Clean Up Corrosive Interpersonal Dynamics on Your Team with This System

"The consequences of not identifying and addressing conflicts and corrosive team dynamics are always dire," says **Laura Gates**, whose work as an executive coach helps clients navigate these hard conversations. "When leaders are unwilling or unable to talk about tough issues, co-founders fight, high performers quit, equally talented people get fired unfairly, projects fall apart or miss deadlines, cultures turn toxic, morale suffers, people leave and companies implode. The price of *not* addressing conflict is simply too high."

> Bottom line, if people don't feel safe, they can't be creative. If they aren't creative, they can't innovate. If they don't innovate, the business eventually becomes obsolete.

Luckily there's a way to stem this tide: You can build vital, authentic conversations into your company's culture at regular intervals to eliminate built-up tension systematically. In this piece, Gates — who has worked with organizations ranging from NASA to Shell Oil, from the U.S. Military to Silicon Valley Giants — walks through how to make this happen. She talks about the common reasons teams don't address issues, highlights the core problems she's seen too many teams grapple with, and describes how to constructively dig in and resolve them so everyone can do their best work.

Why We Avoid Hard Conversations

Why do teams of brilliant, ambitious people with the same goals continue to be derailed by interpersonal issues?

"For starters," says Gates, "They flat out avoid people and problems that might make them feel badly. Every team harbors things that are unsaid — withheld emotions, old resentments, silent feuds." This weighs people down and gunks up the system.

"Hands down, the number one reason people tell me they can't address a hard issue is that **they don't have time**," she says. "I don't buy it. I tell them it's better to say 'I'm choosing not to make the time to have this conversation,' because then they're being honest with themselves. They're avoiding and choosing to spend their time in other ways on other priorities. My job is to convince them that the cost of putting off that hard conversation will greatly outweigh the short-lived relief of not having it."

Once clients dig into the real reasons they aren't having the conversation, **it's almost always fear** — fear of the person not liking them, fear of the person getting emotional, fear of the other person blowing up or melting down, and fear that the person will be less effective in their role as a result. In other words, the fear is less about the issue and more about the fallout when faced with the conversation.

This is why making time as a team for honest communication is essential. The ideal forum is a couple of hours during a retreat where the team devotes uninterrupted time to discuss nagging problems and challenges. Gates recommends scheduling this at regular intervals (at least twice a year). Otherwise, the work you really want to accomplish during a retreat or offsite — brainstorming, building, etc. — will suffer if you don't address the interpersonal layer first.

COMMON CORROSIVE DYNAMICS

Gates sees these themes emerge in teams across industries. Here are some dynamics that might ring true for you and your team, so you feel less alone:

Bone-deep Competition.

Nearly everyone working at a successful company has been exposed to intense competition from an early age. Primed to excel, get good grades, be the best —we're conditioned from the start toward individual achievement and outsmarting our peers to get ahead.

"We throw a bunch of high achievers in a room together and tell them to collaborate, communicate openly, trust implicitly, share information, give credit to others," says Gates. "It's just not that easy. Even if people are doing it on the surface, their inner achiever feels neglected and is prone to hurt feelings, suspicion and the impulse to outdo, out work, out shine. No wonder people are exhausted and burnt out."

Comparison happens in both directions, she says. "**People constantly question whether they're as good as their colleague or make a point of being better**. It leads to people either withdrawing or becoming puffer fish who blow up, demand recognition and overly assert themselves for attention."

At its worst, this competitive instinct — when left unaddressed — ruins innovation. People are so committed to touting their past accomplishments, they stay in their comfort zone and avoid trying new things that might fail or venture an idea that others might shut down in front of their boss. They stay safe.

> The stress to be outstanding at all times literally triggers fight or flight. It's like we're all trapped in survival mode even though nothing is life or death — over something as innocuous as an email exchange.

Fear of being found out.

Impostor syndrome is a real and vicious dynamic in the workplace. No matter how talented or productive some people are, they still think they're a fraud who's bound to be discovered at any moment. "I've worked with incredibly successful leaders running large organizations, and founders who've raised millions of dollars who will ask me, voice lowered, glancing side to side, 'What if they find out I'm not qualified to be doing any of this? What if it's an accident that I'm even here?' Fear overrides reason and they totally edit out the fact that they wouldn't be where they are if they were unqualified," says Gates.

This fear eats away at self-esteem, causing people to second-guess themselves, procrastinate, and drive for perfection, which, in turn, causes them to control and micromanage. It's particularly harmful and difficult to assess because it can display as frustrating indecisiveness, underperformance, and aversion to risk.

