

Executive Summary - Taming Team Dysfunction - Bob Johnson PhD

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[Executive Roundtable for Materials Growth](#)

Hosted by: [Growth Arc Advisors LLC](#)

Contact: [Bob Johnson PhD](#) or [Kendall Justiniano](#) for follow-up consultations for your organization.

Get Dr. Johnson's free white paper: [Better Teamwork: 3 Mindset Shifts for Transforming Problems into Partnerships](#)

Summary

Dr. Bob Johnson's originally trained as a clinical child psychologist. After graduate school, he joined the Army, which was pivotal in shaping his career trajectory. It was during his time in Germany, working with company commanders to explore the connection between leadership and unit well-being, that his interest in organizational consulting was piqued. In 2005, he transitioned into the corporate sector and has since spent 20 years focusing on team transformation, starting with the selection and assessment side and evolving to equip teams to transform problems into partnerships.

Key insights from Bob's experience include a realization about conflict resolution. Early in his career, he would engage with individual leaders in conflicts, only to find that both parties made valid points, which led to frustration. Over time, he learned to approach conflicts by looking at them holistically, which allows for the emergence of creative solutions. This shift in perspective—from seeking who's right to understanding the whole issue—has significantly enhanced his ability to help teams and leaders resolve conflicts.

Despite advancements, the corporate sector still struggles with problems that require cross-functional collaboration. Leadership teams often face challenges that necessitate changes across various functions, which require transparency, openness, and negotiation to resolve. Dr. Johnson points out that a common issue is the tendency for individuals to approach these challenges from a "win and be right" mindset, often seeing problems in other areas but not within their own. This mindset makes it difficult for senior executives to have open, trust-based conversations, leading to avoidance of crucial discussions. This avoidance is detrimental to both organizational success and team culture, as it robs teams of the joy found in collectively solving problems.

What's Going on in Team Conflict

Bob characterizes group conflicts as "right on right fights," where each party involved has a seemingly logical and justifiable stance, often with multiple compelling reasons supporting their position. These conflicts typically arise when one group's actions inadvertently complicate the workflow for another, leading to complaints and attempts to communicate or give feedback. However, these interactions often result in defensive responses and justifications, rather than solutions, prompting groups to work around each other instead. This avoidance perpetuates recurring issues, referred to as the "here we go again" loop, which escalates the conflict to higher authorities in hopes of resolution. This cycle burdens leaders, who are compelled to act as referees, a role that proves ineffective for all parties in the long term. Bob likens this pervasive conflict pattern to the common cold within organizations, particularly prevalent along cross-functional lines.

Bob's insight into these sorts of conflicts are that the persistent "here we go again" loops are fueled by a common but mistaken belief that solutions are more valuable than problems. He argues that in situations where different parties have conflicting perspectives—such as between supply chain and sales—the cycle of repeating conflicts occurs because each side tries to assert their solution without agreeing on a shared understanding of the problem. Bob believes that effective resolution requires parties to recognize that problems themselves can be more valuable because they offer a common ground. By expanding the definition of the problem to encompass both sides' perspectives, parties can foster a true partnership and work collaboratively towards a solution. Essentially, Bob emphasizes the need for a mutual problem definition that goes beyond the immediate solutions each party proposes.

How Leaders Often Make it Worse

Bob outlines how leaders commonly intervene in group conflicts and highlights some flaws in each approach. One method is when leaders directly intervene and make decisions to resolve the conflict, which can restore momentum but may undermine team commitment and favor one side, instead of addressing the root problem. Another approach is for leaders to encourage teams to build relationships, but this often results in superficial meetings that fail to produce lasting solutions. The third, and most effective approach according to Bob, is for leaders to facilitate discussions themselves, although this still presents the challenge of making leaders a constant presence, rather than empowering teams to resolve issues independently.

Bob believes that leader behavior can exacerbate problems when leaders rush to resolve conflicts without ensuring all sides understand each other's perspectives. He illustrates this with a supply chain and sales example, highlighting their differing priorities: supply chain values process discipline, while sales prioritizes options and flexibility. Both are essential for organizational success, yet without mutual understanding, prematurely proposing solutions can hinder effective resolution. Bob argues that leaders should encourage their teams to comprehend and appreciate the validity of opposing viewpoints before deciding on solutions.

