Moving from best to better and better

Business practice redesign is an untapped opportunity

The Deloitte Center for the Edge conducts original research and develops substantive points of view for new corporate growth. The center, anchored in Silicon Valley with teams in Europe and Australia, helps senior executives make sense of and profit from emerging opportunities on the edge of business and technology. Center leaders believe that what is created on the edge of the competitive landscape—in terms of technology, geography, demographics, markets—inevitably strikes at the very heart of a business. The Center for the Edge's mission is to identify and explore emerging opportunities related to big shifts that are not yet on the senior management agenda, but ought to be. While Center leaders are focused on long-term trends and opportunities, they are equally focused on implications for near-term action, the day-to-day environment of executives.

Below the surface of current events, buried amid the latest headlines and competitive moves, executives are beginning to see the outlines of a new business landscape. Performance pressures are mounting. The old ways of doing things are generating diminishing returns. Companies are having a harder time making money—and increasingly, their very survival is challenged. Executives must learn ways not only to do their jobs differently, but also to do them better. That, in part, requires understanding the broader changes to the operating environment:

- What is really driving intensifying competitive pressures?

- What long-term opportunities are available?

- What needs to be done today to change course?

Decoding the deep structure of this economic shift will allow executives to thrive in the face of intensifying competition and growing economic pressure. The good news is that the actions needed to address short-term economic conditions are also the best long-term measures to take advantage of the opportunities these challenges create. For more information about the Center's unique perspective on these challenges, visit www.deloitte.com/centerforedge.

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Overview: Beyond process

UNDER mounting performance pressure, many corporate leaders are looking to business process reengineering to improve performance, and in many ways that makes sense—after all, processes give shape to an organization and are often useful for coordinating routine flows across large organizations. The routine work of a company *should* be done as efficiently as possible, which increasingly means incorporating automation.

But organizations may be missing a much greater opportunity to improve performance.

Here's the thing: Much of the work of many organizations today—at least the work that typically offers the potential for differentiation—is no longer routine or even predictable. When conditions and requirements shift constantly, processes fail. While process optimization can still certainly help reduce costs and streamline operations, leaders should consider a different kind of organizational rethinking for significant performance improvement.

And in an environment of accelerating technological advances and rapid and unpredictable change, *constant performance improvement is a must*. Competition can come from anywhere—doing well relative to the competitors on your radar isn't enough. Many barriers to competition are falling, and many boundaries, between industries and between markets, are blurring. Consumers have more access to information and alternatives than ever, along with a coincident increase in expectations. Workers have more access to information and alternatives—and increased expectations.

At the same time, many employees, in all kinds of environments, face increasing pressure to reach higher levels of individual performance. The useful life of many skills is in decline, creating a constant pressure to learn fast and reskill.

Many companies have struggled to effectively respond to these pressures since long before the Internet of Things and cognitive technologies added new layers of complexity. The average return on assets for US companies has declined for the past several decades, and companies find themselves displaced from market leadership positions more often than they used to.[1] While the price-performance improvement in the digital infrastructure has increased exponentially, most companies are still capturing only a small fraction of the value that ought to be available through the technologies built on this infrastructure. Existing approaches to performance improvement appear to be falling short.

It begs the question: In a world of digital transformation and constant change, what does *performance improvement* mean? Many companies suffer from at least one of three broad problems that can misdirect their focus:

1. **Thinking of performance improvement too modestly.** Leaders often think of performance advances as discrete, one-time jumps from A to B, or even a series of jumps to C and D. The initiatives that typically generate these bumps are similarly construed as pre-defined, one-time changes rather than as unbounded efforts that have the potential to generate more and more improvement. As we discuss in more detail in *Beyond process*,[2] not only do most companies need to continually improve their performance—those that don't start accelerating may fall further and further behind and become increasingly marginalized. Accelerating improvement, then, should be a goal of *operations*, not just one-off initiatives.

2. **Thinking of performance improvement too narrowly, focused only on costs**. Process optimization and cost reduction have

dominated much of performance improvement efforts for the past several decades, focusing largely on the denominator of the financial ratio of revenues to costs. But costs can be cut only so far, and technology-based process efficiencies can be quickly competed away, especially at a time when the changing environment and shifting customer expectations are making many standardized processes quickly obsolete. Further reductions can become harder to achieve and have less impact.

The relevant performance might be more about an organization's ability to create significant new value. Workers across an organization regularly encounter new needs, new tools for meeting needs, and opportunities to identify new ways of delivering more value and impact in multiple dimensions, including helping other parts of the organization generate more value. The potential for value creation isn't confined to certain roles or functions, and is bounded primarily by an organization's ability to create new knowledge and creatively address new problems. Focusing on new value creation may be the key to getting on a trajectory of accelerating performance improvement. Doing so would require an organization to move beyond efficiency and standardization and begin focusing on cultivating the behaviors—such as experimentation and reflection to make sense of what has been learned—associated with new value creation.

3. **Thinking of performance improvement at the wrong level.** Most organizations manage performance where they measure it—which is to say where they have data: broadly, for the department and organization, and narrowly, for the individual. Both levels can miss where work, especially value-creating work, increasingly gets done: in groups. As a result, organizations can miss the opportunity to shape how work actually gets done. Focusing on performance where it matters most to the organization's work might be a key to having a significant impact on the performance that matters.

The imperative to act seems simple: Today's environment seems to offer no reprieve, no stabilization that gives us a chance to catch our breath and say, "OK, now we've got it figured out." The methods and processes that led organizations to great success in the past seem to no longer be working. For sustained performance improvement, companies may need to change their focus and look in new directions.

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DEFINITION OF A FRONTLINE WORKGROUP

For our purposes, a frontline workgroup is characterized by size, sustained involvement, and integrated effort. A workgroup pulls together three to 15 people working interdependently to deliver a shared outcome that could not be achieved without all members working on it together. The members spend the significant majority of their time interacting with each other, formally and informally, on tasks that cannot be highly specified or sequenced in advance.

What a workgroup is not:

- an entire department

- a task force or committee in which decisions or recommendations are made but not executed by that task force or committee

- a set of people whose work is determined by highly specified, tightly integrated tasks

- a standing unit whose composition remains stable over a long period of time

- a team that meets on an infrequent basis to perform some tasks together

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Where will organizations find performance improvement instead?

Fortunately, many companies have a largely unexplored opportunity to not just improve performance but to accelerate that improvement, breaking out of the trap of diminishing returns and moving onto a performance curve of increasing returns. And it isn't an opportunity only for the organization but for the workers as well.

If an organization is to take advantage of this opportunity, it may need new business practices—focused on new value creation—that help it get better and better, faster. The opportunities to identify and create significant value will likely emerge on the front lines, where workers are encountering changing market needs and dynamic conditions almost every day. These unexpected demands, or "exceptions," fall outside of the standard processes. As the demands and conditions become more complex and unfamiliar, frontline workers could have to work together in order to address them, since an individual alone will be less likely to effectively solve an issue or develop an opportunity.

An opportunity for companies, then, is to shift to cultivating the workgroup practices (see sidebar, "Definition of a frontline workgroup") that can accelerate improvement in the operating metrics that seem most relevant to a company's performance. These groups' ability to accelerate their own learning and impact as they encounter exceptions can be key to improving their own operating metrics, which in turn could be critical to overall corporate performance.

PRACTICES TO ACCELERATE PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

We identified nine key practices that help frontline workgroups accelerate performance improvement.

First, what do we mean by *practice*? A practice is the way work actually gets done, the activity involved in accomplishing a particular job.[3] We use it in contrast to formalized process, referring to the way work and information flow is organized and coordinated across stages. Process is how work can be done in a controlled and predictable environment where the solution is understood and predetermined.

Processes leave little room for variance. They can be documented. They are often handed down from above and manifest the command-and-control often thought necessary to drive performance efficiency in a predictable, scalable efficiency model. Practices, by contrast, are not typically codified. They are mostly tacit and emerge through action—for instance, there's no learning to ride a bike except through the act of trying. Practices tend to be context-specific and are constantly evolving—much like today's business opportunities.

Practices can be difficult to articulate; they don't translate into a "practice manual." Specific instances of practices will share some similarities that guide—rather than govern—our actions. That is part of what can make a practice so powerful. One can describe a practice and what seems to be most important about it at a high level, but the actual practice will develop in a way that is specific to the context. Studying Xerox field technicians in the 1990s, anthropologist and organizational consultant Julian Orr observed that even supposedly identical machines, once deployed in the field, develop peculiarities depending on age, usage, and the characteristics of the physical environment in which they sit. As a result, in all but the most straightforward cases, the issues technicians faced fell outside of the documented process for which they had been trained. Fixing any given machine on any given day depended upon a set of undocumented and evolving practices that helped field technicians learn faster what would work or not work in a specific context.[4]

Practices that may help accelerate performance improvement in the workgroup would:

- **Emerge in the workgroup:** We distinguish the practices of a group from management practices, which tend to require organizational leadership to implement, or individual practices, which rarely have the scope to affect an organization's performance.[5] By providing the space for experimentation and reflection, workgroups can be a uniquely effective environment for cultivating the tacit knowledge of practices. Practices may more readily be observed, tried out, refined, and informally shared within a group's narrower confines and deep, trust-based

relationships. In this way, groups can both learn new practices and use those practices to potentially learn faster how to improve performance.

- **Drive learning embodied in action**: The learning that is important here is not just sharing existing knowledge or data but creating new knowledge. That might mean coming up with more creative ways of acting on information or dealing with entirely new situations.
- **Leverage technology**: Practices should catch up with technology. As new technology platforms and tools emerge, practices should evolve to harness the potential in technology.
- **Evolve as context evolves**: Business practices may not sound revolutionary. In fact, the shift from focusing on business process optimization to cultivating workgroup practices, which could evolve and diverge, is subversive, empowering work and workers and undermining efforts to standardize and, ultimately, control them. Shifting to practice more than process can lead to a proliferation of ways to do things on the front line, defying documentation and standardization.

While practices themselves are usually context-dependent, the need for practices can transcend contexts, including "culture." Some cultures may naturally lean toward certain practices over others, while some may seem unsuited for any of the practices. Regardless of the existing culture, however, organizations aiming to stay relevant will likely need to move toward a culture in which workgroups accelerate performance improvement. These prac-

tices can help create the conditions for groups and, perhaps ultimately, organizations to rapidly evolve.

This set of articles hardly constitutes an exhaustive blueprint of everything a workgroup should do—a well-functioning group will no doubt develop other useful practices and processes that help members accomplish their work. The practices we identify specifically focus on what may be needed to *accelerate performance improvement*. However, they are also not exhaustive in the sense of even detailing what a workgroup might need to do to accelerate performance, since the conundrum of writing about practices is that, by their nature, even the act of trying to capture a practice has a way of changing it. We have tried to describe what is most pertinent: the practices that seem to drive the type of continuous learning in action that is needed to accelerate performance. We also offer examples of more-specific sub-practices and tactics.

Note that we deliberately are not talking about the practices for *high-performing teams*. The distinction is more than semantics. Others have extensively discussed practices for high performance, and we don't intend to challenge or recreate that research. Nor do we dismiss it. The organizations that learn how to get on an accelerating performance trajectory—where they continuously develop new and better ways to deliver new value rather than becoming more efficient at delivering the same value—could be the ones that thrive in an increasingly unpredictable world, one in which a strength can rapidly turn into a vulnerability. The practices that aim to generate high performance as typically defined within an organization—delivering the results that leaders expect—are unlikely to gen-
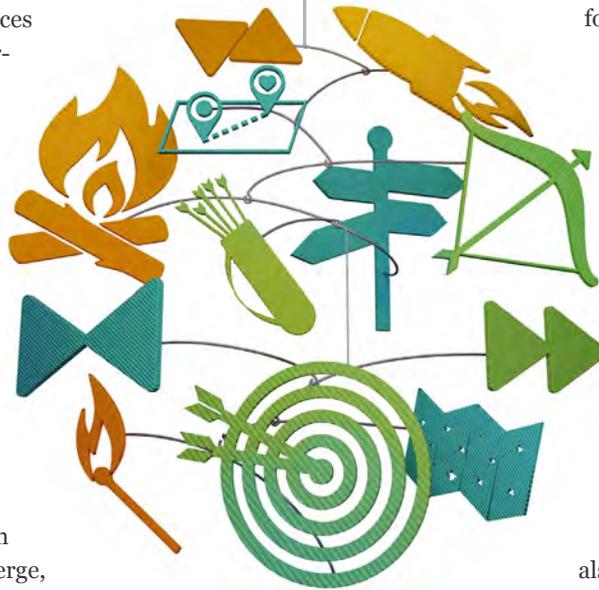
Figure 1. The nine practices

The practices for accelerating performance improvement work together: provoking the workgroup to push boundaries, propelling the group into action, and pulling the members together to achieve more and more impact over time.

Source: Center for the Edge.

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erate accelerating performance improvement and may actually hinder it.

THE PRACTICE BUNDLE

In this report, we identify nine practices (see figure 1) that are key for accelerating performance improvement in operational workgroups. Taken individually, they can help provoke, propel, and pull together, building momentum around a challenge. Combined, they reinforce and counterbalance each other to help workgroups learn faster and have more impact.

Given the limitations of text and language, we write about each practice individually. Two points should be clear: First, the power of the practices is as a bundle—the more the better. They tend to

THE NINE PRACTICES PLAY THREE ROLES THAT CAN ACCELERATE PERFORMANCE AND LEARNING:

- Those that can **provoke** the workgroup to think differently about a challenge and possible approaches and create better alternatives

- Those that can **propel** a group into action to gain additional insight into the next best move to make a greater impact

- Those that can help members **pull together** to harness diversity and come up with ever-higher impact and outcomes

amplify each other to accelerate performance and learning within a workgroup. While implementing any one practice can help a frontline group accelerate performance, the goal should be to bring together as many of the nine as possible.

Second, workgroup leaders should not think of these practices as sequential—and certainly not as siloed. Many of us in organizations are so oriented toward thinking in process steps that it can be almost impossible to look at nine practices and not immediately start thinking about them in a sequential way. Resist the urge. These are not stages or handoffs; they don't have defined inputs or outputs. Rather, these are ways of working in which most, if not all, group members would be engaged much of the time. They reinforce each other.

For example, *prioritizing performance trajectory* can help amplify the *shared outcome* by establishing tangible objectives that the team can pursue. Additionally, having a *bias toward action* and a *commitment to a shared outcome* could direct a group forward but also might mean that workgroups stick to the way things have always been done. However, pairing it with *cultivate friction* and *reflect more to learn faster* might ensure that teams go beyond "good enough" and look beyond the old way of doing things.

How to use these practices

Practices may look different for every workgroup. We present the nine practices in a format intended to guide exploration and practical use.

Each write-up includes the following:
- An introduction, describing the potential value of the practice in terms of driving performance improvement over time for a workgroup
- **What the practice is**: definition and key distinctions
- **What it isn't**: misunderstandings that can send you down the wrong path
- **You know you need this practice when**: You have to start somewhere; use this section to get a sense of which practices might have the biggest impact on your workgroup in the near term
- **Putting the practice into play**: discussion and examples of how a practice can become real,

including a deeper look at techniques that could help bring theory into practice
- **Antibodies at work**: Why isn't this easy? What are some of the key obstacles you might face in the organization when trying to put the practice into practice?
- **Questions for reflection**: practical questions designed to help you develop the practice within the context of your own workgroup

How to get started

Perhaps the best news: This doesn't have to be a huge organizational transformation. Get started today, one workgroup at a time, starting with those that might have a disproportionate impact on the organization's operating performance. Small moves, smartly made, can set big things in motion.

Anyone, whether an executive or a frontline worker, can use these practices to begin changing how her organization works. Leaders may have to resist the urge to make it a major initiative and instead be very targeted, focusing on one or two workgroups with the most potential for impact to generate proof points and build momentum. Staying small and focused could help avoid alerting the organizational immune system, affording more space to demonstrate impact. On the other hand, employees would have to take initiative to start developing these practices within their own groups, or honoring and cultivating the practices that already exist, without relying on a mandate or even permission from above.

Which practices you start with might depend on whether a particular workgroup has been in existence for a while or if it is just forming. It's safe to say that many organizations could benefit from more productive friction, but some established groups may need to *eliminate unproductive friction* first, while new-forming groups might be encouraged to defy conventional wisdom by forgoing "fit" and seeking to *maximize potential for friction*. A workgroup should choose the practices that seem likely to have the most impact on the challenge it is facing. Whatever the practices, look to identify a few workgroup metrics that are especially relevant to understanding a workgroup's performance and

trajectory. Significant performance improvement, as reflected in a key operating metric, could drive interest in having a more systematic focus on practices to drive widespread performance acceleration.

It is worth repeating that, as momentum builds in one or two workgroups, the goal should not be to standardize these practices for scale across the organization. Measure and monitor performance at the workgroup level, for those groups. Use the selected workgroup-level operating metrics as tools for better understanding the success of certain practices rather than for reporting or compliance.

Business practice redesign is more than a key to unlocking the potential for accelerating business performance improvement. These nine practices can be a key to working in a world of constant change and digital transformation—for working in a world of *flow*. They have the potential to change the way we work with each other, today. And they might be just the beginning of a conversation about how we will work, tomorrow; they may put organizations on the path to redefining work to focus humans on what we can uniquely do, along with helping to amplify the potential of humans and machines working together. The practices are ready to be made yours and put into practice in your own workgroups—a living, and evolving, list that shouldn't require approvals or change management. It requires only that you get started.

CASE STUDIES

Over the course of developing this framework and identifying and describing these nine practices, we talked to 60-plus workgroups across 20 markets and three continents. We sought to focus in particular on groups that seemed to be improving their performance over time. For a representative list of these groups, see exhibit A in *Beyond process*.[6]

Full case studies for eight workgroups will be forthcoming in the *Case study library*, to be published in February 2018. Although our research suggests that few organizations collect any type of systemic data at the workgroup level, members of the groups we profile believe that they are indeed accelerating performance. Each have adopted at least one practice from each category (provoke, propel, pull together). The two most commonly used practices are *commit to a shared outcome* and *maximize potential for friction*, which seems to make sense: To get better over time, the groups we studied had to be committed to a specific outcome, and all of them had tried to bring in divergent ideas around achieving those outcomes. Where many workgroups fell short was around cultivating friction to harness the creative potential of that diversity. The case studies illustrate how real workgroups across an array of industries are using practices to accelerate their own performance improvement.

ENDNOTES

1. John Hagel, John Seely Brown, Maggie Wooll, and Andrew de Maar, *The paradox of flows: Can hope flow from fear?*, Deloitte University Press, December 13, 2016. The Shift Index shows that over the past five decades, there has been a sustained, non-secular decline in ROA for the US economy. The rate at which companies lose the leadership position in an industry is known as the topple rate and is tracked as part of the Impact Index.

2. John Hagel, John Seely Brown, Andrew de Maar, and Maggie Wooll, *Beyond process: How to get better, faster as "exceptions" become the rule*, Deloitte University Press, November 13, 2017.

3. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, "Balancing act: How to capture knowledge without killing it," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2000.

4. John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business School, 2002), p. 101.

5. As discussed in greater detail in John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, "Practice vs. process: The tension that won't go away," *Knowledge Directions*, spring 2000, there is an ongoing and unresolved tension in any organization between how knowledge is generated, through practice, and how it is implemented or propagated, generally through process. Large organizations need not to resolve this tension but, rather, to become comfortable with the play between the practice and process.

6. Hagel et al., *Beyond process*.

How can workers and companies get better, faster?

Nine business practices aim to help workgroups accelerate performance improvement.

PROVOKE ▲▼			**PROPEL**

FRAME A POWERFUL QUESTION	**SEEK NEW CONTEXTS**	**CULTIVATE FRICTION**	**COMMIT TO A SHARED OUTCOME**
Set the stage	**Look around**	**Embrace complexity**	**Make the most important thing the most important thing**
Know what you don't know	Bust silos	Keep an open mind	
Ask a question that changes the game	Find a performance edge	Celebrate diversity	Take the long view
Focus on the who, not just the what	Shape serendipitous encounters	Be curious	Be bold
		Play with possibilities	Define the ends, not the means
			Capture the feeling
Amp it up	**Look within**		Go public
Name one thing	Put context in context	**Amp it up**	
Make it personal	Probe the context	Name one thing	**Make it meaningful**
Seek surprise	Seek an unvarnished view	Make it personal	Make it real, now
Look for insights, not answers	Give before taking Focus on the fundamental	Seek surprise	Keep it real
		Look for insights, not answers	Raise the bar

		PULL TOGETHER ◄◄		

BIAS TOWARD ACTION	PRIORITIZE PERFORMANCE TRAJECTORY	MAXIMIZE POTENTIAL FOR FRICTION	ELIMINATE UNPRODUCTIVE FRICTION	REFLECT MORE TO LEARN FASTER
Reframe risk	**Identify metrics that matter**	**Engage diverse perspectives**	**Foster trust and respect**	**Feed the reflection**
Maximize upside potential	Measure what matters	Diversify diversity	Embrace vulnerability, encourage humility	Capture what you can
Disagree and commit	Don't give up on your gut	Look outside the workgroup	Empathize Make it about we, not me	Be radically transparent
Create sandcastles	Embrace double standards			Seek continuous feedback
Make more decisions reversible	Closely watch a few numbers	**Seek volunteers**	Build deep trust, swiftly	
Go until no	Put operating metrics over financial ones	Find powerful ways to pull	Live your values	**Make the most of your -mortem**
		Vote with your feet		Conduct pre-mortems
Act to learn	**Track trajectory, not snapshots**		**Have learning conversations**	Reflect in action
Modularize where possible	Focus on accelera-tion	**Turn down volunteers**	Create a common language	Conduct after-action reviews
Stage your moves	Keep moving the edge	Look for character before competence	Focus on what's important, be specific	Reflect on how you reflect
Minimize effort, maximize momen-tum		Staff for passion over skill	Start broad, go deep	Be your own judge, not your only judge
Leverage to learn	**Tackle tradeoffs**	Prioritize a growth mind-set	Listen for what's not being said	
Accelerate decision-making	Think both short and long	Build an all-star group, not a group of all-stars	Manage the temperature	**Make sense of signals**
	Put effectiveness before efficiency			Detect anomalies and celebrate exceptions
Jazz it up	Make distinctions	**Evolve a winning workgroup**	**Make it fun**	Recognize emerging and evolving patterns
Look for what's not being done		Change it up	It's up to you	
Expand the potential for improvisation		Make it a rule to change the rules		
Improvise in the moment		Make roles context-dependent		
Build on mistakes				

Frame a powerful question

Ask questions that focus on the learning opportunity—and can provoke and inspire others to change the game

Introduction: Beyond incrementalism

It sounds like a too-good-to-be-true story of inspiration—but it actually happened. In 1943, Polaroid co-founder Edwin Land was taking vacation photos with his family, and his 3-year-old daughter asked, "Why do we have to wait for a picture?"[1]

Now, *that* is a powerful question. It inspired the invention of an entirely new product—and it exemplifies the kind of inquiry that opens up real possibility. Its audaciousness grabs our attention, captures our interest, and motivates us to come together to try to make its vision real. And in an environment that can be unpredictable and challenging, framing a powerful question might provide inspiration and motivation to the workgroup and help lift it out of the day-to-day to zoom out to a bigger-picture, future view.

In a rapidly changing world, with dynamic requirements, assumptions *will* change, including potentially the assumptions that made a particular approach the best one, or made a performance objective the most relevant, or made a shared outcome worthwhile. Consider, for example, the assumption that *film must be developed in a multi-step process in a darkroom*. The target at which you've been aiming may no longer represent what you want to achieve. A powerful question forces the workgroup to continuously challenge its assumptions and focus on what might be most relevant.

A powerful question can also help a workgroup break out of incremental tendencies. Incrementalism allows us to believe we are doing OK because we are busy and getting better at something every day, but it can obscure the real danger of falling ever further behind more rapidly advancing alternatives and expectations. But it's one thing to understand that incremental efforts are not enough and another to let go of running a little harder on the business-as-usual treadmill and to really look for what might make the treadmill obsolete. A powerful question can pop that bubble of complacency, provoking us to reconsider the bounds and rules of the game. Framing a powerful question is a way for a workgroup to step back and ask: *Is this what we should be doing? What else is possible? Is the group's shared outcome still the most relevant and*

important thing we should be focused on to have more impact?

Workgroups looking to accelerate performance improvement will have to be able to continuously adjust to focus on the outcomes where they can make the greatest impact and avoid getting trapped making incremental progress against objectives that are no longer relevant. Framing a powerful question can help us not only adapt to change but use it to break new ground.

YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:

- The questions we're asking aren't attracting others or leading to new insights

- There are few, if any, opportunities to change the game

- Outcomes don't inspire individuals or energize the workgroup

The *frame a powerful question* practice: What it is

A powerful question, as we define it here, is one that reframes what a workgroup is committed to and how members approach it. A practice of framing a powerful question might mean periodically stepping back from the workgroup's immediate demands and considering what has changed and what hasn't.

A powerful question is:

- **Authentic**. Powerful questions should expose what we don't yet know. They should challenge us to embrace our own vulnerability, to admit uncertainty about the path forward, and to lean into discomfort.

- **Compelling**. A powerful question should pull people out of an incremental mind-set, refocusing workgroups on where they can achieve an entirely new level of impact. Even as a powerful question should require collective exploration, it can also tap into individual passion, generating energy and excitement in members.

- **Open-ended.** Instead of inspiring a single, definitive answer, a powerful question should open

EXAMPLES OF POWERFUL QUESTIONS

The right question can animate a workgroup. Here are some variations of powerful questions that have inspired real workgroups and organizations:

- Why do we create appliances for our customers instead of with them?

