



# CHAPTER 11

## HAPPY TEAMS

What does it take to collaborate?

# HAPPY TEAMS



Whether problem-solving centers on business or balance or budgets or bananas, one thing is constant. **Human beings control your destiny.**

## Puzzlers are people.

Under the right conditions, people can achieve the extraordinary. But they are a funny lot. They become high maintenance. They bring baggage. They get PRICKLY. While it's not possible to change human nature, much can be done to cultivate happy teams.

“Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships.”

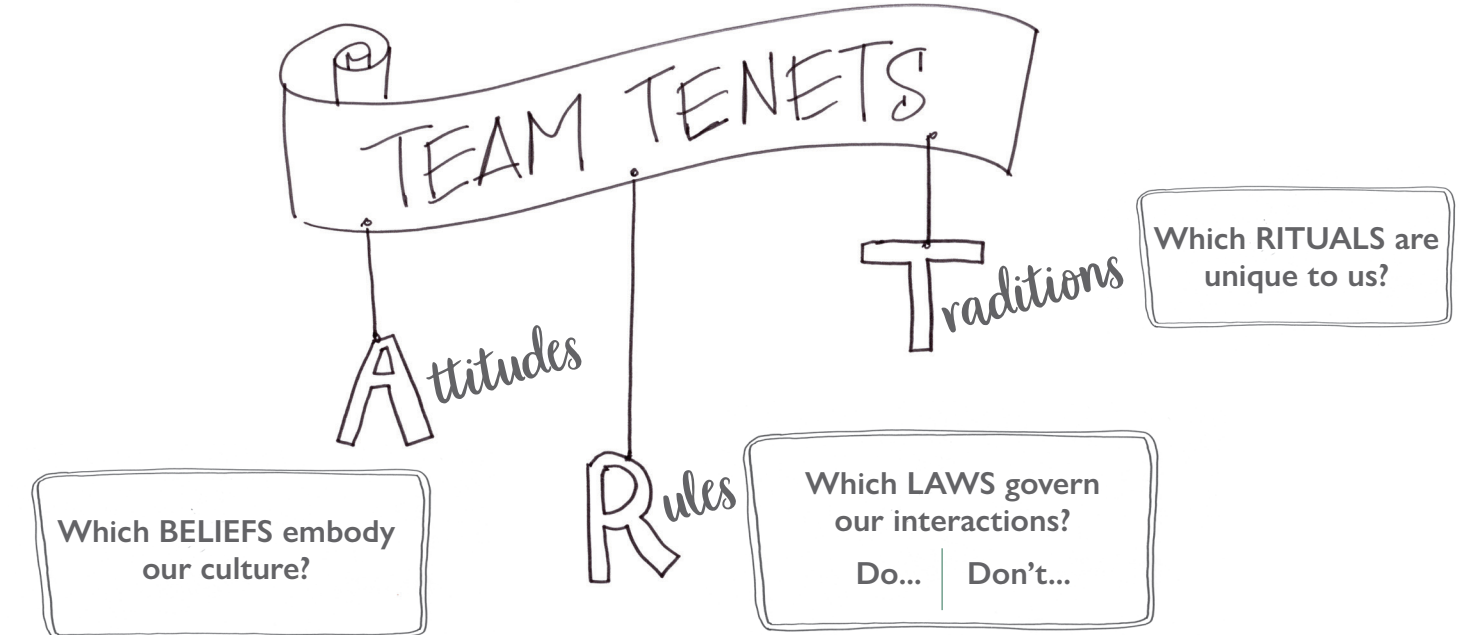
- Michael Jordan, *basketball player*

# TEAM TENETS

Consider two overlapping GAMES: your *puzzle* and your *people*.

*Guidelines* help solve the *Challenge*  
*Tenets* help solve the *Team*

Turning collaboration into ART, strong **TEAM TENETS inspire better problem-solving.** They become indispensable when complications arise (if enforced consistently).



## Attitudes



Tony Hsieh, founder of the online shoe vendor Zappos, believes.



"IF YOU GET THE CULTURE RIGHT, EVERYTHING ELSE WILL FOLLOW NATURALLY."

Zappos's ten FAMILY CORE VALUES include;

1. Deliver WOW through service.
3. Create fun and a little weirdness.
8. Do more with less.

Notice, there is no mention of footwear. More than mere words, they are a way of life.