My reality is not *the* reality.

"The way our brains are wired, to discern patterns and short cuts in order to process massive amounts of input, **we constantly take an observation or experience and blow it up into a blanket judgment about others and what they're likely to do in the future**," she says. "This is another efficient, helpful, built-in survival mechanism that can get in the way of collaborating and working together. Sitting in many meetings, I can literally see how they don't hear each other, how they talk past each other, make conclusions and assumptions and then react based on what they thought they heard — which is often far from the reality of what the other person said."

It's no surprise then, that we feel someone is "disrespecting us" or being "rude" to us when in fact they think how they're behaving is completely fine. We hear through our filters of reality.

This can be particularly pernicious because assumptions travel fast through gossip — inevitably abstracted from any shred of fact — and the originating incidents are hardly ever surfaced and contradicted (again, because people don't feel like they have "time" to talk it out or admit they're wrong). Gossip and venting then erodes trust and breeds more gossiping and venting.

It's no fun being the squeaky wheel.

People will allow their resentments and negative emotions to build and fester simply because they don't want to be perceived as a complainer, a whiner, a stick in the mud, or not a team player. They often invalidate their own feelings by thinking they aren't important enough to express. This tends to be an even more common issue for women who fear they'll be criticized as abrasive or weak or unable to go along with the flow.

It's difficult to volunteer that something is bothering you in the middle of high-velocity work. However, the best managers ask, says Gates, and make non-judgmental space for these feelings to surface and be addressed in a safe way.

Feedback stays at the surface.

Regular 360 feedback sessions are a good habit, but too many of just report the symptoms of much deeper problems.

For example, if someone's a chronic procrastinator, the average review would say that they often wait until the last minute to get work done, and strongly suggest they focus on time management. "**The optimal way to approach the problem would be with curiosity**," says Gates, "For example, if the employee misses a deadline, the manager could ask about what happened before the project was due, how the time was spent, and get to the emotional core of why it was put off — which usually is more about a fear that the outcome wouldn't be good enough, or the person has overly high expectations of themselves. That way, both manager and report can approach it differently the next time."

When you fail to get to the root causes of behavior in a review, you leave people wondering how they should change. Often the route they pick is to camouflage or hide negative behaviors or feelings, which only perpetuates them.

Denial that work is personal. It is.

People are often told not to take things personally at work. This isn't very helpful, says Gates.

> Work is personal. It's intimately tied to perception of self, how we measure our worth, the shape of our lives, the sacrifices we make. It's only human to take things that are said and done at work personally.

Ignoring or invalidating these feelings is a mistake many managers make. "I hear people cut conversations short because they 'don't want to bring emotions into the workplace' or they 'don't want to make it personal' — but it's all personal!" she says. "Problems emerge when people feel like they shouldn't be having strong emotions about their work or need to 'check them at the door.' When we let ourselves cry or get angry at work, we have the hard conversations we need to have sooner."

If you're experiencing any of the above on your team, you're far from alone, says Gates. She highly recommends managers review this list so they can constantly be scanning for ways to catch cracks before they become chasms.

EMOTIONAL CLEANUP IN PRACTICE

Okay, now that you have a sense of what could be going on beneath the surface of your team, here's how to clean it up.

Step 1: Enlist an objective facilitator.

This doesn't have to be a professional like Gates, but it should ideally be someone who has less skin in the game, preferably someone not affiliated with anyone on your team, who won't take sides or have a stake in the outcome. Their role is to be a sounding board, and to make it easier for people to say what they're so reluctant to share directly with colleagues.

The most important role the facilitator plays is Chief Noticer. "When I'm leading a group discussion, my primary job is to watch the dynamics in the room — who is quiet, who is loud, who seems withdrawn with their arms crossed looking down, who keeps repeating themselves because they don't feel heard, who cuts off who in the middle of their

sentence, what people's body language is saying, what's their tone, etc.," says Gates. "This is often more telling than the actual content of the conversation, and I make a point of asking people about small behaviors that indicate larger issues."

Depending on what they see, the facilitator/observer can identify possible tension between people, draw quiet folks out who might feel intimidated, or prevent one or two people from dominating with their point of view. "More than once, I've noticed someone crying, sitting at the conference table, and literally no one else noticed them until I asked them, 'How you doing over there?' It's wild. We see what we want to see and kind of tune out the rest. Especially if it's uncomfortable."

Before a retreat, Gates recommends sending an anonymous survey about interpersonal issues. Also, let team members confidentially share what's bothering them or what they want to see resolved with the facilitator. Suggested survey questions include:

- What's working well about how the team relates to each other?