- How can we make innovative products that the market wants—while it still wants them?

- If we are the "best of the best," why are attacks not disappearing but actually increasing? What game should we be playing, and how do we get better at playing it?

- How do we grow higher-quality barley in a future with half the water supply?

- What would it take to eliminate all car accidents?

- What if we could keep more planes operational? What if we could knock the No. 1 delay driver out of the top 10?

- How can we use technology to see the impact of our decisions and make better ones?

things up, setting the stage for ambitious, targeted action. It shouldn't be fuzzy or vague, or limited by what the workgroup or the organization has done in the past.

- **Focused.** A powerful question should challenge the why and the what, as well as the who, how, where, and when, *for a workgroup*. It should be a focusing mechanism to help a group focus on what is going to matter to actually achieve breakthrough performance. The question should give us pause yet remain within the context of the workgroup and be about the kind of future a group might strive to shape and create.

- **Actionable.** A powerful question should come out of deep thought and reflection, backed by commitment to act. It should reflect the conviction that there is value in asking it—inviting new perspectives and ideas to the table—and should generate *actions rather than answers*.

In short, a powerful question can help a workgroup navigate a shifting environment, directing our attention and guiding our action. Unlike a fixed North Star, a powerful question should leave room for doubt and new information and leave itself open to be challenged. It should prime the imagination, focus passion, and motivate accelerated performance, aligning the group toward a transformative goal.

. . . and what it isn't

- **A "moonshot."** A moonshot isn't a question but a declared destination: *We will go to the moon.* It is inspiring but predetermined, not open to debate. A powerful question also shouldn't presume a single resolving answer or dictate what form the solution will take. Answers are of limited value in accelerating performance and, in an exponential world, tend to become obsolete faster and faster.

- **A questioning culture.** While there is inherent value both in questioning and in learning to ask better questions, the idea here is to use a single, overarching question as a focusing mechanism—one that could help the workgroup home in on the crucial elements of breakthrough performance.

- **A stretch goal or incremental.** It's not *How do we get to 100x performance,* but *What could we do, what kind of impact could we have, if we were performing at 100x?* By moving the focus away from numerical measurement and toward fundamental change, framing can set the stage for entirely new levels of impact.

- **A postmortem.** Rather than asking questions when something goes wrong, the workgroup should frame a powerful question when everything is going well, in the face of success: *What else should we be doing to do a lot better?*

INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

A powerful question can influence every aspect of a workgroup's efforts.

- **Maximize the potential for friction**. By not prompting an easy answer, a powerful question can force workgroups to look outside the group for perspectives and re sources that can help uncover or create the answer.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** A compelling question can create a context for shared meaning in which we can articulate disagreement and explore thoughts and feelings, facts and figures.

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** The question can shift the scope beyond just the moment at hand, connecting the "moment" to the implications and learnings across moments and over time. What did we learn that informs our powerful question?

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** A powerful question can set the stage for committing to a shared outcome, while progress toward that shared outcome can create the basis for a more powerful question.

- **Bias toward action.** A powerful question can help overcome old assumptions and build more of a creative set of conditions.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** A powerful question can help identify the area of highest-potential impact, which would guide the performance objectives and metrics that the group will choose to track.

- **Seek new contexts.** To answer a powerful question, workgroups look for inspiration and exposure to more and different ideas and approaches that might accelerate learning for the group.

- **Cultivate friction.** Saying from the outset, "We don't know how to get there" can set the expectation of coming at a problem from different angles and challenging them on the way to finding answers. Lacking a ready answer invites productive challenges. In addition, the magnitude of the question can raise the stakes for group members.

Putting the practice into play

A powerful question isn't handed down from on high—instead, a workgroup must articulate and refine it. How do you get to the question that is going to catalyze a leap in performance? First, set the stage for the workgroup to ask the questions that matter. In an exponential world, what got us to where we are likely won't get us to where we need to be. How can you convey that magnitude of changed assumptions and expectations to engage others?

Part of what makes a question powerful is that it can invite new perspectives and ideas to the table and lead to significant actions that may not have otherwise been considered or possible. How does this work? The framing matters—not only what you ask but how you ask it. Amp it up to turn the question into something that is visceral and urgent, not just a thought exercise, for those who hear it.

The challenge is that there are a multitude of questions that could potentially change the game. The workgroup members must consider how they can make it their own in ways that only they can. The powerful question *and* the possible actions it spurs are unique to the group.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- How many times have we missed an opportunity by being "realistic"?

SET THE STAGE

A powerful question may originate from a work-group's leader or emerge from a discussion. That first question starts to open up the space for getting to the question that matters. Focusing on a question, rather than a goal, is more than semantics: Saying, "I have no idea what that goal will look like or how to get there" is very different from saying, "We will land a rocket on the moon in five years through this agency." This is something new: *I think I have a powerful question and an interesting idea, but how could it be more powerful?*

The purpose isn't to reinforce your own opinion or persuade others to your thinking—adding a question mark to a predetermined idea can breed cynicism and shut down potential avenues of exploration. Rather, this type of asking is for getting better insight into what matters and where the workgroup [...] can focus to have the most impact. **[...]now what you don't know** [...]nd ask for help. Organizations often see questioning and admitting to not having all of the answers as signs of weakness. But framing a powerful question that acknowledges the current state of reality—including the areas of [we]akness and doubt—can get people['s] attention. It also can build trust. [...]ss might start with being vulner[able and ex]plicit about not having an answer, [...] [s]hared acknowledgement of what people don't know and a shared commitment to exploring potential answers. Legitimizing doubt often creates the space for workgroup members to challenge, fundamentally, what the group is doing and whether it should continue to do it. Admitting imperfection and uncertainty can also unlock a certain human empathy in others beyond the workgroup, allowing you to forge connections to those who otherwise may not have been as apt to help.

Ask a question that changes the game to jolt the workgroup out of business-as-usual. It might not be articulated such that it will be *the* overriding question for the workgroup, but you may need some shock and a sense of urgency to help the group look at the big picture and notice what's new. At first blush, the question might seem impossible, or at least not obvious. The goal should be to treat absolutes as conditional, to recognize that what may be true in one context may not be true in another.

For every one question, there are sub-questions to unpack:

- What assumptions am I making that make this seem impossible?
- What don't I know about that assumption?
- What are the leverage points that might make it possible?
- Does the question fundamentally revolve around value creation and impact on costs and efficiency?

Force the group to identify the issue it is aiming to solve and why it matters. For example, costs will matter, but focusing only on cost might get you nowhere. One problem with posing game-changing questions is that people will likely try to provide answers. Group members may respond with facts, figures, and expertise about how it is done and (more likely) why it can't be done. Try to acknowledge current realities that run counter to the vision of a possible future, and then push on and explore the nature of those constraints.

Consider the elite Field Tech workgroup in Southwest Airlines' Maintenance and Operations Unit: Members didn't ask themselves how they could get planes back in service 2 percent faster than other airlines, or relative to themselves the year before. Instead, the field techs began the question in the context of the shared outcome: If we care about getting passengers where they need to be, how can we keep our aircraft operational all of the time? That was ambitious but too costly relative to the impact. They unpacked that question to one that motivated action: How can we knock the No. 1 "delay driver" on the issues list out of the top 10? At the time, Southwest people generally believed it nearly impossible to reduce the impact of that No. 1 issue, much less knock it out of the top 10.

The question has value, but so does the asking. **Focus on the who, not just the what**, to elicit broad participation. The more tightly you frame the question, the less it is going to challenge people in terms of creating new approaches. Not having the answer focuses attention on what can be learned, and in so doing could attract others who want to

learn and make space for others to bring forward options and get excited about creating answers.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What should we ask but never do?
- What *questions* could we ask today that would fundamentally change the game tomorrow?

AMP IT UP

Challenging questions can be overwhelming. The point of framing a powerful question isn't to overwhelm but, rather, to spark urgency and inspire action, including reaching out for help and attracting outside resources. The way the group shares the question with others will likely shape their response. How does a workgroup go about framing and sharing a powerful, challenging question in such a way that it motivates group members, attracts other resources, and gives everyone a sense that there is a way forward? It should be a balance between being narrow and diffuse, between being grounded and making space to accommodate others, between being ambitious and working with constraints.

One way of narrowing the question is to focus just on uncovering points of leverage. It's not about changing everything—the challenge is to **name one thing** that has the potential to change everything.[2] Think about a performance goal, but instead of focusing on the goal, frame a question around what could have a genuinely major impact: *What one lever in the organization that, if we shift it, might get us to a different level of performance? What would have to happen for that to become reality?*

Having landed on a potentially powerful question, the workgroup should be as open as it can with as many people as it can about the question. The goal is to attract other resources and passionate individuals who are excited about being part of making progress toward an answer. The messenger matters: People are more likely to help someone they value or respect, especially when that person demonstrates

conviction and commitment. **Make it personal** and humanize it: *Why does this question matter to me? What is my story that led me to this question? To what human need does this speak?* Avoid framing in conceptual terms that engage only the mind. When the question isn't abstract, people can be more willing to deviate from the standard operating procedures to look for alternatives that might generate more impact.

For example, for a group of supervisors of dispatch at Southwest Airlines, the question was how they could honor the legacy of a colleague, Mike Baker, who had championed using technology to make smarter routing choices and make a complicated job a whole lot easier. They formed a workgroup committed to addressing the very question that he had posed and named it in his honor. "Baker" is now mentioned hundreds of times a day throughout the organization, and his passion for smarter decisions can live on throughout the next generation of dispatch supervisors.[3]

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- Let's not get distracted by questions— we've got to stay focused on results.
- Great question, but we're probably not going to be the ones who figure it out.
- Yeah, sure, this all sounds good—but it's too risky, and here's why it will never work.
- We don't have time for questions.

If you aren't surprised by the responses to a question, it is not the right question. Don't ask a question seeking to confirm a belief or validate a preferred approach—**seek surprise** by focusing on what you don't know. Seek to uncover information or resources you didn't know existed. One way to do this is to play with constraints—resources, time, or methodology—to make the question provocative enough to attract attention and elicit focused responses.[4] For example, a broad question, "How do we win the race with a car that is no faster than anyone else's?"[5] is ambitious but likely to generate

broad responses based on what people already know. Constraints—"How do we win if we can't change the body?" or "How do we win if the race is twice as long?"—could prompt people into thinking about specific dimensions that they have not considered and that they would need to explore further, through action, because they haven't thought about it before. Constraints can force people out of areas where perceived expertise stands in the way of new learning—*I have answers*—and into unknown territory.

Here, where they are not expert, they can be more open to **looking for insights, not answers.** In an exponential world, answers, no matter how good they are, tend to become quickly obsolete. Beyond the boundaries of their expertise, people may be more open to taking in new information, building new constructs, and being more creative and resourceful in developing an understanding of the challenge. The answers that do emerge may be just the starting point for an even better question.

ENDNOTES

1. Warren Berger, "The power of 'why?' and 'what if?'," *New York Times*, July 2, 2016.

2. Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* (New York: Viking, 2014).

3. Andrew de Maar and Maggie Wooll, interview with Brandon Beard and John Strickland, Southwest Airlines, October 27, 2017.

4. Adam Morgan and Mark Barden, *A Beautiful Constraint: How to Transform Your Limitations into Advantages, and Why It's Everyone's Business* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), p. 36.

5. Ibid., p. 59.
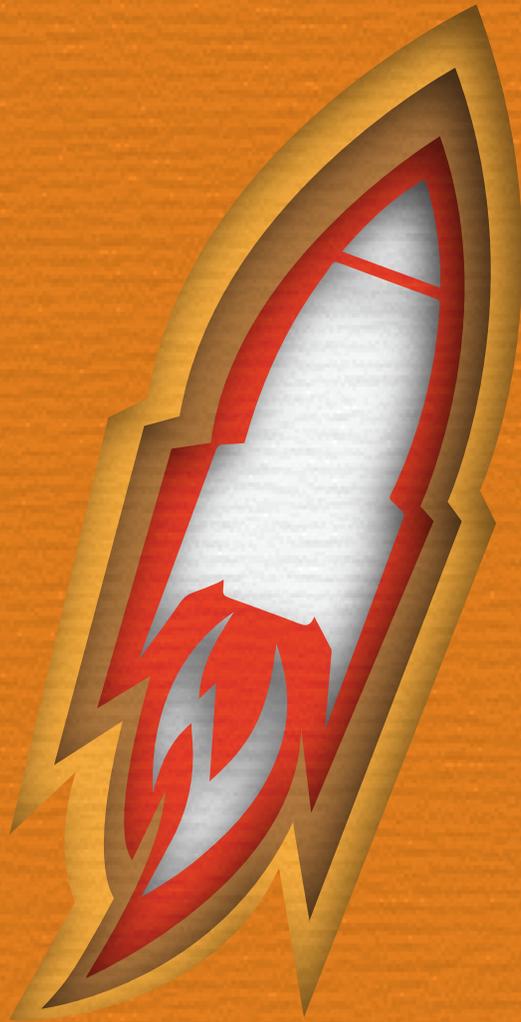
Seek new contexts

Expand your exposure to a range of contexts to discover promising new approaches

Introduction:
New tools and techniques

Doing what you've always done, even if you're really good at it, probably won't accelerate performance improvement. At best, continuing practices could yield incremental improvement; at worst, you might see performance plateaus or even declines as the tried-and-true becomes less suited to a changing context. To *accelerate* performance improvement, workgroups likely need new approaches, and even more so as more cases of first instance appear without proven ways to address them. Workgroups need to rapidly gain new insight, information, and resources to begin developing approaches, and they are less likely to find these within their current context—*even* when the group has the intent to push boundaries and break from old ways.

Exploring a different context, whether adjacent or seemingly unrelated—along with seeing how others are approaching their own issues and opportunities to reach higher levels of performance—can yield fresh perspective on the nature of the challenge a workgroup is facing. It can help them explore their own context and performance challenges differently and avoid falling back on solutions already in place.[1] More tangibly, it can expose group members to new tools and techniques.

Our assumptions tend to dictate our choices and actions. Workgroups need to be able to test, challenge, and refine hypotheses without being constrained by unexamined and potentially invalid assumptions. Trying to understand an unfamiliar context can bring to light those deeply held assumptions that are rooted in "the way we've always done things." It can help group members to reframe core assumptions,[2] repurpose and build off the methods of others, break existing frames, and uncover valuable new ideas. In addition, the act of changing context—and engaging with it to identify similarities and differences—is potent fuel for sparking the imagination, and for inspiring and giving shape to creative new approaches.

For example, LiveOps, a company that runs customer call center operations, took inspiration from the online game World of Warcraft, in which players create their own dashboards to track relevant statistics as a means of improving their own performance. Building from this completely different context, LiveOps gave each employee a dashboard that showed her own real-time performance across several relevant dimensions, including changes in her ranking among peers on key indicators. The personalized dashboards have helped agents understand and improve their own call effectiveness.[3]

In a stable environment, seeking new contexts may have been less important because each workgroup could rely on its pre-existing resources and knowledge. But as the world changes more rapidly, workgroups that look first to what they have and know within their own context may find themselves increasingly disadvantaged. Even if your own context doesn't seem to be visibly changing, you should be relentlessly exploring other contexts to find better and better ways to achieve your outcome.

**YOU KNOW YOU NEED
THIS PRACTICE WHEN:**

- The market is changing faster than your business

- You rarely seem to have unexpected but relevant encounters with ecosystem participants

- The range of interactions you're having with people and workgroups from different contexts is limited

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❝There are many ways, and the way you choose should depend on the current context. You can't solve today's problems with yesterday's solutions.[4]

—Ellen Langer

The *seek new contexts* practice: What it is

Looking for new contexts means identifying the most relevant and potentially fruitful contexts to learn from and drawing insights that each workgroup can use to have more impact on its own outcome. Groups have only so much time, so be deliberate in choosing where to invest it in exploring new contexts. Contexts change at different paces, which means that the right ones may offer a window into some aspect of the workgroup's future. A targeted approach can help identify contexts that are further ahead in some way and that have the potential to expand the group's understanding in one of three areas:

- **Inputs that might matter.** Identify new inputs—such as technologies, data sets, or materials— that could help the workgroup reach a higher level of performance. Is someone already using one of these inputs, providing a model from which we can learn?

- **Performance metrics that matter.** Where is someone achieving higher levels of performance on a key performance metric (for example, customer churn rate) that matters for us? Go explore that, and try to figure out what is—and what isn't—context-dependent.
- **Outcomes that matter more.** At the edge, where change is occurring most rapidly and where performance requirements may be most demanding, the workgroup may discover an opportunity to achieve even more impact.

. . . and what it isn't

- **A time-consuming process of exploration.** Immersion can lead to serendipitous insights and connections. But few workgroups have the luxury of time to immerse themselves in a context that may or may not prove relevant. Groups should, then, aim to get better at swiftly

INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

- **Maximize the potential for friction**. Seeking new contexts is a powerful way to discover resources beyond the workgroup. Part of the workgroup's diversity might be the range of contexts that members have experienced.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** The shared experience of a new context can create a touchstone that deepens the relationships between members and provides a tangible and neutral reference to frame disagreements.

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** Reflection both in advance and after exposure to a new context can help members identify patterns and draw connections in their observations and signals in order to transform an onslaught of information into useful insights for the challenge at hand.

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** The workgroup seeks insights that can be useful for improving the shared outcome.

- **Bias toward action.** The point of seeking new contexts is to draw insights that lead to and inform the next action.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** Spending time in new contexts can help the workgroup discover new approaches to pushing the boundaries of what they thought was possible for the outcome.

- **Frame a powerful question.** The magnitude of the question propels the workgroup to seek insight from new contexts and shapes what might be important about them.

- **Cultivate friction.** Immersion in a new context can take members out of their comfort zone, challenging their assumptions and mental models in an immediate and tangible way.

identifying relevance and picking up insight with less exposure.

- **Random, hoping for serendipity.** This isn't about just being open to learning or getting outside our comfort zone to see what we can see and hoping that useful insights will materialize. While that can be valuable for some individuals, workgroups should be more effective at exploring.
- **A search for the latest shiny trend.** In fast-changing contexts, not all that is new is relevant or useful. It is important to differentiate between the temporary and the enduring.
- **Only about others—or only about the group.** This is about finding connections across contexts that might drive mutual learning and even reveal opportunities to work together toward outcomes that are of mutual interest.

> " Your brain is designed to make meaning out of what you see and will look for patterns out of whatever information you take in through your senses.[5]
>
> —*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*

Putting the practice into play

A fresh context can open a window into the narrow silos of understanding and provide a new lens on the workgroup's own work. However, the relevance of an unfamiliar context is sometimes less apparent when it appears in a typically unstructured way, through narrative accounts, field memos, news reports, anecdotes, and the collective murmurings of social media. It typically takes practice to know what contexts matter and to uncover the underlying information and draw connections that are not easily observable, finding patterns that we have not previously imagined.

The practice of seeking new contexts, then, broadly has two parts to it: first, knowing how to **look around** to find the most productive contexts to accelerate the group's learning about how to have more impact; and second, knowing what to do with it—**looking within** to gain insight and derive actionable information from the relevant contexts.

LOOK AROUND

The future is unpredictable, but it also doesn't happen at the same time. New technologies, policies, and preferences hit certain arenas, geographies, and markets sooner than others. As a result, one way for workgroups to find a way *forward* is to look *around*.

Practically, this means that workgroups, and individual members, shouldn't stay in their lane. **Bust silos** and avoid tunnel vision by connecting with others who are engaged around a similar issue but may live in other departments, organizations, or domains. At Facebook, this occurs organization-wide: Employees from different groups get pulled out of their role every 12–18 months to spend a month on special teams to work together on a particular challenge or interesting opportunity. When people return to their old groups, they tend to be more open to questioning assumptions and participate in more informal sharing of ideas and information across groups.[6] It is important to bust silos everywhere—including at the periphery, not just among the usual suspects in the core functions.

As change accelerates, peripheries and edges can become more valuable because they are often moving at a faster pace. Exposure to new contexts at the periphery can shape group members' understanding

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What gets in the way of us (organizational polices, practices, silos) connecting with those from whom we can learn?
- When was the last time we encountered an unfamiliar resource that ended up providing incredible amount of value? How did we go about uncovering it?

of certain conditions and inform their own work.[7] They might be better able to make sense of the signals they are identifying on the frontlines and better able to identify alternative resources that might be used in unexpected ways. The practice of looking for, and engaging with, new contexts also keeps the workgroup's own boundaries permeable, so that the group can avoid becoming its own silo and better leverage valuable ideas, skills, and resources from others.

Where should we look for context? On the one hand, looking around is about finding the performance edge that matters most to your outcome. On the other, it is about increasing the likelihood that you turn up valuable resources of which you were unaware. In either case, look for the fast-moving contexts for which the performance requirements are most demanding—this is where the future is likely already happening. Look for the tools they are creating and the inputs they are using. The point isn't to bring those tools and models in whole but, rather, to build upon them and make your own better solution for your context.

Edges can take many forms: They can be other workgroups, enterprises, industries, technologies, or even demographic groups. **Find a performance edge** likely to generate insights that the workgroup can use to improve its outcome. Relevant performance edges have either achieved a high level of performance on one of the workgroup's key metrics, are targeting a more significant opportunity for impact, or are further advanced using an input that the group believes might be important. For example, an oil-field services group that is targeting customer churn rate might look to a wireless company that has dramatically reduced customer churn. In another example, consider how, in advance of the Southwest Airlines fleet adopting fiber optics, several Southwest field techs sought out the training school to which a leading telecom sends its employees so that they could learn in context with a group that is pioneering the technology.

The relevant performance edge might also be one in which others are engaging with similar constraints. For example, a workgroup aiming to design a radically inexpensive mass-market car might look

to a developing region with a vast, previously unmet demand for such products.

- What will likely be relevant to our business in the future, and where can we find examples of that in action today?
- How has the periphery changed what we do? When was the last time we acted based on something found on the edge?

Knowing what to look for in a performance edge, how do we go about actually identifying a context that meets our criteria? Research and discussion—asking, "Who does it best?" or "Who has faced something similar and is succeeding?"—might help the group create a preliminary list. Accessing digital content—such as blog postings, social media outlets, and analyst reports—can be the first step in learning about potentially useful contexts. To increase the potential for getting a truly different angle on a challenge, however, it may be worthwhile to cast a wider net by tapping into group members' social and professional networks—for example, posting a brief explanation of the issue on social media and asking for recommendations of contexts worth exploring.

Conferences and training sessions, too, can be an effective way to gain preliminary exposure to a new context and make connections for exploring it more deeply if warranted. Workgroups may discover relevant but previously unknown tools, techniques, and resources and, by seeing them in use and being among the people who use them, may gain unique insight into how to apply them to their own outcome. For example, the New York City Fire Department's Rescue Company 1 regularly attends days-long training with fire units from around the country as well as with military and other forms of search and rescue, from marine to alpine, to learn new techniques and potentially encounter useful tools that could be redeployed in the urban rescue context.

Ultimately, finding the relevant performance edge often requires getting "out on the street," talking with people engaged in and around the performance edge to get a better understanding of the performance or input and its relevance to the group's outcome. Physical proximity often leads to connections, from a casual encounter at a surf shop to a formal introduction,[8] that can be invaluable in terms of revealing new facets of the context and new avenues to pursue to unlock the n

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beyond the workgrou
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shaping serendipity
for individuals, or
workgroups as a me
the passionate and
pected resources,
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encounters to ide
new contexts. Th
zational barriers
consider ways to further leverage people
outside and across the organization, aiming to tap into their knowledge, expertise, and connections to gain exposure to new contexts without devoting the time to becoming fully immersed or proficient in those contexts.

What might this look like? It might mean establishing a presence in physical or virtual space so that others can find you. The second part of this is being as clear as possible about the metrics and potential inputs in which you are interested. Motivating others to participate through potential, thoughtful posting in these spaces can be helpful, so long as you're transparent about what you're doing.

But the point isn't just to get people to come to you and say, "Here's an idea—go for it." Exploring new contexts is time-consuming. Workgroups need to be both effective and efficient in drawing insights

from new contexts. The point is to get people to come to you and say, "Here's an idea, this is what I know about it, this is how I think it applies to your context, and I am going to connect you with this person and take you to this place so that you can learn more."

Part of the work, then, is identifying the talent spikes—the forums and platforms that could be most relevant to other contexts, along with the physical gathering spots, whether a surf shop
a hackerspace favored
tablishing a pres-
ons and challenges
thers, and cultivat-
om promising leads.
ves from GE Appli-
ced to Local Motors
s, they were primed
rom this open-source
or that was upending
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months been thinking
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and explicit statement of
ing to solve: *How can we create innovative products that the market wants while the market still wants them?* When they saw what Local Motors was doing in the automotive space, they realized that the consumer for whom they were designing was a valuable input to a whole new approach. With Rogers' guidance, they quickly learned about creating a community and using platforms and moved to rapidly develop and launch their own model for co-creating appliances. That's how GE FirstBuild (now a Haier company) got off the ground.

LOOK WITHIN

Knowing *where* to look for new context is only half the battle. Understanding *how* to delve within that context and how to extract insights and learning that the group can use to improve performance
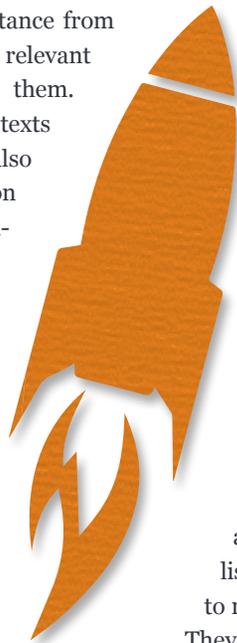
is what makes it valuable. For workgroups looking to accelerate performance, the point of seeking new contexts is to help workgroups uproot assumptions and uncover new tools and approaches, and, most importantly, gain insights that point to possible new actions.

