

### Derailing the Derailers

Today’s modern corporation consists of “teams of strangers,” working remotely and in person, stretched across a continent or the world. Gone are the days when everyone lived in the same community for their entire lives, sharing common values, social structures, and communication—all of which were implicitly understood in large measure within that group.

Even a shared language among “teams of strangers” is no guarantee that communication is actually occurring...and effective communication among all the levels everywhere within an organization is essential for the CEO’s goals to be properly executed. There are steps, however, that can be easily implemented throughout a company that can minimize the three big process derailers: **Protocol Risk**, **Group Think Risk**, and **Misperception Risk**. Here are the essential steps:

1. Identify each corporate goal.
2. Map processes, departments, and personnel involved throughout the company that are necessary for goal achievement.
3. Establish upfront an agreed-upon structure and communication process that will minimize the derailers:

**Protocol Risk Addressed:** Too many times people think that they are both agreeing on procedures only to discover that what they thought the other person was going to do wasn’t what that other person thought they should do.

To minimize, ensure that goals, norms, and roles are all defined, both in writing AND at the start of each conversation. Explain what are the expected social roles—the part each plays as members of a social group—and the social norms—the rules of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that are acceptable. **Choose norms that actually encourage team members from all groups to work well together on reaching the goal and that hold each member accountable.**

Be alert to the onset of microstress—those pressures that occur from “the relentless accumulation of unnoticed small stresses in passing moments.” Many great tools to identify where microstress is emanating from and how to minimize it are in Rob Cross and Karen Dillon’s book, *The Microstress Effect*.

**Group Think Risk Addressed:** One department has a cohesive communication and organizational role definition that they have established and makes all parties within that group productive and satisfied. However, they need to work with other groups within and without the organization that have different communication and organizational role definitions AND those other groups are just as satisfied with their own group’s productivity and ways of working. Oops, here’s a potential and highly likely Group Think Risk situation developing that is responsible for many corporate goal derailments.

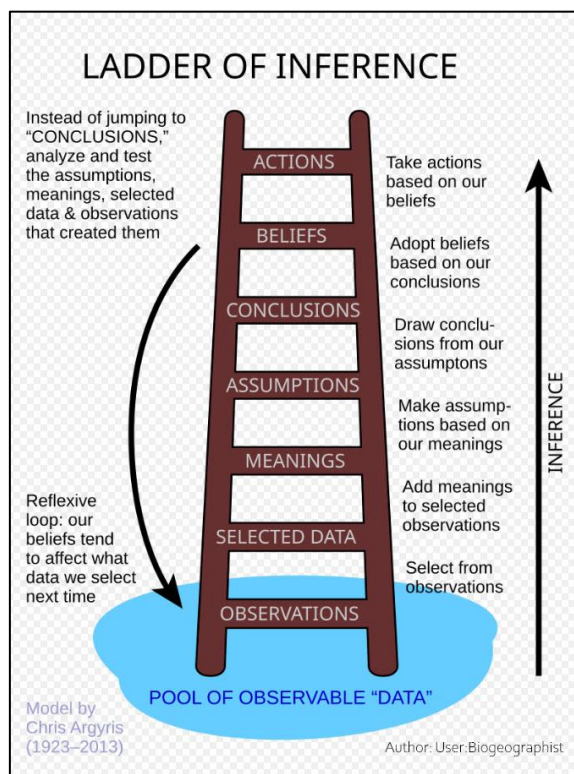
For examples: the classic Sales versus Finance clashes, the new Hybrid Office versus Remote Office versus In-Office clashes. Let’s add in for additional spice, headquarters is in New York, another team is based in Australia, another in the United Kingdom: even though they are all speaking the same language, they might not be understanding each other well as those cultures are quite different in their values, social structures, and communication methods. Go ahead and add in another non-English speaking language group and Group Think Risks multiplies.

A great way to minimize Group Think Risk is to use a Decision-Making Bias-Minimization structure within a Subject Matter Expert (SME) team that has a representative from each of the different departments involved in reaching the goal.

The SME team members determine their roles, and then independently and without consulting the other SME team members (avoids framing bias), each: (a) collects different estimates of costs; (b) considers pros/cons of possible methods and processes to use obtained from both internal and external neutral parties (avoids anchoring, escalation of commitment, and confirmation biases); (c) checks for counterfactual realities (if X were changed, what would Y look like?); (d) reviews potential sampling processes to employ; (e) concludes with a premortem analysis (what could cause this effort to fail and what would all the steps up to that failure look like so that scenario can be avoided?).

Then the SME group meets, shares findings, and as a group, makes recommendations to executives as to how to best proceed. They continue to meet regularly with the same SME members to review and make modifications as necessary to ensure all departments are continuing to move forward on their sections, in sync with other groups until goal is achieved.

Adding different types of personalities and maximum diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, geography) to the functional and experience diversity of a SME team will further reduce the likelihood of Group Think Risk.



**Misperception Risk Addressed:** A person's perception is that person's reality...and those perceptions are formed from the person's reference points of experience, location, genetics, age, environment, unconscious bias, and background. It is no wonder that in the modern corporation of "teams of strangers," Misperception Risk is rampant. In addition to using Active Listening approaches to derail Misperception Risk, consider:

- Employing The 3 Conversations and other techniques detailed in the classic books, *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen; *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* by Roger Fisher, William Ury, Bruce Patton.
- Before acting, checking to see if The Ladder of Inference (LOI) is present. Climbing the LOI almost always results in flawed responses and continues as a negative reflex loop leading to further inappropriate actions based on more misperceptions.

#### IN CONCLUSION:

Yes, there are lots of options to craft unique solutions that overcome risks to achieving corporate goals, even when working in "teams of strangers."

#### References

- ✓ Active listening. (2024, September 6). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active\\_listening](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_listening)
- ✓ Chris Argyris. (2024, August 30). In *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris\\_Argyris](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Argyris)
- ✓ Cross, R., & Dillon, K. (2023). *The microstress effect: How little things pile up and create big problems--and what to do about it*. Harvard Business Press.
- ✓ Dickerson, C. (2024, May 9). *The ladder of inference: Building self-awareness to be a better human-centered leader*. Harvard Business Publishing. <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/the-ladder-of-inference-building-self-awareness-to-be-a-better-human-centered-leader/>
- ✓ Fisher, R., Ury, W. L., & Patton, B. (2011). *Getting to yes: Negotiating agreement without giving in*. Penguin.
- ✓ Hackman, J. R. (2002). *Leading teams: Setting the stage for great performances*. Harvard Business Press.
- ✓ McLeod, S. (2023). Social roles. *Simply Psychology*. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-roles.html>
- ✓ Robbins, S. P., & Judge, T. A. (2020). *Organizational behavior*, 19th edition. Pearson.
- ✓ Shapiro, M. (2015). *HBR guide to leading teams*. Harvard Business Press.
- ✓ Stone, D., Patton, B., & Heen, S. (2023). *Difficult conversations: How to discuss what matters most*. Penguin.
- ✓ This vs. That. (2023). *Method vs. Process*. <https://thisvsthat.io/method-vs-process>
- ✓ Watkins, M. D., & Bazerman, M. H. (2003). Predictable surprises: The disasters you should have seen coming. *Harvard Business Review*, 81(3), 72-85.