

Global Teal Meetup: Building a Collaborative Team Culture With Vanessa Druskat

Human First Works

Transcript of [Vanessa's presentation and fireside chat](#)

Vanessa Druskat: I'm going to start with my path, my interest in team self-management, which is kind of where I began with my career in studying teams. When I was a doctoral student at Boston University, we had a speaker come and talk with us. He was from Polaroid, which is no longer in existence, but he came to talk to us about how wonderful their self-management team initiative was going.

And they had, you know, Polaroid would have not been doing so well with the competition. They've missed a couple of critical opportunities early on. For example, they created the first Xerox machine before Xerox did. But put it aside, and you know, crazy things like that, I just fell in love with this concept of people managing themselves. You know, I just love the idea of the freedom, and particularly, because I've been in a lot of manufacturing plants where people had to ask permission to use the restroom and, you know, their breaks were so carefully scripted and things like that. And I thought, you know, this is really the answer. So, I got involved a little bit in Polaroid but engaged my dissertation advisor in a study of, essentially, self-managing work teams at this production plant. It was a polyester manufacturing plant in North Carolina. And they had, I think they had 300 self-managing teams when we arrived. Forgive me for not remembering the details, but I think it was 300. And what we ended up doing was coming up with, through a collection of all kinds of data and information, a sample of truly, truly outstanding teams that were just, you know, blowing away the self-management concept and performing really, really well. In fact, they were making \$9 million more per year than the average teams in average self-managing teams in that organization.

So I studied the heck out of these 10 super teams, and I studied the sample of another 10 average-performing teams. And it was just fascinating. The critical finding that I had was that the great teams developed a strong culture, they had really strong norms, and the norms enabled them to manage themselves. And central to their norms was this idea of getting to know one another, spending time, you know, learning about one another's needs and not just needs but skills and interests and things like that. And they were all part of their culture was this kind of growth mindset

where they were constantly learning and they wanted, they wanted to be independent, they wanted to be self-managing and they wanted to succeed. And then, but they were also really good with their stakeholders, including the stakeholders that mattered most, which was what I ended up calling their "external leaders," the people who were right above them in the hierarchy. So I quickly discovered that there is no such thing as a self-managing team in this context anyway, you're always reporting to someone. And so if they weren't able to manage that relationship well, then they weren't able to maintain their freedom in this situation because the leaders above them had this dilemma of not really understanding their role.

How do you lead a self-managing team? So that spurred a whole second set of research questions, which I can talk a little bit about, but let me stick here with the self-managing team, you know, what it was that helped them to succeed. And I just started using this, I love this model because it was a model of how a team can empower itself, how a team works well, and what it needs to do in order to create a culture that really includes people. And I've been tweaking that model for the last 30 years and using it in organizations. I don't really call it a model of self-managing teams, because I've gone on and just changed really my focus. I now call it a collaborative team model. But I know in my heart that what I'm building is a team that is super-empowered, super able to feel ownership over the process. And recently, I've spent a lot of time thinking about why this model works so well. And I've come to the conclusion that it's because the culture that it creates is a culture of belonging. So, as I dug into the belonging literature, I learned that belonging requires a couple of different things that end up getting taken care of in this model, and I'll show you the model in a couple of minutes.

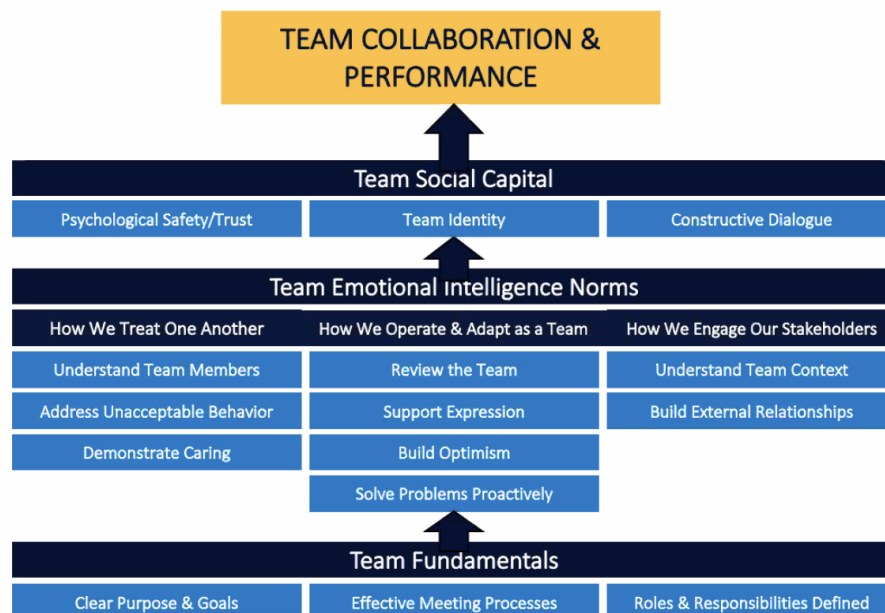
The first thing you have to have when you want to feel a sense of belonging that kind of frees you up in a team is you have to feel like you have some self-worth, that you're understood, that you're heard, that you're felt, that you're known and you're cared about. And people value what you bring to the table. So that's really fundamental. But you can't maintain that unless you have a voice in how the team operates. And so the second piece that you absolutely have to have in order to feel a sense of belonging is a voice in thinking through what the team culture is about, what the team's currently doing, how can we get better. You need to constantly check in with how are we doing now. How do we need to change? How do we improve, and everyone's voice is heard? And third, not only is everyone's voice heard, but everyone feels that they have a sense of control in that team. So those are the three buckets that I found really enable a person to feel like they belong, and I think that that's what really drives this model.