Making effective use of exposure, however, isn't easy. The goal is to explore the periphery without being consumed by it. Workgroups that develop practices for how they will explore new contexts may be better able to gather information and, through reflection and discussion, draw out the insights that could make an impact on the group's outcome. Time is always a factor, and it can be tempting to divide and conquer to quickly gather information from as many different contexts as possible. A small group exploring together, however, can gather richer information and help each other make sense of what they see and experience. With practice, workgroups, like individuals, can get better at exploring and experiencing the edges.

How do you approach another context? What works—or doesn't work—in one context may not translate into another. Look for what can be generalized but also what can't. In the GE FirstBuild example, one key difference between contexts that workgroup members didn't grasp at the time was that many people may be less excited about appliances than about cars. One way to begin is to **put context in context**. Take a step back and consider the next, larger context—the slightly larger picture. Just as a chair exists in a room, a room in a house, a house in a neighborhood, and a neighborhood in a city, context is relative. Considering how "the room fits within the house within the neighborhood" can change our perspective and may reveal previously unnoticed relationships and opportunities, both in the context we are looking at and elsewhere.

New context can be overwhelming. Our mindset and dispositions often determine the world we encounter, including what we notice and pay attention to, and the possibilities we apprehend. Similar to how an emergency-room triage nurse makes snap decisions about who should be admitted, we often make quick judgments based on "precognitive responses," guided by our experience as well as by the systems we have constructed in advance, that allow the brain to make rapid decisions.[10] In a cog-

Figure 1. Different levels of looking outside-in

INSIDE ARENA

Novel approaches
of our potential competitors

Common challenges
and solutions across contexts

Analogous situations
that can be instructive

Metaphoric lessons
to draw inspiration from

OUTSIDE ARENA
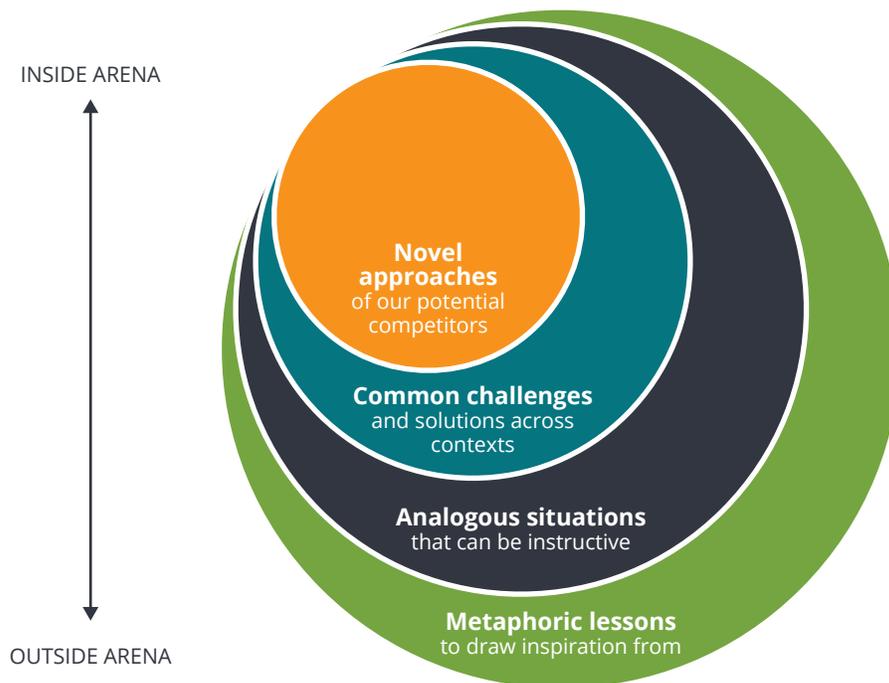
Source: Doblin.

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nitively diverse workgroup, members will naturally notice different things and interpret them differently. The workgroup may find that being more deliberate about **probing the context**, however, can help to reduce the complexity and to stage their moves to balance the breadth and depth of exposure.

Workgroups won't have the time or resources to become proficient and fully immersed in all contexts of interest; the goal of probing is to get enough information for the next move. Probing balances the immersive richness of physical with the efficiency of virtual, moving from reading a web page to having a phone call to meeting in person to taking a group to visit off-site, stopping at whichever level is appropriate for the value gained. Each nugget of insight can potentially help to develop a new lens and shape the next move. For example, at New York agency sparks & honey, the culture briefing workgroup had been noticing a trend around different milk sources. These "micro trends" were showing up in a range of places including social media discussions, product testing in local markets, and localized menu innovations. After tracking related signals and connecting those to existing "macro trends" in the agency's trend taxonomy, the group concluded there might be something to it. The entire workgroup visited, and eventually immersed themselves in, a tasting that included milk from several different animals, including camels.

Another approach to probing is to assign a different aspect of context for each member to pay attention to or use as a lens (see figure 1). Sparks & honey uses the five senses as lenses but also formalizes sensitivities by "tagging" items along a spectrum from micro- to macro- to mega-trends. Alternatively, workgroups could use a system such as ethnographers' "AEIOU" (**A**ctivities, **E**nvironments, **I**nteractions, **O**bjects, **U**sers) observation framework, with each member going into a new situation with responsibility for just one category.[11] Of course, the most important lens to use against the onslaught of information may come from the shared outcome itself. Calibrate the group's attention to focus on what actually matters to the shared outcome. What information, if we could figure it out, would help us know our

next move? *What's different and what's comparable between the context and the outcome we are trying to achieve?* Workgroup members may also find it more effective to explore and experience contexts in dyads or triads, rather than altogether, to avoid overpowering the context with their own presence.

Although it's easy to talk about taking on new contexts in the abstract, in reality staying aware and vigilant to signals can easily morph into being overwhelmed. Certain contexts may prove very useful, and in those cases, the workgroup may want a deeper exposure, over time, gleaned from building a relationship rather than just harvesting insights in a one-off visit. Consider what the workgroup can **give before it takes**: Does it have new knowledge or learnings that might be beneficial to others in the new context? Ideally, the learning becomes open-ended, mutually beneficial and generative, creating a new node or set of nodes from which to gain feedback and perspective on the group's experiments or future challenges, even if the current issue is short-lived. Workgroups that help develop others may begin fielding proposals to collaborate, creating a virtuous cycle of insights and impact. Connecting to these broader networks can provide specific subject-matter expertise where needed and can lead to additional ideas to inform the group's current frame of thinking.[12]

When group members can maintain an openness to inspiration from other people, areas, and environments encountered throughout the day, the workgroup can continually collect ideas from various contexts that can be used to fuel the productive friction in service of getting better and better at problem solving in other instances.[13] For example, in Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd.'s Newbuilding &

Figure 2. Stewart Brand's pace layering model
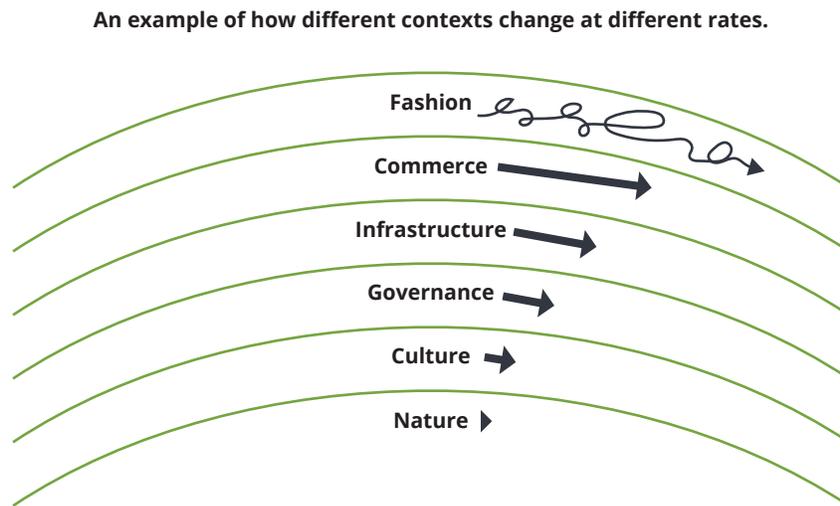
An example of how different contexts change at different rates.

Innovation workgroup, designers decided to change the configuration of a room after staying in a hotel that made use of limited space in an interesting way: It featured a modular desk that a guest could slide out when needed but made the room feel more spacious when concealed. The unique design inspired several sliding furniture additions that Royal Caribbean made to its Quantum staterooms.

Although workgroups will have to make trade-offs—going deeper in some areas and broader in

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- We need to keep our heads down and focus on what we do best.

- Since no one is asking for that, why are you spending time on it?

- Plenty is wrong about what we do today—why are you worrying about the future?

- We're the market leaders—others try to copy *us*.

others, depending on time and resources—it can be beneficial to focus on the fundamental. Not all contexts are changing at the same rate, and facts have different expiration dates (see figure 2). Differentiate between what is changing fast and what is currently stable, what is transient and what is enduring. Look most frequently to the contexts that are changing most rapidly—others may have valuable parallels, but if they're moving more slowly, they'll likely reward only intermittent check-ins.

Drawing insights from individual observations and the flood of information out there requires group members to listen to one another and their surroundings deeply, to recognize patterns and draw connections through discourse and reflection, and to incorporate these insights into their evolving assumptions. Paradoxically, successful exploration of new contexts designed to cope with near-term uncertainty often requires an increased focus on long-term direction. Contexts are shaped by what connects them to each other.

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Cultivate friction

Draw out conflict and learn from disagreements to generate new insights

Introduction:
Avoiding a flat trajectory

Friction can lead to better outcomes. The right type of friction can transform individual contributions into something far larger than the sum of the parts. Indeed, creating good friction is the entire reason for forming a workgroup and entrusting it with key organizational work. That power materializes, however, only when the potential for friction is realized and the workgroup draws relevant, actionable learning from it.

And cultivating friction is increasingly important. In this rapidly changing environment, workgroups aiming to accelerate performance will need to learn faster how to make an impact on the performance that matters to the outcome. Issues will likely only become more complex and unexpected, requiring a range of approaches to address them. The right approaches might not exist yet. The type of learning that's perhaps most important to accelerating performance improvement, then, is that which creates new knowledge about how to approach unanticipated problems or situations. It isn't about training in new skills or accessing existing knowledge. It is group learning embodied in action.

A group of people with conflicting perspectives has the power to envision a set of possibilities differently, and more broadly, than any of the individuals alone, potentially leading to emergent behaviors and creation of new knowledge that could not have arisen elsewhere.[1] Creating that new knowledge requires workgroup members to make full use of the group's diversity and the external resources to which it is connected across the range of the group's activities. The ways people diverge in how they think about a problem and differ around approaches, assumptions, and actions can reveal potentially powerful insights.

How does friction come into play? Friction can drive faster, more robust learning to help workgroups come up with better and better approaches. The right types of friction—for our purposes, defined as group members' willingness and ability to challenge each other's ideas and assumptions—can drive groups to reexamine assumptions, test constraints, and push boundaries. It can force individual members to stretch their own thinking, about the problem and how to approach it, in ways they would not likely get to on their own. "Un-like-minded" people and contradictory evidence or information that runs counter to our current framework can help us see our own thinking in a new light. If we are open-minded and committed to improving an outcome, and if we don't feel attacked, challenges could make us reexamine our assumptions, refine our thinking, and even change our approach.[2] Such challenges can also make us pay attention to new information and resources that fell outside our initial frame.[3]

Of course, timing matters. Some workgroups need to operate like a well-oiled machine *in the moment*, whether that moment is going into a burning building or interacting with a customer. The key for improving that in-the-moment performance, though, is cultivating the friction between moments, to elicit observations and new options for approaching the next *moment* differently. Focusing on seamless execution (the goal of many high-performing teams) and failing to cultivate friction can result in a flat trajectory, even if the starting point is high.

YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:

- There is little space and time for disagreement and debate

- Everyone agrees and talks about agreeing or takes pride in the group's cohesion

- The group seems focused on its own efficiency as the primary measure of success

- Everyone has a designated role and area of expertise for which they are responsible, and the group defers to the expert judgments

The *cultivate friction* practice: What it is

Cultivating productive friction is about benefiting from the potential for learning that comes from diversity—all kinds of diversity. In a diverse

workgroup, members are influenced by a range of past experiences, apply different implicit rules, and notice different pieces of information.[4] Cognitive diversity can create tensions within a workgroup, and those tensions can have unexpected and positive results.[5] Yet our desire for harmony can be so strong—to some extent, we are biologically wired to mirror the behavior of those around us[6]—and often is so ingrained in organizations that productive friction simply will not happen without taking deliberate action to stoke it.

Friction must be cultivated first within the workgroup, day-to-day, but also outside the workgroup, between the workgroup and others who might have relevant insight, knowledge, or resources. Practically, this means that members are open to being tested and questioned by others and willing and able to see how one idea fits with or builds on another. It also means that the group itself is open to challenges from the outside. The workgroup essentially invites others to "question us" and to introduce diverse external resources.

A workgroup that cultivates friction might be characterized by:

- **Energy over harmony.** Workgroups that go along to get along won't get far in an environment that demands new approaches and rapid learning. The right type of friction can be exhilarating.
- **Challenge and discussion over approval.** In fact, if the workgroup's output is similar to one of the inputs, there may be too little friction.
- **Transparent thinking.** Sketching a potential solution or a framework for approaching a problem or even a list of assumptions on a whiteboard can be an invitation for challenges from within the group. Up the ante by putting the board in a public place and inviting outsiders to the conversation.
- **Thinking made tangible.** Just writing something on a board can reveal assumptions and relationships that aren't apparent in a discussion. As an idea becomes progressively more tangible—for example, moving from spoken idea to written description to drawn pictures to models and prototypes—fresh aspects of the problem and potential solutions can be exposed, stirring up additional friction.

. . . and what it isn't

- **Brainstorming.** Too often groups use brainstorming to get "more" ideas on the table, and the means of doing this is to remove friction. Participants may be told to silence their skepticism and treat all ideas as equally valid and plausible, and at the end, everyone feels good about the number of ideas generated. But stifling any arguments carries a cost, as the potential learning from exploring the trade-offs and unstated assumptions behind the ideas is lost. Lost, too, is the opportunity to candidly interrogate the ideas, to find weaknesses or to see the power to be found in combining two ideas that didn't capture anyone's imagination initially. Workgroups looking to accelerate performance should focus on *better* ideas, not *more*.
- **Playing devil's advocate (or other roles).** If everyone knows that someone is playing a role for the sake of creating some friction, they will likely treat it as a game. The quality of the friction generated would be low, because the challenge wouldn't be grounded in a real perspective or deeply held belief; there would be little to unpack and few insights to discover. The goal should be to stir up and direct the real disagreements and divergence that exist, not to manufacture arguments.

Putting the practice into play

Just setting up the conditions for friction is a start, but the type of productive friction that can help a workgroup learn faster isn't likely to occur on its own, even with a diverse and passionate group. Being open to friction and maintaining a high level of friction generally takes a deliberate and conscious effort, at both the individual and workgroup levels. How can you stir up the right type of friction and sustain it over the group's time together? Workgroups may need to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It begins with embracing complexity when our instinct is to simplify. Leaning into complexity, with all of its messiness and unpredictability, can help highlight a problem's nuances and the contrasts and contradictions within the workgroup.

INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

Workgroups often need friction across the board, in all of the workgroup's activities, to sharpen the thinking and push the group to be better.

- **Maximize the potential for friction**. The productive friction a group cultivates can become more potent when it comes from a diverse and passionate membership. Members who are passionate about the outcome will likely challenge each other and themselves to learn how to have more of an impact, faster.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** When the group proves itself capable of managing friction productively, members will be more confident and willing to engage with different perspectives or challenge and explore as a group. It can create a virtuous cycle, wherein they see that friction is beneficial and more confidently bring forth their diversity in future interactions.

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** Challenging each other's observations and interpretations of what happened in-action, and what the results of the action were, is an important element of effective reflection that draws out learning.

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** The group periodically challenges itself to ensure that it is still pursuing the highest-value outcome. The commitment to a meaningful outcome can help workgroups tolerate the discomfort of friction.

- **Bias toward action.** To act with the most impact, workgroups need friction not just in coming up with ideas but in planning action, taking action, and making sense of action.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** The metrics that matter to the outcome may provide a focal point for discussion and can ground disagreements in data.

- **Frame a powerful question.** The right question should create tension that provokes friction.

- **Seek new contexts.** Immersion in a new context can take members out of their comfort zone, challenging their assumptions and mental models in an immediate and tangible way. Changing context and experiencing a new and very different context can also help create awareness of orthodoxies and assumptions, and through exposure to others' contexts, group members can cultivate a willingness to continuously reexamine, test, and update their own.

But it doesn't end with recognizing that a problem has many facets and group members have different ideas. Having shined a light on complexity, seek out challenges and draw out the group's areas of disagreement and divergence.

EMBRACE COMPLEXITY

Performance improvement isn't straightforward, in part because we don't always even know how to assess performance. Proxies such as focus, speed, and efficiency—driving out waste and costs—tend to favor stripping out complexity. But in a world of interconnected systems, the inputs, outputs, and conditions of each are constantly changing. A single approach or toolset won't generally suffice across the range of conditions; mastering a single process or tool can't be the goal. In a complex world, it isn't about how

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Are the unique voices and perspectives in our workgroup being surfaced and heard?
- How can we do a better job of drawing out the diversity that we have?

fast you get from break to shore but about how well you ride the wave. This is second-order performance: how well you adjust and drop what isn't working and pick up new things, how well you stoke curiosity, sample from the edges, and develop new skills and tools.

Workgroups can create tension when they resist the urge to immediately simplify. The perspective you hold, as an individual or a group, is never the only perspective. **Keep an open** consider other angles explore the nuances particular situation. re's usually more to story: What else don't know? Take time to sider, for example, a refrigerator isn't g into just a "house" t into a *kitchen* within *duplex* in a *shrinking idwestern city*. Does t change any assumptions? Abstracting roblem until it looks like something with which we are more familiar can seem like an efficient way to handle complexity; do it too early, however, and you risk losing the richness of the problem, which is where the opportunities are likely to be. In the case of the Joint Special Operations Command[7] in Iraq, when intelligence analysts were teamed with the forces, some important nuances came to life: Although most raids shared some similarities in the abstract, being on the ground in a raid made clear to the analysts that the specific context, the ways in which that raid did *not* resemble others, often mattered more. Being deliberate about interrupting the tendency to jump straight to tasks, to be as efficient as possible, can make space for members to diverge, explore, and start to build on the possibilities without feeling as though each divergent thought is a tangent that is preventing the group from getting on with the "real" work.

Celebrate diversity by being explicit that cognitive diversity is not just a nice-to-have but exactly what the workgroup needs. Be open about the fact that group members have different backgrounds and skills; this may open the door for members to reveal more of their differences. When workgroups rush to smooth over differences, they can miss the opportunity to sample ideas and techniques and pick up new tools and approaches. Set the tone by provoking members to speak to their belief systems, their reasons for participating, and why the outcome matters to them—even if, or *especially* if, these reasons differ. Resist the urge to resolve contradictions or emphasize commonality. Establishing a tolerance for unresolved tension can ease individuals' fears that disagreement will damage the team dynamic.

The goal should be to create disequilibrium in the group and evolve the options on the table, keeping the intensity high enough to motivate the group toward a creative next step, but not so high that it becomes unproductive. One way to do this is by **playing with possibilities** to slow down a pell-mell rush to execution. A playful discussion of what-ifs can test the boundaries and conditions rather than treating them as realities. As communicator Nancy Duarte points out, the arc from what *could be* to what *is* creates useful tension.[8] It doesn't have to be just a mental exercise—tinkering is a way to look for where there is play in physical systems and routines as well. Royal Caribbean Cruise's Newbuilding & Innovation group, for example, uses a

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Are we turning up the heat enough? In what ways do we tend to avoid conflict?

- What if friction wasn't just allowable but demanded? What if we went beyond accepting different points of view and insisted that they be surfaced?

variety of design tools and graphical simulations to explore the ideas and possibilities brought forward by domain specialists from aircraft design, fashion, entertainment, and shipbuilding that stretch the group's collective thinking.

Ultimately, it may be as simple as being willing to **be curious**. A workgroup aiming to improve has an obligation to be curious. Ask the question when you don't understand, and adopt a beginner's mindset. Reach beyond your experience, and listen for what an idea could be rather than what it is.

SEEK OUT CHALLENGES

It's one thing to get options on the table, another to transform them into solutions. The goal of cultivating friction is the latter, getting to better and better solutions by learning as a group and embodying it in action. An alchemy of interactions makes a workgroup more than the sum of its parts (or its ideas). Individual ideas bump up against each other and against diverse perspectives, get tested in real conditions, and become different and better as a result. This happens not once but repeatedly, as the context changes along with the group's understanding. To create this alchemy, it isn't enough for members to *tolerate* challenges[9]—they should *insist* on challenges.

Sometimes, particularly when a group seems to gel quickly and develop instant camaraderie, the idea of doing anything to upset the balance can seem completely counterproductive. But a norm of not rocking the boat can solidify over time, making it seem harder and less likely that a group member will risk a rift. Challenging early on, when the stakes might be lower, can help a group understand and adjust how it responds and reacts to uncomfortable situations. Community—and bonds of trust—can come from crises, even small ones.

Challenge yourself and others to break through any ego and hubris that can prevent individuals from engaging with each other around what is most important, from unwillingness either to show vulnerability by asking questions or to be open to *being* questioned. Misunderstandings and disagreements can be fertile ground for learning and creating something new. Individuals should strive to repress the desire to display authority or expertise—and shouldn't let other members go unchallenged by virtue of their expertise. A workgroup, collectively, can help by not accepting serial monologues or

presentations and by questioning and exploring assumptions as a matter of habit.

Even people who think they are open to new ideas and learning often have deeply ingrained—and unexamined—assumptions that can shape the way they approach the world. Although it may feel awkward at first, here are some ways to elicit challenges:

- Try to bring more of the invisible and unstated—beliefs, experiences, expectations, and theories—into the open by asking others to state their core assumptions when they offer a perspective.
- Take the group into a new context temporarily, or bring outsiders in, to help heighten awareness of our own orthodoxies—a key first step to reexamining and updating them. For example, as the Red Cross has begun using more people from local communities in responses, a side benefit has been to expose the organization's professionals to more perspectives that challenge what they "know" about the work.
- Prompt members who are likely to hold opposing perspectives and explore the disagreement. Rather than minimize the differences, try to explicate the "ladder of inference,"[10] working backward from the expressed perspective to the beliefs, experiences, and assumptions that led there. Instead of, "How can you think that?", ask, "I wonder what information you have that I don't?" or, "How might you see the world such that this

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QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- To what extent are workgroup members encouraged to speak beyond their expertise?

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makes sense?"[11] Even better than asking: Try to experience what the other person does. Going deeper into disagreement may get to a more nuanced understanding of the root problem.
- Call out the elephant in the room or question the organization's long-established conventional wisdom and principles. Setting an expectation that the unspeakable may well be spoken is another way to break through complacency and elicit challenges.

The goal of bringing gaps in knowledge and understanding to light is to gain insight into what we don't know: Either others do know about it or the group can create new knowledge around it.[12]

For agency sparks & honey, success depends in part upon cultivating friction in a daily culture briefing.[13] The briefing leaders prompt specific individuals on certain subjects and consciously distribute the conversation. Rather than try to resolve opposing or even unrelated perspectives, they use the common language of the agency's cultural intelligence system and framework to focus on looking for the new insights and connections that such divergence might reveal. Over time, many of the briefing participants have also tacitly picked up skills for eliciting diverse perspectives and managing the resulting friction—an ever-growing community of practitioners developed through tacit learning.

Beyond a practice of challenging each other in discussion, another approach is to **impose constraints** as a means of forcing creativity and divergent views by placing an entire workgroup into a stress position. Imposing constraints on the tools and conditions of a solution is one way to do this. Constraining the budget, expertise, or (especially) timing can spark creativity and produce a sense of urgency.

Finally, try to **create space** so that friction can develop from a variety of sources. Silence can be an important tool and is a discipline that supports the need to avoid rushing to answer, resolve, or simplify. Silence itself can provoke tension for some

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- Don't stir things up—just smile and nod so we can be done.

- There's no such thing as a bad idea and all ideas are equal—let's not judge.

- We're all in agreement and know how this works—let's just get on with it; we've got the A-team on this.

while allowing space for other voices to clarify and emerge. Mediate the conversation to keep multiple interpretations alive so that additional important insights and slow-building approaches can have a chance to materialize.

Although action-oriented group members may become impatient or frustrated when passionate views collide and generate multiple interpretations of a challenge, these collisions and interactions could be necessary to continue to reach new levels of performance. It takes practice, for both individuals and groups, to balance the need to diverge and generate heat with the directive to draw actionable insights that can be used to make progress toward an outcome. As a group's members increasingly employ tensions and disagreements to reach better solutions, they can help create a virtuous cycle of more honest and forthcoming challenges.

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9. We use challenge as both verb (*to dispute, to question, to call someone to engage*) and noun (*a call to participate or engage, a call to prove or justify*).

