



Love the One You Hate

True team development by allowing weakness

By Jürgen Hell and Katie Johnman

"Our CFO is as flexible as a concrete wall. And on top of that: he doesn't care about aesthetics, he doesn't appreciate beauty," the lead architect and CEO of a bespoke architecture firm explained to me. "Honestly, we're fighting a non-stop battle and at least once a day I think of firing him. I have to keep reminding myself that only since we took him on board, we've started to make some serious profit. Though I've always been proud of our creative performance, financially we've been hanging on the cliff edge. That is history now, thanks to our CFO's ruthless edge in pushing us for more cost-effective design and lean management. I even see that our architects are anticipating his response. In fact this unbending CFO is stretching our creativity, we're starting to enjoy the challenge to couple beauty with efficiency."

The principle of 'play to strength' is widely spread and apparently embraced in teams and organizations. In most team development work we do at Volta, there is a focus on team members getting to know and understand each other's unique capabilities better and developing team skill to compensate each other's weaknesses. Easier said than done, however. Because, as the example above illustrates, truly building on your partner's strengths also requires that you are willing and able to pay the price for their quality. And this is where we easily go wrong. Yes, we say, we want to play to strength and we aim for an inclusive culture, building on diversity. But meanwhile - more implicitly - we struggle to allow 'weakness', which we then coin 'development needs'. At least every team member should meet the criteria of the company's leadership model and benchmark well against the competencies. It's a bit like saying: I love your sense of humour, as long as you don't make jokes. And of course to make the problem worse, good old human nature comes along to play: it is only natural to think 'my way is the best way' or in the more extreme 'it's my way or the highway'. As the CEO of an English Prison once said to us after contracting us to carry out some team development for his SMT, with the aim of appreciating team diversity 'this is all very interesting stuff but I just wish they all made decisions like I do'. At this point we knew we still had a long road to climb.

In any organization or team there is a natural tendency to equalize rather than diversify. There is a powerful equalizing force, which often becomes visible in job descriptions, competency frameworks and reward systems. They often breathe the desire that all people should meet certain standards, and all should behave in more or less the same manner. The process driven culture we live in today and drive for standardization further compounds the problem - in many organizations they expect everyone to follow procedure by the letter. Whilst it may drive efficiency and protect against litigation, it is also unintentionally stifling the natural creativity of our employees by giving them the disempowering message 'there is only one way to skin the cat around here'. The challenge then for organizations is getting a balance between recognizing where process is necessary from where it boxes people in and stops them thinking. We need to find a way to encourage employees to put their heads up with curiosity in a culture which is becoming unquestioning and robotic. Truly high performing organizations however do exactly that, they recognize that meeting the standards is not good enough and will at best lead to mediocre performance. They have the courage to allow deviations. They don't spend time on managing diversity, they act diverse!

In the early 90's, Brazilian striker Romário was the top-scorer in the Dutch football league. His mentality though was 'different' from your average sporting hero: he felt 'a bit tired', at best he was late for training, or often didn't show up at all. Once over summer holidays, instead of starting the new training season on the cold and wet field in Holland, he chose to extend his holiday by two weeks to dance the samba on Copacabana beach. Desperately, his club sold Romario for a bargain to Barcelona. There, instead of putting emphasis on discipline, coach Johan Cruijff focused on the football play, and gave Romario back the pleasure and thrill of playing football. More timely to training than ever, he became top-scorer again in the Spanish league. His former club PSV in Holland lost the competition.

In order to truly build on the diversity in a team and to utilize everyone's talents, we think the following 3 conditions are paramount:

1. The team composition should be right
2. Team members need to understand the dynamics of strengths and weaknesses
3. Team members are able to trust and confront

Let's take a look at every condition more specifically.

