By Jean-Francois Cousin

TRUST AND PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

Introduction

How can you build stronger trust amongst your executive team? How can you nurture its ability to hold productive conflicts? In this article, executive coach Jean-Francois Cousin draws from his experience with many leadership teams in Asia to share what can work well.

Observing an executive team meeting focused on "Performance Plans", the newest head-office initiative, I notice participants are focused, seek clarity, joke regularly, write-down their actions, take decisions... And when Andrew -the CEO- questions those who don't say much, they provide valuable opinions. However, the meeting drags-on well beyond the time allocated, with many more discussions on form than on substance... As if it was more important to do the exercise to perfection for headquarters, rather than complete it in the best interest of the local business. Another issue: Andrew speaks 40% of the time, 2 other executives about 15%, while the rest hardly contributes, unless prompted. Most strikingly, there is no real group-discussion and no confrontation of different opinions. Andrew concludes: "I know this is creating a lot of extra work for all of us; please let me know if it isn't possible to do it within the deadlines." No one says anything... but the silence weighs heavily.

"Andrew, may I give you candid feedback on this meeting and your executive team?" I ask. "Please shoot!" "The good news is: you have a brilliant collection of dedicated executives. The bad news is: you don't have a team. Your guys' degree of interpersonal trust seems low. They don't engage in healthy group-discussions. They don't talk about the elephants in the room (such as the growing number of priorities and the quest for perfection)." Andrew requests me to elaborate and then decides to embark on a team-building exercise focused on trust, productive conflict and accountability.

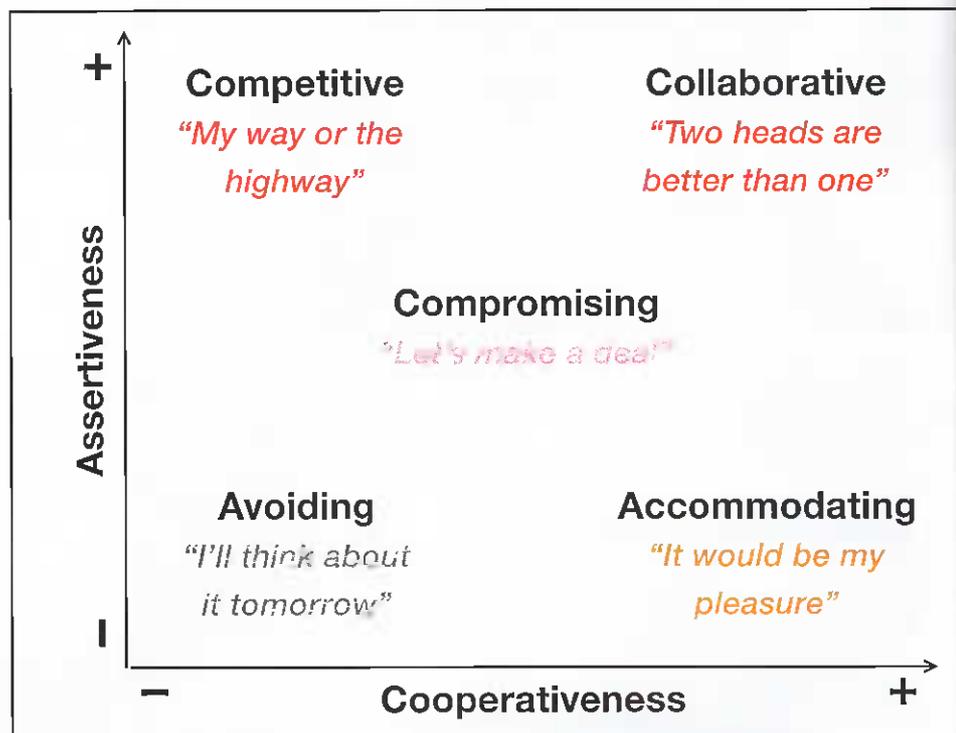## Effectiveness derailers for an Executive Team