So what can go wrong in that is having a leader who's leading the team who's insecure, who doesn't know what their role is. And what I found, often, was this lack of a sense of control over the team in the person that they reported to. So I could talk *ad nauseam* about that, and I'll leave that for questions. I want to show you the TEI [Team Emotional Intelligence] model just because I think it's a good one, and it might spare some thinking in you. But I ended up doing some research on great leaders of self-managing work teams, and a lot of their work is about managing the team's context and holding back forces that are trying to take control away from the team, right. And so you have to, and let me say something. My mind is spinning here.

But one of the things you have to realize is that I'm studying teams that are in pretty typical organizations, right? [These] large organizations are typically built from what you would call a pyramid model. And so this is an oasis. This is something they're trying, and it's an oasis within the pyramid. And people who are raised with that pyramid model, have a hard time fulfilling the role, I found, of leading a self-managing work team.

So let me show you the TEI model and how powerful it can be. I've been using it for years now. Yeah, there we go.

Team Emotional Intelligence Model



Alright. So this model was initiated again in that manufacturing plant in southwestern, or excuse me, southeastern US. But the bottom part, what we call Team Fundamentals was just something that I built secondly when I took this research to many, many different organizations. I discovered that in order to be an even average performing team, in order to even be pretty good, you had to have a clear purpose and goals. And that means an engaging purpose and goals. You had to have, you know, someone who knew how to facilitate meetings, so you didn't have people dominating. You had to have somebody who was there, as the, you know, watching out to make sure that there was an even flow of information in meetings. And then finally, people had to know what their roles were, you know, what their responsibilities were, they had to be very clear. So these were fundamental, but they wouldn't kick you into this high level of performance. And what we found, again, in the high-level performance, were these social norms. These norms, this culture that had, again, had really several buckets. And we call these Team Emotional Intelligent Norms because they built this socially and emotionally comfortable environment. So people really, it basically built psychological safety, which you'll see in the model, and it builds a sense of belonging, which I've come to understand since then.

The buckets fall into the three buckets: How We Treat One Another is one level of the norms, that's how we treat each other one on one. The second is How We Operate and Adapt as a Team. So this is how we continually improve. And then third, How We Engage Our Stakeholders.

And so these were, you know, these are empirical, you know, came out of that initial research. I had these three buckets, and then the norms underneath them were tweaked slightly over the years. But the first one is really understanding the people, peeling the onion of who these people are because you can't feel like you belong if you don't feel known and understood. And so for me, this is one of the most critical norms in the model. People have to know who you are, what you want, what you care about. They can't trust you unless they know you. That's something fundamental to bring up building safety and trust.

We have to be able to address what I've actually started calling this "unhelpful" behavior. I've been doing some work in Scotland these days. Nobody likes the word "unacceptable" in many places in the world, as you can probably relate.

And so what I found and I found this in self-managing teams, they give each other feedback and they would do it in often pretty caustic ways, but it was better that way, I've come to learn, than just giving someone the cold shoulder if they were doing something you didn't like. So in the lousy teams, if someone did something that you felt was unhelpful, you know, they showed up late, didn't do what they said they were going to do, cut people off, [dominate], you know, whatever that might harm the team, people just give them the cold shoulder or ostracize them as a way of trying to

control them. And it didn't really work. And it just created negativity in the team. So the ability to give feedback in a way that's acceptable to the team, and every team does a little bit differently. And then finally, just respect. We listen, you know, we care about one another, and that really builds belonging.

