

Nine Behaviors for Better Team Engagement

Competencies, Benefits &
Skill-Building Activities

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Introduction

Before exploring the nine behaviors for team development, let's start by understanding what we mean by "mindset." Psychologist Carol Dweck describes mindset as the beliefs that influence how we think, feel, and act. According to her research, there are two main types of mindset:

- **Fixed mindset:** The belief that intelligence and abilities are fixed and cannot change.
- **Growth mindset:** The belief that intelligence and abilities can grow with effort and persistence.

Building on this idea, Roger Schwarz introduces the concept of a **mutual-learning mindset** in his work *Eight Behaviors for Smarter Teams*. While similar to a growth mindset, the mutual-learning mindset focuses on how teams can work together to improve by fostering transparency, curiosity, accountability, and thoughtful decision-making. On the flip side, a **position-based mindset** emphasizes defensiveness, control, and a desire to "win" or prove one's point—closer to a fixed mindset.

Schwarz's ideas build upon the work of Chris Argyris, an expert in organizational behavior, who developed the Action Science framework. Schwarz turns Argyris' theories about communication, learning, and problem-solving into practical actions that teams can use to work better together. Together, these frameworks give us tools for creating smarter, more adaptable teams that can challenge assumptions and solve problems effectively.

I've also added a ninth behavior to this framework: **listening to understand**. Research from the Center for Creative Leadership highlights how critical listening is to curiosity, collaboration, and effective problem-solving.

The prerequisite for teams developing these behaviors presumes that a level of psychological safety and trust already exists. What follows are the nine behaviors that, when practiced consistently, support a mutual-learning mindset and help teams thrive.

Behavior 1: Listen to Understand

Listening to understand involves being fully present and seeking to grasp the speaker's perspective, values, and emotions.

Examples of include:

- Being fully present.
- Suspending judgment.
- Asking clarifying questions.
- Reflecting and summarizing.
- Demonstrating empathy.

Benefits: Builds trust, reduces misunderstandings, and fosters a productive team culture.

Competency: Actively and intentionally listening to others to understand their perspectives, feelings, and intent. Seeks clarification to avoid making assumptions. Welcomes new ideas and feedback from teammates at all levels.

Food for Thought

- ◇ On a scale of 1 to 10 how well does your team listen to one another?
- ◇ Do you notice people on your team seem to listen for others to stop talking so they can talk? Or are they genuinely interested in what others have to say?
- ◇ Do you hear team members listening to understand, or listening to give advice?
- ◇ How present is your team during meetings? Do they give their full attention with eye contact and body posture? Or are they doing something else while the meeting is going on?
- ◇ Do you find there are interruptions throughout your team meetings?

Behavior 2: State Views and Ask Genuine Questions

Stating views and asking genuine questions means sharing your thoughts, including your reasoning and intent, and inviting others to comment. When asking questions with genuine curiosity the listener knows that you sincerely care about what they think. This approach encourages mutual learning and avoids leading or rhetorical questions. It encourages open, focused conversations where people build understanding rather than making assumptions or trying to persuade each other. By clearly stating your perspective and asking authentic questions, you promote transparency, address differing viewpoints, and improve decision-making.

Benefits: Fosters transparency, resolves disagreements, and encourages collaboration. Enhances team relationships, improves decision-making, and ensures open, productive dialogues.

Competency: Demonstrates clear communication by confidently sharing opinions and actively engaging others with thoughtful questions to foster understanding and collaboration.

Food for thought

- ◇ How often does your team share their points of view with one another? When they do, what is the quality of the questions asked of them?
- ◇ Are the questions that are asked of one another in team meetings open-ended and curious or are they position-based, leading or judgmental?
- ◇ Does your team engage in a robust sharing of ideas and opinions? If so, why do you think that is? If not, why?
- ◇ What level of psychological safety exists in your team? Do you notice team members holding back or sharing their views offline or in chat?