- What's not working well?

- Any specific situations or examples you can share?

- What's your personal role in why things might not be working well?

Be sure to make it clear that nothing they say will be disclosed without their permission. "The purpose of this is not to have the facilitator call anyone out, but for them to see how those problems manifest in real-time during the conversation so they can catch and discuss them in that context," says Gates.

"Let's say I know someone has an issue with a colleague interrupting her. I'll see it happen during the course of the discussion, and to bring it to the surface I'll say, 'I just noticed the little interruption there,' and wait to see if that leads to further conversation. My job is to open the door, but they need to be willing to walk through it. Once the retreat is over, I'll be gone, and they'll still working together, so the more I can encourage folks to practice real-time, the better."

Most importantly, the facilitator makes sure the discussion purposefully goes after the major interpersonal issues identified in the survey and the pre-briefs with team members — and that the meeting doesn't wander off track, fall flat, or turn into an argument.

Have everyone agree that the facilitator can intervene, call timeout and redirect the conversation as needed. They can check in with anyone about how they're feeling, whether they're anxious or worried or feeling like they can't jump in. "It's much easier for someone to say to a facilitator, 'Person X stresses me out when she does Y...' instead of turning to person X and saying exactly that. The right person cushions the blow to bring important issues into the open."

Step 2: Set the stage with a resolution.

To have a productive discussion as a group, you need to cut through the etiquette and niceties that prevent transparency. You have to declare this time and space a wholly different zone, where honesty and openness are championed. Ideally, this is an opportunity to talk about what's bothering you in detail, publicly. Resolving things in this type of forum dramatically cuts down gossip and hallway conversations.

Habit is hard to break, so the most senior person in the room ideally sets the stage appropriately:

We resolve to be brave and courageous enough to say what needs to be said to each other to ensure future great work. We resolve that this conversation is the most important thing we could be doing with this time. We resolve that it's okay to get emotional about work and this discussion. And we resolve to emerge stronger, healthier, and with more momentum than ever as a result.

Putting this type of stake in the ground makes it clear this is a unique opportunity. Everyone is rallying around the same objective, and everything that gets said — whether upsetting or not — is in service to working better together. If you don't do this, people won't be as forthcoming, as direct, or as motivated to get to the heart of things.

Step 3: Kick off with prepped vulnerability.

People will often hesitate to reveal anything vulnerable or uncomfortable about themselves unless they see someone else do it first. Anticipate and prepare for this in two ways:

- **Have one person (ideally the most senior member of the team) prepared to share a vulnerable anecdote first.** This sets the example right off the bat that the conversation will be real, deep and pull no punches. When an authority figure models this courageously, it inspires others to open up. "When I share my experience about growing as an intensely competitive gymnast and swimmer, and how I can be competitive in my work as a result, it speaks to people," says Gates. "They can relate to me as a human being and they are almost excited to share their own stories."

- **Have everyone come prepared with a paragraph-long story about something in their background that shapes how they interact** — particularly, something they perceive as a weakness. "For example, we had one leader tell how that he was one of 10 kids growing up, which made him pushy. 'If I didn't grab food, it would be gone,' he told us. We got it, it made sense with his behavior and helped us understand his actions better. Another woman said she could be quick-tempered because her mom often was." When shared in a group setting, this exercise prompts the right level of vulnerability and helps everyone see each other in a new light.

"What we're looking for is who you are really. Where do your self-perceived weaknesses come from?" says Gates. "I see a lot of facilitated discussions where people are encouraged to share their most embarrassing moment, and it ends up being funny, but ultimately empty. That's not good enough. **You want people to think about the traits that've tripped them up in the past, and where they come from.** By sharing, people see they aren't alone in feeling imperfect, no one is hiding, and you see why people are who they are in a way that makes you compassionate, not resentful. I've had colleagues who've worked together for 30 years learn new things about each other— and suddenly so much made sense. And in some cases, 30-year vendettas vanished overnight."

A big commonality that emerges during this exercise is people's fear of failure or not being smart or competent. "So many of these conversations, everyone's reveal is that they're terrified of failing because of what others will think, and then they realize so many people feel the exact same way. They have a good, healing laugh (and sometimes cry!) about it and decide to experiment with something new together. Now that it's out on the table, they can take risks without worrying what the other person will think, because they realize the other person is just as afraid of failure as they are."

After everyone shares, you've cultivated an extremely rare degree of trust and vulnerability. From this place, there's an opportunity for people to talk about where these stated weaknesses/challenges might have created problems for the team.