1. Team composition

An evergreen in theory around understanding team performance is that of Teamrole Management stemming from the research of Meredith Belbin and associates around the success and failure of teams. Belbin et al¹ studied real life (management) teams and observed the different contributions made by the individual team members². They identified 9 different 'team roles' or characters played in a team, and although inevitably the types are a simplification, we see the key principles of the team role theory confirmed in any team. Firstly, we see that the different personalities in a team often tell us much more about how the team operates, than team member's technical abilities. Teams of sometimes only mediocre technical abilities can be very successful when the different personalities work together effectively, whereas teams of brilliant technical experts can fail miserably. Second, we see that team success depends on the mix of personalities and how they are allocated. There is compelling evidence that personal characteristics and how individuals interact, are more indicative of team performance than the level of technical competence in the team. Even in highly specialized teams, like

intensive care units or surgical teams, it is the mosaic of the team roles that makes the difference rather than the technical skills of the team members. Here 'the right mix' does NOT imply a close harmony of personal characteristics or team members being the best of friends. On the contrary: the right mix may (and often should) consist of conflicting characters, an energetic and almost explosive brew of different traits. The secret of success is that team members value the differences and build on them; they try to complement each other as opposed to trying to iron out differences.

Thirdly, a team should have the richness of roles as is required by the environment. Diversity is not necessary per se, it depends on the market and the organisation the team operates in. For example in the ultra-competitive and opaque stockmarket, 'Wolf of Wallstreet' Jordan Belfort proved that a sales team composed of mainly extraverted, achievement driven and opportunistic go getters could be at least temporarily successful. However when other factors like integrity, transparency and risk control come into play, such a monomaniac sales team would have to become more diverse. They should welcome newcomers - people who are more conscientious, value-driven and, yes why not, dull.

Regarding team composition there is still a lot to gain in the recruitment process. Most efforts are focused on finding the right person for the job, not on finding the best addition to the team. As assessment consultants we are elaborately briefed about the role, but given little insight about the team. We think that HR managers and we as consultants should do more to understand the team composition, in order to advise whether a new member really fills a gap, is a good 'fit', whether potential conflict can be foreseen and how the team could best play to the new individual's strength.

2. Understanding the dynamics

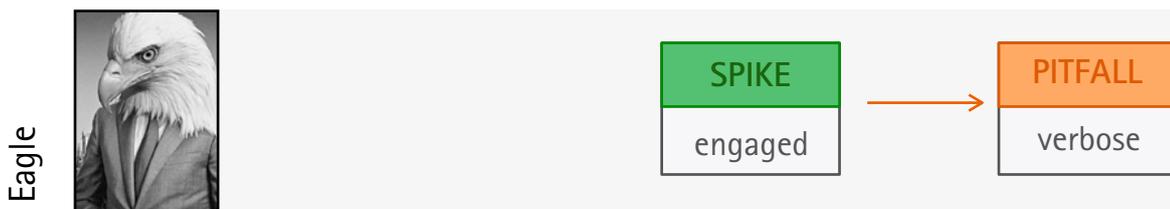
How do interpersonal differences in a team play out? When does conflict arise and when, on the other hand, will differences between individuals lead to higher performance? Let's try to unravel this by means of the Spike Strength Model.

We start with the core strength of a person, for which we use the term *Spike*. The spike strength stands for any distinguished positive personal characteristic that an individual can possess. Usually these are the adjectives that we tend to hear when asking others who know the person well: 'If you think of this person at his best, what's he like then?'

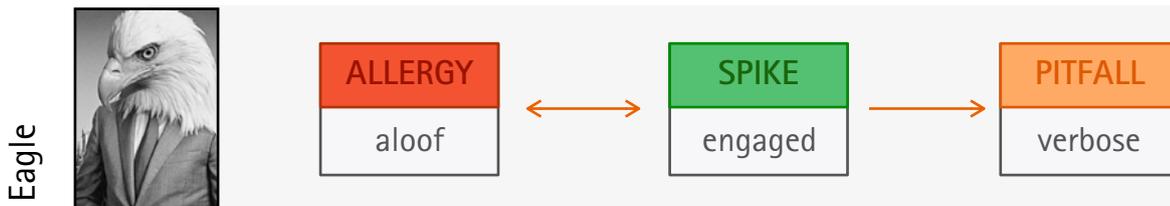
Here we have a guy called Eagle. At his best, Eagle is passionate about his ideas and can really win others over with his point of view.



