

# **Fixing a Self-Sabotaging Team**

by N. Anand and Jean-Louis Barsoux

From the Magazine (March–April 2023)



Joshua Scott

**Summary.** Teams under pressure often fall back on dysfunctional coping mechanisms that are deeply rooted in human evolutionary psychology. The group works like a pack, instinctively looking for ways to alleviate its members' collective anxiety. It might unconsciously... [more](#)

**The CEO of a European** city's public transit authority recently called us in to coach the organization's new head of HR. Having joined the executive committee six months earlier, Jocelyn (not her real name) was having difficulty integrating with the team.

According to the CEO, her attitude was holding back its efforts to develop a strategy for meeting the city's growing transportation needs in a more sustainable way.

In speaking with Jocelyn's subordinates, colleagues, and boss and with external stakeholders, we were struck by the contrast between her peers' views of her as withdrawn and uncollaborative and her subordinates' impressions of her as professional and supportive. And it became clear that the team's struggle to come up with a coherent strategy predated Jocelyn's arrival. Our interviews revealed a major tension: The team was torn between increasing the transit infrastructure for less-connected parts of the city and making the system greener; it lacked the funds to do both.

We'd been called in to fix a person, but it was the team that needed help. Overwhelmed by its strategic challenge, it had become stuck in a pattern of infighting. To escape anxiety and self-examination, its members were unconsciously deflecting blame onto a convenient scapegoat: the newcomer, Jocelyn.

In our work with teams, we regularly encounter such dynamics beneath the surface. Teams under pressure often regress to unhealthy coping mechanisms that are deeply rooted in human evolutionary psychology. The group acts like a pack, instinctively looking for ways to alleviate its members' collective anxiety. It might unconsciously ascribe unwanted roles to one or more members in the hope of containing that anxiety, or it might lapse into other skewed behaviors in an effort to keep it at bay.

In what follows we'll discuss how to recognize, understand, and overcome such self-sabotaging dynamics. But first we'll explore the psychology behind them.

### **The Team as a Pack**

Any pack's deepest concern is for its own survival, and work teams are no exception. In times of heightened stress, allaying that concern may override all else. When its collective anxiety becomes intolerable, the team must do something to counter it. But rather than address the situation rationally, it often attributes the source of its troubles to one person, as the executive committee did with Jocelyn. Unconsciously, her team members thought, *Someone must be responsible for our paralysis*. This off-loading process is the group equivalent of splitting and projection, observed by the child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein in individual psychology: disowning disliked or uncomfortable aspects of the self and assigning them to another. Think of how one parent may become the family disciplinarian because the other parent consistently hangs back.

Other beneath-the-surface roles we have observed include enforcer, caretaker, clown, dreamer, rebel, follower, and bystander. Some people are predisposed to take on certain roles because of early experiences in life, such as family interactions. But teams often foist roles upon people on the basis of perceived personality or demographic characteristics—especially age, gender, and ethnicity.

**Any pack's deepest concern is for its own survival, and work teams are no exception. In times of heightened stress, allaying that concern may override all else.**

Once a role has been assigned and seemingly accepted, the team feels relief. That can help it move forward in the short term. But locking someone into a dysfunctional role sabotages group dynamics in the long run and puts tremendous pressure on the person chosen to absorb or otherwise handle the group's anxiety. When we explained these dynamics to one group we worked with, a participant called out her teammates for making her the enforcer during an intense project with multiple deliverables and deadlines. "Some members projected their competent parts onto me," she told us. "It allowed them to shirk responsibility. I became the quality controller for the group, exhausting myself to keep track of things." In time, she said, she also became a scapegoat. Confronted with these insights, the other members agreed with her analysis and worked to repair the dynamics.

### **Four Pathological Patterns**

All teams' discussions occasionally stray from the group's central task. But such digressions are usually just temporary escapes. The problems start when a team spends more time in avoidance mode than on actual work. They become pathological when it gets stuck in that dynamic.

The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion first noticed groups' extreme patterns of evasion and denial while working with shell-shocked soldiers returning to Britain from the Second World War. He observed that although such coping mechanisms reduce anxiety, they prevent real work from getting done. In other words, a team's natural defenses start to sabotage its mission.

Our own diagnostic work with top teams corroborates Bion's findings about the patterns into which overstressed teams fall. Here are the four most common ones.

