

HOLZMAN LEADERSHIP

A HOLZMAN LEADERSHIP WHITE PAPER

What It Takes to Make a Team Higher Performing

THE REAL WORK METHOD

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SECTION 1

The real work of a leadership team

What distinguishes a higher-performing leadership team from a lower-performing one is its willingness and ability to do **the real work**: to tackle the tough, underlying issues that stand between the team and its higher purpose.

The real work shows up in one of two places:

- **Internally.** Inside the team itself and its own organization, where the team has authority.
- **Externally.** In the system surrounding the team, where the team does not have authority.

Every team has internal real work. Some teams also have external real work.

Higher-performing teams demonstrate:

- Awareness of the real issues.
- The courage to face them.
- The competence to see them through to a workable resolution.

Lower-performing teams are unaware of these issues or avoid them.

SECTION 2

What gets in the way: a trap and a gap

The trap: Work avoidance

Work avoidance is any pattern of behavior by which an individual, team, organization, or the system it sits inside protects itself from real or imagined *psychological pain*: the threat, embarrassment, or losses that come with tackling the real issues.

All teams naturally avoid the real work, because the avoidance of pain is one of the strongest drives in any living organism. The question is to what degree any given team practices work avoidance. Regardless, the path to higher performance runs the other way, toward the real work. As the alchemists put it, *in sterquiliniis invenitur*.

The places a team least wants to look are the places it most needs to grow.

What work avoidance looks like

Activity that seems like work

Another survey, study, consultant, offsite, or workshop. The team feels busy, but the real issues remain untouched.

Talking around the real issues

Corporate-polite, over-intellectualizing, not naming the problem, jumping to action. The team appears to engage without actually engaging.

Agenda management

The real issues never make it onto the agenda, aren't given enough time, or are cannibalized by lower-priority items. Meetings are subconsciously designed to ensure the real issues never have time.

Mis-locating the problem

Blaming people and teams outside the team. Pinning systemic issues on one team member. Reducing conflict between members to a personality clash. The team locates the cause elsewhere, so it never has to look at itself.

Authority issues

An unconscious, overprotective dynamic exists between leaders and their teams. Leaders feel pulled to protect their teams from psychological distress, and their teams want to be protected from it. For example:

- The leader avoids accountability conversations with team members and outsources them to HR, in the name of being busy.
- The leader devolves too much responsibility to the team, in the name of empowerment.
- Team members pull their leader into resolving conflicts with other team members. In the name of compassion, the leader acts as a mediator instead of pushing the work back to the team's members to resolve their own conflicts like the highly paid adults they are.

Why the team cannot see itself doing this

These patterns are usually invisible to the team enacting them. Most teams have never been taught how groups behave under pressure, so they cannot recognize their own work avoidance patterns as they happen. Sometimes individuals sense that something is off, but they do not know how to describe what they are seeing.

Seeing and naming the avoidance is only the first step. The team still has to be good at actually talking about the real issues. That is where most teams struggle.

FROM THE FIELD

IBM and AT&T

An IBM leadership team was on the verge of losing a \$5B contract with AT&T, the largest telecommunications outsourcing deal in history. IBM's take: AT&T was unreasonable and difficult, unwilling to listen, and resistant to change and innovation.

Early in the engagement, we challenged the leadership team's perspective. We presented behavioral data showing that IBM's own behavior toward AT&T was a root cause of the breakdown: patterns of ineffective communication, faulty assumptions, and how they were showing up in customer meetings. It was a hard conversation, and without their willingness to take it in, nothing else would have shifted.

Once they took responsibility, the team's behavior changed. AT&T later gave IBM this unsolicited feedback: *"I don't know what you guys did to yourselves, but you're like a completely different company to work with."*

OUTCOMES

- \$5B contract secured.
- Revenue targets exceeded by 120%.
- Profit targets exceeded by 130%.

Lesson. *When a team is stuck, the first question isn't what the obstacle is. It's whether the team's story about the obstacle is accurate. The real work often starts with challenging a team's story.*

The gap: Candor

Most people equate candor with saying what you think. This is a misconception for two reasons.

First, it is not what the word means. *Candor* is etymologically about illumination: the act of bringing something into clearer sight. Think about what happens when you bring a candle into a dark room. The Latin root does not refer to the speaker. It refers to the truth being seen. The brightness reveals what is there.

Second, conflating candor with self-expression can be both dangerous and harmful. Dangerous, because it can be weaponized as a justification for saying whatever someone thinks and feels.

Harmful, because the most important thing a team needs to do when confronting the real issues is to tap into the collective intelligence of the group, not engage in a vanity game of point-of-view ping-pong. Each member needs to be good not only at expressing their own views on the real issues, but at helping everyone around the table do the same.

Candor is a collaborative search for the truth in service of the greater good.

What candor requires: four capabilities

Candor is a disciplined practice that requires four distinct but interconnected capabilities:

- **Framing** the purpose of the conversation clearly.
- **Naming and explaining** the real issue.
- **Helping others** frame, name, and explain.
- **Listening** to what other people say, and to your own *small voice*.

