT ALL WORK

Like any human construct, teams work within the constraints of their designs. *Team design* refers to the structures and processes that govern a team. Team design grows out of the core values and assumptions of the designer. A leader who habitually uses a unilateral control mindset is likely to design at least

part of his or her team with the same mindset. This will affect team structure, team process, and team context, which is the organization in which the team functions. Unilateral control creates inefficient teams.

### Team Structure

Effective *team structure* includes several basic elements: a clear mission and a shared vision, clear and challenging goals, and a way of measuring progress. It has a motivating task. Roles on the team are fluid, especially leadership. Although there is a formal leader, any team member may chair a meeting, coordinate agendas, or identify next steps. Leadership is both a shared role and a shared responsibility.

All teams have a team culture that affects how members deal with quality, timeliness, or other aspects of the team's tasks. Team culture includes core values and assumption, so that changing a team's mindset is changing its culture. Culture usually operates unnoticed, but mutual-learning teams are effective in part because they understand that the way a team thinks is the way it functions. Behavioral norms are how a team puts its culture into action.

*Just as you're usually unaware of how you're using your mindset to design behavior, you're unaware of how you're using your mindset to design elements of the team.*

### Team Processes

Effective teams have mastered *team processes*, not just problem solving and decision making, but also how the team will communicate, handle conflict, or establish boundaries. There are many systems for solving problems, and all of them are good, to the extent that team members are willing to be transparent, curious, accountable, and compassionate with one another. Teams whose members neglect these values will be ineffective no matter what tools they use.

Decision making, the second primary process, can take one of three forms: consensus, team input, and individual. Again, all three processes are valid, but will yield different results depending on the mindset of the leader. Team members do not expect, need, or want to be consulted on every single decision, but

they do expect transparency and an open mind from the people who make them.

Smart, effective teams assume that differences are learning opportunities, so they ask questions, uncover reasoning, and try to design mutually acceptable solutions. They often find that resolving a high-stakes conflict actually improves working relationships. On a smart team, people aim for balanced and effective communication to create a common understanding of the issues. Balanced communication means going directly to the people from whom information is needed or to whom information is owed. Each team member is accountable, not to the formal leader, but to the entire team, and the leader plays by the same rules as everybody else.

Finally, smart teams set their own boundaries. They arrive at consensus about where their responsibility for a task ends and another team's responsibility begins.

### Team Context

Of course a team's effectiveness is influenced by *team context*, the larger organization. Ideally, the team's mission and vision are congruent with those of the larger organization, but if not, mutual learning teams are willing to approach others with curiosity and compassion. Sometimes, an organization's reward system is designed to reinforce unilateral control; at other times, an organization tries to create one kind of culture while rewarding incompatible behaviors. Smart teams first identify how their organizations handle ineffective team behaviors, then try to change or influence the systems.

*When your entire team uses the mutual learning approach, it changes the nature of leadership in the team, moving from one-leader-in-the-room to a shared leadership approach.*

One of the most common ways for an organization to fail its teams is by withholding feedback from them, or insisting that feedback come via means that are neither transparent nor accountable, such as 360-degree feedback. This method relies on anonymity to arrive at the truth, save face for all parties, and change behavior. However, no research has found that anonymity ensures the truth, because anonymity

excuses people from accountability. Moreover, research has shown that 360-degree feedback does not invariably result in behavior changes.

Direct, face-to-face feedback can be uncomfortable, but the goal is not to feel comfortable, it is to be effective. Trust is not a prerequisite of direct feedback; to think so is to confuse cause and effect. Instead, trust results when team members take the risks of making themselves vulnerable, and see that others do not use the vulnerability against them.

### DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

Once the team is designed and the work begins, certain challenges predictably arrive. An effective meeting, for example, calls for preparation, but not for approaching the meeting as though it were a chess game to be won. Instead, a more effective way to prepare, and to identify necessary areas of transparency and curiosity, is to ask three basic questions:

1. What relevant information needs to be reciprocally shared?
2. What interests must be met?
3. What assumptions and inferences are being made that should be tested?

If everyone is furnished with answers and with questions to be asked of other team members, the meeting will get off to a good start, but it can easily be derailed unless three basic principles are observed:

1. *Go broad before going deep.* Find out *briefly* what every individual team member thinks about the topic at hand before allowing any single member to go into detail. Going broad first helps the team identify the areas where deeper discussion is needed.
2. *Do not hold back.* Many leaders like to hear everyone else's views before stating their own. This is a unilateral control behavior.
3. *Deal with nonverbal behavior.* Name the behavior and who is exhibiting it, check out inferences made about what the behavior means, and ask if the person is willing to share his or her thoughts.