**The sole savior.** When a team is anxious about the future or is looking for direction or protection, it may surrender its autonomy to a savior—unconsciously replicating dependency relationships from childhood.

Strong dependency can be helpful for alignment and responsiveness in a crisis. But when casting someone in the role of savior, other members abandon their own initiative. That's risky for the team: Now it's essentially firing on one cylinder. And it creates a set-up-to-fail scenario for the savior, who will probably have trouble containing the group's stresses and meeting its overblown expectations.

We encountered that dynamic in another coaching intervention. A Dutch health care executive in her midthirties, whom we'll call Simone, was complaining of exhaustion. She had unexpectedly been called on to head the pharmacy chain founded four decades earlier by her mother. As we discussed the concepts of unconscious team dynamics, she was struck by the notion of projection. Thinking about how groups instinctively force unwanted roles onto one or more members gave her insight into a frustration she was experiencing with her team.

As CEO, Simone's mother had been a combination of comforter, micromanager, and protector. Although Simone was a more empowering and decentralized leader, she sensed that the team she had inherited was unconsciously demanding that she adopt her mother's style. Worse, she realized that she had started to do so, getting minutely involved in handling the team's concerns, decisions, and conflicts. Members were happy to abdicate their initiative, authority, and voice if that would reduce the collective anxiety sparked by the abrupt change in leadership.

---



Joshua Scott

Once she realized the dynamics at play, including her own acceptance of the role that had been thrust upon her, Simone initiated a series of conversations with her team. “I am not my mother,” she emphasized. “I have a more hands-off style, and I can’t play the mother hen. You need to deal with me as I am. We must learn to work together differently.” She subsequently told us, “Without the insight about role taking, I’m 100% sure I would have ended up in burnout. It’s so draining to do something that’s not you.”

Now consider the case of Bill Michael. Elected as senior partner and chair of KPMG UK in March 2017, he was expected to reverse the organization's underperformance while changing its "alpha" culture. The partners, 81% of whom were men, were seeking someone to rescue them from their looming diversity crisis. "Bill was voted in as a wartime leader," one partner told the *Financial Times*, "because of what we all knew would be a big battle to turn things around."

"My priority will be to drive an inclusive culture...and champion greater diversity," Michael told a reporter at *Accountancy Age*. He actively engaged with staff members, traveled widely to hold town hall meetings across all levels, geographies, and disciplines, and chaired the firm's diversity and inclusion board. In 2019 the company achieved gender equality at the board level. That year its leadership introduced training in psychological safety and unconscious bias, but an independent review found that those measures didn't yield the expected improvements: In fact, they coincided with 99 whistleblower complaints about ethical violations and misconduct, three of which involved top executives.

Then, in early 2021, a leaked video of a virtual Q&A session showed Michael describing unconscious bias as "complete and utter crap." "There is no such thing as unconscious bias; I don't buy it," he said. "Because after every single unconscious-bias training that has ever been done, nothing's ever improved." He added a caveat about the importance of motivation in combating the problem: "So unless you care, you actually won't change." Michael immediately recognized the inappropriateness of his remarks and apologized. But a snippet of the video—selectively edited to diminish his remark about the role of caring—went viral. Amid the ensuing public outcry, he was forced to resign.

## **Is Your Team Stuck in a Destructive Pattern of Behavior?**

Certain clues can help you assess whether the group has adopted a dysfunctional model—and if so, which one. Here are some questions to consider and the probable patterns suggested by your answers.



What possessed Michael, a self-professed champion of diversity, to make those reactionary remarks? One explanation is that the moment of stress revealed the person behind the mask. But we believe something deeper was playing out. For months Michael had been absorbing the profound anxiety of many firm members that shifting to a more-inclusive culture would hurt performance. On one hand, he had to drive productivity; on the other, he had a mandate to instill a more representative culture, which meant adding diverse partners who might be less experienced than the firm's established rainmakers. We'd argue that having become essentially the sole owner of the problem, Michael reached a point where the forces of change and resistance clashing inside him could no longer be contained. Those pressures took over, growing more powerful than his own sense of agency. So he blurted out the partners' suppressed concerns in something like a group-level Freudian slip.



The emotional climate in a sole-savior team is marked by helplessness and insecurity. Members wait to see how the savior reacts rather than work on creating solutions themselves. A telltale sign of this problem is a hub-and-spoke pattern of communication: Everything passes through the leader, with only superficial interactions among the other members.