What Does Bob's Method Look Like

Bob's approach to taming team dysfunction centers around shifting mindsets from "win and be right" to understanding and collaboration. Bob suggests that focusing on a shared understanding of the problem rather than jumping to solutions is crucial, as it lays the groundwork for true partnerships and creative solutions. Bob advocates for leaders to ensure teams understand and respect opposing viewpoints before pursuing solutions. This deep mutual comprehension can transform adversarial relationships into partnerships. Bob's approach relies on reciprocity; once one party articulates the other's concerns clearly, it empowers both sides to collaboratively address the issue. By expanding the problem definition to include all sides, teams become allies rather than opponents, fostering a more innovative and effective problem-solving environment. This shift in mindset, from individual solutions to shared problem definitions, is what Bob believes unleashes creativity and ultimately leads to more harmonious and productive team dynamics.

Bob's methodology for helping teams primarily involves using a three-minute videotaped role play. This approach aims to highlight the gap between perception and reality, similar to how athletes analyze their performance. By recording and then collectively reviewing the video, participants can see discrepancies between their self-assessment and actual behaviors, such as listening, transparency, and collaboration, especially under pressure. This process is designed to be humbling but constructive, as it reveals common struggles and encourages participants to confront their blind spots. Bob emphasizes the importance of understanding this "200% version" of a problem, where solutions require recognizing the half of the equation that one might be missing, that the other party brings to the table.

Improving conflict resolution significantly impacts leaders by enhancing their ability to foster a collaborative environment and create a more productive organizational culture. Leaders become facilitators of growth, helping their teams to become more autonomous in problem-solving, thereby reducing dependency on leadership for conflict resolution and allowing teams to operate at a higher level of effectiveness. This mindset shift not only reduces the frequency of conflicts reaching leadership but also empowers teams to resolve issues independently. As a result, leaders can allocate more of their time to strategic initiatives rather than acting as referees, which enhances their effectiveness and allows them to focus on broader organizational goals.

Conflict at the C-Suite Level

At the executive level, Bob Johnson observes that conflicts often emerge differently compared to lower organizational levels. Instead of overt disagreements, there is a tendency for issues to go underground, leading to a 'cool version' of conflict. In leadership teams, executives may avoid addressing complex issues directly during meetings, despite acknowledging them in one-on-one sessions. This reluctance often stems from a desire to maintain team dynamics and avoid disrupting the perceived harmony. However, this approach often neglects essential interdependencies, resulting in a siloed approach to problem-solving unless a higher authority, like the CEO, intervenes.

Despite the more subdued nature of conflicts among executives, the way they are addressed can be crucial for team cohesion and effectiveness. The challenge lies in fostering open discussion without letting conflicts escalate into personal disputes. Bob highlights that executives must develop constructive communication skills, enabling them to address issues assertively and collaboratively without compromising team dynamics. Bob emphasizes once again, the importance of focusing on problems rather than jumping to solutions. This approach requires a shift from the typical executive mindset where leadership is equated with having immediate answers.

About Bob Johnson, PhD

Bob Johnson, Ph.D., is the Founder and Managing Partner at Shoreline Partners. With a track record of guiding over 1,000 CEOs, executives, and their teams, he equips clients with the awareness and skills to transform friction into fuel - turning their recurring problems into partnerships that drive performance.

He empowers leadership and cross-functional teams to break free from 'here-we-go-again' conflicts and build cultures where people have one another's backs. At the core of his work is a game-changing insight: trust, collaboration, and decision quality don't improve just by wanting them to—they require skilled learning. Yet, even the most capable leaders unknowingly sabotage learning while believing they're committed to it.

Prior to his work in the corporate sector, Dr. Johnson served as Division Psychologist with the 1st Infantry Division, United States Army. During his five years of active duty service, he completed assignments in Germany, Iraq, Kuwait, and the United States.

About Growth Arc Advisors LLC

After a 30 year career as an executive in the chemical industry, founder Kendall Justiniano started Growth Arc Advisors to help chemical business leaders implement the new thinking required for changing fundamentals. We're experienced industry operators who know the old playbooks, their gaps, and the new pages required.

The firm delivers customized engagements for Materials Executives in 3 key areas:

Commercial Effectiveness: increasing growth revenue through proven next-level commercial practices, including digital sales & marketing.

Strategy: helping clients navigate threats generated by sustainability, digital, and global demand shifts.

Innovation: accelerating return on innovation through focused investment.

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