Transparency and accountability require regular feedback, both formal and informal. Good feedback is fast, specific, and sticks to the facts. People give better feedback when they approach the recipient with an open mind and jointly design the conversation and the order of the conversation. They must be careful not to keep the other person guessing, and should ask about the ways in which they have contributed to the problem. When feedback recipients become defensive, feedback givers should continue to be curious, asking for more information and also about how their own actions may have threatened the other person. Leaders should hold people accountable by refusing to accept or pass on anonymous feedback. Above all, they should not impose penalties based on undelivered feedback.

Virtual teamwork is increasingly common, and email is often the main mode of business communications, including problem-solving discussions. The same core values and behaviors used in person and on the phone apply to email: explain reasoning, share views and ask genuine questions, and test assumptions and inferences. Since email eliminates the cues given by body language and tone of voice, it is important to specifically name feelings rather than forcing others to guess. Team members should minimize texted messages; they tend to be less informative and more obscure.

## TRANSFORMATION

Most successful people routinely set goals and achieve or approximate them. The same process applies when transforming a unilateral control team into a mutual learning team: assess current and desired status, develop an action plan, talk to the team, and jointly plan with team members how they will support this progress.

Team leaders must first transform themselves into mutual learners. First, they need to compare results desired to those usually achieved, then work backwards from results to behaviors to mindset. The results under consideration should be personal, not team results. Leaders should examine each current result and identify the behaviors that produced them. Once unilateral control behaviors are identified as leading to specific results, it becomes possible to

recognize mutual learning behaviors that can lead to the desired results. Then, leaders can work back in the same way from behaviors to mindset. Again, identifying the values and assumptions underlying ineffective results opens the door for different ones.

Both unilateral control and mutual learning are systems, so core values and assumptions in each mindset work together to create the behaviors that produce the results. Leaders will notice which alternative values and assumptions are more challenging, and those are the areas that need change. Once one problematic situation has been assessed, team leaders can do the same for others. The same patterns of behaviors, values, and assumptions will emerge because people tend to be fairly consistent in their way of doing things.

The assessment should identify the triggers that lead to one mindset or the other. People tend to go with unilateral control when feeling threatened or embarrassed, for example. Next, leaders should develop an action plan, choose the contexts in which to try new behaviors (the more the better), set specific goals, and schedule regular planning, self-assessments, and feedback sessions.

*The power of the approach stems from the mindset. If you apply the behaviors without it, others will think you've found a new, more sophisticated way to be unilateral—and they'll be right.*

When the new method is being tested with a new team, no announcement is needed, but long-term associates will react better if the new behavior is announced before being practiced. The leader should be transparent about the reasons leading to the change, and what the end goal is. Will team members be expected to change too? Whether the plan is to model the behavior for a while and later ask the team to adopt it, or to have the team to jump right in, leaders must say so.

Team members may be ready to change their ways right away, or they may want some more information. Leaders should acknowledge their own contributions to their teams' sluggish performances with specific examples. Doing so demonstrates vulnerability and builds trust. Leaders should stop to ask questions,

such as: “What are team members thinking and feeling?” and “Do they have other relevant information?” Because leaders and team members are part of a system, leaders will need to be clear about how changing their own behaviors will affect their teams. Leaders who change their own behaviors without expecting similar changes from their teams are not making much change.

## CONCLUSION

Transparency, curiosity, informed choice, accountability, and compassion can energize and transform a team. Like anything else, practice turns new mindsets and behaviors into second nature. Much of the mutual learning approach is common sense about how to treat other people. The challenge is to translate common sense into common practice; the rewards are greater efficiency, better working relationships, and greater well-being for individuals, teams, and organizations.



## FEATURES OF THE BOOK

**Estimated Reading Time: 4–5 hours; 255 pages**

**Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams** by Roger Schwarz will interest anyone in a position of leadership and includes specific, practical advice on how to turn theory into practice. Figures summarize the major points in a memorable way, and some chapters end with a quick-reference summary. A link to the author’s website is provided so readers can take his mutual learning assessment test to better understand their own leadership styles.

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