



## **The Seven Commandments for teams who aren't talking**

Creative Shift recently worked with the board of an organisation that had over time polarized in their views. Helga Henry, Lead Consultant at Creative Shift first observed some (rather fractious) Board interactions at meetings and then interviewed both the Chair and Chief Executive before speaking individually to each Board member.

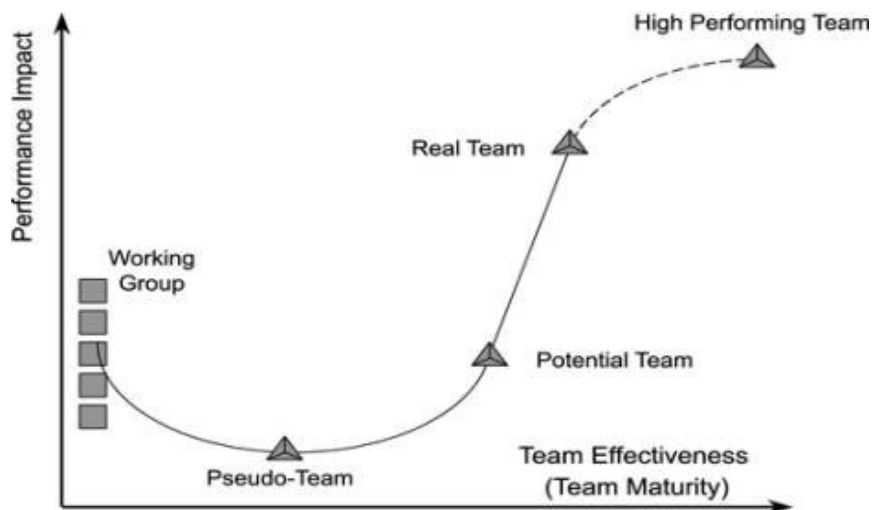
Prior to Creative Shift's intervention the team were operating where no discussion had reached a sufficient point of clarity to get to a vote at Board meetings. The creation and use of the "Seven Commandments" set out below allowed the Board to deal with a mission-critical decision, which was in fact the first agenda item to go to a vote in four years.

### **A shared vision but no shared strategy**

The situation revealed itself to be finely balanced. The group had effectively reached an impasse – but not because each faction wanted different things. Both sides would cogently and passionately advocate for the vision and mission of the organisation. Both sides were in total agreement about what the organisation was there to do. What both sides could **not** agree on was the WAY in which it would fulfil its mission.

Leaders are often exhorted to ensure that everyone is aligned with the vision. Well here was a dedicated and skilled group of people who were in partial alignment. And for several years a shared sense of vision was sufficient to keep the group together. In the interviews however it became apparent that an unhealthy pattern of behaviour had emerged.

The directors of this Board were displaying all the characteristics and "frustrations" of what Katzenbach and Smith in "The Wisdom of Teams" call a 'pseudo-team'. That is to say, "a group for which there could be a significant, incremental performance need or opportunity, but it has not focused on collective performance and is not really trying to achieve it". On the Team Performance Curve (see below), a 'Pseudo-team' is the most unproductive type of team.



The Team Performance Curve – Katzenbach and Smith

These frustrations as revealed in observation and interview are listed below together with the sorts of things we heard and saw:

- ⌚ A loss of energy and enthusiasm  
*"I don't know why I come to meetings, they are always long, frustrating and nothing gets done. I want to resign at the next AGM"*
- ⌚ A sense of helplessness ...  
*"When [name] starts to shout and get angry I just close down. I can't reply to him because I don't know about business like he does."*
- ⌚ Listless, unconstructive and one-sided discussions without candour  
*"The meeting included a long conversation about an application where one board member made a number of minor criticisms and points but when asked to clarify whether he approved the action he avoided the question." [From notes of observations]*
- ⌚ Cynicism and mistrust  
*"I don't know why [name] did that. I suppose it's so he can build his empire."*
- ⌚ Interpersonal attacks made behind peoples' backs and to outsiders



*“I don’t know what hold this person has over him, but he keeps promoting [name] way beyond their level of capability.”*

This was the least harmonious group Helga had come across in some time. Everyone was far too interested in playing their own tune to play together. In fact the first note she made while observing the meeting was “Poor listening skills?”

### **Crunch time**

The board was approaching a pivotal decision in its future direction. There had been a series of meetings and conversations that had not resulted in any progress. A new Chair took the helm to see if that could change the group dynamic. The meeting Helga observed ended in tears, acrimony and shouting. Even though the team had been together for years, it was not displaying the maturity required for high performance.

Something had to give.

Following the observation and interview stages, a day-long meeting was convened.

It had become apparent to Helga that there were a number of factors around the venue and context of past meetings that did not help constructive working. Meetings were held in the evening and board members tended to arrive straight after work. No proper refreshments were provided so by the end of the three-hour meeting people were tired and hungry. There was a palpable dip in energy after the first 90 minutes. The room where meetings were usually held was in a building which was actually closed for the night so the environment was dark and the building had a sombre atmosphere. As people arrived, they walked in to a silent room and did not socialise. These factors were reversed for the day-long meeting which Helga characterised as a “strategy day”. There were many factors that went into the preparation of the day to ensure a productive result but in large part they merely reversed some of the negative factors at play in the unproductive meetings.:

The meeting was held in the daytime and started with a breakfast of good coffee, juice, fruit and pastries. The light and airy room was filled with music as people arrived and they were encouraged to sit and be sociable for 20 minutes before beginning. We created clearly delineated areas for “work” and refreshment and moved between the two every 90 minutes or so to change pace and energy.