10. The "ladder of inference" was put forth by psychologist Chris Argyris in 1970 and further developed by Peter Senge in his 1990 book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. The model describes the unseen thought processes that come between taking in facts and ultimately acting or responding.

11. Stone, Patton, and Heen, *Difficult Conversations*, p. 37.

12. From the Johari Window framework. There are four quadrants: On one axis is "known to self" and "not known to self"; on the other axis is "known to others" and "not known to others." By making what we believe we know visible to others, we can gain insight into what we don't know, whether because someone else does know it or whether by bringing the unknowns to light, the group can collectively create knowing around something none individually knew prior. See Gray, *Liminal Thinking*, p. 62.

13. The daily culture briefing is developed and hosted by the Briefing Workgroup and attended by most of the agency as well as outside participants. Read more about the sparks & honey briefing workgroup in the full case study, forthcoming in February 2018.

Commit to a shared outcome

Focus on the outcome that matters most to foster passion and amplify your actions

Introduction: Focus and alignment

A shared outcome is the reason a workgroup exists; it is why group members come together and what they aim to achieve every day—for example, to *save lives* or to *stop cyber-intrusions*. For most workgroups, this outcome will support the mission of the larger organization, but it is much more within the group's ability to control.

When a shared outcome is significant and meaningful, commitment to that outcome can drive a workgroup to take action. It can rally members from different domains and possibly different organizations to work together despite their having competing perspectives, goals, and even performance metrics. A shared outcome can also compel a workgroup to reach outside its membership for help, insight, and resources. All of these—action, generative collaboration, and leverage—are key for workgroups looking to accelerate performance improvement amid rapidly changing conditions and requirements.

When it comes to accelerating performance improvement, the way an outcome is defined is key. No workgroup can definitively achieve a well-defined outcome in the short term. For example, while a group of firefighters might be saving lives every day, there are always more lives to be saved and, conceivably, better, more effective ways to do so. As a result, commitment to a shared outcome typically helps to focus and align workgroup members on what could be done and drives them to constantly take action to get better at achieving that outcome.

Committing to a shared outcome can help elevate a group's objectives over individual objectives, creating an expectation and a vehicle for putting aside competing agendas[1] and focusing on the issue at hand. The significance and meaningfulness of a shared commitment can also help workgroup members to tolerate the potential discomfort of challenging and being challenged by others as a means of getting better and better at achieving the shared outcome. In fact, research indicates that groups with shared outcomes are half as likely to feel that competing priorities hold the group back and a third as likely to complain about constraints due to corporate politics.[2]

By being larger than any one member and requiring not just every member of the workgroup but also external resources and learning, a significant shared outcome can lead to learning from others. In a world of mounting performance pressure, one of the keys to success could be finding ways to engage and motivate others to help achieve even more impact. Defining a shared outcome can help a workgroup attract the right talent and connect more effectively with others by being clear both about what it is trying to accomplish and where and how others can help.

> **YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:**
> - There are competing definitions of success with no consensus
> - We have a bunch of solutions but no clarity on what we are solving for
> - The workgroup is easily distracted or moving in too many directions at once

The *commit to a shared outcome* practice: What it is

The optimal shared outcome—*this* is what we are committed to—can help a workgroup accelerate performance improvement. A well-defined shared outcome should provide clarity, focus, and guidance for making decisions and taking action, orienting workgroups amid uncertainty, and making clear to members where they are heading and what is worth fighting for and what is not.[3]

Some attributes of a good shared outcome:
- **Clear and credible.** This is about the basic work of the group; members are the driving influence and doing the bulk of the work.
- **Significant.** Big enough to inspire and motivate. Group members believe they can achieve it better collectively than individually.
- **Broad and open-ended.** There is always more that can be done, and doing it typically requires pulling in resources and talent from outside the workgroup.

- **Narrow and tangible.** Defined to provide focus and guide decisions because it is directly relevant to who they are and the skills and scope they bring to the work. The outcome can give a sense of what success would really look like.
- **Meaningful.** At its best, a shared outcome has an element that connects to members' values and identity; achieving that outcome can become personal and meaningful to each of the group members.

. . . and what it isn't

- **The organization's goals** or part of a broader effort. For most workgroups, the shared outcome will support the mission of the larger organization, but it must be within the group's

authority and ability to make a significant impact on the outcome. For example, if the organization has a mission to "improve lives through wellness," the workgroup's shared outcome might be to "scale a wellness business." The exception might be project-oriented organizations such as an urban fire department.
- **A quantified goal or target.** Workgroups can get locked in on a specific number, causing them to act more narrowly or even game the system, aiming to achieve that number rather than continuously push the boundaries to achieve better and better outcomes.
- **An ideal or vision.** Lofty goals that aren't tangible or clear—say, *make the world a better place*—generally provide too little focus or guidance to prompt action. The group may be inspired but could either become overwhelmed by magnitude

INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

- **Maximize the potential for friction**. A clear, long-term direction around a meaningful shared outcome can help attract diverse members who are passionate about the outcome and can help mobilize others to engage as well. Without it, the workgroup may attract people best suited for near-term events but unprepared to make progress toward longer-term objectives.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** By overriding individual agendas, a shared commitment to an outcome can help build the foundation for deeper trust between individuals.[4]

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** When group members trust each other's commitment to an outcome, they may be more willing to reflect and share honestly in order to learn how to have a greater impact on the shared outcome.

- **Bias toward action.** The shared outcome provides guidance that enables members to move more quickly and confidently into rapid actions that could yield learning, without fear of political reprisals for appearing to make a mistake or having to change direction.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** The shared outcome sets the context for how success would be measured and what metrics would be most relevant for the workgroup.

- **Seek new contexts.** Using a shared outcome as a lens for what matters can help you make sense of new contexts and not get overwhelmed.

- **Cultivate friction.** Motivated by commitment to a shared outcome, members may be more willing to endure some discomfort in order to participate in practices that increase the type of friction that is generative of new and better approaches.

- **Frame a powerful question.** There is a back-and-forth dynamic between the shared outcome and the question. The shared outcome generally sets guiderails for the direction of the question, while that question animates and adds urgency to the shared outcome. Part of the art is using one to inform the other.

Putting the practice into play

A shared outcome can be valuable for any type of group. However, for edge workgroups, the way the outcome is articulated and the ways that members choose to deepen commitment to it can influence the size and nature of the group's impact. Workgroups can create and sustain commitment to the type of shared outcome that accelerates performance improvement by making sure that the most important ... re treated as the most ... rtant, and by making ... shared outcome mean- ... gful to the members. ... hese practices, in them- ... elves, have the potential ... o drive accelerated per- ... ormance improvement. ... While a shared out- ... ne will remain rela- ... y stable, it should be ... ing conversation, open to revision as the workgroup and context evolve. Throughout the effort, leaders should entertain suggestions for updating the outcome, periodically surface other interpretations, and then rearticulate the shared outcome to ensure continual team alignment.[5] This gives the shared outcome renewed credibility by illustrating that it is connected to its dynamic context—and reassures members of the team that they are a part of the shared outcome.

MAKE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

The workgroup shapes the nature of their work through the way members define the outcome they are committing to deliver. Even with organizational expectations of what it will deliver, the right outcome on which to align may not be immediately obvious. For example, a disaster response group might define a shared outcome of "saving lives" or "minimizing trauma" or "restoring normal infrastructure function," each suggesting different priorities and approaches. Without alignment on what *the* most important thing is for the group, workgroup members may find themselves working at cross purposes or just being slowed down by the need to keep renegotiating priorities. Negotiating and agreeing to a shared outcome will almost certainly raise different and opposing perspectives. This is an opportunity for the group to establish how it will handle friction productively.

Ideally, the workgroup collectively explores how it might define the outcome, up front, to better ensure that all of the members share in and can commit to it. Start by **taking the long view**, asking: *What is the highest impact that we can have? Where can we offer the most value?* The idea is to focus first on the future and the opportunities ahead and then work backward. Paradoxically, focusing on a long-term direction could actually help to deal with near-term uncertainty. This can generate excitement, helping groups break free from current constraints and opening up the domain beyond just what group members currently do. For example, a group of firefighters might initially define their shared outcome as "putting out fires" but, upon further discussion, clarify the outcome to be "to save lives" or even "to prevent fires."

In addition to looking to the future, **be bold** in considering unexplored horizons that might not yet seem quite possible. Periodically reevaluating the shared outcome can provide an opportunity for the workgroup to draw out potential and possibility over time. IsraAID, an international humanitarian aid organization, defines its mission as act-
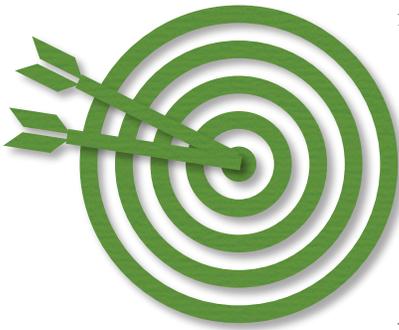
> ❝ When you face a tough decision, or when prospects for success look bleak, reminding one another what you are trying to do provides guidance, sustenance, and inspiration.
>
> —*The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*

ing where it can make the most impact, where others are not, to provide disaster relief and long-term support. Depending on the response effort, an IsraAID workgroup might define a shared outcome of building public health capacity or creating an infrastructure for future local response. The group responding to the 2011 Japan earthquake focused on areas and populations that larger organizations were overlooking. When group members discovered that other organizations were failing to offer psychosocial and post-traumatic support—especially for children and elderly victims—the response group refined its shared outcome: to increase local psychosocial capacities to support the local population's long-term sustainability. Ultimately, the IsraAID group worked with local government agencies to train educators in art therapy and offer post-traumatic stress disorder training for counselors and social workers.[6]

A workgroup commits to making the outcome the focus of all activities and to working together to achieve it. And while the outcome should be within the group's scope and authority, the shared outcome should also acknowledge the inherent uncertainty and evolving nature of both resources and contexts. By aligning on only **the ends, not the means**, a workgroup is free to think broadly and creatively about the best approaches to achieve that most important outcome. A compelling *what* combined with an open *how* would also tend to attract relevant resources that the group might have been unaware existed. Defining a group's impact requires flexibility, balancing concreteness and aspiration to arrive at something tangible enough to pursue, based in a concrete understanding of the effort required,

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Where has a short-term orientation gotten us into trouble?
- What is the most important thing on which we could focus our efforts?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What would be the impact on the organization if we succeed?
- What would have to happen for us to achieve the largest impact?

but not so tangible that it hinders creativity or kills group members' passion and motivation.

In some contexts, outcomes aren't straightforward and might be difficult to articulate. In addition to defining the outcome, try to **capture the feeling** that you want the outcome to generate. Then the workgroup can reflect on whether the outcome as defined would elicit that feeling, for the group or others. Appeal to group members' emotions, not just their minds. There are different ways of *knowing*, and feeling and emotion are powerful motivators that may be overlooked by groups eager to jump to metrics and goals. At Pixar, for example, workgroups often lack objective criteria to assess their progress: They reflect on whether a particular character animation or scene captured the feeling they were trying to elicit, and, if it doesn't, they consider every component—the lighting, the colors, the textures, the shot style and camera angles, visual details, sound, and voice, as well as the actual script and story—to understand what is supporting the feeling they are trying to achieve and what isn't or is working against it. In *Inside Out*, about a child's emotions, the filmmakers struggled with the character Joy, knowing they wanted to elicit a childlike optimism and enthusiasm without irritating viewers with too much sweetness.[7]

With a group commitment to a shared outcome, **go public**. Reinforce it by speaking the commitment out loud to each other and use it to guide the group's activities. Whether through blogs or press releases, conversation or public speaking, look for ways to publicly share the group's shared outcome to motivate taking action and, more importantly, to attract others to your cause and potentially reveal new resources.

MAKE IT MEANINGFUL

A workgroup is committing not only to the outcome but to the journey together. But the commitment that feels so strong at the beginning, when the challenge is novel and exciting, can fade as the new becomes old and the exciting becomes difficult. Paying attention to what makes a shared outcome meaningful can help to sustain and revitalize commitment over the course of a longer effort—or of many short efforts. The shared outcome should remain relevant even as circumstances change and evolve. How does the shared outcome connect to the larger context of an organization or situation as well as to the smaller contexts of the group members? How can the outcome connect to something larger, something beyond self-interest or ambition? Workgroups that can answer these questions—or at least keep asking them—may be better able to sustain members' commitment.

Make the outcome real *now* by taking meaningful actions now. An outcome around which the workgroup can mobilize today helps members to begin learning sooner. For accelerating operating performance, small actions help test the assumptions and conditions necessary for achievability, and the actions themselves should also demonstrate commitment. The members' unique and diverse sets of resources and capabilities put the group in a unique position to achieve this outcome. Past performance, in particular, can make the achievability real. Have the people and organizations involved in this effort previously shown themselves capable of focusing their actions and resources on the "most important thing?"

Over time, commitment generally comes from having a connection to the shared outcome and deriving meaning from it. This connection may happen through a negotiation: Members bring their own identities, which initially shape the way each member thinks about the outcome and her individual approach to it. Through defining the shared outcome, a collective identity begins to emerge. The workgroup identity, and the deeper understanding of the impact the group can make, begin to shape the members' personal identities. When members find alignment between the shared outcome and

their individual identities, it can elicit their passion to bring the outcome to life and have more and more impact on it. Members can **keep it real** by continuing to shape and evolve the outcome to accommodate what they learn and what is important over time. They frame their actions in terms of the outcome. *What they do, why they do it, and who they are can align.*[8]

One way in which members can internalize the shared outcome is by articulating what they find personally meaningful about this effort and how the shared outcome aligns with that. Through clarifying the group definition, personal identity, how each individual might approach the problem and her role in the group, and what meaning she will derive can begin to emerge. The workgroup can sustain that commitment by being open to challenges from group members as the context changes and more information comes into the picture, and adjusting their shared outcome and action-taking as a result, showing a constantly improving and credible path. This bottom-up approach to accountability and group identity can allow the entire group to adjust quickly to respond to the changing environment and work together toward their shared outcome.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How do we avoid inertia from overcommitment?
- What changes would allow us all to believe in the outcome and feel committed?

Beyond remaining relevant as context changes, a shared outcome can be more meaningful when it connects to something larger, an impact beyond the reach or ability of any one individual or workgroup that motivates the workgroup to seek to get better and better at achieving the outcome. This type of commitment typically has an emotional component and connects to individuals' personal passions and identities. Passion makes members feel more invested in the outcome and mutually accountable to getting the work done; more importantly, passion is associated with a desire to learn faster to have a

greater and greater impact.[9] Tying the shared outcome to a larger narrative that spans workgroups is one way of **raising the bar**—inspiring, stoking passion, and reinforcing commitment.

A narrative can be a powerful call to action. It should appeal to emotion, not just intellect, and lay out a compelling, open-ended vision that invites others to participate in it, shaping it through their own actions. It is realistic about the challenges and obstacles that may be confronted along the way, but that's why the call to action is so powerful—it makes clear that workgroup cannot achieve the opportunity without sustained, collective action. In times of uncertainty and turbulence, narratives can help groups overcome risk aversion, short-term thinking, zero-sum views of the world, and erosion of trust.[10] Organizations or movements might create a narra-

tive; the workgroup probably won't. By definition, the narrative exists outside of the workgroup and is focused externally: How can others participate, taking independent actions to make the vision reality?

So if workgroups aren't creating the narrative, how do they use them? Workgroups can start by becoming aware of the narratives around them and identifying the narrative that can turn the shared outcome into a greater, open-ended aspiration that taps a deep need in individuals and motivates them to go the extra mile to achieve the desired outcome. In the case of a workgroup, a narrative can illuminate how actions support an even greater ambition, one that *can* be accomplished and is being accomplished—not necessarily by the workgroup alone but in part through its efforts.

One way of continuously making the shared outcome meaningful is to keep it visible, front and center, as a guide, a call to action, reminding the group what they are striving for. Whether in physical form, on a whiteboard or dashboard (Southwest Airlines Field Techs), incorporated into a project name (Royal Caribbean Project Edge), or as an open manifesto (sparks & honey), incorporating references to a shared outcome reminds the team what they are trying to achieve and can help guide decisions. Visible cues can often be enough to spark the inspiration and motivation that many members feel when they first join a team.

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- The organization already has a mission statement.

- We shouldn't ask for trouble. Restating the organization's goals is the safest way to go.

- Keep it vague. We don't want to sign up for something we can't deliver.

- My boss sets my performance objectives.

ENDNOTES

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4. Jill Geisler, "To build the team, build the trust, with these 8 tips," Poynter, May 10, 2012; Geisler, "What great bosses know about building trust," Poynter, February 20, 2010.

5. For examples of how successful companies don't change their commitment to the shared outcome, see Michael E. Raynor, *The Strategy Paradox: Why Committing to Success Leads to Failure (and What to Do About It)* (New York: Crown Business, 2007).

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8. Mark Bonchek, "Purpose is good. Shared purpose is better," *Harvard Business Review*, March 14, 2013.

9. John Hagel, John Seely Brown, Maggie Wooll, and Alok Ranjan, *If you love them, set them free: Why building the workforce you need for tomorrow means giving them wings to fly today*, Deloitte University Press, June 6, 2017.

10. For more about the power of narratives and how to create and use them, see John Hagel, "The untapped potential of corporate narratives," Edge Perspectives with John Hagel, October 7, 2013.

Bias toward action

Move from discussion to action
as quickly as possible

Introduction:
Reactivity is not enough

The front line is, of course, where most problems or opportunities first appear—and where people find themselves crafting strategies and taking actions to address them. Such moves usually need to happen at top speed, since the window of time to address the issue at hand is often short—too short to accommodate exhaustive analysis, planning, and approval processes. It's no surprise that many organizations look to speed reactions and solve problems more quickly. But workgroups aiming to accelerate performance improvement should adopt a different mind-set: They should *act* rather than *react*.

In a rapidly changing world, workgroups take a real risk in reacting to whatever is happening at the moment. Reactivity tends to breed modest, incremental improvement at best; at worst, it tends to lock workgroups into their approaches of the past. Groups need to respond quickly to whatever they are confronting—and respond in ways that can move them toward achieving higher impact.

Action is a means of targeted and rapid learning that is an important element of accelerating performance. It is a different type of learning than *training* or sharing existing knowledge. Taking action to engage with a possible solution uncovers a problem's conditions and requirements as well as the capabilities and limitations of our resources. This information informs the next action and ultimately creates new knowledge that can be built into a better approach. Until the new knowledge is embodied in action, the workgroup is unlikely to learn from it.

A group can learn faster how to achieve higher levels of performance by taking more of the types of actions that create new knowledge and matter to the outcome. Balancing the value of fast feedback with the longer-range goal to significantly improve an outcome, a group can avoid the reactive incremental loop and pursue truly impactful learning. This can shape how members will think about what actions to take and which actions and opportunities to pass by.

Further, in a world where what is true today about a given issue may not be true tomorrow, a bias toward action could orient the workgroup to look beyond compliance and the status quo. It can help propel a workgroup past the paralysis brought on by uncertainty and prompt the group to keep testing assumptions and developing new approaches to improve performance regardless of inertia or roadblocks in the larger organization. A bias toward action can also help clarify the overwhelming noise that many workgroups sometimes encounter.

To accelerate performance improvement, workgroups should increase decision-making velocity, taking reasonable and fluid actions—whether that is first responders breaking down a door or a product designer posting a mock-up on a platform—without cumbersome decision-making and approval processes. Groups should be able to take action—small moves, smartly made—over and over and over, to keep testing conditions and assumptions and pushing boundaries to reach higher levels of performance.

Too much planning or approval-seeking without action can defuse momentum, squelch passion, and delay the learning and refinement needed to progress. If workgroups are too slow to try things outside the status quo, they may miss valuable opportunities.

YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:

- We are slow at putting our ideas into action; we focus on process (for example, stage gates) more than the results we are trying to achieve

- There is no time to tinker, prototyping new ideas feels high risk, and failure is frowned upon

- Many people can say no, while no one can clearly say go

- We can't get the right people in the room to make decisions—or, worse, we have to get everyone in the room

- The outcomes around which we align cater to the lowest common denominator; we could be missing the opportunities that would have significant impact

- We feel as though we have too few resources to achieve the impact we want

- There are no consequences for not improving performance over time

For example, Polaroid was slow to act when radical changes were occurring in the imaging/camera industry even though the company had the technical capabilities to pursue a new approach.[1] Accelerating performance improvement, then, doesn't necessarily come from response and reaction, no matter how fast, but from choosing where to act to get the best impact on the outcome over time.

The *bias toward action* practice: What it is

In a fast-paced and unpredictable business environment, not all actions are equal. Action matters when it leads to new actions that can ultimately deliver higher impact. Bias toward action is about acting quickly to learn faster, but it's also about choosing where to act; deciding what will drive the most useful learning. It is a balancing act: Groups need to get into action sooner—and also take every possible moment before action to get the most out of it. A strong sense of where the workgroup is aiming, what performance metrics matter most, and what

the workgroup doesn't yet know make bias toward action possible.

Effective action to accelerate performance improvement is typically characterized by:

- **Timing**. Be explicit about the downsides of waiting to act. Knowing when to act can be as important as knowing what to do.
- **Leverage**. Leverage others' capabilities to learn as fast as possible and focus on what has not been done before.
- **The unknown and unpredictable**. Aim for actions that haven't been taken before, whose effect is unknown, rather than variants designed to confirm a hypothesis. There shouldn't be a designated result that, if it doesn't turn out that way, the action is a "failure."
- **Improvisation**. Improvise as you go. Look for ways to tinker with the approach, and incorporate feedback to build on—and build in.
- **Short feedback loops**. Take action that elicits useful feedback faster. Look for ways to get feedback earlier from actions that take longer.
- **Planning**. Take time to understand and manage risk in advance. Plan for how the workgroup

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INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

- **Maximize the potential for friction**. A diverse and passionate workgroup can shape and build the actions that will have the most impact on performance.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** Workgroups can act more effectively and learn from actions if members do not fear judgment and repercussions and expect actions to be made in support of the workgroup's learning.

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** Action generates the raw material for reflection. What action can give us the quickest feedback about how to improve the outcome the most?

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** Action has implications for bridging all of the workgroup's practices into impact on the shared outcome.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** Out of all the possible actions, which is most likely to have an impact on the performance metrics that matter most to the outcome?

- **Seek new contexts.** Workgroups can draw inspiration and insight from other contexts about what assumptions they should test and what types of actions they can take next.

- **Cultivate friction.** If the point of action is to generate the most impactful learning, groups should constantly question assumptions and look for opportunities to build on and improve other actions.

- **Frame a powerful question.** The powerful question can help overcome old assumptions and build more of a creative set of conditions for action.

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will gather feedback and learn from actions, and consider whether the action can be made more productive.

. . . and what it isn't

- **Agile**. The way many organizations have interpreted and implemented Agile, it is almost exclusively focused on speed-to-market and the ability to respond more quickly. While organizations can find this incredibly useful, workgroups aiming to accelerate performance improvement should focus on the actions that will help them learn faster how to reach higher and higher levels of performance.
- **Acting for the sake of action**. Without a clear direction and a desired impact to help guide and prioritize possible actions, groups can spread themselves too thin in a misguided belief that more action is inherently better than less. Of all the actions on the table, choose those most likely to have an impact on the performance that matters most.
- **Acting recklessly**. It's anything but. All failures are not created equal, and those resulting from inattention or lack of effort or competence should have consequences.[2]

Putting the practice into play

Workgroups aiming to accelerate their impact should act relatively quickly. But they should also act deliberately, to avoid getting trapped into reacting to the moment rather than choosing the actions that have the most potential to propel the workgroup toward its long-term objectives. The practice of biasing toward action, then, is a balancing act between speed and impact. It requires prudence and planning, as well as a nuanced understanding of risk to make it more manageable and place it in the context of other risks and rewards. Rethinking and reframing risk can make taking action more compelling. At the same time, planning actions to be less burdensome, more productive for learning, and designed to accommodate improvisation in the moment can further encourage workgroups to act.

In fact, part of the practice is knowing when not to act—and being focused on exploiting the limited time available to make the next action, and the one after that, have as much impact as possible.[3]

REFRAME RISK

In a fast-moving environment, inaction is one of the greatest risks that workgroups face. Conceptually, we know that inaction means sticking with the status quo, which means, at best, diminishing returns and a shallow line of incremental improvement. At the outset, though, it may be hard to appreciate the opportunity missed or gauge the cost of a chance to learn passed up. To begin reframing the notion of risk, groups should make the risks of inaction part of the conversation. *What are we risking by doing nothing? What is the potential impact of what we might learn? What is the cost of continuing without this learning?* The risk of doing nothing is missing the opportunity to jump from a shallow linear curve to an accelerating trajectory of performance improvement: *Where could we be in six months, in a year, in 10 years relative to today, if we get on an accelerating trajectory?*

The same phenomena—increasing rate of change and shifting expectations and demands—that are moving the action to frontline workgroups also significantly increase the risk of inaction, though few organizations have the tools or skills to really understand the impact of opportunities missed. A group can set a tone by deliberately focusing conversations on action and making the risk of inaction part of any conversation about risk. It can also be useful to draw on well-known examples of the changing dynamics in other domains to be explicit about the potential downsides of waiting (for approval, for clarity, for external pressure) relative to the potential of getting on a higher trajectory in such an environment. Consider, for example, the story of Amazon Web Services. Back in 2005, when a group at Amazon began working on the project, many likely questioned the investment—after all, what did it have to do with books? Yet within a decade, it had reached $10 billion in annual sales and was growing at a faster pace than Amazon's e-commerce business.[4]

For workgroups, a large part of developing a bias toward action is to focus on what can be gained

from taking an action and then **maximize the up-side potential**. What impact or learning might an action have on the outcome? How could we tweak this action to increase the impact or gain even greater learning? Consider what is desirable, feasible, and viable—in that order. One way to maximize the upside is to focus on actions that haven't been taken before, whose effect is unknown. These will likely have far greater learning potential than trying out variants designed to confirm a hypothesis. The action should generate information or create new knowledge rather than have a designated answer that is either right or the action "fails."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What has prevented us from accomplishing our larger goals?
- Are there types of decisions we make final and unchangeable that shouldn't be? How might we benefit from making more decisions reversible?