**Either you shape the culture or the culture shapes you.**

Below are core ATTITUDES for my consulting firm, *The Puzzler Company*.



## PUZZLER TEAM TENETS

1. Almost every problem is **solvable**
2. "WE" is greater than "ME" (and more FUN!)
3. **Dreams first**, then logistics
4. Amplify CURIOSITY and AMBITION
5. Especially today, *yesterday rarely describes tomorrow*
6. Find CLUES where no one else looks
7. Seize opportunity in ROADBLOCKS
8. If at first you don't succeed, **learn something profound**
9. Insist that POSITIVITY rises in parallel with difficulty
10. Consider *turning the puzzle over* and discarding half the piece

## Rules



Where attitudes are aspirational, **rules are tactical**. They describe BEHAVIORS puzzlers should and must observe. Rules come in two flavors: *dos* and *don'ts*. Examples include:

### Do...

- Be punctual
- Be present
- Be participatory
- Be pleasant
- Be positive
- Be proactive
- Be private (keep confidentiality)

### Don't...

- Check tech
- Engage in side conversations
- Interrupt
- Ramble
- Take it personally
- Be prickly
- Hold a grudge

In addition to *meeting protocol*, rules can describe COMMUNICATION ETIQUETTE.

### Do...

- Respond within 24-hours
- Label memos clearly (for easy sorting/findability)
- Make writing readable (concise paragraphs, no jargon, etc.)

### Don't...

- Schedule meetings longer than 90-minutes without break
- Include controversial, thorny issues in email
- Flood in-boxes with unnecessary messaging

## Traditions

**What makes a team feel like a team**, rather than a disunified collection of individuals?

**Distinctive traditions build camaraderie.**

This is why fraternities notoriously devise secret handshakes. Some customs evolve organically, while others stem from intention. The best examples are MEMORABLE and DIFFERENTIATED, offering positive flashbacks even decades down the road.

### Cultural Traditions

are about general conditions of play

#### ATTIRE

Dress-down Friday; hat 'n suspenders; purple pants; polka dot socks; ugly ties.

#### OBJECTS

Smurf-shaped crayons; Bonsai trees; balloon purses, offensive coffee mugs.

#### ACTIONS

Secret handshake; special knock; Secret Santa program.

### Celebratory Traditions

unify the team when something goes right

#### GESTURES

Snaps; silent applause; bird whistles, special salutes.

#### SAYING

Insider phrase (one team celebrates by declaring "Coffee Kapow!")

#### ACTIONS

Group huddles; sing-alongs; fight songs; customized cheers.

#### LOCATION

After big wins, visit a particular diner, bar, beach, tree, or other venue.



## Orchestrating ART

Team Tenets can be established in advance of a GAME or through a facilitated activity. *Post this doctrine visibly.* Incorporate refreshers as needed.

**Be sure everyone agrees upon stated conditions.**

The radiant Hallie Looya has been tasked with leading a bold initiative for Big Company, a large organization renowned for its risk-averse culture.

**CHALLENGE:** Transform how we operate.

Before even pondering solutions, Hallie must compel her team to buy into the notion of CHANGE. Grasping the magnitude of this puzzle, she needs an ally in Team Tenets. Rather than implementing top-down expectations, their initial meeting centers on **collaboratively defining priorities.**



After distributing *Puzzler Company Attitudes* and *Zappos Family Core Values*, Hallie switches on the BLUE lens. “What resonates most?” Positivity emerges, with a light-hearted but productive discussion.

She then turns attention inward. “As you know, we’ve been charged with evolving our model. To *prevent getting stuck*, which **ATTITUDES** should WE consider?” Puzzlers collectively propose twelve ideas. Then it’s time for praise, followed by concerns. Finally, they vote on five sanctioned beliefs.

The team seems pleased with these winners, and Hallie is delighted. If (OK, when) resistance rears its face, these MUTUALLY AGREED UPON beliefs will become indispensable, providing *clarity and guidance*.

**RULES** of engagement require less time. Hallie asks puzzlers to suggest DOs and DON'Ts.

After building both lists, she opens the floor for debate. Nobody chimes in. They adopt what is written

Historically, Big Company’s culture has been fairly sterile. Developing **TRADITIONS** feels unfamiliar. One player pushes back: “Isn’t that gimmicky?” Hallie asks him to trust the process.

