

# Help! My Teammates are Driving me Crazy!

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## INTRODUCTION

We are often faced with working with others who challenge our ability to get things done. Understanding and working with people whose behavior puzzles and frustrates us can be a daunting task — but it's not an insurmountable one.

In this article, I'll discuss a model of human behavior that helps explain what might be behind some of the most difficult behaviors we encounter. I'll also show you what you can do in a team setting to build productive relationships, provide candid feedback, and coach those whose behaviors challenge you.

## THREE BASIC NEEDS THAT DRIVE BEHAVIOR

Will Schutz developed The Human Element Model<sup>1</sup> in an attempt to synthesize several prominent theories of human behavior. According to Schutz, people have three distinct needs that build on each other over time. First, people need **inclusion**. They need to feel a sense of belonging and uniqueness. Secondly, people need to feel in **control**; a way to compare themselves to others and to feel some power or influence over their environment. Lastly, people want **openness**. They want to be able to confide in others and trust the people with whom they work; and they want others to confide in them and to trust them. Openness is ultimately about the intimacy we want with others, versus the degree to which we want our relationships to remain impersonal.

When one of these basic needs goes unmet, certain predictable behaviors emerge. If I don't feel included, or predict that I won't be included in the way I want, I might withdraw to protect myself. Alternatively, I might force people to pay attention to me through being excessively social. If my control needs are at risk, I might hold back to avoid making a mistake or seeming incompetent, or I might dominate to assert my power. If I'm worried about how much openness feels safe, I might avoid revealing too much about myself to protect myself from being rejected. Or, I might share everything and expect others to share everything, too, because I'm driven by the need to be liked. In the language of Schutz's Human Element Model, the behaviors we often describe as "difficult" or "challenging," he describes as "defensive." He uses the term defensive to highlight the core issue: we're defending ourselves from the pain of not getting something we need (i.e. inclusion, control or openness).

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<sup>1</sup> Schutz, Will, *The Human Element: Productivity, Self-Esteem, and the Bottom Line*, John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd.; 1995.

## PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Things get complicated when we, ourselves, have unmet needs and we find ourselves trying to develop a productive working relationship with team members who also have unmet needs. Before we look at strategies for working with others whose behaviors challenge us, let's pause for some reflection – as in a mirror.

Team members who blame others, team members who are critical and judgmental, team members who need constant reinforcement, team members who take on all the responsibility for anything that goes wrong, team members who withdraw and won't tell you what they really think, or worse, team members who dominate every discussion – Who are these people, anyway?

Generally, the exasperating behaviors demonstrated by others seem much more reasonable when *we* demonstrate them. I know that when I criticize or blame, I have a good reason for it; I'm angry or feel threatened. When I dominate a discussion, it might be because I perceive inequities and I'm duty-bound to level the playing field. We're ingenious at making our choices and behaviors seem reasonable. We're equally dumfounded by experiencing the same behaviors in others. Developing some self-awareness about our own defensive behaviors will do two things: we'll develop empathy when we see the behavior in others and we'll have experience in analyzing the link between thought and behavior.

## PLAYING DEFENSE

When we encounter a potentially threatening situation, we begin having thoughts and feelings that show up to help us cope with the threat. If the defensive thoughts and feelings go unchecked by a conscious decision to get more data, we demonstrate a familiar pattern of defensive behavior. Because we've already interpreted the situation as threatening, we inevitably will interpret the consequences of our behaviors as justification for our thoughts; that is, we interpret the world through the filter of our beliefs. When we get the outcome we expect, our thoughts and feeling get reinforced — and, while we may not get our needs met, we settle for not getting hurt. See the example in Figure I.