Putting thought and planning toward action may help to direct the group's efforts toward high-impact goals, but members will likely have different perspectives about which actions have the greatest potential and how exactly they should be taken. The goal should be to balance impact with the speed of getting feedback to drive learning. If a workgroup has divergent views, try to **disagree and commit** rather than force consensus. This practice is inspired by a phrase from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, who credits this concept with the productivity of the company's teams: *Feel free to challenge an idea or plan, but when the time comes to make a decision, everyone commits to executing it even if they disagree.*[5] For workgroups, it generally means knowing when the value from further discussion is less than the value of getting feedback from action— when it is time to make a decision and move on. The expectation that many actions will fail to generate anticipated results means that the commitment to

any particular action may be limited. It would generate learning of one kind or another, and if it fails to have the expected impact, the group may well go back and execute the other option.

Developing this sense of open-endedness about a workgroup's decision-making can help that group take action more easily. Members can question their own assumptions about a proposed action's magnitude and finality. Decisions often feel weighty because we assume they are weighty; it's always worth questioning. Consider making it a formal part of discussion to ask: *How significant is this decision? What are the implications for regrouping and trying something else if this action doesn't have the expected impact?* This is somewhat of a paradox, since workgroups should be looking for actions to take that are significant in terms of potential for impact and learning, while also thinking about them as transitional and experimental. In rapidly changing conditions, this impermanence only increases; as one Southwest field tech put it: "What was 'no' yesterday might be 'yes' today."[6]

Consider playing with assumptions and boundaries to **make more decisions reversible**. Reversible decisions can be made with less authority or consensus, creating a stopgap for workgroups that might get stuck in analysis paralysis. If an approach or decision fails, the group can quickly recover and try another option rather than live with the consequences for too long. In doing so, members would learn and move on to focus on learning about the biggest opportunities rather than trying to predict the future.

Making risks more manageable can also tip the scales toward action rather than deliberation. Simulate actions by **creating sandcastles** in environments that have a lower cost of tinkering and contain the ripple effect of experiments. Try using environments that aren't dependent on core processes and IT, and leverage virtual tools to iterate quickly on specific actions that would benefit from tinkering. This practice could make it easier for workgroups to embrace productive friction because it would lower the stakes of any one challenge or decision—*hey, it's only sand*. The group would de-

velop an approach and then immediately build or test it. The immediacy of the action can generate rapid feedback for the group to take in and reflect on, shortcutting the need for long decision-making processes and cumbersome scheduling and buy-in. Having limited downstream effects, a group would have increased degrees of freedom to quickly test out and adjust its approach rather than trying to fix an airplane midflight.[7]

For example, FirstBuild—the ope[...] unit of GE Appliances, now a Haier [...]pany[8]—uses a community of enthusias[...] test concepts for new products. Afte[...]ing which types of products generat[...]thusiasm, such as a "chewable ice ma[...] FirstBuild might go back to the commu[...] with more detailed concepts. After [...]rowing the concept, the workgroup be[...] a more detailed design, going back to [...] community as needed. Once a desig[...] ready to prototype, the group uses a cr[...]funding site to test the market's intere[...] the product as designed and priced. I[...] market is less interested than expected[...] group can easily pull the product back [...] either kill it or tinker with features and [...]ing to take to market again. In Royal C[...]bean Cruises' Newbuilding & Innova[...] workgroup, members build sandcastle[...] virtual environments where they can s[...] sands of design solutions in a few hours, swapping out details that would otherwise have been costly or impossible to test in reality. For example, the group adjusted colors of panels, tested how much light structures provided at night versus day, and got to identify safety hazards invisible in blueprints. While members don't get the benefit of guest feedback, the entire group can see the design impact of decisions almost immediately, making for richer reflection and discussion of what actions come next.[9]

Workgroups should be able to address the issues or opportunities they see unfolding in front of them when the chain of command is occupied with other concerns, or when there isn't time to wait for more complete feedback or further instruction. An assumption of permission—go until "no," both for the group actions and for individual members—is key

for moving quickly and not getting hung up seeking permission, consensus, or buy-in from a wide array of possible stakeholders in advance. Asking for forgiveness rather than permission can help a group maintain momentum and spend its resources on activities that generate new knowledge rather than on navigating the organizational structure.

This assumption of permission may conflict with an organization's broader culture and make [...]mfortable. In order for this to work, [...]rs would have to trust each other [...]n good faith in the interest of im[...] the shared outcome and to have [...]understanding of the need to pri[...] actions that have the potential [...]atest impact on the outcome. In [...]ingly dynamic environments, act[...] slowly may be riskier than letting [...]ent people exercise their judgment. [...]ining decision-making authority [...]also constrain a group's learning [...]al and may be unnecessary if the [...] objectives and priorities are clear[...]erstood to guide decision-making. [...] Stanley McChrystal describes in [...]f Teams (his book about the Joint [...] Operations Command during the [...]ar), "I was connected to almost [...]ecision of consequence. This was [...]shing holistic awareness but it also created a nightmare of paperwork and approvals. . . . The wait for my approval was not resulting in any better decisions, and our priority should be reaching the best possible decision that could be made in a timeframe that allowed it to be relevant. I communicated across the command my thought process on decisions like airstrikes and told them to make the call."[10]

ACT TO LEARN

The most powerful learning for workgroups can be through action—getting out there and doing something—rather than sitting around a table and discussing. The more quickly the group gets to action, the sooner it can start learning how to accelerate performance improvement.

The relevant actions for a group often aren't the type that require large investments and extensive planning. If the actions are, instead, a means of learning to improve the outcome, how can we formulate actions to maximize the potential impact on the outcome and also have shorter feedback loops? One way could be to divide complex actions with long feedback loops into a series of assumptions to test. Consider formulating the most impactful actions into a series of small moves with interim milestones designed to elicit new information and create new knowledge. Try to **stage your moves** to focus on getting the actionable information or feedback that is important to the next step as quickly as possible without losing sight of the larger action. Consider what information or knowledge the workgroup may be missing and what feedback would be sufficient to inform further action. These actions can be viewed as interwoven experiments in a larger experiment that can lead to better solutions and outcomes in the future.[11]

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What do we do best that will make a difference, and what can we rely on others to do?
- To what extent could we make decisions faster with less information and achieve more as a result?

A minimum viable approach (MVA) can help **minimize effort, maximize momentum** by helping groups quickly identify what works and what should be discarded. MVA is frequently used in product development to deploy a product in the market sooner; in the context of workgroups, it has a wider aperture. The group would focus on identifying the barest approach or action that can lead to the next iteration, accelerating the rate of learning and encouraging members to test ideas outside their comfort zone or established approaches with minimal investment of time or resources.[12] MVA may not be appropriate for all situations (for instance, space

exploration or surgery), and scaling a solution may eventually require greater organizational support.

Workgroups can lower the barriers to action, increase the diversity of perspectives, and reduce risk by **leveraging** (capabilities, expertise, resources) **to learn** from outside the group. In fact, setting constraints—time, budget, technical—can prompt more creativity and also focus a workgroup where it is most likely to create value. If someone does it better, let her do it for you. Many work products are openly available and can reduce the cost, time, and effort required to act. Doing this well may require emphasizing rapid appropriation and reusing knowledge from other contexts and tight feedback loops so that participants can rapidly build on the contributions of others. While orchestrating others and using existing third-party tools has costs, mobilizing others can cultivate allies, build relationships, and allow a workgroup to focus on what it does best. The more rapidly a group learns from others, the richer the overarching set of possibilities—both the nature of the opportunity and the journey needed to achieve it.

Keeping in mind that the reason for adopting "minimum viable" practices is to accelerate the rate of learning, workgroups can **accelerate decision-making** as a proxy for whether they are making progress toward creating an environment where more learning happens faster. A "good" decision made too late for the opportunity or challenge can prove worse than an imperfect decision made in the moment. Part of this practice is to get more comfortable with acting on less information. Another is to get more creative at identifying proxies for the information you need. A third aspect is to make use of the immediacy and transparency of technological tools to get input much more rapidly than hiding behind established decision-making processes. For example, e-commerce luggage start-up Away attributes the use of Slack to "making decisions in a day that used to take weeks or months."[13]

Consider how the Joint Special Operations Task Force in Iraq went from 10–12 highly planned monthly raids to more than 300 monthly raids by learning how to take action within, sometimes, min-

utes of receiving actionable intelligence information. The raids may have had more unknowns, but they were also more successful at capturing targets and additional intelligence information because they were acting on information that hadn't gone stale.

Another example comes from Southwest Airlines, where the Baker workgroup has developed a tool to see decisions' direct impact on network operations. At one point, the group wanted to add a graphical dashboard that would show where Southwest was long or short on airplanes. Rather than take weeks to build the functionality, the superintendents of dispatch sat next to a developer in the workgroup, working together to create a summary table built into the system in only a few hours. They began getting feedback immediately as their colleagues began using it.[14]

> ❝ If you know in advance that it's going to work, it's not an experiment.[15]
>
> —Jeff Bezos

Jazz it up

There is no such thing as perfect experimentation or efficient innovation. Taking action early and often can only produce so much learning if workgroups don't also bring a spirit of play and possibility to their work. Try to take off the guardrails and embrace the messiness of rework and deviation. The point is not to discourage mistakes but to encourage recognizing mistakes, ineffective approaches, and invalid assumptions, and use them

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION
- To what extent is the current approach holding us back from achieving more?
- What can we do to learn more from our mistakes?

as inputs into better approaches, sooner. To really draw on its performance improvement potential, a diverse workgroup should embrace the vital role of improvisation, failure, and the unexpected in creating new knowledge that can lead to better and better outcomes over time. Similarly, leveraging capabilities from the outside is nothing more than outsourcing if the group uses those capabilities in predetermined, already-established ways.

With any action, **look for what's *not* being done**. We tend to focus on the urgent or the easy—because it's right there—but what is most important to the outcome may be neither urgent nor close at hand. Venture into a territory where your efforts can expose or create new knowledge rather than iterating on well-worn ground where the insights are incremental. The more unexpected the outcome, the more potential for valuable learning. If a workgroup is generating few surprising outcomes, it may not be pushing the boundaries that would lead to a new level of performance.

Improvisation is a skill that defies documentation, codification, and outside control. It can be misconstrued as chaotic, with individuals just winging it. In fact, for workgroups, similar to jazz ensembles, the quality of improvisation could depend in part on the foundational skills and talents each member brings, and in part on the quality of listening and riffing on what others are doing—and what has already been done—to make each additional move additive and constructive. **Expand the potential for improvisation** by relaxing organizational and operational constraints that get in the way. Royal Caribbean, for example, creates the space for improvisation by building change orders into the plan so that the company is prepared, structurally and mentally, to benefit from the interactions of the diversity of backgrounds brought together in the design workgroups. This also seems to set the expectation that members could build off of each other.

Celebrate the "fast failures" as opportunities to practice **improvising in the moment**. This would keep the focus on problem-solving, incorporating new information, and creating new knowledge. Although failing fast has become almost a cliché when talking about innovation, the

key is often to keep improving the group's ability to find the easiest, fastest ways to generate discrete and actionable feedback. Workgroups' limited size and the shorter time frames within which they work typically demand that these practices more closely resemble tinkering than iteration, and small, rapid adjustments rather than formal revisions.

Failing can lead to unexpected outcomes. **Build on mistakes**. Rather than start over after a failure or, worse, hiding it, consider incorporating failures and the learning from them into the next action. Starting with a clean slate loses the learning. Workgroup members may struggle with recognizing the value of what they are learning from unexpected outcomes, and what is relevant may come to light only through discussion and additional viewpoints. Consider the well-known example of 3M and the Post-it note. One of the company's most widely

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- We need consensus. If we get everyone on board, we're full steam ahead.

- This is it—take your shot.

- Failure is not an option: Screw this up, and you'd better look for another job.

- We don't move until we're sure.

sold products, the Post-it resulted from a "defective" new adhesive that was insufficiently sticky to hold papers together; sheets could just be peeled right off. It was only after consideration that the workgroup recognized the potential for an alternate use.[16]

ENDNOTES

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Prioritize performance trajectory

Track trajectory of the metrics that matter and make trade-offs to accelerate performance improvement

Introduction: Increasing impact

"Are we getting better at achieving our outcome?" This is the crux of workgroup performance, and almost no one measures it. Not only that, but in times of more rapid change—when the requirements, the technologies, the competition, and the contexts often change minute-to-minute, day-to-day, and incremental improvement can't keep pace—the important questions to consider are, "Are we getting better at achieving our outcome quickly *enough*? Are we getting better, faster?"

It may be insufficient to commit to a particular outcome. In a world of exponential technology advances, we need exponential, or accelerating, improvements in performance. That means committing to a trajectory, not just a target. Frontline workgroups will be making decisions and solving problems, in changing contexts, with limited time and other resources. It can be easy in this type of environment to get caught up in the immediacy of the day-to-day demands, acting to maximize impact in the moment but getting only incrementally better and possibly moving in a direction that could soon be obsolete. Pressures on the larger organization may push the workgroup further to focus on efficiency at a time when it needs to be focused on creating more value or delivering a better outcome. A key to shifting the focus away from efficiency is to identify and prioritize what will have the biggest impact on the shared outcome.

Setting high-impact performance objectives and tracking the trajectory of their improvement can help workgroups make trade-offs that may accelerate them toward better and better delivery of the shared outcome instead of getting distracted by incremental or short-term gains. As Amazon founder Jeff Bezos noted in 1997, "Because of our emphasis on the long term, we may make decisions and weigh trade-offs differently than some companies."[1] Focusing on trajectory can help workgroups prioritize the signals that matter and balance opportunity with distraction, discipline with flexibility, and experimentation with learning.

As workgroups come together to tackle the unexpected, the right performance objectives, and metrics against them, can help the group better understand the impact of their work, improve decision-making around priorities, maximize learning in the short and long terms, and continue to motivate action to figure out how to reach the next level.

YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:

- There are no workgroup-specific metrics and/or rewards for workgroup success

- Personal metrics are not tied to the impact they have on the workgroup and the larger organization

- The workgroup's critical priorities are different based on whom you ask

- We don't know where we stand relative to outcomes we want to achieve

- There is no agreed-upon and measurable metric for success that is being prioritized above others

- Metrics are focused on the near term and are mostly backward-looking—for example, ROI

The *prioritize performance trajectory* practice: What it is

This practice is about explicitly identifying and tracking the key metrics that matter for improving the shared outcome. It involves regularly assessing trade-offs across the metrics in order to achieve greater impact faster. The emphasis is on looking at performance over time and not settling for linear improvement. The performance trajectory indicates whether the workgroup is building in enough opportunity for experimentation, learning, and knowledge creation to keep up with, or ahead of, the changing environment.

- **Focus on value.** What does performance mean in terms of the value we deliver and what we are trying to achieve? Define better in the context of the shared outcome, and clarify how it might be measured.

- **Focus on workgroup operating metrics.** What frontline metrics could have the greatest impact on the organization's key operating metrics? What metrics and performance objectives will support improvement in the outcome? One challenge is that most organizations don't measure workgroup performance, either at a point in time or over time. The individual is measured, and business units are measured, but few organizations track anything at a workgroup level.
- **Make small moves, smartly.** Take actions to understand the key drivers of the shared outcome, and what aspect of performance is most meaningful to improve for that outcome.

. . . and what it isn't

- **Efficiency.** Efficiency-based improvement can increase for only so long before it generally tapers off. You typically won't accelerate performance improvement by focusing on efficiency.
- **Financial performance.** Revenue is usually an inadequate metric for value and, with few exceptions (such as for sales groups), is almost meaningless at the workgroup level.
- **A lot of numbers.** The metrics that matter can change over time, but if you have more than three key metrics, you likely have too many.
- **Performance snapshots.** Performance at a particular point in time offers little useful information about where you are going and how you might get there.

INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

- **Maximize the potential for friction**. A clear, long-term direction around a meaningful shared outcome can help attract diverse members who are passionate about the outcome and can help mobilize others to engage as well. Without it, the workgroup may attract people best suited for near-term events but unprepared to make progress toward longer-term objectives.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** Tracking and prioritizing group, rather than individual, performance metrics can help group members put aside competing agendas and ulterior motives that can lead to unproductive friction.

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** Taking the focus off performance snapshots in favor of performance over time might free workgroup members to be more open about failures and potentially eager to delve into current performance in order to improve the trajectory. Leading indicators point to likely areas of inquiry and provide fodder for reflection in advance of and in between action.

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** The shared outcome is what the group wants to achieve; the right performance metrics should help the workgroup assess progress toward that shared outcome.

- **Bias toward action.** Movement is a key to improving the trajectory. Action can be helpful when it is focused and accelerating progress toward a shared goal. Metrics help assess the current action and shape the next action.

- **Seek new contexts.** Finding performance edges in new contexts can help the workgroup get to previously unimaginable performance levels.

- **Cultivate friction.** When group members focus on rapid performance improvement and have data as a starting point, they may disagree about how to get to that next level of performance and generate ideas for new approaches.

- **Frame a powerful question.** If a powerful question and commitment to shared outcome help identify the area of highest potential impact for the group and align the workgroup around it, prioritizing performance trajectory may help the workgroup increase its impact over time.

Putting the practice into play

Caught up in the action of the day, workgroups often need to make decisions fairly rapidly; even reflection and post-action debriefing may be compressed. They won't have the luxury of waiting for quarterly reports to see how effective their actions were, and the financial metrics would yield little insight into an operational workgroup's effectiveness in any case. Instead, for workgroups faced with prioritizing their own efforts and resources, the question is: What can we look at, today, that can give us an indication of whether we are taking the right actions to achieve the impact we want to in the future? Workgroups that want to accelerate performance improvement will have to identify which metrics matter most and track their trajectory over time to make better, more informed, trade-off.

IDENTIFY METRICS THAT MATTER

The winners in this exponential age will likely be those that can focus most effectively on the relevant leading indicators of performance. Good metrics can provide visibility into impact at any time. This can motivate the group and also overcome complacency, highlighting relevant trends and flagging potential problems and opportunities earlier.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- How will we measure success?
- If we can closely watch only a few numbers, which might those be?

If the adage *what gets measured gets managed* is true, it is important for workgroups to be thoughtful about **measuring what matters**. Too often, it is also true that we measure what we can, or because we can, not because it matters. Measurement should reflect what you value and what will be most important to achieving the shared outcome at any given time. While it may seem obvious, the most important thing for a workgroup to measure is generally *workgroup performance*, against the shared outcome and the objectives that support

the shared outcome. Within the workgroup, that means prioritizing group performance objectives over competing agendas, at either the individual or department level. Shifting incentives toward workgroup performance can help, but that decision is often outside the group's control. Beyond the group's performance of the shared outcome, what else matters? Define a few objectives that can have a significant impact on improving the outcome, and identify the associated metrics that will be most important at a point in time to indicate whether the group is on track.

But focusing too heavily on measurement and metrics based on what is available can lead to undervaluing areas in which measurement or data is less available. One consequence of being too focused on the metrics at hand—whether or not they are the right metrics—is that we may dismiss feelings and gut instinct. **Don't give up on your gut** just because you can't measure something. For a workgroup, that means treating gut instincts and feelings as potentially valuable inputs and exploring them as part of developing approaches and making decisions. Such feelings may reflect important information that hasn't yet fully emerged about the context or connections between disparate and unarticulated ideas. Workgroups that deal only in facts may miss important information and be hostage to courses of action guided by irrelevant or incomplete metrics. At a minimum, a gut reaction should make us ask some questions: *What assumptions are guiding this feeling, and how true are they? If I had no background on this problem, what would I see and believe about it? Do we need to identify new metrics*? Workgroups can use gut instincts to reconsider the objectives or look for alternative proxies that better represent progress on the desired trajectory.

Too many metrics can be as bad as no metrics. The point is to **closely watch a few numbers**, not to spend a lot of time collecting, reporting, and managing metrics. Too many metrics can dilute the group's focus. Identify the few that can give the group the best information about how they are doing and what to do next to have even more impact. Each Amazon "two-pizza" team, for example,

focuses on a single business metric, with that metric serving as the team's "fitness function."[2] The metrics are a tool for discussion, course correction, and learning, not an end point or the basis for assessing rewards and punishment.

Not all metrics are created equal: Some might indicate a company's financial success or highlight a single initiative's marginal impact on reducing turnaround times. While senior executives tend to use financial metrics as a measure of performance,[3] workgroups should **put operating metrics before financial ones**. Good metrics are leading rather than lagging, indicating what impact an action is likely to have, while there is still an opportunity to influence and adjust it. This is important because failures can unfold over long periods of time, and leading indicators can help you get ahead of the potential challenges before the failure plays out. Financial metrics are generally easy to measure but tend to be lagging indicators, reflecting the financial impact of a previous operating environment. They're also often difficult to tie back to specific initiatives or workgroup performance. Operating metrics, such as customer churn rate or time to introduce new products to market, tend to be more timely and thus more useful, reflecting a current state of performance that is within the workgroup's control to affect. They anticipate the future and predict the resultant financial performance.
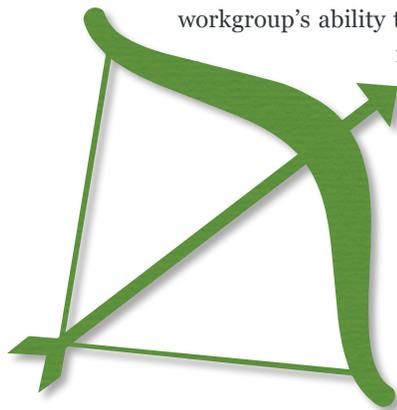
When RCL was working on the construction of one of the most technically advanced ships, Royal Caribbean International Cruises (RCL) largest and most technically advanced ship, the company's Ecorizon workgroup was committed to making it the most energy-efficient cruise ship on the seas. The group began with an objective of reducing energy use by 12 percent over the most energy-efficient ship at that time. The workgroup identified 89 initiatives that could improve the ship's energy efficiency—from the weight and amount of materials

used in the ship's hull and the types of engines installed, to energy reminders for guests, glass thickness on balconies, and interior designs that maximized natural light. The workgroup focused on a few initiatives that would drive the majority of the energy savings, but over the course of three years, it also pursued "quick" wins, always keeping an eye on progress against the energy-efficiency metric; ultimately, the group delivered a more than 20 percent reduction in energy use.[4]

Figure out which leading metrics will be most important at any point in time. The optimal operating metrics, ones that can have the greatest short-term impact on the shared outcome, could give the workgroup a tangible lever with which to improve performance. For example, instead of focusing on call-center costs, a company that aspires to deliver top customer service might identify a short-term objective, such as reducing average time to resolution, that would accelerate progress toward that long-term outcome. This objective, and the associated metrics, might lead the group to prioritize an initiative to find trends across calls. A recent study found that companies that measured a relevant nonfinancial factor (and validated that it had an impact on value creation) earned returns approximately 1.5 times greater than those of companies that didn't.[5]

How can workgroups target the right metrics? First, understand the connection between action and result through small what-if experiments that can test which metrics have the biggest impact on performance. Beware of metrics that are used as a matter of habit or convenience that could be flawed or inappropriate for the objective. For example, in the well-known story of *Moneyball*, Oakland A's then-general manager Billy Beane changed the game when he chose to focus on then-arcane metrics such as on-base percentage and slugging percentage based on a deep understanding of cause and effect.[6]

Operating metrics are just the beginning. With new technologies that make the invisible visible through sensors and real-time capture, workgroups may find new ways to monitor interactions and other patterns that would define new metrics that matter. For example, research on social metrics has

revealed that certain patterns of interaction within an organization can help to accelerate the introduction of successful new products and services.[7]

Track trajectory, not snapshots

A trajectory is a path, a series of positions over time. A snapshot, which is how many organizations look at performance, is a position at a single moment in time. Workgroups that accelerate performance over time are on a steeper trajectory—over time, the end point could be very different than a workgroup on a path of linear improvement. Looking at any given snapshot, however, wouldn't tell a workgroup whether its performance was accelerating or incremental. Snapshots offer little useful information about where you're going and how you might get there. Workgroups aiming to accelerate performance should pay attention to the trajectory—considering where they started, the rate of progress, and the direction they want to go—and not get too excited or discouraged by performance at any given moment.

When Billy Beane started using his new metric analysis to acquire players, the new Oakland A's roster got off to a slow start: After 46 games, the team had a record of 20 wins and 26 losses. Beane ignored the discouraging snapshot, sacrificing short-term fan approval by refusing to abandon his metrics and bring on higher-salaried stars, and focused on trajectory. By the latter half of the season, the A's had improved to 68–51—and then came a 20-win streak, taking the team's record to 88–51. The A's ended the season with 103 wins and 59 losses. Beane constantly reevaluated his system of leading indicators—beyond the simple win-loss column—as the environment changed, aiming to confirm that he was best using the metrics.[8]

> "Everything important you manage has to be on a trajectory to be "above the bar" and headed for "excellent."
>
> —Ray Dalio, *Principles: Life and Work*, 2017

While Beane's example shows the potential value of focusing on the group's trajectory when snapshots would indicate the group is performing poorly relative to others, it can be equally important to maintain **a focus on acceleration** when snapshots indicate the group is doing well. An upbeat snapshot can breed complacency: If the snapshot indicates that we are hitting a pre-set goal or performing as well or better than competitors, we are typically satisfied. There can be two problems with this:

- As industries or markets undergo significant change, an organization's known competition may be less and less likely to be the relevant performance marker, and today's drivers of high performance might be obsolete tomorrow.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What leading indicators could we use to track performance improvement over time?
- How can we better monitor these key performance levers?