Each is a trained skill. Most senior leaders have capability gaps in two or more of them.

What goes wrong: 10 traps and gaps

Holzman has analyzed over 30,000 failed conversations. In every single instance, regardless of prior training, life history, context, company, culture, or country, the person fell into more than one of 10 predictable traps and gaps that contributed significantly to the failure.

- **Traps (errors of commission).** Jumping to action before agreeing on the real issues. Piling on too many points at once. Asking leading questions. Easing in (taking too long to get to the point). Softening (sugar-coating or watering down what you think).
- **Gaps (errors of omission).** Failing to frame the conversation transparently. Failing to express or explore points of view on the real issues. Failing to share or surface the data and reasoning. Failing to name the stakes. Failing to engage the emotions in the room.

Why this happens: the Overprotective Program

The root cause is what Harvard's Chris Argyris discovered in the 1970s and called *Model One*. Holzman calls it the *Overprotective Program*. When people perceive even a modicum of threat, an unconscious universal operating system takes over and blocks leaders from behaving according to their own principles. Comfort blocks courage. Competition blocks curiosity. Control blocks collaboration. Condemnation blocks compassion.

The Overprotective Program is one of the most researched phenomena in organizational behavior since WWII. Most coaches do not even know it exists, have not been trained to recognize it in themselves, and do not know how to help leaders overcome it.

The cost

A team with the candor gap can talk all day about the real issues and make little progress on them, because the leaders around the table keep falling into the predictable pitfalls and have not rewired the Overprotective Programming that drives them.

The work is collective. The development is personal.

A team that courageously tackles the tough, underlying issues depends on members who have learned to manage their own Overprotective Programming: the pull to look good and not bad, be right and not wrong, stay in control, avoid conflict, and condemn others who don't think and behave as we think they should. These anti-truth reflexes do two kinds of damage. They block team members from expressing their own views on the real issues, and from helping others do the same.

As Victor Bultó, Novartis' US President, puts it, "Not everyone will make it in these teams if they have not worked on their own development. How each member responds signals those who are doing the work individually and own it, versus those who are not."

Most of the time that exposure is healthy. The work becomes a forcing event for their development. With the right support, they grow into their potential and contribute more to the team.

In rare cases, the developmental gap is too big to close given the work this team must do in the time it has. That is not a character verdict. It is a mismatch between a person's current developmental level and what this team needs from that seat now. The same person, with more time or a different seat, might close it. Either way, it is critical information the team leader needs to determine what this person's role might be.

SECTION 3

How typical coaching colludes with the avoidance

Most team coaching engagements do not disrupt the team's work avoidance patterns. Many unintentionally reinforce them. The coach gets selected, contracted, deployed; the team has its sessions; new operating norms are put in place; commitments are made; the engagement closes; the protective patterns continue. Sometimes the team feels better. Sometimes the surface markers improve. Real progress on the real issues is rare.

This isn't because team coaches aren't competent. Most are skilled and well-intentioned. The problem is that they have not been trained in the things that would let them disrupt work avoidance patterns and ensure the team is confronting the real issues honestly and effectively. The training exists, but it is niche and rare.

Three capabilities team coaches need but most don't have

Disrupting work avoidance patterns requires extensive group dynamics training, or expertise in a method that embeds the lessons of that work. One can acquire this acumen through formal group dynamics programs in the Tavistock and A.K. Rice tradition, or by

learning from and teaching with Harvard professors like Ron Heifetz and Dean Williams (or their skilled protégés), who teach adaptive leadership group dynamics courses at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Very few team coaches have done either. Holzman's founder has done both, and codified what he learned into the Real Work Method, which our coaches are trained in.

Building a team's candor capability requires a reliable method. Candor, in the way Holzman Leadership thinks about it, is not just saying what you think. It has two faces:

- Asking questions that draw out other people's points of view on the real issues.
- Expressing your own point of view on the real issues in a way that makes people lean in rather than push you away.

The coach has to do both, and has to develop both in the team.

ICF and EMCC certifications produce coaches who are exceptionally good at the first face of candor. The GROW model, which dominates ICF training, builds excellent question-asking discipline. That training is valuable. It is also insufficient. It treats questions as the whole job and rules out the second face of candor by conflating *expressing a clear point of view* with *advising or telling people what to do*. That is a false choice.

We have trained dozens of ICF-credentialed coaches globally. The pattern is consistent: they are excellent at asking questions, but most are unable to express a point of view in a way that engages others, particularly when the conversation is uncomfortable for them. Even ICF's Advanced Certification in Team Coaching (ACTC), the most advanced team coaching credential, does not address this gap.

The popular candor literature (Radical Candor, Crucial Conversations, Difficult Conversations) mostly addresses the second face. It contains some good thinking, but the methods are not built on extensive, field-tested research. They contain gaps and errors about what actually works in the real world, and the good thinking they contain is often not actionable. The coach who relies on them will not have the candor capabilities the team needs.

Coaching the team in systemic work requires the coach to be expert in cross-boundary leadership themselves, and to know how to develop that expertise in others. Systemic coaching is fundamentally about equipping the team to lead beyond the boundaries into the surrounding system. The team needs that capability because most leaders do not possess it.