She challenges the room to imagine ten possibilities, which become gradually more creative. Ultimately, they endorse a CULTURAL and CELEBRATORY option. Unexpectedly, these customs quickly grow on the team.

**Other employees notice a special bond among these puzzlers.**

Their tenets, transcribed onto a POSTER, are placed prominently every time the group meets.

**Big Company**

Team Tenets

Attitudes

1. Assume anything is possible
2. No sacred cows
3. Hold traditions lightly (rather than maintaining a death grip)
4. Grow!!!
5. Delight in all we do

Rules

DO

- Listen
- Wait before commenting
- Give 100% always
- Keep emotions at bay
- Smile

DON'T

- Judge before understanding
- Fear new things
- Get defensive
- Multitask
- Use tech in meetings

Traditions

CULTURAL

Wear **silicone wristband** with  
“*assume anything is possible*”  
to all meetings

CELEBRATORY

“**Wrist bumps**”  
(touch wristband to your  
teammate’s)

# PRICKLY PERSONALITIES

Human beings are intelligent, kind, clever, creative, collaborative, funny, and fragrant. We are also imperfect, complicated, neurotic, boneheaded, hypersensitive, awkward, and wholly insecure. Explained another way:

People can be **PRICKLY**.

While PRICKLY PERSONALITIES make for great reality TV, they complicate problem-solving. As a result, disproportionate energy must be spent managing relationships.

Address destructive behaviors head on, but realize that complete amelioration is not possible. Learn to accept—even embrace—endearing quirks of your team.

As facilitator, be sure **YOU** aren't the prickly one!

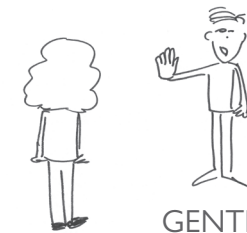


When encountering PRICKLINESS, five approaches exist.



Option 1  
**Ignore**

Sometimes it makes sense to just let things go. Accept imperfections and move forward.



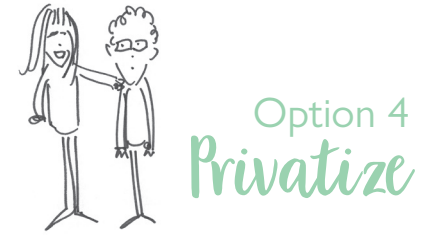
Option 2  
**Confront**

**GENTLY call out the behavior.** However, public shaming rarely helps. The offender might shut down or initiate a private vendetta. Employ with care.



Option 3  
**Systematize**

After diagnosing root causes, prescribe a **REMEDY**. A host of strategies follow.



Option 4  
**Privatize**

Meet **ONE-ON-ONE** to **identify positive, workable solutions.** Begin by *validating and listen empathetically.* Perhaps a legitimate issue flies under your radar.

When appropriate, share concerns non-emotionally. “How can I support you while ensuring team success?”



Option 5  
**Eliminate**

Some individuals are simply incompatible. They fight progress at every turn. The only sensible remedy may be cutting ties. However, consider this a last resort.

- You may not have authority to “fire”
- Even if you do, this act may burn a bridge, hurting more than it helps
- Can have unintended consequences, destroying **SAFE SPACE**

Puzzlers carry three strands of prickliness:



**TECHNIQUE-based**  
*problem-solving skill deficiencies*



**PUZZLE-based**  
*issue-specific fears or biases*

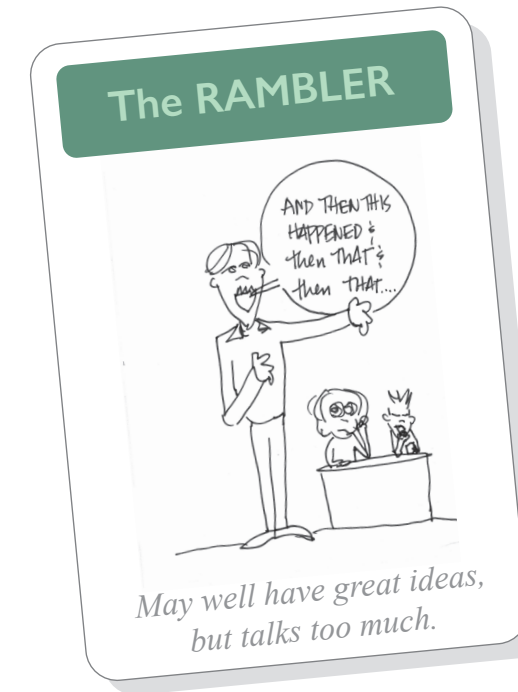


**PERSONALITY-based**  
*individual idiosyncrasies*

The pages that follow inventory common GENUS and SPECIES of prickliness. Each class is paired with an **anecdote** and **corresponding object**. Like Great Gaming Goggles™, *these articles are metaphorical*.

However, you may experience greater success by introducing strategies alongside actual physical items. Doing so is both fun and instructive.

## Genus 1: Verbosis Maximus



story, down in the weeds trivia...OK, anyone else? Once a RAMBLER starts, they hog the mic and kill the flow. Worse yet, **a norm is suggested**, signaling that others should equal or exceed this *excruciating* quotient.

Of course, there are times when deep explanation is necessary, even desirable. But proceed with caution. It's not common you hear, "I wish people talked much, much longer!"

**Long-winded answers are a DEATH KNELL for productivity.**

### Why do people talk too much?

- SOOTHED by their own voice.
- BOGGED DOWN in the weeds.
- Believe more words SOUND SMARTER.
- FOLLOWING SUIT after others gab.
- LACKING SKILLS to reduce ideas to their essence.

Idea.

Idea.

Idea.

Idea with details, talk, talk, talk, talk, explain, explain, explain, YAK, YAK, riff, lecture, *lengthy tangent*, endless

Puzzler Anecdote:

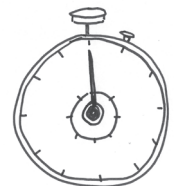

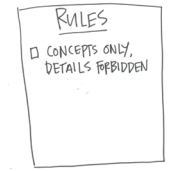
SAND TIMER

Though functional tools, sand timers are just as effective symbolically. Hold it up as a **visual stimulus**, reminding, “We want to hear from you, but quickly get to the essence!” Emphasize that *less is more*: A paragraph beats a page; five words are better than ten; two trumps five.

In fact, why not make it into a game? Offer a CONCISE MESSENGER prize.

Pictures are magnetic when framed with “white space.” This principle translates to communication. People convey so much more when forced to say less!

**BREVITY** can be systematized by setting specific constraints.

Time Limits	Sentence/Word Limits	Rules	Consequences (for getting into weeds)
			

“The most valuable of all talents is never using two words when one will do.”

- Thomas Jefferson, 3rd president of the United States

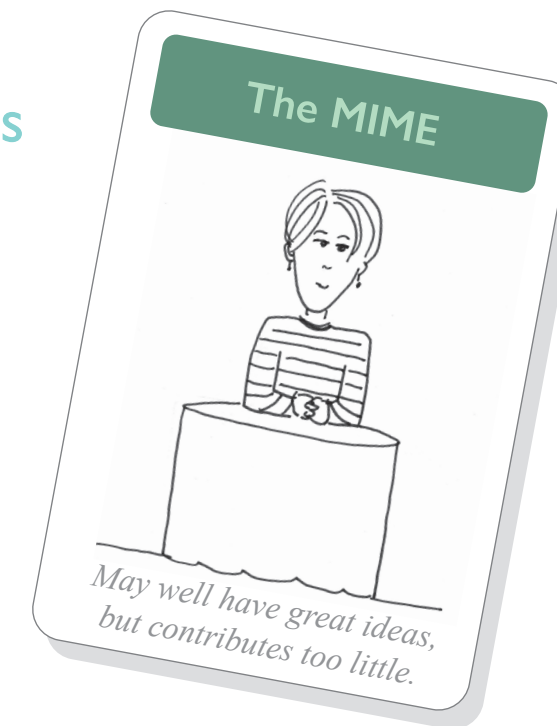


Genus 2: Quantitus Wrongimus



Just about every team experiences **participation inequity**. EVER-READYs have an answer for everything, while MIMES find safety in the shadows.