### **The difference that made a difference**

The most important thing the group did with the facilitator was to agree a set of behaviours for the day. These were nicknamed “The Seven Commandments”. The first six listed below were suggested in advance based on some of the behaviours Helga had previously observed in the group and individually.



- 1 **State your mind while avoiding giving or taking offence.**
- 2 **Be aware that everyone's perceptions are different; don't deduce or assume intentions or motives (particularly based on your fears).**
- 3 **Be specific, avoiding generalisations such as "always", "never", "every time".**
- 4 **Speak about behaviours and impacts rather than personal comments ("When X happens I feel Y").**
- 5 **Fight your own battles, don't fight other people's battles "for them".**
- 6 **Take responsibility for your contribution to the situation, your actions and feelings.**

In discussion, each member of the group agreed to the six principles. We asked if anything was missing. After some discussion (during which Helga pointed out when the Commandments were being broken), a seventh was added:

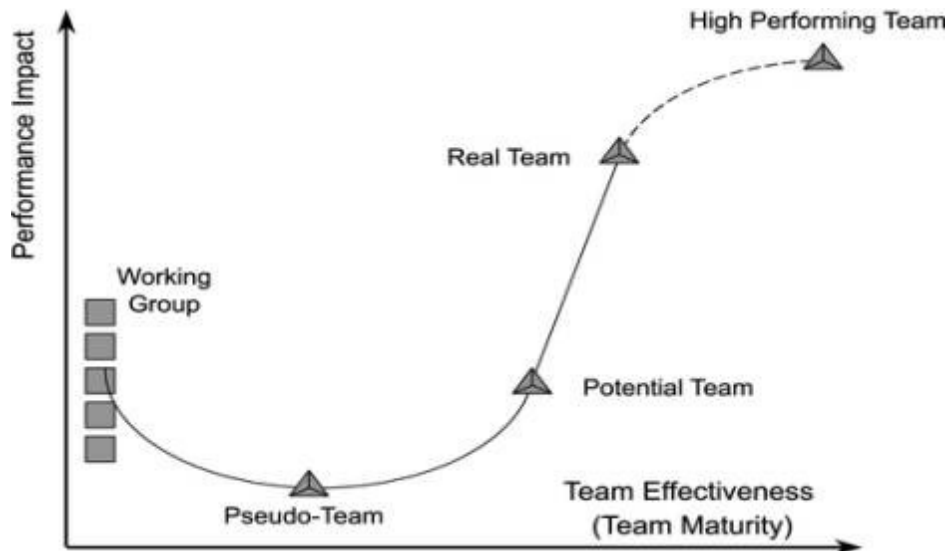
- 7 **Commit to seeking a resolution.**

These seven commandments proved to be a powerful tool in moving the group forward. They were displayed prominently throughout the day. At first Helga had to model and reinforce the commandments every time they were breached. Within a couple of hours however the group took over, using the commandments as a tool to build consensus, safely air opinion and "say the unsayable".

A previously reticent member of Board felt empowered to volunteer to nominate themselves as "Keeper of the Commandments". The "Keeper" took away the sheet on which the Commandments were written away and committed to displaying them (and more importantly enforcing them) at each subsequent meeting.

## **Results and lessons**

The strategy meeting did much to clear the air. It was just one day but it moved the 'Pseudo team' on to such a degree that by day's end they were displaying the characteristics of a 'Potential Team' ("... a group for which there is a significant, incremental performance need, and that really is trying to improve its performance impact. Typically, however, it requires more clarity about purpose, goals or work-products and more discipline in hammering out a common working approach.").



*The Team Performance Curve – Katzenbach and Smith*

Most importantly for the organisation the result was that at the next Board meeting the pivotal issue was discussed and voted on. This may seem a small matter. However in the de-brief the Chair informed us that this was the first matter to have reached a sufficient level of clarity to get to a vote in the previous **four years**.

## Are you a member of a pseudo team?

If you recognise any of the frustrations listed above and if the team or Board you are working with are not as productive as they could be, think about the following things:

- ⌚ Are the venue and context of your meetings optimally arranged to harness or to dissipate energy?
- ⌚ Do you have both a shared vision and a shared strategy on how the vision will be achieved?
- ⌚ Are you clear on what you agree and where and how your opinions differ?
- ⌚ Have you explicitly agreed to a protocol or way of communicating?
- ⌚ Are expectations around timetable and responsiveness clear?
- ⌚ Do you welcome difference of opinion or is it shut down?



- ⌚ Do you have confidence and commitment of purpose?
- ⌚ Would you benefit from a strategy day, whether or not moderated by an expert, independent facilitator?

**Creative Shift uses a number of creative tools and techniques to create high performing teams. We can create safe spaces in which to have difficult conversations. Wherever you are on the team “curve” we can work with you to improve and maintain performance. Find out more at [www.creativeshift.uk.com](http://www.creativeshift.uk.com) or call 0121 689 1051.**

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