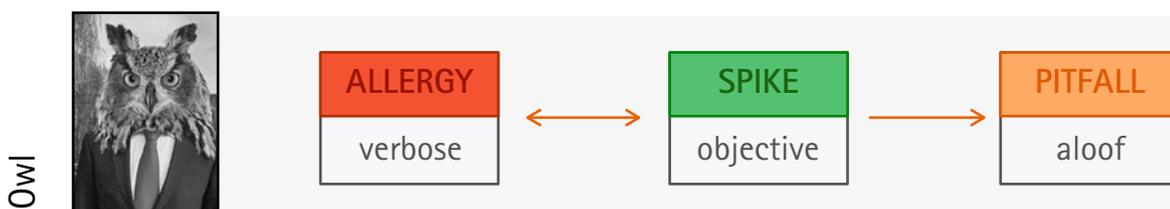
As the word spike already reveals, this strength is usually not just positive. It is often a strength with a potential overkill to it, it can be overplayed. In our model, the overplayed strength is referred to as the *Pitfall*. Eagle for instance, easily gets carried away by his enthusiasm, he may elaborate too much and become verbose.



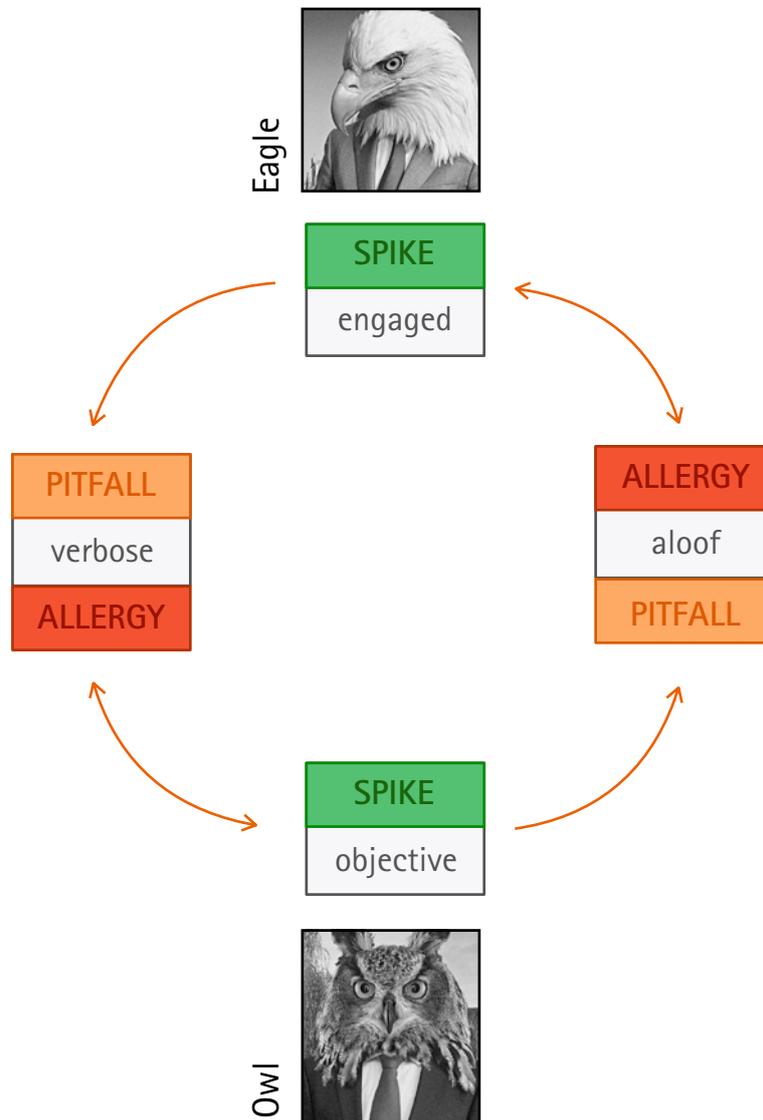
What kind of people do we find most difficult to deal with? Often, it is the type totally different from ourselves. Eagle is likely to find it hard to relate to people who do not show enthusiasm and are more reserved. Eagle has a colleague called Owl. What gets to Eagle, is when Owl just remains silent and shows no interest for his story. Owl is in Eagle's *Allergy*.