If unchecked, saviors may come to overestimate their capabilities, developing a sense of entitlement and invulnerability that leads them to overstep boundaries and may result in their expulsion. What appears to be self-sabotage may actually be the product of a sole-savior configuration.

**The dynamic duo.** A related form of dependency occurs when two people are cast as saviors. The chief risk here is that the pair will get carried away with their power, increasingly losing touch with reality.

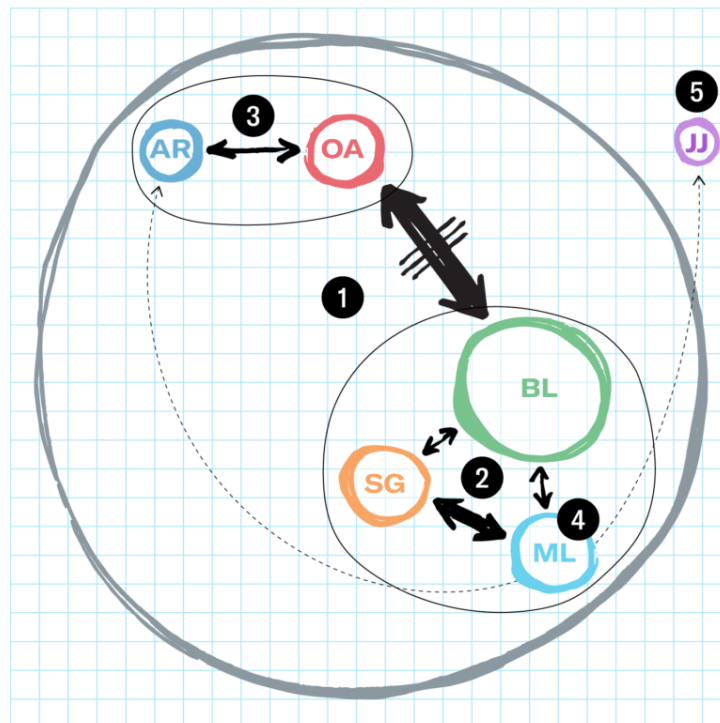
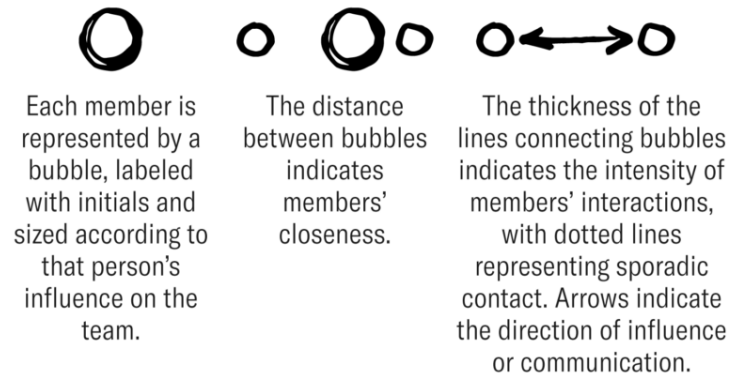
That was the case in a tech start-up we studied. It was founded by an industrial-engineering graduate who came up with a digital logistics solution and decided, with the support of four other recent graduates, to develop it through a local accelerator program.

Although it initially had little trouble attracting interest from investors, the team was anxious about selling its solution to established companies. The founder (by now the CEO) brought in an experienced business-development executive as COO. She was able, with some difficulty, to sell the solution as a pilot project to her former employer. In the wake of that success, the team looked to the pair to sign other large clients. Some members had misgivings, thinking it might be smarter to license the technology to existing logistics players, but they did not air their concerns.

---

## Visualizing Team Dynamics

The drawing below, created by one member of a European transit authority that was struggling to agree on a strategy, captures the relationships and tensions within the organization's top team.



- 1 **BL** (the CEO) and **OA** have a conflict-ridden relationship, represented by the crosshatches on the line connecting them.
- 2 **ML** and **SG** have a close relationship and support **BL** (whose goal is to expand the number of passengers served).
- 3 **OA** and **AR** form an opposing coalition (they want the system to become greener).
- 4 **ML** acts as a messenger to **AR** and **JJ**.
- 5 **JJ**, who became a scapegoat for the team's inertia, is isolated on the fringes of the group.