- Snapshots can be easily gamed in the moment—by making teams smaller, for example, and pushing the remaining people to work harder. These tactics generally can't be sustained and, over time, generate diminishing returns or even productivity erosion.

For a workgroup to focus on acceleration, it should find a relevant way to track its improvement relative to past performance. For some workgroups, tracking metrics in and across situations over time

might mean clustering projects of similar type or scale or looking at improvements within a longer-term project and being aware of the factors that could limit direct comparison. Focus on metrics that can be tracked in relatively short intervals—these may provide more data about changes over time that can inform how workgroups approach reaching the next level of performance. For example, at sparks & honey, a New York-based advertising agency, every two weeks a small workgroup reviews a key set of operating and performance metrics related to the group's daily "culture briefing," a critical driver of the insights and pattern analysis that underpin the agency's products and services. Looking at the week-over-week changes in the metrics and comparing them to the longer trajectory can allow a fast-growing company to scruti-

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

• What can we do today to get better, faster over time?

nize what is shaping performance, identify areas to explore or improve, and develop new approaches to reach the next level.[9]

A workgroup can track performance over a series of events even if many of the group members change from one project to another. The performance of the overall pool from which they are being pulled should be accelerating over time, creating new knowledge and practices. This is another argument for keeping metrics simple, easily understood, and few.

But how do workgroup members know if they are on the right trajectory? If competitors aren't a relevant guide for how high to aim or how fast to move, what is? Don't get trapped into comparing against others. The comparison should be internal, to the workgroup's own trajectory so far. **Keep moving the edge.** Where are we improving most rapidly, and how can we do more of that? Where is improvement slowing down, and how can we change what we're doing to improve the trajectory? It can be valuable to look at the performance trajectories on other fast-moving edges, including in un-

related arenas—not to judge success but to ask what can be learned from them, especially about effectiveness. How are they doing more with less? Accelerating performance improvement is unsustainable if it's accomplished by throwing more and more effort and resources at it. Part of the key is learning to get better at accelerating value creation—otherwise you could just get widespread burnout.

TACKLE TRADE-OFFS

In times of uncertainty and rapid change, one of the greatest risks is distraction. Workgroups constantly make trade-offs: between short-term demands and long-term expectations, between learning and efficiency, between better and cheaper, and so on. On the road to accelerated performance improvement, workgroups may have to make trade-offs that run contrary to the short-term mind-set ingrained in many organizations. While most companies are willing to sacrifice long-term economic value for short-term earnings, a short-term mind-set can distract a workgroup into activities that deliver a quick performance bump but don't help the group get on the path for higher performance in the long term and may even send it in the wrong direction.

Workgroups looking to accelerate performance should **think both short and long**. The group has to act in the short term, often addressing a challenge over a short, or very short, time frame. At the same time, the workgroup itself may continue, possibly with a varying subset of members, over a longer period of time, pursuing the same shared outcome across changing conditions. At the organizational level, companies such as Amazon and Netflix have successfully accelerated their performance by focusing on two extreme horizons: Where/what do we need to be in 10+ years? And what two or three initiatives can we take in the next 6–12 months to accelerate toward that goal? The long-term focus helped Netflix see past the significant drop in stock price the company initially experienced when it shifted to streaming services.[10] While workgroups might not operate in such a long time frame, this type of two-horizon approach is a useful model for more informed trade-offs: It allows

workgroups to iterate between where they are now, where they want to go in the future, and what types of actions can address the immediate demands of the present in a way that puts them on the right path toward significantly better long-term performance. Use the long term to aim high, focus efforts, and create opportunity to learn from successes and failures. Use the short term to test assumptions and increase learning.

Some actions result in short-term gains and generate momentum. Some make a long-term impact. Ideally, a workgroup will take pragmatic actions, delivering value and learning in the short term and building the foundations for longer-term

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ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- If it ain't broke, don't fix it: We made our quarterly targets—we must be doing something right.

- I'm just trying to survive. Trajectory over time? Making our numbers, today, is what matters.

- Metrics are meaningless in such a complex, rapidly changing world. Measuring is a waste of time.

- Focus on efficiency. Performance improvement means that costs are going down or speed is going up.

- I have my own metrics to worry about. I know what I'm measured on, and it isn't this group.

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learning and value creation aligned with the long-term objective. Thinking on the extreme long-term horizon can have an added benefit of encouraging the workgroup to think in a space that others are not yet thinking about. This practice allows workgroups to use information and learnings from quick actions to adjust the long-term objective and challenge themselves: Is the most important thing still the important thing?

Returning to the Royal Caribbean example, being in the top echelon of energy-efficient ships is one objective alongside others such as improving guest

satisfaction. These long-term objectives help the workgroup prioritize initiatives and opportunities that come its way, helping it look beyond just the savings that can be built into the ship design. Instead, members also look at opportunities to experiment with different partnerships, on-board experiences, and refurbishments a few years down the line to include innovations that don't yet exist.[11]

Finally, even for those who nod their heads and recognize some truth in the idea that we are moving from a world of scalable efficiency to scalable learning, chasing efficiency can be a hard habit to break. Efficiency as a goal and a value is so baked into most of our organizational structures—even those that are incredibly inefficient—that workgroups may default to favoring efficiency as a performance objective and will put time and resources to the activities that gain measurable improvements in efficiency. Efficiency tends to be particularly compelling because it lends itself to measurement. But workgroups that want to get better, faster, over time may have to consciously **emphasize effectiveness over efficiency**. Mistakes, while the enemy of efficiency, can be the fuel for learning how to be more effective. This shifts the emphasis away from performance in the moment and away from ad-hoc measures of success. Paradoxically, it is through focusing on improving performance over time that groups can get better at addressing ad-hoc needs.

This isn't to say that efficiency doesn't matter. The answer to accelerating performance cannot be simply to work harder and harder. No amount of commitment to a shared outcome will prevent eventual burnout if the workgroup doesn't also become more efficient at creating value. The difference is that it is efficiency in the service of value creation.

Trade-offs are part of a workgroup's reality, and a whole group should be engaged in them to make better decisions, avoiding the trap of splitting the group. For example, when part of a group focuses on short-term solutions while others look at long-term goals, each can venture too far down its own rabbit hole, missing opportunities and changing context, and creating an environment in which people talk past one another and become artificially invested in one side or the other.[12] The tensions be-

tween trade-offs create friction, even if the group doesn't encourage factions. **Making distinctions** between temporary challenges and enduring problems, nice-to-haves and need-to-haves, big prob-

lems and acute ones, can help workgroups better understand what the issue is before deciding what to do about, making the trade-offs, and tensions easier to navigate.

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Maximize potential for friction

Assemble a group of passionate people who can challenge each other with diverse mind-sets, preferences, and perspectives

Introduction: Generating new knowledge

Friction may generate plenty of uncomfortable moments—but it's essential. Friction fights against groupthink and complacency; it can force a workgroup to reexamine what it is doing and whether there is another way to have more impact. It can take a good idea and turn it into an even better idea; it can transform two better ideas into a great approach or slow down a misguided assumption before it gains momentum. The right types of friction—for our purposes, defined as people's willingness and ability to challenge each other in the interest of coming up with better approaches—can transform a workgroup into something larger than the sum of its members. Questioning assumptions and approaches can uncover new opportunities and better ways to address issues or meet customer needs and lead to better outcomes.

This type of productive friction is often absent in workgroups. Few organizations encourage friction—indeed, many leaders work to minimize it in any form. Yet as groups face issues that are more complex, unexpected, and demand fresh solutions, they will need a broader range of approaches to problem-solving and analysis. Productive friction around how to approach a problem is an important element of generating new knowledge embodied in action, perhaps the most powerful type of learning for improving performance.

Maximizing the potential for productive friction across every activity and phase of work can help workgroups to keep pushing the boundaries to accelerate performance improvement. The key is to heighten the conditions that lead to more productive friction.

The *maximize potential for friction* practice: What it is

Practically speaking, ideas don't clash and transform into better approaches on their own. The friction comes from *people*. One member brings an idea or an approach or a technique to the table, and another member disagrees or suggests alternatives or brings a different interpretation of the problem.

YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:

- People have no passion for the outcomes the workgroup is trying to achieve

- People choose people like themselves

- You have the same people doing the same things and getting the same results

- You're overly focused on only a few types of diversity

Each challenge, if made in good faith and respectfully, can lead the group into a deeper exploration of the problem and potential approaches. This is friction—*productive* friction. In the end, the output could look quite different from anything that was originally brought to the table.

Additional friction can result when the group takes action against real requirements and complications in a particular context. When we consider the results, we challenge each other's interpretations and evolve our understanding of the implications. From this friction, we create a next approach. Maximizing the potential for friction means ensuring that a workgroup has the right people in the group, and the right connections outside the group, to disagree with and diverge from each other and the status quo.[1]

The potential for accelerated performance comes from the powerful intersection of diversity of mind and the passion of the explorer in the workgroup's composition:

- **Aggressively recruit diverse individuals.** Bring people into the workgroup because of their different attributes and styles, not in spite of them. Researchers have done a lot of valuable work on diversity in organizations, creating an array of definitions; for our purpose, for friction that can lead to better problem-solving and analysis, we are concerned with cognitive diversity, most closely aligned with Scott Page's definition.[2] Individual members represent problems differently, have different ways of interpreting information or developing a solution, and think about cause and effect differently. Cognitive diversity helps a workgroup examine a problem, or

solution, from multiple sides and offer more approaches and broader challenging.

- **Seek people who share the passion of the explorer**.[3] Build a workgroup in which, despite being diverse, everyone is similar in her passion and mind-set. The dispositions for passion—specifically the disposition to quest and a commitment to domain—and a growth mind-set, as well as some basic values, can motivate the members to probe, to challenge others and be challenged, and to seek out additional resources to learn how to make a better impact. With the right mind-set and dispositions to listen and make use of friction, group members learn from each other and from new information and experiences, creating new connections between one perspective and another.

. . . and what it isn't

- **Getting *more* ideas on the table**. Workgroups looking to accelerate performance should focus on developing better ideas, not just bringing in more.
- **Narrowly defined diversity**. Diversity has an important role to play in shaping and developing ideas. This is not about achieving appropriate demographic diversity. It is about ensuring that workgroups bring different backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and personalities into the mix to enhance the potential for new and creative ideas.
- **Crowdsourcing**. Crowdsourcing can be useful as a funnel to bring in a higher volume of ideas but typically doesn't increase the potential for friction. Many organizations treat crowdsourcing ineffectively, as a competition to identify the final solution: They pick the best one and run with it instead of working with the top five ideas and combining them to make something better.

Putting the practice into play

Where does the useful friction come from? A group of like-minded people doing what they've al-

ways done is unlikely to naturally generate the type of friction that leads to better and better outcomes. Instead, the workgroup may have to be deliberate about setting up the conditions for friction to occur.

The group itself can be a primary source of friction: Who are the members? What do they believe? What do they bring to the table? What do they care about? How will their way of viewing and interacting with the world challenge others in the group? Secondarily, the workgroup can increase the potential for friction by reaching beyond the group, even beyond the organization—for resources, inputs, challenges, and guidance on gnarly questions—and to connect to a broader network of others who are also on a quest to increase impact. Finally, the workgroup can adopt practices to structure in episodes of friction: periodically changing the routine, context, roles, or membership.

ENGAGE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Research suggests that groups that are more diverse are likely to be more creative and productive than groups that share equal ability but are less diverse. UK researchers Alison Reynolds and David Lewis found that cognitive diversity, defined as "differences in perspective or information processing styles," accounted for the variance in the performance of over 100 groups of executives on a strategic execution exercise focused on managing new, uncertain, and complex situations.[4] University of Michigan professor Scott Page further notes that "random collections of intelligent problem-solvers can outperform collections of the best individual problem-solvers," provided the problem at hand is one that will benefit from diverse interpretations, heuristics, and perspectives.[5] As the world moves faster and more routine work is automated, more of the work of the frontline workgroup likely will be exactly the complex problems that do benefit from this type of diversity.

Humans have a uniquely unlimited potential to address new contexts and push boundaries. However, a group that shares similar ways of thinking about problems and analysis may have trouble generating alternatives when they get stuck. New, uncertain, and complex situations may require framing problems differently, using different approaches (for example, experimenting versus analyzing), or bringing different interpretations.[6] These

INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** The potential found in diversity and passion can be harnessed when members aren't derailed by negative friction.

- **Reflect more to learn faster.** Analysis and adjustment can be more fruitful with more, potentially divergent, interpretations of events and passion to learn to do better.

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** A clear, long-term direction around a meaningful shared outcome can help attract diverse members who are passionate about the outcome and can help mobilize others to engage as well.

- **Bias toward action.** While a diverse and passionate group can bring a broader set of perspectives to shape the actions that will have the most impact, taking action can drive individual learning as well as help to cultivate passion.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** Passionate workgroup members can be more likely to want to get better and will help pull the entire group upward.

- **Frame a powerful question.** A compelling question can attract others who are passionate to make more of an impact on the challenge.

- **Seek new contexts.** Experiencing new contexts can cause us to reevaluate our assumptions and broaden or change our perspectives, creating the potential for additional friction for the group and individuals.

- **Cultivate friction.** Group composition and connecting with other resources provides the raw material for productive friction.

differences nudge members to pay attention to different things, leading to fresh understandings of the opportunity and potential resources to address it. While members' experience and skills are key to a group's ability to execute, its capacity to improve depends on its range of approaches to problem-solving and its ability to learn from and use that experience and those skills. In fact, research has shown that without making an effort to make use of members' diversity for better understanding, decision-making, and problem-solving, groups often perform less well than do individuals.[7]

The diversity that can lead to productive friction goes well beyond identity markers. However, just as with identity, workgroups will tend toward cognitive homogeneity unless they intentionally **diversify diversity**. In many organizations, hiring and staffing tends to favor like-mindedness, standardized requirements for education and experience, and cultural "fit." Expediency, meanwhile, focuses groups on the resources that are most easily accessible, staffing workgroups from within their own unit, geography, or enterprise. And people's tendency, particularly under pressure, is to choose those with whom we anticipate the least friction, resulting in "functional biases." Workgroups can counter this by deliberately seeking diverse backgrounds and experiences that will make cognitive diversity more likely and paying attention to the group's interactions to see if further diversity is needed.

Consider the example of the briefing workgroup at sparks & honey, an advertising agency focused on mapping culture and one of several groups we saw trying to engage diversity in more effective ways. Although members have a range of backgrounds—languages spoken, age cohorts,

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- To what extent can we broaden our circles and invite new perspectives? Could/should we do more?

countries of origin, ethnicities, gender expressions, as well as functional expertise (data science, strategic consulting, brand planning, journalism, anthropology, and social sciences)—these traits don't indicate whether the group has cognitive diversity, and it can fall into some common biases: residing in New York, being "creative," having chosen this type of work. In order to increase the *potential* for engaging with more diversity of mind, and to overcome biases that arise from social class, personality/temperament, working style, and mind-set, the briefings are open to guests, and the agency cultivates external participation through an advisory board, scouts, and immersive ethnographic studies. The agency's intelligence system also balances these biases with automation: active machine learning that surveys, gathers, and feeds intelligence into the system from the broad (mainstream) to the narrow (fringe).[8]

Bringing in more cognitive diversity is one thing, but the potential friction can be amped up by bringing group members into closer contact and deepening the level of engagement with each other. Instead of soliciting divergent feedback via email or some other static exchange, a more useful, generative interaction might result from surfacing the divergent perspectives in the workgroup setting, with disagreeing members potentially venturing out into the relevant context together to test an idea or approach. For example, when the Army's Joint Strategic Operating Command was seeking a better way to fight an unorthodox enemy in Iraq, it coupled intelligence analysts with Navy SEALs and Delta Force operatives to go "shoulder to shoulder" out on raids as well as into analysis.

Workgroups can further broaden the range of perspectives by **looking outside the group**, whether to specifically solicit additional perspectives, to test and debrief a new approach, or even to partner in delivering a solution. Casting a wider net, beyond your own networks, may be particularly important for complex or thorny issues. Workgroup members can exploit what sociologist Mark Granovetter calls "weak ties," looking beyond their small circle of deep relationships—where people often share similar values, interests, and experiences—to their looser network, where connec-

tions, insights, and unexpected resources might be more far-reaching and diverse.[9]

For many workgroups, the nature of the issues and exceptions will dictate that the actual membership changes over time or episodically. Diverse groups can be rapidly staffed from larger pools. In fact, as frontline workgroups take on more important, value-creating work, companies may scrap much of their organizational chart, instead organizing as pools of workers assigned to flexible workgroups that stretch across boundaries. If groups are diverse and passionate, the pools would also become more diverse over time as members rotate back. However, leaders would still have to be deliberate in assembling cognitively diverse workgroups. For example, at the Red Cross, responders are often pulled from an external, formal pool of local resources who are likely less similar in background to each other or the professional staff. Members of this local pool share certain basic training, but each brings a unique perspective and set of tools and resources to the specific problem. For instance, each local resource might have a unique take on how and where to procure supplies, how to navigate back roads to get from one site to another, or what the most powerful coalitions of local service group leaders might be.[10]

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What can we do more to access and attract those outside our workgroup to achieve more of our potential?

SEEK VOLUNTEERS

Asking for volunteers attracts people who are motivated to make a difference and who can attract others like them. As Gillian Tett notes in The *Silo Effect*, "People who are willing to take risks and jump out of their narrow specialist world are often able to remake boundaries in interesting ways."[11] Since even the most passionate people need something to be drawn to, workgroups should make themselves known and discoverable, whether formally,

creating blogs or websites that state the group's purpose and goals, or informally, through word of mouth. In either case, try to **find powerful ways to pull**. For example, Team Solo-Mid, a group that plays the multiplayer online battle game League of Legends competitively, posted a recruiting message on a well-known League community website: "Our goal is to improve and to constantly develop strategies. The purpose of this clan is to constantly increase the skill level of the upper-level play." Tap into the passion of potential members with a succinct description of the issue that also speaks to the outcome and the way the group will get there—the practices and opportunities to accelerate individual learning. A small set of willing members can build momentum, making membership in such a group more attractive to others.

Even if the group has to start small, letting people **vote with their feet**—opting in or self-nominating rather than being "volun-told"—attracts those who are passionate about a particular challenge and want to be involved.[12] Choice about where to focus people's efforts can fuel dedication, accountability, and excitement. At Google Analytics 360, for example, people can self-nominate to be part of the response group that forms whenever a competitor launches a product. They can also self-nominate into more sustained workgroups, choosing to participate on the issues about which they feel most strongly or where they are excited by the type of challenge or the customers with whom they'd work.

TURN DOWN VOLUNTEERS

Not everyone who volunteers will be right for a particular workgroup. You want people who care deeply about achieving the outcome—but also people without a lot of preconceived notions about how that outcome could or could not happen. Experience can be valuable, certain skills might be necessary, but overreliance on expertise can be limiting, to both the individual and the group. Expertise can tend to work against openness to learning and new ideas. Workgroup members need to be willing to challenge others, to be challenged, and to be open to learning from those challenges.

Consider what can happen with an issue that is perceived as high-visibility, one that might have leaders calling for the "cream of the crop." Having all risen to the top of the same organization, these individuals will likely have broadly similar conceptual tool kits, problem- es, and mind-sets. This pronounced in narro more specialized field lead specialists to appr solution in a similar converge in their fin Deliberately busting s pulling skills and expert from across organizatio al and functional barri **all-star group rathe of "all stars"**—can he cognitive homogeneity problem. This can be an exercise in releasing control and trusting the workgroup to do what they've been assembled to do, which is *not* to just execute the status quo. It is yet another acknowledgment that the organization can't predict the future or the shape of the solution that will emerge.

Character also matters. Diversity in core values is generally unproductive no matter how strong a person's skills, and the skills and tasks required may change. Values persist. The values might be broad: *Behave ethically; don't do anything illegal.* Or they might be specific to a workgroup and context. Consider this example from a Deloitte leader who credits some of her success in growing account revenue over the past decade to **looking at char-**
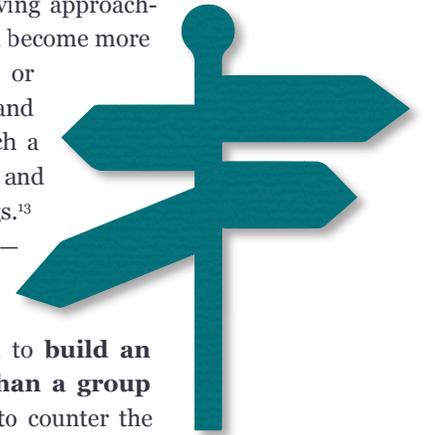
QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What workgroup values do we want to stand for—and, quite possibly, make more explicit?
- How might we select for the kind of challenge-seeking, boundary-pushing behavior that will create new opportunities for the workgroup and the organization?

Figure 1. How do we define quality?

10	**A little humility goes a long way**	We need to continue to win over our clients.
9	**The customer is always right**	Treat clients with respect—always.
8	**"Nothing propinks like propinquity"**	Show up. Be proactive and deliberate in building relationships (internally and externally) and delivering services.
7	**We need clear leaders**	Clearly distinguish leaders and advisers in proposals and delivery.
6	**We are the advisers in the room**	When you see your client may be headed down the wrong path, speak up and escalate professionally.
5	**We work it out**	Break down any functional barriers and do what's right for the client and our organization—even when it's difficult. Communicate!
4	**When paint falls off the ladder, everyone gets splattered**	We are one organization to the client. Finger-pointing is unhelpful, so work as a team to solve challenges.
3	**Nothing gets better with time**	If you sense a client issue, be quick to address it.
2	**Deadlines aren't guidelines**	Do your best to adhere to commitments and deadlines. If you are not going to meet a deadline, provide ample notice to your client.
1	**The client is your buddy**	And his requests are exceedingly reasonable.

Source: Deloitte analysis.

Deloitte Insights | deloitte.com/insights

acter before competence in staffing. She has created a list of guidelines for behavior and attitude (see figure 1 that addresses character.) The list is both a filter and a way of setting expectations at the outset to increase the likelihood that all members are suited to creating value in that environment.

So if not skills and performance ratings and other résumé criteria, and not the friction-killing cultural "fit," what criteria might guide whether to accept a potential group member?

Passion and a growth mind-set.[14] Without these, a workgroup is unlikely to constantly push boundaries in pursuit of learning how to make a greater impact.

Aside from certain nonnegotiable competencies, **favor passion over skill**. People who have passion—what we've defined as passion of the explorer[15]—seem driven to learn how to have more of an impact, faster, on a particular domain. To that end,

they tend to embrace challenges and connect with others around those challenges and typically find the unexpected and difficult more motivating than fatiguing. They continuously pursue new approaches and better solutions and will persevere and look for learning in nearly every situation. In a group of passionate members, the desire to make an impact can overcome organizational tensions and barriers. For those with passion, a workgroup can be an attractive opportunity to connect with others and learn faster on significant challenges. At Southwest, for example, the selective Field Tech group looks for "folks who are frustrated because they could perform their job so much better if only they had this tool or that tool." One perk of the job is being empowered to create or obtain whatever tools people need to do their job better. The group looks for members who have technical aptitude and a good work ethic

but also "love trying to fix something that can't be fixed by anyone else."[16]

One challenge is that this type of passion is scarce, characterizing only around 13 percent of the workforce, although 52 percent of workers surveyed have at least one attribute of this type of passion on which to build. For those who haven't fully realized their passion within the confines of a job description, participation in a workgroup may help cultivate the questing, connecting, or commitment characteristic of the passion of the explorer. Through deliberately breaking silos, workgroups can have the added benefit of connecting the passionate with other passion-

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- We want people to want to work here—we don't want them to fight.

- We don't have time to go out and create the perfect team—just make do with what you have.

- We need to be a well-oiled machine, not one that's constantly in the shop.

- We need to minimize the potential for conflict, not maximize it.

ate people from across the organization.

Connecting and working with others who are passionate can be a powerful motivator.[17] For example, at Facebook, voluntary hackathons showed that many people would take time outside of their day job to come together purely because they were interested in a specific problem and wanted to be a part of creating a solution. (For example, a manager of the site's News Feed created a Facebook feature specifically for in-laws because she was close to her husband's mother and had no way to classify their relationship on the site.) This in turn can create more demand for the opportunity and attract others who may not have understood the impact previously.

EVOLVE A WINNING WORKGROUP

Over time, informal practices may harden into formal processes, expectations may become codified, and perspectives and beliefs may converge.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What rules do we need to change or make more context-dependent?

This may be comfortable but is not good for friction. What wins in one context may lose in another. **Change it up** with new people, ideas, and conditions that are surprising rather than predictable. Look for people who tend to play with, rather than within, the boundaries. Try to nudge people out of their comfort zones. Even changing the work environment—meeting in person if the group is remote or working off-site if it's normally in the office—can refresh the dynamic. Structure in ways to avoid the trap of tried and true by **making it a rule to change the rules**. At sparks & honey, the briefing group's goal, every day, is to run the most productive and insightful one-hour meeting possible. They have honed the format to a specific pace, hitting benchmarks of discussion and analysis throughout the hour. When something works, members stick with it—except for on Fridays, when they try some new structure or technique, keeping the group off-balance and interested and discovering useful new techniques to incorporate along the way.