EXTROVERTS are often rewarded in teams and society. With an eagerness to step up, they are known for enthusiastic participation and dominating conversations.



However, a failure to embrace quieter delegates comes at a cost. At least one-third of the population self-identifies as INTROVERTS. They can be indispensable. *Many have changed history*. Sir Isaac Newton discovered gravity. Rosa Parks refused to stand. Elon Musk explored space. J.K. Rowling brought wizards to life. Abraham Lincoln freed slaves. Dr. Seuss gave us a hatted cat.

Uneven participation isn't just problematic because *those poor quiet folks feel left out*. **Overlooking human potential** comes to the detriment of both puzzle and team.

### Puzzler Anecdote:

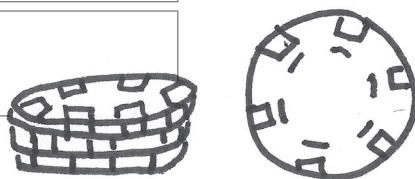
## POKER CHIPS

Each puzzler places three (five, etc.) poker chips in the LEFT POCKET. After each comment, one token is transferred to the RIGHT POCKET. No contributions allowed after all have exited the original pouch. With this tactic, excited extroverts must think twice before jumping in. “Is it really worth spending capital on this?” Conversely, introverts are encouraged to step up and jump in.

*Other small objects are just as effective: marbles, coins, paper clips, pebbles, coupons.*

Additional tactics help ensure all voices are heard.

<b>Careful Management</b> Good facilitators balance discourse: “Who haven’t we heard from?”
<b>Systematized Inclusion</b> Rotate methodically until everyone has contributed.
<b>Pass the Object</b> Pillow, balloon, Rubik’s cube, or other article indicates who has the floor.
<b>Small Groups</b> Equal participation is more likely in chamber settings.
<b>Think-Pair-Share</b> (1) Work individually; (2) Discuss with partner; (3) Offer highlights to full group.
<b>Social Media</b> Digital platforms can collect messages in real time.

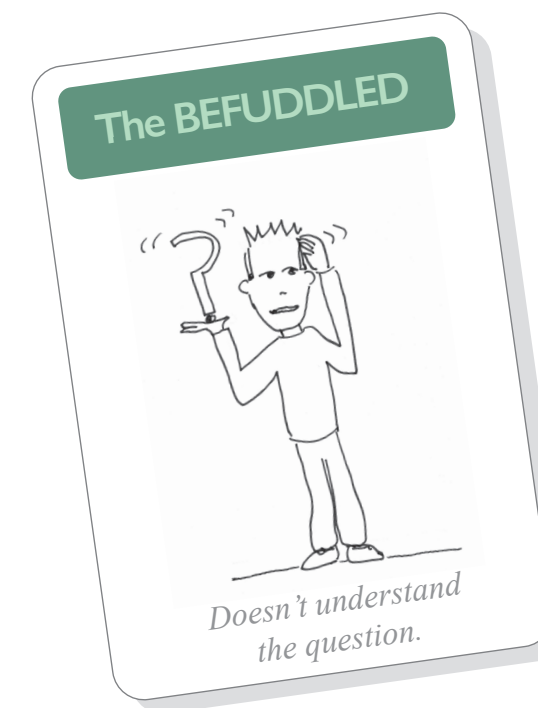


## Genus 3: Outa Focusus



DIVERTERS stall progress, **suggesting solutions**—even great ones—to the **WRONG problem**. Or at least an issue that isn’t currently under consideration.

Unskilled facilitators fall into the trap of chasing these beasts, investigating merits and demerits with an open mind. Jolting conversation off track, this tangent continues until another fascinating but peripherally related notion emerges. The cycle continues...



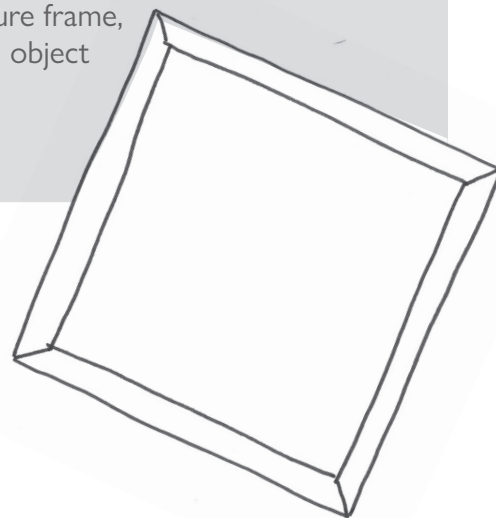
The BEFUDDLED are confused. **They don’t grasp what is expected**, whether from unclear facilitation or momentary zoning. Rather than requesting clarification, they jump in and flail. The result falls on a spectrum between unfocused discourse and full-blown chaos.

