



Smart Leaders Smarter Teams

How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results

Roger Schwarz
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Take-Aways

- Teams stall when leaders and team members adopt “the unilateral-control mind-set.”
- Unilateral leaders make all the team’s decisions, and believe only in their own ideas.
- Team members who are under the control of a unilateral leader don’t hold each other responsible for the team’s results.
- Most leaders don’t recognize that they work with this controlling attitude, but 98% do.
- Unilateral control is a zero-sum system: I win; you lose.
- The “mutual-learning mind-set” is a positive alternative based on all team members learning from each other.
- Mutuality is based on “transparency, curiosity, informed choice, accountability and compassion,” as well as shared leadership.
- The benefits of mutuality include improved team performance, smarter decisions, improved individual well-being and enhanced team relationships.
- Ask for and listen to feedback from your team members.
- As change occurs, work with your team to stay focused on your goals.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	8	6	7

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) Why team leaders should avoid “unilateral control”; 2) Why leaders should adopt the “mutual-learning mind-set”; and 3) How to manage your team for more effective, collaborative results.

Recommendation

Most leaders claim to consult with their teams and say they want everyone’s input. In reality, most leaders act like tin-pot dictators – assuming that people who don’t agree with them are always wrong. Organizational psychologist Roger Schwarz explains why some executives adopt this self-destructive, unilateral – and often oblivious – management style. He proposes a “mutual-learning mind-set” that helps leaders become as open-minded as they claim to be for better results all around. Some of the author’s recommendations are laughably impractical, like urging team members to explain out loud why they’ve just used negative body language, like rolling their eyes. However, that doesn’t detract from the insightful advice at the core of the book. Schwarz demonstrates a rare understanding of the negative aspects of leadership, how people can recognize those aspects in themselves and how they can change their behavior for the better. *getAbstract* recommends this book to team leaders and team members.

Summary

Restrictive Behavior

Corporate leadership teams often find themselves stuck in restrictive behavior patterns and unable to achieve the results they want. Often, the team as a group doesn’t seem as intelligent or effective as its individual members. To “get unstuck,” challenge your basic assumptions about leadership and embrace a few simple, effective teamwork tactics.

Forget the traditional idea that each team should have a single leader. While universally accepted, this principle proves flawed in action. Belief in one leader produces the “unilateral-control mind-set,” the I’m-in-charge attitude that 98% of all leaders adopt. On the surface, unilateral control seems logical. It says that in any room, one leader – generally the person with the most authority – makes the team’s decisions, directs the meetings, focuses the group’s attention and evaluates team member performance.

Staff members usually assume that leaders are “all-seeing, all-knowing and all-doing,” as if the leader becomes a boat’s “designer, captain, navigator and engineer,” while the rest of the team sits and rows. This system prevents team members from holding each other accountable. If there is only one leader, then only he or she must be responsible for every success or failure. Team members fall into this attitude because the leader calls all the shots. The leader in turn expects members to accept accountability; this paradox creates a dysfunctional disconnect.

Unilateral-Control Mind-Set

Most team leaders don’t realize that they operate with a unilateral-control attitude. They claim to be open and cooperative, and ready to listen to team members’ ideas. Whether leaders recognize it or not, unilateral control is a widely common default position. Under this rubric, the leader always knows best and acts from only the most pure motives – as if

“Teams that operate from a unilateral-control mind-set have difficulty identifying – let alone challenging – their own assumptions.”

“You can express your own views as passionately as you want, as long as you’re equally curious about others’ views.”

“Every incorrect assumption or inference you make undercuts your ability to find a solution that works for you and others.”

“The insidious thing about the unilateral mind-set is that it reinforces the very results you and your team are trying so hard to avoid.”

“Unilateral control decreases commitment, strains working relationships, reduces team learning and also promotes inappropriate dependence on others.”