This is where the facilitator should refer to the core challenges identified via the survey and pre-meetings. They can either read them out loud (anonymized and generalized), or start with one in particular: "So, I read in the surveys that a lot of people were struggling with burnout and unreasonable expectations," for example. "Perhaps this has to do with how many competitive or Type A folks have identified themselves on the team..." And see where that leads. At this point in the conversation, people feel much more comfortable bringing up or claiming their issues.

As a group, make a list of the key conflicts on the team. Write them down on a piece of butcher paper or a whiteboard so that everyone can see them and they can be dealt with one by one.

Step 4: Trace hurt back to the source.

Most conflicts or disagreements started with small incidents — an unintentional slight, a misunderstanding that was

never cleared up.

The words people say and the actions they take are not always what they mean. Something might have come out wrong months ago, leading a colleague to have a misperception about you. We tend to cling to isolated incidents, and then confirmation bias kicks in, viewing all future interactions through a negative lens.

With each of the main conflicts you identified on your team, go through the exercise of figuring out where they started. Here are some questions to use:

- When did you first notice this problem?

- What happened that led you to feel negatively?

- What conclusion did your draw from that example?

- What other evidence have you seen that supports this conclusion?

Let the person who was negatively impacted speak first. Let them think back to the source. Sometimes they'll only have one example. Other times, they'll be able to describe a pattern of behavior, like interrupting or ingratitude. Regardless, this helps you get to the root of the feeling so it can be dealt with more directly.

> I've seen people still fuming a year after an incident occurred, where they had basically stonewalled the other person, and when they traced it back to that first negative interaction, it was a small miscommunication.

The facilitator needs to be especially active during this part of the conversation. There will be strong impulses for people to talk if they feel like they're being accused wrongly or unfairly — or if they want to comfort the person who is speaking to make them feel better. **It's the facilitator's responsibility to hold the silence for people to find their words even when it's difficult, and to make sure the conversation isn't cut off prematurely.**

"I like to say, 'This is clearly emotional, and that's okay. No need to fix this problem right now, we can just sit with it for a moment,'" Gates says. "Often, if people jump in too soon to soothe someone and make them feel better or try and change the subject to avoid the discomfort, they end up fixing a superficial problem, but not the underlying issue."

Step 5: Rewind and replay.

Once the root of an issue between people has been exposed, the facilitator should rewind back to that incident and have it replayed from the perspective of both sides. The person who was impacted gets to describe how they perceived the situation and the pattern of behavior they observed.

Then the individual or people on the other side of the issue get a chance to talk. Gates suggests the facilitator use this language: **"What was your experience of the situation?"**

"For example, someone spoke about how they were talking about an issue in a meeting that felt like a risk for them, and while they were talking their manager raised his hand mid-sentence and the person felt shut down. From that point on, they felt discounted, like their voice didn't matter, like their opinion wasn't valued by the manager. As a result, they tended to not speak up in meetings and felt they had been humiliated in front of their peers," recalls Gates. "I cannot tell you how many times, when we research back to that originating hurt or slight, the person either has no clue what they did that was so offensive, or they'll say something like, as in this case, 'I wasn't dismissing what you said, I was actually trying to quiet John, who was sitting next to you.' And then John will say, 'Really? I don't even remember that meeting!'"

Not all of these exchanges will be so clear cut, but hardly ever will someone say that they meant ill will or to hurt someone else. In the vast majority of cases, everyone's on the same side and communication was flawed. Also, because

you set the scene with everyone talking about what role their own flaws played and where they might have stemmed from, you diffuse a lot of the tension around digging into issues.

In one rewind and replay, "A woman was able to say to her boss, 'I thought you were kind of a robot, but now I know that your lack of emotion comes from your prior experiences...'" says Gates. "Everyone in the room has gotten to know each other better, and a bit of why they react the way they react. Now, if it ever comes up in the future, the people involved can recall this information and think, 'Oh right, I know why they might be acting this way — one of 10 kids...' or whatever the case may be."

If anyone gets particularly hostile or defensive during this part of the discussion, don't shut them down. Just describe their behavior back to them, says Gates. "I'm noticing you're using critical language," or "It sounds like what I just said upset you more because you raised your voice a bit." More often than not, they won't even realize they sound that way, and are able to express themselves better with that feedback.

Step 6: Finding paths forward.

After reviewing people's varying experiences with each conflict, decide how it could have gone differently. There are probably several alternatives that would have been acceptable. What would both sides have preferred? Write this resolution down to make it memorable: "In future cases where X occurs... Y is the way to communicate better."