Beware of puzzlers on the back of a frog, *leaping nonlinearly* from idea to idea.

### Puzzler Anecdote:

## PICTURE FRAME

When conversations veer off topic or exhibit confusion, take a TIME OUT to regroup. Holding a picture frame, clearly **reframe the prompt**. This physical object emphasizes the need to focus.



Facilitators are tasked with delivering **crystal clear instructions**. At all times, puzzlers should understand the activity, lens, response time, and other pertinent PLANS (see page 128).

But things don't always click. The larger the group, the more likely somebody misses a point. When folks climb the wrong tree, you have four options:

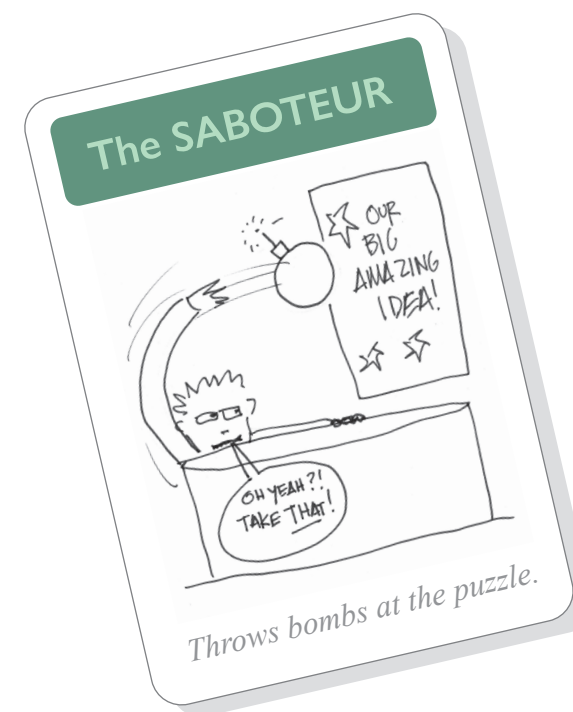
1. CUT OFF speaker and restate the frame
2. ALLOW the comments, then refocus
3. FOLLOW the detour to see where it leads
4. BACK POCKET intriguing, off-topic concepts for future consideration

When activities go awry, the best option is usually to freeze action and back up. Using *simple, unambiguous language*, rearticulate expectations. Or ask a puzzler to step in and explain in their own words.

Also keep in mind that most people are VISUAL LEARNERS. Reinforce instructions with projected slides and/or printed **worksheets**.

**Extra minutes for CLARITY trump wasted time in mayhem.**

## Genus 4: Ginormous Buzzkillus



A colleague in direct opposition to the team/GAME is particularly challenging. **Multiple cynics reinforce one another**. Their negative power can dominate even if representing just a fraction of voices. Unfortunately, this is all too common, particularly during change initiatives.

SABOTEURS are committed to **tanking the GAME**. Engaged and loud, they are first to arrive, leaving no chance that forward motion occurs without



vehement opposition. Prone to *negative language* and a bleak outlook, Saboteurs hurl explosives on multiple fronts. They exhibit defensiveness, bullying, even character assassination. When asked to BLUE lens, they simply can't imagine the positive, reverting instead to RED.

### FEAR motivates saboteurs.

Fear their role will diminish, or require new focus, or become irrelevant. Fear of failure, losing control, evolution, uncertainty, the unknown. There may even be a *fear of success*. Whatever the root cause, Saboteurs are determined not to become accomplices to change.

APATHETICS, on the other hand, *couldn't care less*. Checked out and unimpressed, their prime disappointment is wasting time on your GAME. **Be careful not to diagnose Apathetics as Mimes**. Though symptoms are similar, root causes are poles apart.