The CEO and the COO quickly formed a powerful relationship that drove the firm's strategic direction. They grew less and less receptive to input. In their codependence and isolation, they created a mini echo chamber.

Their strategy proved to be expensive and slow, because it meant converting clients one by one. But they persisted with it, becoming stuck in a *folie à deux* that prevented them from facing reality. "They imagined that our little start-up could become a dominant player in the industry," one team member told us. And as the two spun their wheels, established logistics specialists developed comparable solutions. Raising more capital on flat growth proved almost impossible for the start-up. By the time it had pivoted to a new strategy, it lacked the funds to execute it. Four years after launch, the once-promising enterprise folded.

**Fight mode.** Anxious teams sometimes pursue the opposite of dependency, developing unrealistic expectations of autonomy and unity. Individuals seek refuge within the powerful boundaries of the team, which closes in on itself and discusses only issues with which it is comfortable. It may become fixated on a common enemy, real or perceived, such as the head office, a partner organization, or a competitor. Instead of working to find a way out of its difficulties, it blames that party for its internal problems and mobilizes its forces accordingly. The emotional climate is one of urgency, but the team is fighting the wrong battles.

We saw those dynamics in the executive committee of a European investment bank. The CEO had realized that the top team was suffering from a lack of trust and brought us in to facilitate a trust-building program. Significantly, he himself did not attend.

## **When a team is anxious about the future or is looking for direction or protection, it may surrender its autonomy to a savior. That's risky.**

The prospect of examining the team's workings clearly created anxiety among the 12 participants, which initially manifested itself as hostility toward one another. Interactions were tense and abrasive; members were ultracompetitive and disparaging of their peers. But those behaviors soon subsided, and members began uniting and directing their hostility toward the facilitators. Instead of addressing their own anxiety, they went on the offensive, attacking us by resisting the learning goals and the process.

During an outdoor trust exercise, for example, two teams of six were blindfolded, given a long coil of rope, and asked to form an equilateral triangle. We saw several participants peek through their blindfolds. That was highly unusual; we rarely if ever observe teams cheat in this exercise. But it was more important for the team members to beat the facilitators than to learn. Their actions created a superficial sense of togetherness but subverted their actual task.

**Flight mode.** A team in flight mode also has outsize expectations of autonomy and unity, but it avoids its anxiety by trying to escape from a common enemy. Such teams are marked by resignation, fear, and withdrawal. Members become preoccupied with signs of organizational or ecosystem change, and important tasks are postponed or ignored.

We encountered this dynamic while studying the Australian subsidiary of a global information provider. Its top team had grown used to having a new country manager imposed on it every

two or three years. The head office, in the United States, treated the position as a developmental assignment for rising talent.

A new team member, whom we'll call Denise, quickly noticed that the prevailing attitude toward the incoming country manager was a cynical "Here we go again." "It was a sport," she told us. "It was almost, 'Well, you just need to survive the next managing director, because they're not going to be around long.'" The team saw corporate headquarters and, by extension, the incoming country manager as its common enemies and blamed them for the subsidiary's poor performance. Yet members were reluctant to take any initiative to improve matters. "The culture was very avoidant," Denise recalled. "People would nod and say they were doing things without having any intention of following through. They were just going through the motions."

To try to disrupt those dysfunctional dynamics, the regional head office requested a break with tradition and was allowed to appoint a local executive as country manager. Denise was tapped and given a mandate to turn the operation around. Once a team in flight mode loses its common enemy, it's forced to confront its anxiety. The team at the Australian subsidiary could no longer blame head-office interference or a clueless incoming manager for its difficulties. Denise helped it recognize its self-sabotaging tendencies and brought in new members. Those changes allowed the team to gradually become less avoidant and more engaged with improving performance.



Joshua Scott

When stuck in one of the four patterns, team members lose their critical faculties and individual abilities. They may seem engrossed in a vital but vague mission, discussing peripheral matters as though they were of great consequence and having little tolerance for pushback. The group regains full command of its capacities only when it realizes that the source of its anxiety lies within the team, not outside it.