“The wonderful thing about the mutual-learning mind-set is that the more you use it, the more you strengthen it.”

team members might have ulterior purposes. It stands to reason that the leader must prevail in any dispute. Leaders often believe that they think logically and that their members seldom think clearly at all.

Unilateral control preordains rigid thinking and behavior, and patterned responses to any situation: “When I am in situation X and Y happens, I should say or do Z.” This may translate as: “If I’m in a problem-solving meeting with my direct reports, and they are proposing a solution that I think won’t work, I should tell them why their idea is flawed.” This is unilateral control in action: telling team members that they must do only as the leader requires.

Even the most oblivious leader – one totally unaware of utilizing this dictatorial mind-set – can change. Learn to recognize the unilaterally controlling leader’s basic values:

- **“Win, don’t lose”** – The only objectives that count are yours – not the team’s. You must accomplish your ends, no matter what. You want to hear from your team members how they support your concepts and goals.
- **“Be right”** – Being right all the time feels wonderful. Your motto is, “I told you so.”
- **“Minimize expression of negative feelings”** – Ignore or suppress any unpleasant feelings your team members may have about your decisions.
- **“Act rational”** – Once you present the facts in your unimpeachable manner, reasonable people will succumb to your powerful logic.

The unilateral leader makes these incorrect assumptions:

- **“I understand the situation; those who disagree don’t”** – Your assessment must be correct. People who see things differently cannot understand.
- **“I am right; those who disagree are wrong”** – A team member challenging your assumptions only demonstrates his or her mistaken reasoning.
- **“My motives are pure”** – But only yours. You can trust me, but you can’t trust them.
- **“My feelings and behaviors are justified”** – Remember, I am always right.
- **“I am not contributing to the problem”** – How could I be an issue when I’m perfect?

Unproductive Behaviors

Such attitudes and assumptions lead to restrictive and unproductive behaviors. You tell team members what you think, but you don’t ask for their ideas. You share only the information that promotes your view. You never share your reasoning; you speak in confusing generalities and you make inaccurate assumptions that lead to poor decisions. Tough decisions make you uncomfortable, so you avoid them. Unilateral control leads to poor team performance, unproductive relationships and an overall decrease in team members’ well-being.

Team members generally accede to a leader’s unilateral approach, even though they might be frustrated. Because it represents accepted wisdom, following one leader feels right. Team members automatically accept and reinforce unilateral control, even when it limits their group success. As a result, both the leader and the team get stuck in the wastelands of unilateralism.

Team leaders should give up on always being right and promote the idea that every member can be a team leader. Teams can and should reorganize to help team members

“A unilateral-control mind-set leads inevitably to unilateral-control behavior, and the net effect is usually the opposite of what anyone wants.”

“Many approaches to leadership and teams become less effective as knowledge about them spreads.”

“Organizations are littered with the carcasses of once-touted change efforts that focused on changing only behaviors.”

“Simply learning new techniques or changing behavior without changing your mind-set is likely to lead to more of the same problems you’re encountering now.”

become accountable to each other. In the process – though it isn’t easy – leaders can change their own attitudes and behavior. “Changing how you lead begins with changing your own mind-set.”

The “Mutual-Learning Mind-Set”

Learn to function in an atmosphere of mutual learning – that’s the superior point of view that most leaders claim to prefer, but which few of them actually use. A mutual-learning leader’s main principle is: “I understand some things. So do you. Let’s learn and move forward together.”

Mutual learning values “transparency, curiosity, informed choice, accountability and compassion.” Transparency means sharing all the information your team needs to make smart decisions. Curiosity calls for learning what your team members think. Informed choice emerges from transparency and curiosity. You can make intelligent decisions because everyone has the right information.