The second bucket is that we step back periodically in a systematic way and review how we're doing, how were our norms, how was our culture, and this is what the great teams, great self-managing teams did constantly. You have to check-in. They didn't have a leader necessarily do this for them, to tell them what to do, so they had to say, "well, how are we doing?" And so they did that periodically, and it would work really well.

Supportive expression is something that we added after that initial study because we discovered that in great teams, they make it easier to speak your truth when you're reviewing the team. So they lower the hurdle. So they have a way of lowering the hurdle to make it easier so that people can actually take the risk. And once the team gets into flow, and once you know, the risk is not so great, but initially, especially, you have to have to support people's truth. Being optimistic, oftentimes, when you're reviewing the team, and people are speaking their truth, they can feel negative, and so what we found, what I found in that self-managing work team study was that they had a way to come around and say, "oh, yeah, but we're great, and this is how we're going to do in the future. This is how we're going to create momentum." And then lastly, was this fourth norm that really fell statistically into the third bucket, but, uh, theoretically, fell into this bucket, which was being really proactive, being strategic, if you will. So thinking in advance about what could go wrong, which team members love, gives them a sense of control. That often requires going out and getting information from stakeholders.

So these stakeholders that were in the self-managing teams were really customers, but more important to their ability to maintain their self-managing status, it was managing the people above them in the hierarchy, and the teams beside them in the hierarchy. The people were handing things off to them. And I just had story after story of how they would go out of their way to understand what was going on up the hierarchy and around them, and then how they built relationships so that when they needed someone, they were there, right? And that really mattered to them being able to manage their teams well. So all of this, we call the Team Social Capital, but it's basically safety, identity, and dialogue, which led to this high performance.

So that's the model. And I'm probably going over my time already. I can't remember what I said. I was going to say, let me ask you, Liz, how's my time? Where would like me to go from here?

Liz: you're doing great, Vanessa. Travis, how are you feeling? Are you ready to step in and ask some questions?

Travis: yeah, I'm happy to and I had some queued up, but there were some great ones already coming from the chat. So I'm going to pull some of those as well. You even called out that this model applies when there are little islands of self-management that are caught by some umbrella holder that protects the team. Do you have any thoughts on how this changes with some of the more aggressive models of self-management that, you know, like, whether it be Holacracy that puts, suppose theoretically, the purpose at the center of the decisions or some other things if you've seen the translation because it seems like there'd be a lot of applicability on that?

Vanessa: Yeah, I have to say, Travis, I'm really sorry to say that I have started reading a bunch of your information, but not as much as I wish I had. So I don't know. I've stopped thinking about self-managing teams so much, and I've started thinking about going into organizations and trying to change the culture to be more like self-management without using the term. Do you know what I mean?

Travis: Haha, I do.

Vanessa: Because it's scary. And I can't tell you how often let me just tell you that after working in that organization to collect my data, I stayed connected with the organization for several years and help them with a whole bunch of training and stuff, and then, all of a sudden, they got a new—what do you call it?—manager of their manufacturing organization, whatever that's called, plant manager! He said, "I don't believe in self-managing teams. Forget this" and went off the side.

And it turns out, I've seen that so often, hence, my negativity about it. I had a company contact me recently, and say, "you've got to help us become (...)." "There's an HR department, so we're going to start with our HR department. We're going to become self-managing. And then we're going to roll it out to the rest of the organization. We really want you." And I said, "oh, dear." Internally, I said, "it's not gonna happen." I even said that to a couple.

Well, they started working, they got all excited, it started moving. And then all of a sudden, their director changed his mind. He didn't like it after all. And this was after a year of hard work. Because his power was taken away, right? So my new way of thinking about it is to more suddenly go in there. And, you know, use this model to empower people, and suddenly help the leader to let go. Now, I don't know how that fits with your Holacracy model, or what else other people are doing. But I leave it at that.

Travis: That's interesting. So building on that, you're tackling it by making the team more powerful, but not by necessarily explicitly saying, "Hey, leader, you've got to give up the power." Does that run into any challenges or limitations when the leader is hesitant? Or are there easy ways where the leader gets a chance to let go of power and things that you do to encourage that revelation?