Individuals can be stretched and motivated and the group dynamics shaken up by **making roles context-dependent**. Switching up the structure and roles will likely make some members uncomfortable and may cause frustration because it works against the drive for efficiency into which we tend to fall. Being in different roles and relationships could challenge the expectations of a group and create potential friction for individuals and the group collectively. For example, the Red Cross has a practice called *blue sky/gray sky* that allows for members to adopt entirely different roles from their normal day-to-day in a disaster response. Depending on the context and their own skills, someone might be the incident commander in one response but be boots on the ground loading water for the next one. The explicit move to *gray sky* seems to eliminate the friction that can come from hierarchies and refocuses everyone on achieving the shared outcome.

ENDNOTES

1. Peter High, "John Hagel: Scalable learning is the key differentiator for enterprises of the future," *Forbes*, July 25, 2016.

2. Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007). Page explains why diversity is fundamental to a productive workgroup in simple terms: If two collections of problem-solvers contain equal ability, but one is homogeneous and the other is diverse, the diverse group will, on average, outperform the homogeneous. He offers four "frameworks" of cognitive diversity, that is, diverse perspectives: ways of representing situations and problems; diverse interpretations: ways of categorizing or partitioning perspectives; diverse heuristics: ways of generating solutions to problems; and *diverse predictive models*: ways of inferring cause and effect.

3. For more on the concept of worker passion and passion of the explorer, see John Hagel, John Seely Brown, Maggie Wooll, and Alok Ranjan, *If you love them, set them free*, Deloitte University Press, June 6, 2017.

4. Alison Reynolds and David Lewis, "Teams solve problems faster when they're more cognitively diverse," *Harvard Business Review*, March 30, 2017. In the study of more than 100 executive groups, performance variance was not causally related to gender, ethnicity, or age.

5. Page, *The Difference*.

6. Reynolds and Lewis, "Teams solve problems faster when they're more cognitively diverse."

7. Cass R. Sunstein and Reid Hastie, "Making dumb groups smarter," *Harvard Business Review*, December 2014.

8. Andrew de Maar and Ryan Gatti, interview with Paul Butler, COO of sparks & honey, New York, February 21, 2017.

9. Mark S. Granovetter, "The strength of weak ties," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): pp. 1,360–80.

10. Andrew de Maar and Maggie Wooll, interview with Alyssa Pollock, regional disaster officer, Red Cross Regional Disaster Unit Central/Southern Illinois, October 26, 2017.

11. Gillian Tett, *The Silo Effect: The Peril of Expertise and the Promise of Breaking Down Barriers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), p. 168.

12. Abigail Sickinger, interview with Google Analytics 360 team, January 17, 2017.

13. Page, *The Difference*. Similarly, Reynolds and Lewis reported working with a start-up biotechnology company at which a team of scientists, mixed in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity, never finished a strategic exercise task. They were all experts in the same domain, had no versatility in how to approach the task, and could not complete the assignment.

14. Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (New York: Random House, 2006). Stanford professor Dweck distinguishes two extremes of the mind-sets that people tend to have about their basic qualities: 1) In a fixed mind-set, "your qualities are carved in stone." Whatever skills, talents, and capabilities you have are predetermined and finite. Whatever you lack, you will continue to lack. This fixed mind-set applies not just to your own qualities but to those of others. 2) In a growth mind-set, "your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts . . . everyone can change and grow through application and experience." Qualities such as intelligence are a starting point, but success comes as a result of effort, learning, and persistence. The distinction between fixed and growth mind-sets has tremendous implications—as individuals, workgroups, and organizations—for how we address the growing pressures around us.

15. Hagel et al., *If you love them, set them free*. Worker passion, or "passion of the explorer," is defined as exhibiting behaviors consistent with having a questing disposition, a *connecting* disposition, and a commitment to making a significant and lasting impact in a given domain. While around 13 percent of the US workforce, as measured by a 2016 survey of more than 3,000 workers, have all three attributes of passion, they are not innate and can be cultivated and developed through experiences and environment. However, today's organizations, largely designed to pursue scalable efficiency through standardization and tightly scripted processes, have little place for this form of passion and often work to limit it.

16. Andrew de Maar and Ryan Gatti, interview with Field Techs, Southwest Airlines, Dallas, May 1–2, 2017.

17. Tett, *The Silo Effect*, p. 182.

Eliminate unproductive friction

Seek ways to make friction as productive as possible

Introduction:
How much is too much?

When diverse people with different ideas come together, friction is inevitable—and can be highly generative. When workgroup leaders are able to channel that friction into challenging and strengthening the group's thinking, new approaches can emerge. For workgroups that need to constantly develop better solutions in order to accelerate performance, the more diverse the flows coming together—the more friction—the better. The point isn't just to bring in more ideas but to create something new and better when—not *if*—the knowledge, ideas, data, and resources conflict.

That is productive friction. Group members bring their diverse perspectives to challenge each other's thinking, and such challenges can expose inadequacies in the approach and uncover gaps in understanding. They can also broaden the possibilities and point a workgroup to explore new, more fruitful directions. Indeed, a virtuous cycle can develop: When we see friction leading to better results, we may be more willing to bring challenges and divergent views to the table, expanding the flows.

But there's a limit: Too much friction, or friction of the wrong kind, can flatten flows and derail a workgroup. With tensions festering, a group might lose energy and lack the time or energy to seek out the flows that might have the highest impact. A group may not risk interrupting progress to question its assumptions or approach. Members can become less willing to challenge their own beliefs, show weakness, or expose themselves to criticism, and less willing to push boundaries and take risks as a group.

Whether a workgroup has been in existence for a while or is just forming, in most organizations members don't likely share an overabundance of trust. When unproductive friction goes unmanaged, a group doesn't work to create better approaches, and performance may slip. Members can become frustrated, further losing trust in the workgroup; they may withdraw either formally or by increasingly declining to express divergent ideas or challenge other members. Minimizing and managing unproductive friction is key to building trust and encouraging members to put forward more of the types of friction that can generate better solutions.

> **YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:**
> - People seem frustrated or unhappy
> - People feel put down upon, dismissed, or rejected
> - Some voices are not being heard
> - Hierarchy is preventing people from being forthright
> - We spend most of our time talking about what we agree on versus what we don't
> - Our best talent doesn't stick around for very long

The *eliminate unproductive friction* practice: What it is

This practice is about fostering trust and creating an environment that encourages more productive friction while minimizing the types of friction that might make workgroup members hesitant to challenge and interact.

Productive friction can help a workgroup actively create new knowledge. It can arise from engaging

Teams that bring these diverse styles together should, in theory, enjoy the many benefits of cognitive diversity, ranging from increased creativity and innovation to improved decision-making. Yet time and again, diverse teams fail to thrive.[1]

—Suzanne M. Johnson Vickberg and Kim Christfort

diverse individuals around an outcome about which they are passionate and playing with the resulting tension—if the individuals are willing and able to challenge and build on each other's perspectives. That typically means the friction is focused around the *what* or the *how* instead of on individuals.

Unproductive friction is often rooted in members feeling threatened, misunderstood, or disrespected, which can escalate conflicts and harden positions such that a group reaches poor compromises and continually sub-optimizes. Unproductive friction can be caused by, among other things, miscommunication, interpersonal conflict, competition for resources, political behavior, status-seeking, zero-sum mind-sets, a culture of blame, or different personalities and styles. Friction can also become unproductive when it occurs at the wrong time or place.

Creating friction and eliminating the unproductive elements of that friction is a balancing act. It's often challenging to get the balance right, and perhaps understandably, many organizations have aimed to reduce friction in the first place. After all, no one is penalized for insights not surfaced—they aren't visible. But friction is visible, often in a negative way. Avoiding conflict is always the easier path.

Eliminating unproductive friction balances:

- **Preventing certain types of unproductive friction from occurring.** Build trust, and focus on the learning opportunity and the group's larger goals. A sufficiently meaningful and urgent outcome, such as the life-or-death nature of firefighting, tends to minimize unproductive friction.
- **Making friction more productive.** This might include leading with questions rather than making pronouncements—for example, instead of, "That won't work—we already tried it," asking, "What has changed that makes us believe this could work?"

. . . and what it isn't

- **Being more efficient.** After decades of scalable efficiency, there's often an underlying assumption that friction is always unproductive and undesirable. Friction can definitely slow things down, at least in the short term. But accelerating learning in order to achieve greater impact isn't simply executing against a plan.
- **Eliminating all friction/fitting in.** Much of the focus on group dynamics tends to be on minimizing differences and focusing on common ground. We often lack confidence in our ability to manage friction and, naturally, look to get along with everyone, especially as the workplace itself becomes more diverse. As a result, the bias is to assemble like-minded teams and favor fit, though "team players" often go along to get along rather than provoking a group to improve itself.
- **Removing emotions and feeling.** Emotion and feeling play a vital role as a source of understanding and motivation as well as of friction. When people are passionate about an outcome, they bring emotion. Creating space for feelings can help to foster the relationships that workgroup members may need to work productively through friction.
- **Safety from discomfort.** At the same time, this practice isn't about creating a safe space where group members won't be challenged on their beliefs, assumptions, and ideas. Challenges should be respectful and with the intent of arriving at a better understanding, rather than to be divisive, but this doesn't mean that people uncomfortable with rigorous discussions should expect to avoid them altogether.

Putting the practice into play

Workgroups can make friction more productive and subvert the unproductive aspects by fostering trust and respect and having learning conversations. The two reinforce each other: trust is a prerequisite for learning, and as learning happens, trust and respect deepen. At the same time, you can't really have trust, or learning, until you have friction. In disagreement, conflict, or crisis, you get to see how people behave. These moments can also reveal the hidden depths and strengths of a community.

FOSTER TRUST AND RESPECT

Our notion of trust has changed. An organization's success used to come from owning some knowledge or formula that no one else knew, applying those knowledge stocks in distinctive but repeatable ways, and doing it efficiently. Trust was grounded in having the specific skills and knowledge necessary to deliver the expected results. The leader had to trust that subordinates would execute his plan, efficiently and without challenging it; the workers had to trust that the leader's plan would be effective, with minimal changes or need for rework. Strength and certainty reigned.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What dimensions of friction do each of us find most unproductive?
- What makes us dread or avoid collaborative work?

Trust based on knowledge stocks, predictability, and efficiency is no longer as compelling. In fact, when the goal is to achieve more impact than the sum of the workgroup's parts, trying to establish trust in this way can actually erode it. While past actions or accomplishments suggest how we can expect someone to act in the future, trust is becoming more about whether we believe a person has the disposition and values to learn and work together even if his existing skills are being challenged or made obsolete. Any person, whether a leader or a peer, claiming to know all the answers rings false when we see the environment changing rapidly and know ourselves to be increasingly in unfamiliar situations. Instead, the type of trust that workgroups may need comes in part from attributes that used to be considered weaknesses.

Expressing vulnerability and encouraging humility can establish a trust that isn't premised on power, control, or omniscience. At the workgroup level, this might start with collectively acknowledging a situation's realities and difficulties. When a workgroup makes a practice of establishing *what we don't know, what else don't we know?,* and

this is what we need help with, it makes space for individuals to be open about needing help or having gaps in understanding or ability. Other group members would trust more, and be likely to admit their own vulnerability, further deepening trust. Asking for help can give others a mechanism to step forward to help fill the gaps—and is what can make vulnerability powerful.

It isn't just OK to admit weakness—for this type of trust, it is essential. This is important: When members don't conceal deficiencies and don't delay asking for help, the group can learn more rapidly and uncover valuable new resources. Of course, being vulnerable should be a prelude to discussion, not an ending—no one wants a group member who regularly throws up his hands and says, "I need help!" without an inclination to dig in and work together to figure it out. The practice is to become more aware of what we lack and more effectively frame our needs to elicit better help.

Trust and respect together can provide the basis for being open to new information, listening deeply and working to understand divergent ideas, and being willing to accommodate contradictions and embrace discomfort.

Group norms that can reinforce respect can emerge through the way the group discusses and frames the challenge. Start with the expectation that members will treat each other with courtesy and an assumption that everyone has value to offer. Build a respectful climate by letting people with conflicting positions explain their reasoning—within time constraints—rather than quickly jumping to "agreeing to disagree." This can be the time for group members to practice challenging *ideas* rather than *people* and begin to demonstrate that they can engage with others' observations without either sugarcoating or overreacting. Groups may have to be more deliberate to guard against the subtle reactions that communicate that honesty and interpersonal risk-taking hinder a workgroup's forward progress.

Even in a group where members appear predisposed to extend courtesy to each other, disagreements and misunderstandings often arise. Being able to **empathize** with other members—and to recognize that disagreements might arise from

unmet, unarticulated needs rather than from bad intentions or incompetence—can reduce the negative friction. Try to meet in person, at least at the beginning, and discuss different working styles, preferences, and strengths. A framework, such as Deloitte's Business Chemistry (see figure 1), can provide structure for understanding and discussing differences that lead to unmet needs and can set the tone for embracing the differences that cause friction.[2]

Making it about *we*, not *me* can help keep the workgroup focused on a shared outcome and members' mutual commitment to it rather than on their individual identities, fears, and ambitions. Language can matter in subtly shifting the group;

avoid assigning ownership to specific ideas or questions and actively guide the discussion away from *who is right* and *toward what is right*. Of course, even in a workgroup that celebrates group successes and shares rewards and recognition, some individuals might not be able to shake the me-first mentality. The Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. Newbuild & Innovation workgroup, which includes external designers and other specialists, learned that no matter how talented a member was, the group would benefit only if she was committed to the shared outcome and open to being challenged. Now everyone, including designers with brand recognition, presents to the entire workgroup to reinforce that all decisions are about the shared

Figure 1. Understanding business chemistry
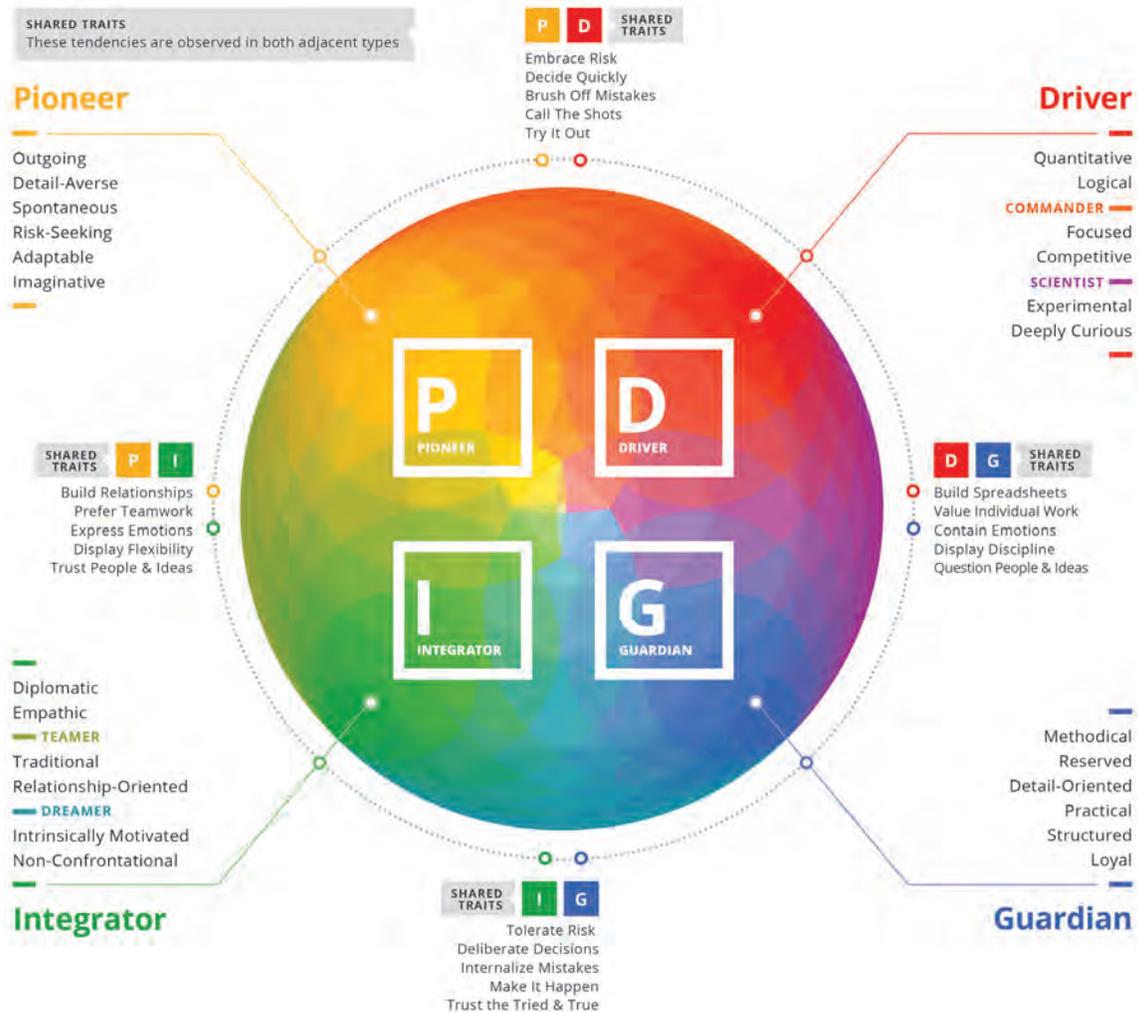
Source: Deloitte.

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outcome and all members have an invest-ment in those decisions. Designers might ask questions of the architects; restaura-teurs might challenge the designers—and outsiders really like working with RCL because they are able to learn so much more through this practice.[3]

While deep trust and respect often take time to develop, there are tactics that can help **build deep trust swiftly**. As a workgroup:

Assume trust. Extend trust (and respect) to all members from the outset, assuming best intentions and value to offer, and establish that everyone is committed to achieving a shared outcome.

Invite trustworthiness. Find near-term tasks to give individuals opportunities to act in ways that are transparent and show commitment to the work-group and openness to learning.[4] This can be as simple as demonstrating, in less significant matters,

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

• How well do we ensure that we maintain the trust of the workgroup?

• What do we do to encourage each other to express vulnerability?

that they are willing to voice their views, to take ac-tions that are consistent with what they voice, and to have their views challenged and changed.

Work together to deepen trust. Deeper trust and respect ultimately come from observing others in action. When members actively work together on a shared outcome, they begin to act as a community of practice, bound together through "shared experi-ence, reciprocal trust, and a collective world view."[5] Working side by side, trust and respect deepen as

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INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

• **Maximize the potential for friction.** Eliminating unproductive friction can help clear the way for the group to benefit from bringing diverse perspectives and cognitive styles to bear on an issue. Managing disagreements and tensions effectively can help members be more receptive to bringing in an even greater diversity of voices and resources.

• **Reflect more to learn faster.** How workgroups handle friction outside of the moment—how they honor it and learn from it while managing the more emotional and reactive frictions—can shape their ability to act and accelerate.

• **Commit to a shared outcome.** Group members trust each other to act in good faith in support of the outcome. Individuals would be more motivated to work past the unproductive traps of friction and have more incentive to focus on making friction productive if the shared outcome is meaningful.

• **Bias toward action.** Workgroups can't get distracted and waste energy on unproductive friction *in the moment*, when decisions need to be made quickly, especially if lives are on the line.

• **Prioritize performance trajectory.** Objective data and metrics can provide grounding for disagreements.

• **Frame a powerful question.** A powerful question can help to focus workgroups on what is important.

• **Seek new contexts.** By adopting a different context for a time, a workgroup can gain fresh perspective on its own problem as well as on the group itself.

• **Cultivate friction.** The more productive the friction becomes, and the more the group trusts that destructive friction will be handled effectively, the more members will likely also be open to challenging, creating a virtuous cycle.

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group members see each other **live their values** and gain deeper appreciation for what individuals have to offer.

Research has shown that workgroups identify more strongly as a group and show higher levels of innovation when their members share certain non-negotiable work values.[6] These might include core tenants that guide how the group pursues the outcome, such as treating each other with respect, maintaining personal integrity, and acting legally and ethically, as well as some that might be workgroup-specific, such as acting sustainably or supporting members' personal goals.

HAVE LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

Try to learn as much from friction as possible, especially the disagreements. The point is to learn how to achieve higher and high[...]ing the group's interactions as [...] versation, members can chann[...] tentially destructive disagreem[...] into something more informat[...] and unexpected.

The goal of a workgroup'[...] learning conversations is to [...] look at things from multiple [...] vantage points and expose paradoxes and areas of ambiguity. In these conversations, a group tries to draw out and probe "mindbugs"—the troublesome blind spots and habits of thought that get in the way when we are trying to break frames and innovate. Mindbugs may be around long-established performance trade-offs that no longer hold, or about conventional wisdom that no longer applies; they can lead us to say that something won't work or to overlook the problems in something we assume will work.

What makes a good conversation?

- Everyone seeks to understand a broader perspective. It isn't a presentation or a debate or trying to persuade others or defend our opinion.
- It surprises us, providing unexpected information or insight and provoking further inquiry.
- Everyone listens and everyone participates—at least, every *unique* voice participates, recognizing that some members will share a common experience or perspective. Researchers have found that relatively equal distribution of voice

in workgroups leads to better work.[7] The Human Dynamics Laboratory at MIT used a badge technology to track communication behavior in groups and discovered that patterns of communication were as significant to group performance as all other factors combined: individual intelligence, personality, skill, and substance of discussions.[8] Researchers also found that when some members don't participate fully (whether because of culture, background, or affiliations), the whole group ends up with less energy and engagement.[9]

- There is space to clarify misunderstandings. With more diverse voices, people might use the same words with very different meanings. We heard this concept expressed as, *I don't know what I said until I know what you heard* from [...]ers of the Army for whom [...]backs," repeating an order back [...] giver, are part of the workday. [...] As one general said, upon ask[...]ing for a plain hamburger and [...]getting a hamburger with abso[...]tely nothing on it, the brief back [...] its own isn't enough. **Creating** [...] **ommon language** is an ongoing practice of confirming and clarifying what people mean. This could be as informal as interrupting the flow of a discussion to clarify a key term—for instance, *When you say 'X,' what do you mean? What does that look like?* It could also be a formal set of key definitions published or posted where members can see and reference them easily. A common language might be borrowed from another discipline or the organization itself, then customized and periodically updated to the workgroup's needs.

- It keeps moving. Time still matters. Strike a balance between clarifying and being repetitive or getting mired in minutiae. Hold each other accountable to **focus on what's important— and be specific**. Filling air time without saying what you mean can block other voices and make members work unnecessarily hard to find meaning and understand points of conflict. It can also mean trying to discern the key points of disagreement and understanding their sources, including the emotional context, rather than over-

analyzing peripheral issues. For the Joint Special Operations Command, there was a real cost when meetings bogged down: The task force wouldn't get a chance to digest valuable intelligence until later in the day or the next meeting. The group addressed it by establishing a norm that each presenter had only four minutes, including discussion. It forced the briefers to provide only the most salient information to the entire group, letting others continue the discussion offline, and to solicit viewpoints rather than wait.[10] Productive idea flow is a delicate balance of reinforcing existing ideas and values to build confidence, while exploring alternative ideas and perspectives. Attend to how ideas flow within the workgroup so that members can incorporate others' innovations to arrive at better actions. **Start broad and go deep** to balance the value of surveying the landscape to identify what issues are most important against the value of getting beneath the surface. Reserve time to delve deeper into the issues that are most relevant to the workgroup.

Workgroups might find it helpful to periodically take a meta-view of their group conversation—using an outside observer, technology such as badges, or through surveys and analysis of data collected from collaboration tools—to get a better understanding of how the workgroup itself is functioning separate from the work of the group.

These insights can help a group leader **control the temperature**, possibly with a moderator's help: *Turn up the heat*, bringing more diverse participation into a conversation that has become low-energy and monotonous, or using anecdotes to introduce doubt into a conversation that has become too certain. Researchers at Yale found that Major League Baseball umpires assess their accuracy in calling pitches—their ability to accurately see reality—at 97 percent. Yet, when calls were analyzed against Pitch f/x data, they are accurate only 87 percent of the time and, in close calls, only 66 percent.[11] *Turn down the heat* by redirecting the conversation away from issues that have become too emotional or laden with interpersonal friction for the group

to be constructive. It can be helpful to acknowledge that the heat is too high and give the group a few options to cool down. Techniques include taking a step back to talk about where the issue fits relative to the shared outcome to refocus the group on the positive vision, looking for small wins to point out, and connecting the dots for group members about how the issue relates to other actions they are interested in. A moderator can also help to de-escalate and clarify tensions around share of voice and depth of engagement.

The best conversations happen between humans. We all have feelings, even at work. When emotions are ignored or denied, the gap between what members think and what they say generally widens, and the potential for misunderstanding increases. Workgroup members don't need to spend a lot of time talking about feelings, but they should cultivate greater awareness and appreciation of emotional context. **Listen for what is not being said**, the *song beneath the words*: Acknowledge the likely emotional subtext; leaders can reinforce this by being more open about their own emotions in the moment, such as saying when a piece of feed-

ANTIBODIES AT WORK

- Friction is inefficient. Let's just make sure we don't have it in the first place.

- To be successful, we all have to come to agreement, on everything. Dissension is a problem.

- Don't derail the train—get on board or get off.