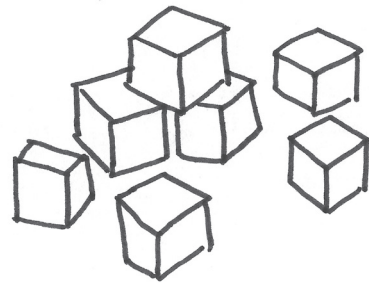
Puzzler Anecdote:  
**SUGAR CUBE**

Turning things around requires a MUTUALLY RESONATING ELEMENT. “Is there any intersection between project goals and your interests? Though we cannot change GAME Guidelines or Team Tenets, is there some sugar cube perk that might motivate positive engagement? *What will it take to bring you on board?*”

Publicly calling out disbelievers accomplishes little more than exacerbation, triggering defensiveness or withdrawal. Instead, schedule a ONE-ON-ONE meeting.

**Begin by taking the pulse.** “In your opinion, what is and isn’t going well?” Resist the urge to comment. Instead, listen empathetically. **Seek root causes** of the resistance/passivity. Validate by signaling, “I’m listening and hear your concerns.”

After providing ample opportunity for the detractor to comment, calmly share some tough love.



“We are charged with solving this puzzle for this reason. Yet it feels our team is working at cross-purposes. *Though we can’t jeopardize the mission*, I sincerely value you. Considering the hand we’ve been dealt, let’s explore WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS. I may not be able to implement all—even any—of your proposals, but promise to give them full consideration.”

Notice a few things about this exchange:

- It begins with listening.
- Dissent is welcome. (Allowing concerns to be expressed may be enough to diffuse tension.)
- The word YOU is never used accusingly, as in “you did this...”
- Though the puzzle itself cannot be compromised, we want you here.
- The prickly partner is invited to suggest solutions, though authority remains with the leader.

## Genus 5: Egotisticus Majora



SELF-PROCLAIMED PRODIGIES genuinely believe they are **experts on every topic**. As indispensable superheroes, the entire effort would surely flop without them. Being the smartest in the room, they rarely concede points or are willing to compromise. Great clairvoyance makes such settlements unnecessary. Words often carry a *whiff of condescension*.



PRIMA DONNAS talk as if they are the **center of the universe**, regardless of project, problem, or conversation. Pushing back against anything that diminishes their gravity, they rarely build on ideas of others. Self-impressed insights include MY idea, MY theory, MY experience, MY education, MY hope. Some *narcissists* look aggressively down upon colleagues. Others simply don’t notice anyone else.



BAGGAGE HANDLERS **previously addressed this problem**. As a result, reimagination is met with resistance, even when pivoting feels beneficial to everyone else. Regularly citing the past solution, they are convinced of its divinity. Unless—of course—previous efforts landed in stalemate, in which case *failure feels imminent*. Acute with folks who *generated the idea*, concepts near and dear to the heart commonly trigger **“Founder’s Syndrome.”**

Puzzler Anecdote:

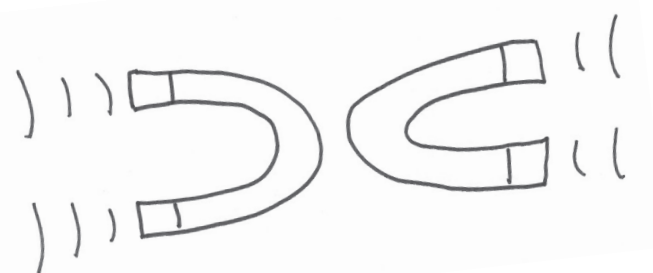
MAGNET

Magnets have two distinct sides: a NORTH POLE that attracts energy and a SOUTH POLE that repels it. To cultivate team cohesion, **require that polarity draws energy from the room** rather than the speaker. A statement might begin, “Building on Marty’s idea...” While this tool won’t transform deep personality flaws, it does systematize the celebration of teammates.

Egocentric tendencies grow in some people for a variety of reasons: childhood neglect, personal insecurity, fragile self-esteem, genetic imbalance, years of playing the big fish in a tiny pond. It is unrealistic to believe that simple puzzling measures will override a lifetime of programming. That requires psychotherapy.