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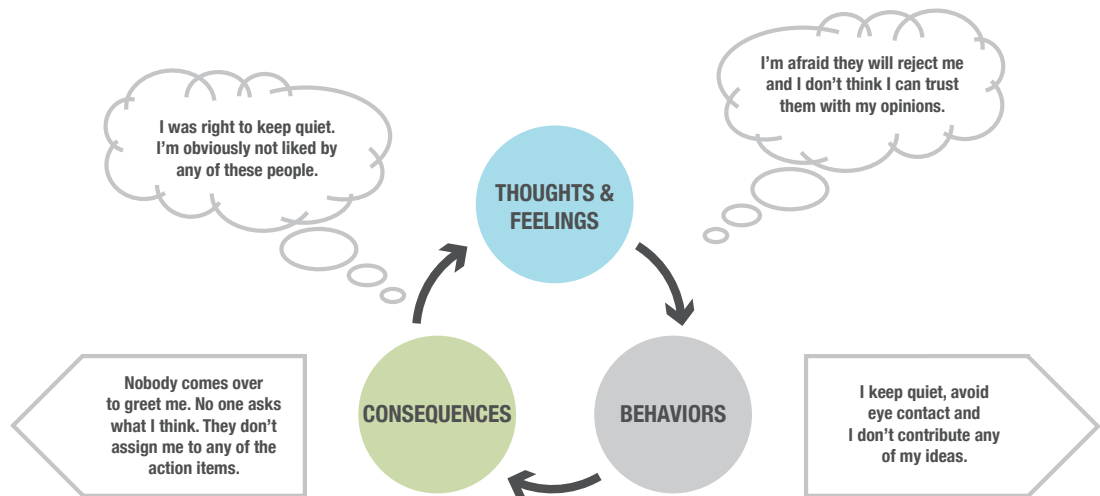


Figure 1.

The only way to break the cycle is to **adopt a different behavior** in spite of the potential threat. In the example above, the individual described may still feel apprehensive, but may choose to express ideas, greet strangers, or act engaged by asking questions. If others encourage these behaviors, the individual will experience different consequences and may revise his or her assessment of the threat because inclusion needs are being met. For self development we can reflect on situations, perhaps with a trusted colleague, in order to understand how certain thoughts and feelings led to certain behaviors that produced consequences that ultimately reinforced our thoughts and feelings.

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### BEYOND DEFENSIVENESS: CREATING A VIRTUOUS CYCLE

While we're working on ourselves, we can also adopt strategies to help our teammates risk a behavior that will lead to a more productive outcome. When a teammate makes a different choice in response to a threatening situation, he or she turns the vicious cycle (that reinforces defensiveness) into a virtuous cycle (that meets needs).

Helping a teammate adopt a productive and developmental behavior requires an assessment of the teammate's motivation to change and his or her level of self-awareness. The matrix below looks at the intersection of motivation and self-awareness and suggests a strategy any teammate can adopt to increase the odds of an individual choosing a productive behavior over a defensive behavior.



Figure II.

Let's look at how the quadrants in Figure II help us identify which course to take to defuse defensive behaviors.

#### Low Self-Awareness and Low Motivation to Change (Quadrant 1)

These individuals have developed a deeply ingrained pattern of behavior that may have served a purpose at one time, and now shows up as an unconscious reaction to certain situations. The individuals may be unwilling and/or unable to change, even when teammates provide candid feedback about the behavior and its impact. The most efficient approach to managing the behavior is for the team to establish ground rules visibly posted during team meetings that will help the team redirect interactions when they get sidelined. For example: *We agree to give everyone an opportunity to express their opinion before we reach a decision and we'll only reach a decision when everyone agrees that his or her individual opinion has been heard and understood by the team.* A ground rule about team decisions will diminish the impact of a domineering team member who pushes the team to premature conclusions based on a personal agenda.

### Low Self-Awareness and High Motivation to Change (Quadrant 2)

These individuals may lack the emotional maturity to realize which of their behaviors create a barrier to team productivity. They're interested in their own development, but lack the self-awareness to prioritize among developmental options; *should I improve my communication skills or should I learn how to manage projects?* Team members who can describe behaviors when providing feedback will be able to get the message across better than those who may refer indirectly to perceptions and judgments about the behavior. Here are examples of effective **feedback about behavior**. In the Table 1 examples, you'll see the feedback also addresses the root cause of the behavior based on the Human Element Model.

Table I.