"We're all wired to react in certain ways, and rewiring can seem impossible," says Gates. "The best way to do it is to create enough space for yourself between a trigger and your knee-jerk reaction. A situation occurs, and instead of responding right away, you get to choose what you want to do — that's the ideal scenario." This resolution exercise promotes more awareness around triggers and supplies you with other choices to react better in the moment.

This won't work perfectly — people who've always been quick to anger probably will be in the future. But at the very least, this equips everyone on your team with greater understanding of why their colleagues may react the way they do, so they aren't surprised, and it won't set off a chain reaction of conflict and hostility. **Everyone starts to develop new mental models for each other.**

"Recently, I was working with a team where the newest recruit was the problem," says Gates. "She'd come from a competitor and seemed really bullheaded — like she had all the answers and didn't need to ask any questions or learn from her new team. Her new team felt like she wasn't listening to them and didn't respect their point of view. All of this came out in the discussion we had, and by tracing it back to distinct incidents — and then having her replay her experience with her colleagues — it was clear she was feeling a ton of self-imposed pressure to immediately perform and succeed. She worried about being a disappointment, or being fired. She didn't mean to come in guns blazing. Going forward, she listened more, she asked more questions. The team in turn, softened, realizing her behaviors stemmed from fear, they were able to be more welcoming and less reactive."

Another great byproduct of an emotional cleanup: Everyone's reminded of what it takes to be a great listener.

"I've encountered leaders who tell me: 'I'm not a good listener' No. That's not good enough. If you're a leader you won't be successful in the way you want if that's the case," says Gates. "To be a good listener is to be quieter than you're comfortable with. Dwell in the silence, don't fill it. Keep asking questions. Get to the root of the matter. Don't just solve for symptoms or to fix the problem. I feel if people took just took a heartbeat or two more to really hear each other, and listen beyond words — tone and body language — we'd resolve so many more problems."

EMOTIONAL CLEANUP IN EVERYDAY WORK

While one or two--day facilitated retreats are the ideal setting to dive deep into the interpersonal issues and dynamics holding your team back, you shouldn't have to wait for an annual event to resolve conflict. After all, immediate feedback is most resonant. Here's how Gates recommends increasing the cadence of emotional cleanup on the job:

Quarterly Management Retreats

It's vital for leaders across your team or company to get along. Breakdown of those relationships has far more damaging consequences. Once a quarter, take a day as a retreat just for managers. Split it in half, make the first half about emotional cleanup running the exercises above, and the second about strategic planning and the work ahead.

One-on-Ones

Even though weekly one-on-one meetings tend to be shorter and more tactical, you can reserve half the time for emotional cleanup if it's necessary (or perhaps one meeting per month). Managers need to play the proactive role here, accepting that reports may have a hard time surfacing issues for a variety of reasons (see the list of corrosives above).

Do your best to play facilitator outside of these meetings, noticing the tone and body language of your reports around the office and when they're working together. Make note of anything that suggests tension, distrust, or conflict. Bring that up in your one-on-one next time.

Managers should be vulnerable to start these sessions off. Talk about a past conflict that you think might mirror the one your report is experiencing. If you think your report's issue is with you, try to pinpoint what it's about and relay your vulnerable anecdote about why you may behave or act that way. Give them context. Trace issues back to their roots, rewind and replay, and then establish future alternatives.

Most importantly, make it clear to your reports that what they share with you will be received without judgment and won't go any further. Make a distinction between venting and gossiping (venting serves a purpose to release negative energy and seek resolution) and let them vent without changing your opinion of them or anyone they mention. Keep these promises.

If you do all this on a regular basis, you'll keep negative emotions from festering, and nip demoralizing gossip in the bud.

Post-mortems

Add an interpersonal dynamics segment to every project post-mortem as a team health check-in. Make it a habit to talk openly about any negative behavior, infighting, tensions or problems that popped up during the course of the project. Use the emotional cleanup process to figure out where these issues stemmed from and how, in the future, they can be avoided. Document these findings somewhere you'll look before initiating a new project with the same team. "Generally, you want to ask, 'How did we all work together on this? How could it have been better?'" If you do this religiously each time, you get to know and trust each other more, and become increasingly efficient.

Company values

Lastly, if you have a central set of company-wide values or operating principles for your company, use them as an opportunity to condition everyone toward emotional cleanup. Think about Step 2 of the process — establishing that people should be brave enough to be transparent about how they feel and how they'd like to work with others, that you should invest the time to resolve problems between people, that it's okay to bring your whole emotional self to work, and that feedback should fuel continual improvement. How can you bake those beliefs into these core tenets everyone holds dear? It's worth it.

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