### **The Immensity of the Challenge**

Leaders typically struggle to recognize and deal with these pathological patterns, for three reasons. First, they are *hard to avoid*. It's impossible to always tamp down anxiety, so any team will occasionally succumb to the coping mechanisms we have described. Second, they are *hard to spot*. It's difficult to be both a participant in and an observer of your team—and there are usually far-more-accessible explanations for what's going wrong, as with the transit authority that blamed its “problematic” new head of HR. And third, they are *hard to fix*. Simply addressing the symptoms, through coaching, team building, experiential exercises, or training interventions, may temporarily improve attitudes and performance. But the root causes will most likely persist, as they did at KPMG. To truly escape problematic

patterns, teams must adopt new processes and new ways of thinking and behaving—which requires more than simple interventions.

Teams in these circumstances can benefit from a specialist in group dynamics, who can surface underlying anxieties and identify the task the team is avoiding. But of course not all teams have ready access to such an expert. In what follows, we describe a simple methodology a team can use on its own to diagnose and reverse degenerating dynamics.

### **The Self-Monitoring Team**

We use sociograms—graphic representations of group ties and interactions—to help teams uncover dysfunctional patterns of behavior and take ownership of their own development. The use of sociograms as a tool for mapping relationships was pioneered in the 1930s by the psychiatrist Jacob Moreno. They are the prototype of modern social-network analysis.

Sociograms work like this: Each member of a group draws a simple diagram showing how he or she perceives the people on the team and the relationships among them, following certain basic instructions. Every member is represented by a bubble, labeled with initials only and sized according to that person's weight in the group. No words are allowed in the diagram. The distance between bubbles indicates members' groupings and closeness to one another. The thickness of the lines connecting them signifies the intensity of their interactions, and arrows represent the direction of influence or communication. The exercise is meant to be spontaneous and intuitive, so it should take only a minute or so to complete. People shouldn't overthink it.

**To truly escape problematic patterns, teams must adopt new processes and new ways of thinking and behaving—**

## which requires more than simple interventions.

Members then discuss the sociograms one by one, with the person whose drawing is being considered sitting silent and facing away from the others. That encourages free association and frank exploration among the participants and averts defensiveness and self-justification from the drawing's creator. Everyone—not just the leader—shares a perspective on the various sociograms, which reveal pairings and other subgroups on the team along with members who have disproportionate influence and members who are isolated. Discussions might center on dependencies among members, on who has a voice, on who can challenge the leader, on roles people have picked up, and on coalitions and competition.

We used this technique with the top team of the European transit authority described earlier. Reflecting on their drawings, members identified several reasons why they were unable to make progress. The sociograms showed two clear factions within the team—a trio prioritizing the need to increase infrastructure and a duo focused on making the system greener—along with an isolated member who had only a weak connection to one of the subgroups. The heads of the factions dominated discussions but consistently clashed on how to move forward, and their rivalry extended to their followers. As we've noted, the team attributed its inefficacy to the new head of HR, Jocelyn, who became the scapegoat for its incompetence and lack of engagement. And the less that was expected of her, the more withdrawn she became, intensifying the group's tendency to blame her and creating a vicious circle.



Subscribe to our Monthly Newsletter

**Leadership**

The qualities of the most effective leaders are always changing. Read our latest.



Sign Up

---

The sociogram exercise shined a light on these dysfunctional dynamics, and the team made a concerted effort to understand and integrate Jocelyn's strengths, resulting in greatly enhanced contributions from her. It also prompted a productive discussion about the factions within the team and how six talented people were managing to neutralize one another's competencies.

The messiness of the sketches added to the experience, sparking moments of playfulness that helped create a sense of safety. The group delivered candid feedback on itself without having to label it as such. When one person brought up an issue, others built on it. The process freed voices that had been silent. The directional arrows between members alerted the team to those who had been pushed into specific roles: For example, one person in the dominant trio had assumed the role of messenger to the two least-involved members of the group. After surfacing its suppressed tensions and fears, the team was able to break its destructive cycle of behavior and move forward.

...

If you understand the unconscious forces that influence how your team functions, you can become less captive to them. You can spot dysfunctional patterns taking hold, call them out for discussion, and choose a path that leads away from self-sabotage and toward increased productivity and success.

A version of this article appeared in the March–April 2023 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

# NA

**N. Anand** is the Shell Professor of Global Leadership and the dean of research at IMD.

**Jean-Louis Barsoux** is a term research professor at IMD and a coauthor of *ALIEN Thinking: The Unconventional Path to Breakthrough Ideas* (PublicAffairs, 2021).