- Feelings are a distraction. No place for them in business.

back made them angry or worried. And don't react emotionally: Show care or concern, but act in ways that help the other—through coaching or checking in—rather than devolving into "ruinous empathy" that helps no one. When workgroups make a point of accepting emotions as normal, interactions can actually become less emotional.

Finally, **make it fun**. Shared laughter or an unusual experience goes a long way toward reinforcing the interpersonal connections that make unproductive friction less toxic.

ENDNOTES

1. Suzanne M. Johnson Vickberg and Kim Christfort, "The new science of team chemistry: Pioneers, drivers, integrators, and guardians," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2017.

2. Ibid. Deloitte Business Chemistry is a system created by Deloitte that identifies four primary workstyles and related strategies for accomplishing shared goals. Each person is a composite of the four work styles, though most people's behavior and thinking are closely aligned with one or two.

3. Andrew de Maar and Dalia Katan, interviews with various groups from Newbuild & Innovation, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., June 6, 2017.

4. John Hagel and John Seely Brown, "Control vs. trust: Mastering a different management approach," Deloitte, 2009.

5. Alex Pentland, *Social Physics: How Social Networks Can Make Us Smarter* (New York: Penguin, 2014), p. 78.

6. A series of studies conducted in the British National Health Service has shown that workgroups whose values cohere identify more strongly as a group and display greater levels of innovation. Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic and Dave Winsborough, "Personality tests can help balance a team," *Harvard Business Review*, March 19, 2015; Rebecca Mitchell et al., "Perceived value congruence and team innovation," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 85, no. 4 (2012): pp. 626–48.

7. See David Engel et al., "Reading the mind in the eyes or reading between the lines? Theory of mind predicts collective intelligence equally well online and face-to-face," *PLOS*, December 16, 2014. Google's Project Aristotle similarly found few patterns among successful teams except for encouraging distributed share of voice and exhibiting emotional and social sensitivity to other members.

8. Pentland, *Social Physics*, p. 90. MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory developed a badge technology to read individual communication behavior and deployed it to 2,500 people in 21 organizations across a variety of industries in order to better understand group performance. Researchers discovered that patterns of communication were as significant as all other factors combined: individual intelligence, personality, skill, and substance of discussions.

9. Alex "Sandy" Pentland, "The new science of building great teams," *Harvard Business Review*, April 2012.

10. Stanley McChrystal with Tantum Collins, David Silverman, and Chris Fussell, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Portfolio, 2015).

11. Gil LeBreton, "Umps get 1 in 3 close pitches wrong, HBO story shows," *Star-Telegram*, October 1, 2016.
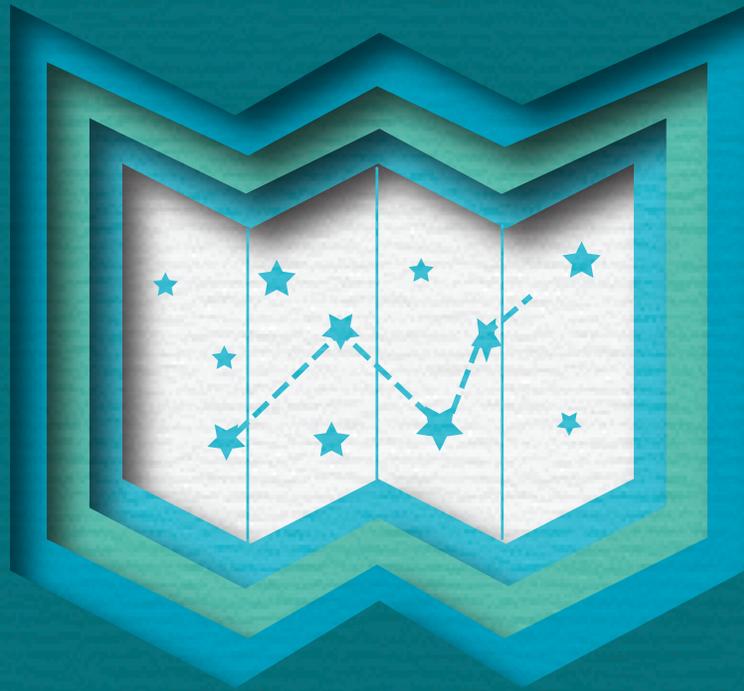
Reflect more to learn faster

No matter how fast things are moving, take the time to reflect on your experiences, supporting even faster movement

Introduction:
The dual role of reflection

When it comes to accelerating performance, there's a paradox: If we want to have greater impact, faster, we have to slow down enough to reflect on what we've done and what we're going to do.

It's a balancing act. Speed matters, of course, but we can't focus too much on speed—otherwise there's no time for reflection, and reflection is critical for learning. If your workgroup just acts and acts without pausing to understand what you've learned and how to apply it, you won't likely achieve a higher level of performance. Action without reflection is a waste of time.

At the same time, it isn't about constantly pushing forward to complete the next task. Taking time to step back and reflect on actions, the results of those actions, and our expectations for actions can be a rich source of insight and learning. *What seemed to have a greater impact? How can we do more of that and amplify it?* This process of reflection and adaptation—before action, during action, after action, and outside action—is often very powerful.

Reflecting as a group holds unique potential for uncovering more insights, drawing more connections, and using them to build better solutions. A group's diversity and passion can be especially valuable when brought to bear on making sense of and interpreting results and data and developing potential new actions. Reflection can serve a dual role, drawing out members' challenges to generate new insights and ideas and, at the same time, helping to build more alignment around a shared understanding of the actions that may have the greatest impact. Workgroups often need opportunities to pull out of the demands of the moment and revisit how near-term actions connect to improving the shared outcome.

Reflection can help workgroups break out of an incremental mind-set at a time when tried-and-true techniques may prove inadequate for the variety of new and unpredictable challenges and cases of first instances that workgroups will encounter.[1] Regular practices of looking at results, observations, and data, and being open to the implications of that information, can help workgroups break from the status quo and chart new paths forward that could better achieve the desired outcome. In reflecting on near-term initiatives and assessing whether they are accelerating us toward our destination, workgroups also learn more about the destination they are striving to reach. Part of the learning process should be to continually step back and ask how refining our view of the destination might help us progress even faster.

> ## YOU KNOW YOU NEED THIS PRACTICE WHEN:
>
> - The workgroup isn't getting the rich, real-time, and context-specific performance feedback it needs
>
> - All the reflection that takes place is on failures; there's no reflection on successes
>
> - Successes seem rare and appear to be either accidental or stem from heroics rather than discipline
>
> - Performance improvements developed in one part of the workgroup rarely scale to others in the workgroup

The *reflect more to learn faster* practice: What it is

Reflection, for our purposes, is about understanding and interpreting information—in the form of results, observations, and data—to evolve our actions to get more impact. It is primarily a group activity. For accelerating performance improvement, we should create more opportunities for group reflection. A diverse group of people willing to challenge each other can get much further than any individual sitting in a room with a mountain of data and trying to make sense of it.

Reflection can get a workgroup together to challenge each other around:
- What worked better than expected?
- What didn't work as expected?
- What assumptions need to be changed?
- What strengths can we build on to ratchet up the impact?

In addition, reflection is about stepping back to remind ourselves of the group's long-term aspirations and the role of near-term actions in accomplishing it.

. . . and what it isn't

- **Learning for the sake of learning**. Reflection can be valuable when the workgroup uses it to learn more about impact and to catalyze action toward a destination. Without a destination in mind, groups may learn from their experiences, but the learning won't necessarily help them improve performance.

- **Finding fault or failure**. Rather than run until something goes wrong, then fix the problem, and keep going, continuous reflection constantly seeks greater impact. It is looking at the successes, the partial successes, and the failures, at the errors that happened and the errors that didn't, to try to determine what the workgroup should do next.

- **Just reflecting on the problem or the opportunity**. To get better faster, the workgroup should reflect on its *approach* to problems and opportunities. In fact, the more you reflect on your approach, the more likely your biggest problems may become your biggest opportunities.

Putting the practice into play

Reflection for faster learning comes from first making a conscious decision to make it a priority for the group. A workgroup should focus attention

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INTERSECTIONS WITH THE OTHER EIGHT PRACTICES

Taking the time to reflect is a conscious decision. It can strengthen and support all of a workgroup's other practices and activities—as long as there's a mechanism to translate insights into action.

- **Maximize the potential for friction.** Bringing together diverse and passionate people can be a necessary condition for rich reflection.

- **Eliminate unproductive friction.** An environment of trust and respect is a prerequisite for the honest and rich reflection that can accelerate a workgroup's learning. Reflection focused on achieving a shared outcome, supported by rich inputs, can make it easier to articulate disagreement in a productive way.

- **Commit to a shared outcome.** Through reflection, a workgroup can learn how to have more impact on the shared outcome and assess whether a shared outcome is still the highest-value pursuit.

- **Bias toward action.** Action creates rich inputs for reflection. Reflection draws the relevant learning from action to accelerate performance.

- **Prioritize performance trajectory.** The performance objectives and metrics can ground and inform a workgroup's reflection about the impact of actions and the performance it is achieving.

- **Frame a powerful question.** The question often shifts the scope beyond just the moment at hand, connecting that moment to the implications and learnings across moments and over time: What did we learn that informs our powerful question?

- **Seek new contexts.** The techniques and approaches encountered in a different context can form the basis of reflection on what is context-dependent and what is more generalizable, and reflection can transform observations into relevant, actionable insights.

- **Cultivate friction.** Challenging during reflection—with the aim of developing better approaches—is important, both pre-action and post-action.

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on getting diverse and robust information to feed the reflection. Also, grounding reflection in the group's larger goals for impact can help to ensure that the reflection is most valuable for accelerating performance. Members can practice reflection—at different levels of granularity and at different moments in time—to reexamine the status quo in light of the desired impact and trajectory.

FEED THE REFLECTION

In order to learn how to get more and more impact, a workgroup needs new information and interactions, along with a growing base of new knowledge, upon which to reflect, draw insights, and determine new actions. **Capture what you can** to feed reflection—data and formal metrics as well as the experiences and observations of group members and others—but try to keep data collection simple. For example, look for ways to exploit and analyze data that already exists, such as the digital exhaust that groups leave behind as they interact with people, technology, and equipment.

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

- What data do we need to get better faster?

Our technology generates an increasing amount of data, such as the number of times we badge into work, or how we move and to whom we speak, or how much time we spend using a particular app, or the ways we link from one website to another while searching for information. Often invisible to us, this data can provide insight into the underlying factors that influence the effectiveness of a particular approach or opportunities to tinker with how the workgroup itself works to create more impact.[2] At Southwest, the Field Tech workgroup has begun to evaluate real-time airline health maintenance data—on the planes' operations, temperatures, rotations, etc.—to identify patterns that act as early warning for parts nearing failure so that they can be addressed before they become an issue. Collaboration tools can bring further visibility into the data around our work—interactions, queries, and searches, distribution of comments, usefulness of

our contributions, and shared objects—for individuals or the group. Often this data is available in real time and can be combined with data pulled from other sources for dynamic feedback.

More data—of all types, even if it involves just short back-and-forth conversations—means more transparency. Look for ways to **be radically transparent** within the workgroup. A more transparent group has more potential value because members can more fully understand the context of what's going on. More context supports more action, trust, and respect, all of which can fuel richer reflection.

If "what gets measured gets managed," the corollary is that workgroups that cast a wide net for potential insights have to avoid the trap of managing everything they measure. Just because data is available and easily collected doesn't mean it is valuable. At the same time, we don't always know the value of data in advance, so it may be worthwhile to consider all sources of information initially. For data and metrics that will require more effort to gather, go through the thought process of why each type of data would be relevant to improving the outcome—for example, what information would it provide that is currently missing, and will that change the next action?—before deciding to invest in data-gathering resources.

Staying focused on learning how to evolve a group's actions to improve an outcome is important for making reflection productive. **Seek continuous feedback** as just one more valuable source of information to draw insights from about how a new approach is working, the unexpected consequences of an experimental solution, or our own performance in the workgroup. In this context,

FEEDBACK QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS

1. What should I continue to do?

2. What should I stop doing?

3. What should I start to do?

4. What can I do to make the group more successful?

feedback isn't an evaluative or punitive tool or a check-the-box reporting activity. The purpose of giving and receiving feedback is to discover something we don't know—feedback that is expected or confirms what we believe is less useful than that which is surprising.

A key to fostering more productive reflection is to identify and implement faster, and richer, feedback loops to get internal and external feedback on a recurring basis. Workgroups should look for opportunities to establish feedback loops that help members understand what the customer expects or needs and where they stand relative to that; they should also look for opportunities to create loops that help point to where they can focus their efforts to have a greater impact. The feedback that groups need has parallels to the feedback that individuals need.[3] In fact, encouraging group members to *ask* for feedback, understand i[...] within the larger context, and [...] translate that feedback into [...] action at an individual level [...] can establish feedback-seek[...] ing behavior that translates [...] into how members reflect [...] and improve performance as [...] a group. If members aren't [...] pulling for feedback, they [...] aren't likely to get it. Con[...] sider how even in loosely or[...] ganized open-source software initiatives, contributors get rapid feedback from others who try their code. Broad adoption of a team's or individual's work products confers status. Contributors carefully monitor this measure of performance and try to learn from others whose contributions gain much greater acceptance.

The patterns of feedback can also yield insight into feedback loops' effectiveness. For example, when GE FirstBuild launched its open innovation model for appliances, members tried to engage the community on every possible design element, down to the shape of the ice-dispenser lever in the freezer door. Looking at the feedback in totality made clear that FirstBuild's community was disengaged and not giving the group useful, actionable insight. FirstBuild founder Venkat Venkatakrishnan said, "We made one big mistake: We assumed that every-

one that was part of our community had a passion for appliances." The group refined its approach to be less reliant on the community for the day-to-day product development.[4]

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR -MORTEM

Most people in organizations are familiar with the *postmortem*.[5] We use the term somewhat facetiously, as workgroups can learn from the practice of examining and reflecting on a problem, its condition, and the circumstances surrounding it—not just in "deaths" or failures but over time—every step of the way. Timing is important: finding time to reflect and determine what level of reflection is appropriate at a point in time—before action, in action, after action, and apart from action. Each has its own objectives and techniques.

These types of thoughtful reviews require groups to commit time and resources and for members to participate in a spirit of creating something better rather than defending a position, rationalizing results, or gaining status. To generate more actionable insights and avoid check-the-box status meetings, reviews should prioritize whatever is surprising—good or bad—and focus on causality. The goal is to improve impact, and to do that groups need to better understand what drives impact and how best to affect those drivers. Finally, reflection, even productive reflection, should have an end point to avoid the paralysis of analysis. The goal is to reflect *just enough* to know what to do next to gain even more valuable information about the current question.
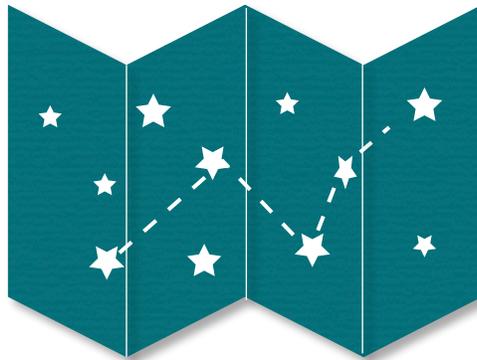
Perhaps the most important objective of **conducting a pre-mortem**, or pre-action review, in terms of accelerating performance, is to frame the questions that the activity is intended to answer and to remind the participants of the context surrounding the action. *What is the purpose of the action? What is the desired impact? What is the most valuable information that could come from the action?* The pre-mortem leverages the group's collective

experiences to clarify what is known and unknown, align on what is needed, identify and mitigate known risks, and talk through possible scenarios and triggers for alternatives in order to give the action the best possible chance of making the desired impact. Pre-action reviews may be brief—in the US Army, units sometimes focus around the simple question, "What's important now?"—but even in quick-turnaround situations, some reflection to envision cause and effect, action and reaction, in advance, can make a difference in managing risks and ratcheting up impact.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What can we learn from our results?
- What are the implications for how we move differently in the future?

Pre-mortems can also be thought of as occurring between episodes or in the absence of an episode. For example, the Field Tech workgroup at Southwest took a largely reactive maintenance program and turned it into a preventative maintenance program by reflecting on and analyzing all of the existing data (pilot write-ups, in-flight diversions, delays) to identify what caused these issues. The insights helped members focus on addressing the most common instances of errors and aircraft downtime before they could even occur through pre-mortem reflection. By taking the time to reflect on the issues as a unit, they were able to uncover larger patterns that led to better overall performance of the maintenance crews and the airline's operations.

Reflection in action—on what's working, what isn't, and how conditions are changing—can help workgroups reorient to be more effective in the moment. In-action reflection often occurs individually or in small groups, in micro-reflections that are so short they might seem involuntary. Taking even a tiny pause to step back and reflect on the action, *during* the action, can yield powerful insights into how the approach might be more effective before key details or ideas are forgotten. Understanding and playing with the in-action time horizon comes

with experience, but a useful first step is to take advantage of small moments outside of action. To the extent that a workgroup can slow down the moment, creating even small spaces for noticing, comparing what we observe against what we expect, and considering the implications for action provide a unique opportunity for learning that might be lost otherwise and provides more concrete input for postmortem reviews.

Increasingly, technology can capture more real-time details and context—think dash-mounted cameras or GPS features in smartphones—that can be brought into the postmortem or after-action review. In addition to supplementing faulty or incomplete observations, one benefit of sensors and other real-time capture technology is that it can be used to create dashboards that support rapid reflection in the moment and more robust analysis in the after-action review.

Conduct after-action reviews[6] to create an opportunity for the group to step back and consider what occurred and what the implications are for the next action. It's often in this stage of reflection that patterns begin to emerge and new approaches are developed. For the firefighters of FDNY Rescue 1, informal postmortems begin as soon as the firemen are riding back to the firehouse, capturing raw observations and impressions, including what was particularly challenging or unique about the situation. The conversations continue back at the firehouse, where other responders hear their stories and share their own insights; together, they are able to draw patterns and develop an action plan for the future, based on the unit's collective experiences. Additionally, when firemen have identified a particularly challenging, complex, or ambiguous scenario, they try to recreate that scenario in training so that all members of Rescue 1 can be better prepared in the future. Effective postmortems can enhance a workgroup's ability to handle a similar situation more effectively in the future—and to identify incorrect decisions or assumptions and how they were made.

An effective postmortem is an opportunity for group members to challenge current ways of thinking and performing, if everyone is open to acknowledging the factors that may have contributed to

failure and success. Such candor is often lacking in organizations out of fear of reprisal or loss of status. Workgroups should be committed to norms that keep politics and one-upmanship out of the group's interactions and might find it helpful to use a facilitator and structured questions to offset the fear and loss of control that might come with speaking openly.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Where are we improving most rapidly, and how can we do more of that?
- Where is improvement slowing down, and how can we change what we're doing to improve the trajectory?

Postmortems should spend as much time on what went right as on what went wrong, in particular what had more of an impact than expected, and explore how to build on that and do more of it. While the positive-negative balance makes it a safer environment to explore every aspect of the project, it keeps the group oriented toward future actions and performance. Participants also bring their supplemental performance data—including metrics such as how often something had to be reworked—to ground the discussion away from default assumptions and subjective impressions.[7]

A workgroup's power is that it can come up with better solutions and have more impact than an individual, no matter how skilled, on her own. It's taking what one member knows, coupling it with what another member of the groups knows, getting other members to react and add, and creating something totally original. A group has the ability to continue to get better and better at performing under changing circumstances in a way that an individual can't, by effectively leveraging the collective passion, knowledge, and experience to create new solutions from which to continue to iterate and improve. Doing so requires the workgroup to invest in one more level of reflection.

The workgroup can evolve its own practices of reflecting and taking action. Periodically **reflecting on how you reflect**—being aware of which reflective practices seem to be generating increasing impact over time—helps guard against falling into a routine with diminishing returns.[8] Research from the University of Alabama in Huntsville suggests that groups improve their performance when they meet in a structured environment in which each member reflects on her role and how it relates to the overall performance of the team.[9] By drawing out perceptions, supplemented by data, members can identify patterns in their own interactions and thought processes to understand how they contribute to incorrect or ineffective actions and how to make better decisions that have more impact in the future.[10] Pay attention to the way messages are conveyed and processed as well as what is not being said. *What is the timing, and who is involved? What is the energy? What is the result?*

Figure 1. Framing signals

What?	**Observation**	Statement of fact. It reflects a single incident that you heard or observed
So what?	**Insight**	A pattern in your observations and some degree of interpretation. It may build off of a repeated failure, or something especially powerful
Now what?	**Implications**	How insights can drive action. How does what you observed affect what you should design? Typically phrased as "how might we address Y . . ." or in the imperative voice as in "provide customers with Y . . ."

Source: Deloitte analysis.

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Consider how the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) Task Force[11] had to reflect on its own practices when its overwhelming firepower and expertise were failing to slow attacks by Al Qaeda in Iraq. The task force took a step back and through careful thought and reflection came to understand that "AQI operated in ways that diverged radically" from what American forces were accustomed to fighting. In the time it took for US commanders to move a plan from creation to approval, the battlefield for which the plan had been devised would have changed. The task force had to reflect on its own practices for processing and learning from intelligence information, because members weren't learning what they needed to fast enough to respond, much less make progress against the enemy.

The data, when they took time to look at it all together, showed that the tried-and-true tactics weren't working. This opened the door to greater questioning of assumptions about what members "knew" about how things worked. With new insight, they restructured the force from the ground up on the principles of transparent information-sharing and decentralized decision-making authority to make shorter feedback and reflection loops tied closely to the action. As a result, forces began conducting more and more raids per night, getting intelligence information across the chain of command much quicker, and acting on its analysis faster. By **being their own judge but not their only judge**, relevant outsiders helped units within JSOC perform at their highest potential.

MAKE SENSE OF SIGNALS

During action, in action, after action, and in-between action—we are gathering more and richer information. It becomes valuable when the workgroup collectively engages with the raw information to learn from it and develop new action (see figure 1).[12] Group members will likely begin to observe more carefully and bring richer context back to the group as they see the group's capacity to derive actionable insights improve.

Most of us value patterns. But years of standardization have taught many of us to abhor anomalies. We try to hide the exceptions, rationalize the pieces that do not fit, and hope that no one notices. Yet breakthroughs happen when we notice and explore

> **ANTIBODIES AT WORK**
> - What we are doing is working; we don't need to change.
> - Our workgroups are well regarded for being tried and true. We're successful because we haven't bought into the craze to reinvent ourselves and try new things.
> - In our organization, seconds count; we need people to act immediately, not debate what they would do differently.

the inconsistencies, anomalies, and unintended consequences—these are the leverage points that can accelerate impact. **Detect anomalies and celebrate exceptions**,[13] acknowledging what you don't see in the data rather than looking just to confirm a hypothesis. Sometimes an insight lies in connecting the dots between what isn't there when new data doesn't align with an existing belief.[14]

When the group can **recognize emerging and evolving patterns**, it may help to make sense of the passive data it collects and inform the *-mortem* reviews. The frameworks and hypotheses in our heads influence what patterns we uncover. We see what we look for. The patterns a workgroup identifies and how it interprets them can be influenced by the questions it asks and the nature of the problem it is trying to solve. The diverse workgroup members also bring range and variety to how they notice and categorize.

The goal should be to make sense of both what we've seen before and what we haven't, looking for indications of some new structure, or of indications that an existing structure is changing meaningfully. Observations and snippets of information that seem unimportant on their own can heighten our awareness of the periphery and provoke new ideas when considered together with the collected flotsam of other group members. Do the snippets signal a deeper structural change? Or are they superficial noise?

Group members challenge each other's categorizations and add their own, creating and breaking categories on the way to identifying meaningful patterns. They may gain perspective through a

practice of deliberately viewing a new problem as a variant of an old problem from a different context. For example, the research problem we set ourselves was focused on workgroup practices, but one of the ways we tried to gain insight was by choosing to see dynamic workgroups as akin to sports teams. Seeing the current situation *as like* something else can help reveal opportunities to apply aspects of previous approaches or solutions to our problem; understanding where the similarity breaks down and previous experiences aren't relevant can be informative as well.

ENDNOTES

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4. Ryan Gatti, interview with Venkat Venkatakrishnan, co-founder, GE FirstBuild, Louisville, Ky., April 18, 2017.

5. Wharton@Work, "After action reviews," April 2012.

6. Ibid.: "Called 'one of the most successful organizational learning methods yet devised,' the After Action Review (AAR) was developed by the United States Army in the 1970s to help its soldiers learn from both their mistakes and achievements. Since then, the AAR has been used by many companies for performance assessment. And yet, as *The Fifth Discipline* author Peter Senge notes, efforts to bring the practice into corporate culture most often fail because 'again and again, people reduce the living practice of AARs to a sterile technique.'"

7. Linda Hill, "How to manage for collective creativity," TedxCambridge, September 2014.

8. In Agile methodology, deep reflection is described as a keen focus on the effort being exerted: the *work* being done. Our research suggests that this type of deep reflection should focus on the workgroup itself—the *how* work gets done.

9. Jim Steele, "Structured reflection on roles and tasks improves team performance, UAH study finds," University of Alabama in Huntsville, April 8, 2013.

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11. For more on JSOC, read the complete case study, publishing in February 2018.

12. This framing is similar to what many of our Doblin colleagues use to uncover significant patterns and relationships across observations.

13. Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic, 1984), p. 131.

14. Gary Klein and Barbara Fasolo, "Seeing what others don't: The remarkable ways we gain insights," London School of Economics, Department of Management public lecture, March 26, 2015.

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