Behavior 3: Share Relevant Information

Sharing relevant information is a practice that encourages teams to communicate in ways that are transparent and forthcoming with all information that might influence an individual or team's decision making and problem-solving, even when the information challenges personal preferences or positions.

Benefits: Promotes transparency, accountability, and mutual understanding within teams.

Competency: Ensures transparency by providing complete and accurate information that is critical for decision-making and collaboration. Is transparent in communicating essential information and underlying rationale for decisions. Creates a culture of feedback with staff to ensure accountability.

Food for Thought

- ◇ How often are you or someone on your team caught off guard by information that is not shared?
- ◇ Do you or others on your team find out important information second-hand or after the fact? If so, why do you think that is?
- ◇ Are there people on your team who protect information at the expense of others or to protect others?
- ◇ How many times have you made a decision only to learn pertinent information later that was not shared with the team? What was the impact to you and your team? What would you like to be different?

Behavior 4: Use Specific Examples and Define Terms

The practice of ***using specific examples and agreements on what important words mean*** provides clear, specific examples and defining key terms to ensure mutual understanding. By naming people, events, and actions, team members can verify information and reasoning, reducing ambiguity and misinterpretation.

Benefits: Aligns team understanding and strengthens communication.

Competency: Communicates with clarity by providing concrete examples and establishing shared understanding of key terms and concepts.

Food for Thought

- ◇ Have you and your team ever discussed abstract and ambiguous terms relevant to your work? How certain are you that every team member agrees about what ambiguous and abstract terms actually mean?
- ◇ When discussing values and terms like success, collaboration, innovation, and teamwork, these may mean different things to different people based on their background, experience, culture and beliefs. Consider making a list of common terms and having a team discussion about what they mean.
- ◇ Does your team provide specific examples when giving feedback, for example? When discussing subjective terms, specific real-world examples along with context help to improve communications and reduce misunderstandings.

Behavior 5: Explain Reasoning and Intent

The meta-cognitive behavior of ***Explain[ing] Reasoning & Intent*** is a reflective process that makes your thought patterns explicit, both to you and others. By sharing your thought process with your team and what led to your conclusion it demonstrates self-awareness and fosters transparency. This helps to reduce misunderstandings, prevent incorrect assumptions, and encourages open dialogue.

Benefits: Reduces misunderstandings, builds trust and encourages constructive dialogue supporting mutual learning.

Competency: Sharing the purpose (intent) and the logical process (reasoning) behind decisions and actions.

Food for Thought

- ◇ How often do you explain your reasoning for a decision you've made or a directive given?
- ◇ Do you notice yourself and/or your teammates assuming other people should know what they are asking for or thinking and why?
- ◇ When was the last time you and your team discussed clarifying roles and articulating expectations?
- ◇ When giving directives or delegating projects, do you take the time to confirm through dialogue that you and others are on the same page? Or, do you assume and expect them to know what you want?

Behavior 6: Focus on Interests, Not Positions

Focus on Interests, not positions involves team members being able to address the underlying needs (interests) of their teammates rather than advocating solely for their proposed solutions (positions) seeking to find common ground, as well as collaborative and creative solutions.

Benefits: Encourages flexible solutions, promotes collaboration, reduces conflict, and helps to uncover and define shared objectives.

Competency: Prioritize the underlying needs and goals of the stakeholders over rigid stances to foster collaboration and innovative problem-solving.

Food for Thought

- ◇ What are some positions that you are holding? How do they align with the interest of others on your team? How are your interests aligned or misaligned with the greater vision and mission of your team?
- ◇ What does collaboration mean to you? How are you demonstrating collaboration on your team?
- ◇ Do you think you have more of a position-based mindset or a mutual-learning mindset?
- ◇ On a scale of 1 (rarely) to 10 (all the time) how often do your team meetings end in frustration and conflict? Given what has been covered so far in this white paper, why do you think this is?