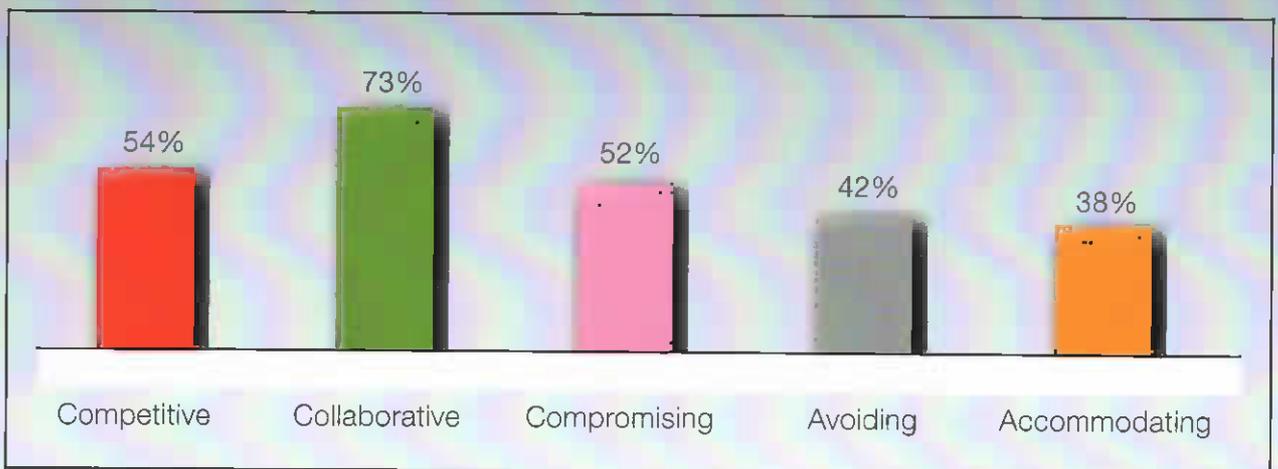We choose to leverage Patrick Lencioni's approach in his book "the five dysfunctions

of a team" : five steps to build a highly effective team. First, establish trust amongst members, the kind of trust which makes people comfortable to disclose their weaknesses and ask for help. Second, engage in unfiltered, productive conflict, rather than skip it to preserve artificial harmony within the group. This suppresses ambiguity and generates healthy decisions, to which people can genuinely commit (third step). The fourth step invites team-members to be accountable to each-other for their performance and "call their peers on actions and behaviors that seem counterproductive to the good of the team". The final step -"attention to results"- requests team-members to place the collective goals of their peers-team above their own interest or their subordinates' team benefit.

Andrew and his executives read Lencioni's book and complete its team-assessment questionnaire. Unsurprisingly, the team scores low on 2 particular points:

- "team-members know about one another's personal lives and are comfortable discussing them";

- "team-members discuss together the most difficult issues until resolution is found ".

Another preparatory assessment the Executive Team undertakes is 'Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument' (TKI) (2), which categorizes people's approach to conflict along two dimensions: assertiveness (the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns) and cooperativeness (the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns).

Competitive
"My way or the highway"

Collaborative
"Two heads are better than one"

Compromising
"Let's make a deal"

Avoiding
"I'll think about it tomorrow"

Accommodating
"It would be my pleasure"

Assertiveness / **Cooperativeness**

Competitive	Collaborative	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating
54%	73%	52%	42%	38%

Andrew's executives have very different TKI profiles. Some often resort to 'avoiding' or 'accommodating' behaviours whilst others primarily use the 'competing' mode. A promising information is that the team's TKI compounded-profile shows 'collaborative' as the preferred approach to conflict overall. Typically, a 'collaborative' person explores a disagreement with a view to learn from each other's insights or/and try to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem.

The core challenge: embracing trust and personal vulnerability

Team-building time has come. We gently embark on our hard-work, with a music-video from Heather Small, who questions: "what will you do today to make you feel proud?" The first dive is for everyone to share "3 outstanding things about her/him... that no-one else knows in the executive team, good and not so good!" (participants had been invited to prepare this sharing a few days before, so it comes as no surprise).

