THE THREAT SWITCH

The Secret to Creating Breakthrough High-Performance Teams

RANDY YOST

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PART I

Why Better Thinking Creates Breakthrough

Chapter 1

The Threat Switch: Enemy Number One of Breakthrough Teams

Fred Penman was a problem-solver. When builders and public agencies in Sacramento had a problem with tough terrain and obstacles, they turned to Fred, the construction operations manager at Western Engineering Contractors in Loomis, California.

One day as Fred tried to decipher a stack of handwritten field records, he knew he had a problem. How could he get all of his field foremen to upgrade record-keeping from pen and paper to portable, handheld computers?

Fred decided to pursue the goal: a handheld computer in the hands of every foreman within a year's time. He set up a meeting to explain the logic of switching to the digital age.

But soon, there was conflict. When Fred approached the field foremen with the idea, he got a lot of pushback. Fred

explained, encouraged, and even harangued the foremen about the benefits of switching to the handheld electronic devices, all to no avail.

The foremen fought Fred on the issue, complaining bitterly about the difficulty of changing their record-keeping from paper to electronic records, despite the benefits. Tempers flared during the meeting.

"C'mon Fred, give us a break. We are up to our eyeballs in mass grading and utility installation projects," said a veteran foreman named Ben. "And now we should drop everything and learn some computer program? A pen and paper form work just fine, and are a lot cheaper too."

Now, Fred's natural inclination usually would have been to fight with the foremen over the issue. After all, he was the boss and what the boss says goes. But instead of fight, he chose flight.

"Fine, just fine," said Fred, as he stood up and walked out of the conference room.

That's when Fred sought me out, and we discussed the Breakthrough, High-Performance Team approach to managing the change.

"Fred, they flipped The Threat Switch in your brain," I advised him. "It was fight, freeze, or flight. You choose flight, and

that is only natural. Even if they flip The Threat Switch on, remember you have the power to flip it back off."

Fred brought the foremen back to the table. Instead of fighting them with top-down leadership, Fred encouraged the foremen to engage in making the change work for them.

"You are well-seasoned and experienced engineers," Fred calmly told the team, "so you engineer how we upgrade."

Once the foremen could participate in figuring out the best way to use the new equipment and were allowed to make decisions regarding the implementation, they took ownership of the project.

Within three months, when Fred toured the projects, he saw every foreman was using a handheld device for field reports. Back at the office, Fred could easily read the field reports that crossed his desk.

After a couple of months of going digital, one foreman approached Fred and said, "I am glad we thought of this. All of the foremen agree we would never go back to pen and paper again."

Living with The Threat Switch

"When we do what comes naturally, we stand to lose." A wise mentor named Bern Moses (really, his name was Moses) told

me that a long time ago. It took me years to really understand what he meant.

Moses was telling me that a part of our brain is designed for one thing: survival. This brain part often dictates our behavior, consciously and subconsciously. In anatomy and neuroscience, it is called the amygdala, and it is often referred to as our lizard (reptilian) brain. This part of the brain helps us survive by dictating whether we choose to fight, flee, or freeze.

I call the lizard brain The Threat Switch. This ancient part of our brain is only the size of an almond (amygdala is Greek for almond), but it has huge power.

When the amygdala detects a possible threat to our survival, it immediately hijacks the brain and engages our fight, flee, or freeze reaction mechanism. This is quite a natural action.

The challenge all people face is that the amygdala doesn't differentiate between a *real* life-or-death threat situation or a *perceived* life-or-death threat situation. The Threat Switch reacts the same whether someone is coming at you with a baseball bat or telling you that they think your idea is stupid. The amygdala has only two positions—on or off—and once it senses a threat, it goes into action.

Moses explained that humans do not have to allow their amygdala to dictate their behavior when the situation is

not life-threatening. Simply tell The Threat Switch you're not going to die, so back off. Hence, you do not have to do what comes naturally. You can be *supra*natural. Being supranatural means knowingly and purposefully not doing what comes naturally.

So, what does it mean to be supranatural, in practical terms? The best way I have found to take back control from the amygdala is to focus on asking clarification questions. This act of being intentionally supranatural redirects blood flow from the amygdala to the cerebral cortex, where human genius and creativity reside, not where our survival lizard resides.

Mechanism

Ah, the amygdala. Clinical studies including brain scans and neurocircuitry mapping have allowed scientists to understand more about how the brain is structured and how it works. It has become well recognized and accepted that emotional intelligence resides in a part of the brain called the limbic system. Proof of this is best evidenced from several medical cases in which a person's limbic system has been damaged, and the person has lost the ability to experience emotions or feelings.

Within the limbic system resides the amygdala and its fight, flight, or freeze response. Virtually all animals have this survival instinct hard-wired into their brains. While this mechanism is crucial to our survival, it often takes over at

work when it is not needed, resulting in inappropriate and often damaging behavior to ourselves and others on the team.

How often have you experienced or seen another person engage in the fight, freeze, or flight response during the course of a business meeting?

A typical example: one team member shares a solution regarding an issue at hand, and a second team member quickly states that the proposed solution is wrong and gives his or her own solution. What happens? Most likely a disagreement ensues in which each person defends his or her solution (fight), or one of the team members will capitulate to the other, not agreeing but not willing to argue (freeze). I have seen team members actually push themselves away from the table or leave the room (flight).

Here is a typical business scenario to illustrate. A customer is demanding a cash refund for not getting a product on time. The team discussion might go something like this:

Team member one: "I think we should refund 10 percent of the price to maintain a positive relationship with this customer." (*Neutral.*)

Team member two: "Wrong! This customer is always complaining. A refund would just encourage them to complain more." (*Fight.*)

Team member one: "That's just stupid. This customer is a big account. No way we should antagonize them more." (*Fight*.)

Team member two: "You're calling me stupid? What's stupid is being wimps in front of these guys." (*Fight*.)

Team member one: "Fine, whatever. Are we done here?" (*Flight*.)

Interestingly, the amygdala's natural response to even a perceived threat like the episode above is to hijack the brain and force the fight, freeze, or flight response to drive behavior. Rational thought leaves the room, and chaos often ensues.

The key to dealing with the amygdala's natural reaction to a perceived threat is to take command of one's thoughts and instruct the amygdala that survival is not at stake, so lighten up. This takes some training and practice, but the rewards for both the individual and the organization can be spectacular. When team members do not allow the amygdalae (that's plural) in the room to take over, they are able to work together to find the best solution to an issue and not waste time or energy arguing about and defending who is right or wrong.

In short, team members engage in an emotionally intelligent discussion. This is so important because when The Threat Switch takes control, trust is absent. Research conducted at the Deming Center for Quality Management found 50 percent of time wasted in business is due to lack of trust.

A lack of trust seems to be natural in business. The secret to creating Breakthrough, High-Performance Teams is to *not do what comes naturally*. That is explored in the following chapter.

Axioms for High Performance

The Threat Switch: Enemy Number One of Breakthrough, High-Performance Teams

- Do not allow The Threat Switch to drive your thoughts or actions.
- If someone flips your Threat Switch, flip it off and seek first to understand.
- You do not have to choose fight, flight, or freeze; there are other options.
- You do not have to do what comes naturally; you can be supranatural.