Category	What the team experiences	Feedback in Private
UNMET INCLUSION NEEDS	Team member disengages during team discussions. Avoids offering ideas. Never volunteers for team tasks.	<i>We haven't heard your thoughts on this topic and we want to make sure that our conclusions reflect a team consensus. Your perspective is unique and important. What could we do to ensure the team gets the benefit of your thinking?</i>
UNMET CONTROL NEEDS	Team member overreacts to perceived criticism and frequently blames others when things go wrong.	<i>During our last staff meeting, you said to Frank "I'm not an idiot, you know" when he asked you if you had any questions about his presentation. As a result, the room went silent and no one asked any questions. I'm wondering what was going on for you at that point in the meeting? How do you think Frank and the others felt after you made your comment?</i>
UNMET OPENNESS NEEDS	The individual avoids social gatherings and seems impatient when the team engages in relationship building discussion or activities.	<i>When Denise suggested we do a "check in" at the beginning of the meeting, I noticed that you rolled your eyes and crossed your arms. Everyone talked about what they had done over the holiday weekend, but when we got to you, you said, "we didn't do much" and left it at that. I'd like to get to know more about you, but it seems like some of our team activities get on your nerves. How do you see it?</i>

### High Self-Awareness and Low Motivation to Change (Quadrant 3)

These individuals understand the impact of their behaviors and may have been given feedback in the past. They recognize the link between problematic situations and the behaviors they adopt to cope with them. The strategy here is to be clear about the behavior, and then focus on the impact or consequences of the behavior with an eye towards increasing motivation to change. We'll use the examples from Table 1, but notice the private feedback has changed.

Table II.

Category	What the team experiences	Feedback in Private
UNMET INCLUSION NEEDS	Team member disengages during team discussions. Avoids offering ideas. Never volunteers for team tasks.	<i>We haven't heard a lot from you and I want to make sure you feel included. I'm worried that over time you'll get into a pattern of listening and observing and the team will eventually stop asking for your thoughts and simply proceed on the assumption that you don't want to be included in discussions. Before we reach that point, I want to check with you about what you've been thinking about and figure out with you how the team can benefit from your perspective.</i>
UNMET CONTROL NEEDS	Team member overreacts to perceived criticism and frequently blames others when things go wrong.	<i>After your response to Frank when he asked if you had any questions, the room got quiet. My perception is that you felt insulted by Frank's question; were you? I believe that the other team members wanted to avoid escalating any conflict and that's why they didn't say anything. I'm concerned that people will start working around you rather than risk the kind of response Frank received today and in the end, you won't have the influence I think you want when it comes to team decisions.</i>
UNMET OPENNESS NEEDS	The individual avoids social gatherings and seems impatient when the team engages in relationship building discussion or activities.	<i>I noticed your reaction to Denise's suggestion about doing a team "check in." When we got to you and you said, "we didn't do much," I was left feeling frustrated that we didn't hear more about your life outside of work and I wondered whether or not you trust the team with personal information. I'm worried that over time, the team will begin to wonder more about what you're not telling us than what you are telling us.</i>

#### **High Self-Awareness and High Motivation to Change (Quadrant 4)**

These individuals want to develop more collaborative behaviors and understand that they've adopted some counterproductive habits. People who want to improve and have the ability to be self-reflective about their own behaviors simply need a useful thought framework and trusted colleague to provide coaching and encouragement. The key strategy here is to build an agreement that you will point out examples of an unproductive behavior and talk through what might be behind it.

#### **IN CONCLUSION**

Working on teams will be a reality for most of us throughout our lives. I've been a member of productive and successful teams, and I've coached and consulted with many productive and successful teams. In both cases, the highest performing teams have always been the ones that chose to explore the behaviors creating interpersonal tensions, rather than avoiding or working around them. Three of the keys to sustained high performance are self-awareness, self-reflection, and constructive feedback.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jay Cone has spent the past 25 years helping leaders and teams collaborate productively. His current consulting practice focuses on senior team facilitation, strategic thinking, leadership development, and innovation. Jay serves on the faculty of the Executive MBA program at The University of Texas at Dallas, where he teaches innovation and collaboration. His articles on leadership development have appeared in *Training Magazine*, *The Training & Development Journal* and The American Society for Training and Development's Best of Customer Service Training. Jay received a BA in Philosophy from U.C.L.A. and an MBA from the University of Texas at Dallas. He is certified in Management Research Group's Strategic Leadership Development Process, The Center for Creative Learning's VIEW™ assessment of creative problem solving styles and is CAPT qualified to administer Myers-Briggs assessments.

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