Andrew had shared with me his own 3 points ahead of time, and is ready to go for authentic disclosure first. Yet -surprise! surprise?-, Apinya, the most guarded executive, raises her hand first and speaks out. In summary: outstanding academic awards, charity work and adventurous moments abroad... She seems relieved after her statement, oblivious that she just wasted her opportunity to genuinely open-up to her peers...

I am about to 'activate' Andrew, to lead by example' everyone into real 'disclosure' zone, when Panupong, the charismatic manufacturing director, volunteers with his usual self-confident grin. "First, I probably failed more times than anyone else here! I had a head-start with low grades at school. Had much more fun with outdoors activities. As a freshman at university, I continued to do just enough to pass exams, as life was so good to enjoy. Until my father abruptly died. Devastating shock. I felt I was reborn overnight as... a man, with responsibility (...)"

Now we are getting the right spin

Jantima, the glamorous, ambitious and distant sales director, follows suit: "You don't know that I come from a really poor family. My mother ran a small laundry shop and my father left when I was 4. So I developed a sense for survival early and money

quickly became important. My first job was cleaning my relatives' houses -I was 9 - I will always remember the moment when I got my first 20 Baht salary! (...)"

Such sharing exercise works out very well -with proper preparation of participants and clear expectations upfront-, simply because everyone benefits from more trust amongst team members.

The next activity has everyone writing down the one thing he/she appreciates the most about each of his/her peers, on their individual "Certificate of Appreciation". So simple, yet so positive! Many people actually keep that certificate preciously in their desk...

Certificate of Appreciation presented to:

Then we raise the bar and everyone has to share candidly (A) her/his greatest value added to the team, in just one word, and (B) the one thing she/he wants to improve, to be a better contributor to the team. Our harvest is rich again: 'clarity', 'assurance', 'positive energy', 'understanding', 'vision', 'consistency' etc... on the value-added side. On the self-improvement side: 'more empathy in interactions with you' (says Jantima), 'more systematic thinking', 'more listening', 'ask for help', 'stop kreng jai' etc...

Engaging in productive conversations

We spend the afternoon working on productive conflict, with role-plays, and that's actually when... we laugh the most! We also take a look at the team's TKI profile and the variety across (un-named) individual profiles. Pramet asks: "Why don't you show our names besides the individual profiles?" "Because that is personal information I can't share, unless everyone here asks me to." I reply. "We could interact with each other a lot better if we'd know!" supports Robert, the British IT Director. All agree in an outburst of "Yes!" Another milestone along our way!

Then we practice Susan Scott's 'Confrontation Model', from her remarkable book "Fierce Conversations" (4), which helps engage in genuine conversations on tough issues, and effectively drive to resolution. Team-members get a walk outside, two-by-two, to hold two such 'fierce conversations', on the two most important issues they share...

They return invigorated and all smiles.

Our work on 'accountability-to-the-team' ends with one more personal disclosure: everyone asks others to keep him/her accountable for something new he/she wants to do.

Apinya -who had wasted her opportunity to open-up to others that morning- doesn't miss her second chance, as she says simply: "be me."

Panupong volunteers: "I propose to be the team's 'conflict-miner'." (in charge of extracting buried disagreements within the team)

Jantima -the distant sales director- throws in: "I'll start building empathy into all interactions."

Andrew goes for: "focus strictly on what matters most; and talk less!"

The next day is dedicated to 'practicing' productive team-conversations on most important issues, and starts with agreeing on a short-list of... the 'elephants' in the room. Andrew is in for a number of surprises... Panupong excels in his role of conflict miner, and reminds all -at three tense moments- that "this hurts a bit, but it's better we go all the way."

That evening, as Andrew is about to dive in the swimming-pool, he smiles: "I still can't believe what happened; that was the toughest day in my career so far, and the very best one."