Now comes the beauty of the model. This guy Owl has his Spike strength too; he also has a Pitfall, and an Allergy. Let's take a closer look to understand the interaction between the two. Owl is actually at his best when he is facing a complex problem and there is a need for an objective point of view. He is appreciated for his crystal clear, unclouded judgment. But in particular in emotional situations, people can find him too cool and standoffish. Owl from his end, does not like others to be easily carried away by ideas. People should think more thoroughly before they talk!



If we put the two together now, this is what the picture looks like. Eagle and Owl are very different individuals who can easily end up in conflict when they are in their 'overdrive', overplaying their strength. Then they are in each others Allergy zone. On the other hand, they have a lot to offer to and to learn from each other. They could be a hugely effective team because their strengths are complementary.



3. Trust and confront

Trust is a fundamental condition for a team to be able to work complementarily. Actually, for any organisation or society to 'play to strength' trust is the key. Unless individual members trust each other, they will not pass the ball.

The meaning of trust here is twofold:

- it is the confidence in each other's competence, the belief that the other person can really do the job well;
- it is the confidence of working towards the same goal, the belief that we are trying to achieve the same objectives and that there are no hidden agenda's.

Trust does not happen overnight. It is a precious thing which takes time to develop and which can be easily lost by accidents or incidents. Or as a Dutch saying goes: 'Trust arrives on foot, it leaves on a horse.' Simply working together and spending time together, building and sharing experience together through successes and through crisis, is the best recipe to develop trust. Unfortunately many teams in business today are not given ample time for this – as most teams don't live longer than a year before changes comes ringing. In order to speed up the development of trust in a team, it is helpful to make team members aware of each other's technical capabilities, as well as their personal drivers, values and competencies. And even better: to make the team work together on defining their joint goal, how they want to work as a team and what the reputation is they want to earn. A major responsibility for leaders is to facilitate this whole process. An extra challenge leaders are facing is the development of trust in a remote team. In many global organisations team members have to get along without having met each other face to face. Without physical presence it is typically harder to develop a sense of belonging, closeness and 'we're in this together'. To quote Warren Buffet: 'I've never had a firm handshake by an email.'

Just being nice to each other is not the only ingredient for trust. Trust requires a sometimes edgy interaction, where individuals confront each other with their different styles, preferences or even values. The highest performing teams build a climate for constructive debate as opposed to destructive conflict. The difference being effective teams always engage in some degree of task-related conflict, where as dysfunctional teams get caught up all too often in interpersonal conflict, which is never helpful. Where does someone else's contribution get into my 'allergy' and how can we together employ this friction in a positive manner rather than allowing it to produce fruitless debate. The breakthrough here, comes from the realization that when someone is in my allergy zone, this person actually has a surplus of something, which I myself am lacking! Instead of saying: 'I would like you to act a bit more like me' (which we tend to do in relationships) I should be asking myself how I could benefit most from the other's approach. Returning to the example of the Architect and his CFO: lacking the cool analytical skills and rigidity himself, the Architect had big trouble dealing with his CFO who had ample supply of this scarce resource. We can learn more from those who are different from ourselves, than from equal minded others. Here then comes another challenge for today's leaders – having the courage to resist recruiting 'mini'me's' and thereby creating a team of clones.

It feels appropriate to finish with a note about the consequences of ignoring diversity in a team, a factor all too commonly unveiled in the analysis of faulty decision making. If we take the example of the United States of America's decision to invade Iraq in 2003, George W Bush could be criticised for cherry picking his right hand men who were in favour of the invasion, showing an incurious lack of involvement in the decision making process and sidelining those with a difference of opinion. Many would argue he had already made his mind up and allowed fellow advocates for the invasion a disproportionate degree of power and sought to undermine the knowledge of people who might have a contradictory opinion. If this government had appreciated the diverse expertise of its whole team, the world today might well look quite different.

¹ Belbin RM. *Management teams: why they succeed or fail*. London: Heinemann, 1981.

² Healey AN, Undre S & Vincent, A. Developing observational measures of performance in surgical teams. *Quality Safety Health Care*, 2004, *i33-i40*.