Vanessa: I'll tell you, it's gotten easier since COVID. Because everybody's freaking out right now. Companies are starting to open up to the possibility that whatever they've been doing hasn't quite been helpful enough to their employees. I mean, my phone's been ringing like crazy with people wanting information about this. Yeah, it's hard. You know, my colleagues and I have said, oftentimes that it all starts with the leader's willingness to let go. And so you know, you have to calibrate that. And if it works really well, it's because the leader is relieved to be able to let go of some of their responsibility, and relieved to have the team taking on some other responsibility. When it doesn't work, it's because the leader is a little more hesitant.

Travis: Controlling.

Vanessa: Yeah—laughs. Controlling. They're nervous, they're scared.

Travis: Yeah. Yeah, it's, it's very different. So you're talking about some of the changes that are coming from COVID. Also, the great resignation that's coming out of COVID. And that's amplifying a trend that's been going on, which is self-managing teams, or any teams are changing members quite a bit more. So there are ad-hoc teams all over the place. Sometimes they're self-managing, sometimes they're not. Sometimes they have an "Anointed Shepherd," sometimes they don't. How do teams build new trust, right? Because a lot of your model had pieces on knowing and trusting the other people. So how do you do that quickly and effectively when teams are changing so rapidly?

Vanessa: The best way I know how to build it is to build the culture. Build it into the patterns of what you do, right. So when I first met Liz, she mentioned this great book to me—Frederic Laloux's *Reinventing Organizations*—and I went out and bought it immediately. And it's got these phenomenal ideas in it that I'm sure you've seen about checking in at the beginning of meetings, and you know, the things that you do as a community. That's the stuff you need to do, and people need it more now than ever. People are feeling psychologically distant, and they're feeling detached. They don't see any reason to come back to the organization. They're fine. I mean, I worry about that a little bit. But I can just say that people are feeling more detached than ever, they need the community, and you can do it! You can do it on Zoom, but you have to be more intentional. You have to devote more time to it, right? Does that answer your question?

Travis: I think so. It's a piece that I'm seeing. So you are seeing similar things like, take

the time, make the effort.

Vanessa: Take the time, make it a priority. And you know, what I do? One of the things I talked about a lot is the recent brain research that's been done. The field of social neuroscience has uncovered how social we are. I mean, everything we've been talking about for years, everyone in this Zoom call, meeting, whatever you call it, knows this, that we have social needs. But it's now really coming to the forefront because social neuroscientists are saying, "look, organizations are not set up for our social needs." So we have to create organizations that will meet those needs if we want people to collaborate, which is what we need. To solve the grand challenges in any organization or the world. We need collaboration. And people don't fully unless they trust and feel safe, and all that good stuff.

Travis: Yeah, and there are lots of big problems that are on our horizon that we need to solve, and we need organizations to do it. So I'll have one more question. And then I know, there's been questions popping off in the chat, and I'll leave it to Liz and Ed to pull in questions from that for Vanessa.

My last one is I do a lot of work with startups, and oftentimes there's this implicit trade-off not often vocalized, but I could get somebody that has the technical skills I need, or I can get somebody that has the emotional skills that I need. I can't afford to get both. So when you're looking at that trade-off, is there a place where you draw a line or where you prioritize one ahead of the other?

Vanessa: This is my bias, and I pulled this bias from my mentor, who did lots of research on this topic. And that is, you get the person with the technical skills, and then you build the environment. You build an environment that manages that person. You build these norms. Okay, so here's an example [of a] person with the technical skills. You have to have the skills in the room. You have to have the skills that you need to solve the problem, and that doesn't always come with emotional skills. But let's assume that there are at least a few people, and particularly, people in crucial roles—the leaders—that do have the emotional skills. Then you build patterns of interaction, you do the check-ins in the meeting, so people get to know each other, right? And you humanize the technical person, you connect each other, right? And so, again, let's pull this norm out of reviewing the team periodically. Let me give you an example. I'm working with a team right now, and there's a guy in it who, this often happens, is the technical guy, and he's rude. He can't understand why everybody else just doesn't speak their mind, you know. And so the team is in the process of helping him understand that they need him to be gentler and kinder, and he's slowly learning it.

Travis: So it has to be enough people in the team that can like set and hold those boundaries in order for that to work, to be able to hold the person that hasn't ever

needed to learn that to be effective.

Vanessa: Yes, and even if there's a cadre of those because, particularly in this team, there's the one who embodies those behaviors, but there are several other "techies." And then there are some others, and they're working out their norms. They're working on how are we going to create a community—I saw the word community in somebody's comment here—where we can be ourselves as much as possible, but we understand the needs of each other. And that's the norm. So what's our norm going to be around this? And let's stick to those, and we're going to give you feedback if you keep blah-blah-blah-ing, you know, and keep trying to hurt us.