In this atmosphere, you and your team members hold each other accountable for making smart choices. Compassion, which ties all five values together, recognizes the feelings of other people, connects to those feelings and helps everyone respond positively to one another. The mutual-learning approach makes these assumptions:

- **“I have information; so do others”** – Everyone can make a valuable contribution.
- **“Each of us sees things others don’t”** – Each person brings unique experience and insight to the table.
- **“Differences are opportunities for learning”** – Disagreements help you appreciate and understand your teammates’ views.
- **“People may disagree with me and still have pure motives”** – People see things differently. Having a variety of viewpoints helps your team achieve better results. Different viewpoints do not mean ulterior motives.
- **“I may be contributing to the problem”** – Remember: You are not perfect and you might sometimes operate with an “ineffective mind-set and behavior” that impedes your team.

Design, Behaviors and Results

A mutual-learning approach means improved results, superior team performance, better decisions, more innovation, decreased costs, increased trust, improved team relationships, enhanced well-being, and each person’s stronger commitment to the team and its goals.

Build your team on a foundation of mutual learning. Set goals that everyone can understand, establish clear roles for all team members and provide a workable plan for managing conflict.

Remain aware of your team’s structure and characteristics. Be conscious about process – how your team does things – and about context, external factors that affect your team. Your team needs a clear, aligned mission and vision, a positive culture, well-defined roles for each member, productive decision making, balanced communication, effective feedback mechanisms and a good system for conflict management. Your physical environment is also important.

Achieving superior results depends on particular “mutual-learning behaviors.” You and your team members should say what you think, and ask questions to learn what everyone

“Whoever controls the meeting strategy largely influences the outcome.”

“Team leadership can – in fact, must – come from everyone on the team.”

“Mind-set leads to behaviors, and those behaviors produce results.”

“Learning with and from each other is at the heart of the mutual-learning approach.”

else thinks. Share knowledge. To avoid confusion, reach consensus on the meaning of unclear words. Discuss your reasoning and intentions. Focus on what matters in attaining the team’s goals rather than on individual positions. Test your assumptions. Work together to plan the team’s future actions.

Typical Challenges

Working together under the auspices of a mutual-learning system will differ from how you’ve worked together before. The main differences will revolve around how to organize and conduct meetings, and how to provide feedback.

Think carefully about the information you intend to communicate to your team members in a meeting. Determine exactly why you and your team will meet. Complete this statement: “No matter what solution we come up with, it needs to be one that…” Test your operating assumptions and inferences. During all meetings, “go broad before you go deep”: Solicit everyone’s opinion before individual team members speak in detail. Share your views up front. Ask team members how they would prefer you to deliver feedback: Negative comments first? Chronologically? Positive comments first?

When working with a virtual team, present the views of anyone not present for the discussion. Virtual team members will want to communicate mostly via email. However, email does not communicate nuance. So when you can, make a phone call instead of sending an email.

Begin Your “Smarter Leader, Smarter Team” Journey

Change yourself: Start by setting personal leadership goals. Then, create an action plan. Tell your team members what you are doing. Explain mutual learning and discuss the way attitudes predetermine behavior. Discuss why the mutual-learning approach generates better results. As you begin your change program, compare your results with what you previously achieved. Watch out for triggers that may revert your thinking back to the unhelpful unilateral-control mind-set. Regularly ask for and listen to feedback from your team members.

To change your team, ask team members to experiment with mutual learning and “shared leadership.” The mutual-learning approach represents a major change from the unilateral-control approach. Communication between you and your team members will become more nonlinear than in the past. Problems will take longer to resolve. As you and your team members institute change, strive for mutual agreement about the specific outcomes the team hopes to achieve. Involve everyone in the redesign of the team’s “context, structure and processes.”

Relinquishing the unilateral-control approach depends on gaining “mutual-learning skills,” which your team members can develop naturally. Ask an objective third party to help your team members identify and recognize their processes. Goals for this exercise include better performance, improved work relationships and enhanced well-being for everyone on the team.

About the Author

Organizational psychologist **Roger Schwarz** is president of Roger Schwarz & Associates, a leadership team facilitation consultancy, and author of *The Skilled Facilitator*.