However, consistent RULES and actively managed ACTIVITIES can help. For example:

- **WE over ME.** First person words like “me,” “my,” and “I” are banned
- **Getting BUZZ-ted.** Facilitator hits a buzzer when self-references or past experiences are cited, reinforcing WE over ME in a light-hearted, game-like manner (rather than punitively).
- **Pass it on.** Puzzlers may ONLY share ideas emanating from others—who they name out loud.



- **Role play.** Puzzlers take on roles of relevant “characters,” rather than responding as themselves.
- **Delegation.** Assign afflicted puzzlers to duties like scribing, timing, etc. (less likely to disrupt).

Above all, emphasize we’re all in this together!

Success belongs to the TEAM.

# CHAMPION COLLABORATION



## Conditions



Everyone gets prickly from time to time. Being able to spot, diagnose, and treat symptoms goes a long way. But mitigating these quirks is not enough.

Truly happy teams require something else.

In the theatre world, bad lighting ruins everything. Great illumination, on the other hand, goes unnoticed. Similar principles apply to puzzling. You’re on the right track if participants barely mention logistics beyond occasional WELL-OILED MACHINE references. **Luxury isn’t necessary.** Just offer comfort and eliminate annoyances

<b>Distractions</b> disruptions minimized	<b>Preparation</b> thoughtful agenda set in advance	<b>Scheduling</b> ample time for work, engagement, & breaks	<b>Seating</b> comfortable chairs
<b>Sight</b> easily visible presenters, projections, etc.	<b>Snacks</b> appropriate refreshments and drinks	<b>Sound</b> speaking/playback clearly audible	<b>Space</b> enough room to comfortably maneuver
<b>Supplies</b> materials readily available	<b>Technology</b> projections/tech work smoothly	<b>Temperature</b> not too hot or cold	<b>Vibe</b> calm atmosphere

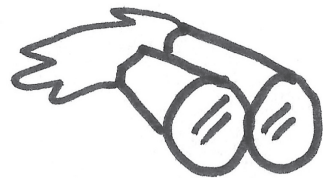


## Clarity

**Problem-solving is hard.**

### Make comprehension a breeze.

The experience must be carefully planned and orchestrated. Puzzlers should struggle with solutions, not purpose; assignments, not instructions; fulfilling responsibilities, not guessing who does what. Facilitators should be trained, comfortable with the process, and able to articulate directives with eloquence.



## Culture



Well-designed GAMES are seductive. Their magnetism attracts contributors IF the culture is right. High-level commitment is most likely when puzzlers feel:

### Authorized

Bestowed with permission and power to offer consequential input.

### Autonomous

Able to contribute without fear of micro-management.

### Accountable

Held to task for achieving results.

### Appreciated

Valued, listened to, never taken for granted.

### Ambitious

Challenging (but solvable) puzzles generate more excitement than superficial, simple ones.



## Consensus

Differences of opinion are sure to arise. Occasional friction and wrangling-before-compromise become experiential hallmarks. Such spirited debate isn't merely permissible. *It's healthy.*

But ultimately, puzzlers may need to compromise, willingly sacrificing personal preference in the name of the greater good. **Imperfect solutions are better than logjams.**

In the end, happy teams come together.

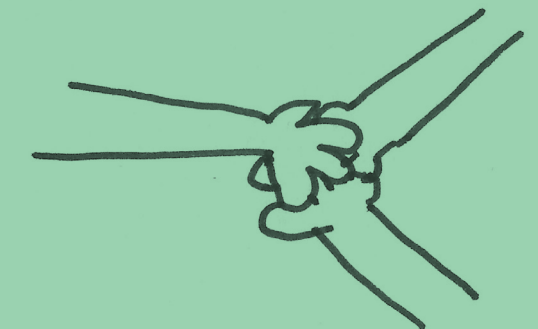


## Completion

How many individuals, teams, and organizations maintain an ever-expanding collection of **incomplete projects**? Quick to dive into any puzzle pool that whets (wets?) the appetite, each effort begins with a splash. Over time, however, commitment diminishes. Bored or distracted, they move to that next big thing—before reaching the other side.

Exploration, experimentation, and cherishing the journey can be their own reward. However,

To win big, you must deliver, ship, score, reach “the end.”



# ■ HAPPY TEAM

doesn't mean  
*conflict free.*



It does require respect,  
common purpose, and  
crossing a finish line...  
*...together*