Behavior 7: Test Assumptions and Inferences

The practice of ***Testing Assumptions & Inferences*** supports team members in learning to identify, question, and verify their assumptions and inferences. It encourages curiosity of different perspectives and the need for gathering more information to avoid misunderstandings and jumping to incorrect conclusions.

Benefits: Builds clarity, fosters openness, and reduces misunderstandings.

Competency: Identifying, questioning, and verifying assumptions to ensure decisions are based on accurate information and reasoning.

Food for Thought

- ◇ What percentage of time would you say you hold negative assumptions about others on your team? What do you do to check out your assumptions to see if they are accurate or not?
- ◇ How often do you act upon your thoughts and assumptions before checking them out?
- ◇ What inference are you making about ideas others on your team share?
- ◇ Do you tend to focus on information that confirms your beliefs and biases? Or are you in the habit of remaining neutral until you gather more facts and information?

Behavior 8: Jointly Design Next Steps

When team members *jointly design next steps* they are taking into consideration other's needs and interests while deciding next actions and processes rather than making decisions unilaterally. This co-creative process emphasizes transparency, curiosity, and inclusiveness and builds trust through collaborative problem-solving. It ensures that informed choices are being made to improve outcomes and fosters shared ownership.

Benefits: Encourages shared ownership, adaptability, and stronger team cohesion.

Competency: Collaboratively develops actionable plans, ensuring all team members contribute to and align with the proposed course of action.

Food for Thought

- ◇ Do you tend to tell people what their goals and next steps are? Or do you invite them to share their thoughts on what goals are most relevant to them and what actions they need to take to achieve them?
- ◇ As a member of a team, do you like to drive the agenda and meeting, or do you invite others to add to the agenda?
- ◇ At the closing of a meeting does your team have assigned next steps and action items. If so, how do you hold one another accountable?
- ◇ Consider how your team makes decisions. Do you use a consultative process, a democratic process, a consensus process, or a delegative process?
- ◇ How often does your team seek feedback on what is working and what needs improvement?

Behavior 9: Discuss Undiscussable Issues

The team skill of “*discussing undiscussable issues*” means that the entire team is committed to openly addressing team-relevant topics that people typically avoid because they are uncomfortable, potentially embarrassing, or may create conflict. Instead of discussing these issues privately or behind others' backs, team members bring them into the open, using behaviors like stating views, asking genuine questions, and jointly designing solutions.

Benefits: Builds trust, reduces misunderstandings, and strengthens accountability.

Competency: Addresses sensitive or avoided topics constructively to resolve barriers and improve team dynamics.

Food for Thought

- ◇ Does your team shy away from controversial topics that are important to the quality and effectiveness of your work?
- ◇ What is your team’s most persistent conflict style; competing, collaborative, compromising, avoiding or accommodating?
- ◇ How does your team handle discussions that are emotionally charged? Do you notice a pattern or specific behaviors that either make space for these types of discussions, or do they tend to be shut down? What are the consequences of either approach?
- ◇ Are there problematic behaviors by members of your team that are never addressed? What would a conversation be addressing these at a team level look like? What are the impacts of these behavior on team cohesion and trust?

Final Notes and Resources

When teams have a level of psychological safety and trust, by adopting these nine behaviors consistently a culture of mutual learning will take root. By collectively practicing the nine behaviors, teams can achieve greater engagement, better decisions, increased commitment, improved working relationships, and enhanced well-being.

Resources used in the development of this document, and for further exploration include:

- Argyris, Chris, et al: Action Science
- Center for Creative Leadership: Better Conversations Every Day
- Dweck, Carol: Mindset: The New Psychology of Success
- Schwarz, Roger: "Eight Behaviors for Smarter Teams"
- Senge, Peter, et al: The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook
- Stavros, J. & Torres, C.: Conversations Worth Having
- Torbert, William R. Action Inquiry; The secret of timely and transforming leaders.