There is training for team coaches on systemic coaching, including frameworks like Hawkins's Systemic Team Coaching and the stakeholder-mapping work in the ACTC. These give the coach useful tools for the systemic territory. But they do not develop in the coach the ability to lead beyond boundaries, or to impart that capability to others.

FROM THE FIELD

Commercial Oncology at a Top 10 Pharmaceutical Company

The commercial oncology leadership team was facing a crisis. Engagement was low from district managers down to their sales reps, execution was deteriorating, market share was eroding, and Glassdoor reviews of the new Sales Oncology VP were excoriating. The leadership team's account: reps and district managers were resisting being pushed out of their comfort zones to drive new scripts.

Our diagnostic surfaced a different root cause. The leadership team had skipped a step. They had diagnosed the market problem themselves, designed the execution response, and gone straight to holding district managers and reps accountable, without ever bringing the field along on the case for change. The sales organization had never bought into the premise that what they were doing needed to change, so the new mandates landed as solutions to a problem they didn't own. Resistance was the predictable result. Instead of recognizing this, the leadership team blamed the layers below.

Once the team owned their contribution, two things changed. They went back and built the case for change directly with district managers and reps, through forums we designed, rather than mandating it from above. And they equipped both groups to meet the new expectations through training we delivered. The shift in how leadership operated rippled through the workforce.

OUTCOMES

- Sales force engagement up 36% in 12 months.
- Moved from #4 to #1 in customer experience in 18 months.
- Leadership team received 150% of their bonus targets.

Lesson. *You can't hold people accountable for solving a problem they don't believe they have. When execution stalls, the question isn't whether people are resisting. It's whether leadership ever earned their agreement that change was needed.*

SECTION 4

The Ten Commandments of our Real Work Method

What follows are the ten commandments of our Real Work Method. Some we understood from the start, the result of our founder's background, training, and education incorporated into the Method. Others we learned the hard way, by running afoul of them. When we have failed or fallen short in an engagement, it is because we violated one of these.

1 Help the team confront and deal with the real issues.

Everything in the Method serves this. The diagnostics, the workshops, the in-session coaching, the leader development, the agenda discipline: all of it exists to build awareness of the real issues, the courage to face them, and the competence to see them through to a workable resolution.

2 Develop the team's capacity to do the real work without the coach.

Independence is the success marker. The methodology aims to leave the team able to spot avoidance, confront what needs confronting, and hold effective real-issue conversations without us in the room. Engagements that produce dependency on the coach have failed, no matter how good they felt at the time.

We measure success by what the team can sustain after we leave.

3 Do not start team coaching until the foundation is in place.

By team coaching we mean in-the-room work to intervene into how the team operates. The first phase of the engagement (usually the first month) is for building the foundation: a rock-solid contract with the leader, the team's full commitment to change, sufficient psychological safety, foundational candor capability, work avoidance fluency, and clarity on the team's higher purpose. Skip it and the work has nothing to land on, the team resists, and the engagement stalls.

4 Get the real issues on the table, with proper time.

The agenda is the first place real work can go to die. The Method requires concerted time on the agenda for the real issues, identified in advance, with lower-priority and informational items pushed out of the way. Without this, even a team with the foundation in place will not engage the work.

The Truth About Psychological Safety

How this seductive idea can help or hurt a team

Psychological safety should enable the real work. Psychological safety helps a team address the tough, underlying issues by lowering the cost of raising a problem, admitting a mistake, disagreeing with a leader or peers, or asking a question. As Victor Bultó, Novartis' US President, puts it, "value is created through tension and discomfort, but productive and lasting discomfort can only be sustained in a safe environment."

But it can be used to avoid the work too. Treated as an end in itself rather than a means to the real work, psychological safety becomes just another work-avoidance mechanism. When a team makes everyone feeling safe the goal, people stop pursuing the truth in its name, avoiding the real issues that make them feel "unsafe" when they are really just uncomfortable.

What psychological safety is not. Safety is not protection from disagreement or hard feedback. The leader, and everyone else, has to be free to say what needs to be said, including challenging a weak idea directly; a team that cannot push back honestly has mistaken politeness for safety. No environment is, or should be, completely safe. The goal is to make people safe enough to do the real work, not to remove all risk. Aiming to remove every discomfort treats capable adults as fragile. That is not just ineffective; it is disrespectful, and it weakens the very people it claims to protect.

The leader sets the tone. The single biggest influence on whether a team is safe is not what the leader says, but how they behave. People watch their authority figures under a microscope, especially in the hard moments: how the leader reacts to bad news, to a challenge, to being told they are wrong. If the leader meets those moments with curiosity, people learn it is safe to speak. If the leader punishes someone for being honest, even quietly, or lets other team members do it, people learn to stay quiet.

Safety is not the leader's job alone. It is created, or destroyed, in how every member of the team interacts with one another. The team's task is to lower the cost of being wrong, so that a mistake or a hard question is met with curiosity rather than punishment. Everyone is responsible for drawing out, backing, and protecting what others have to say, not only for offering their own view. Colleagues who leave this to the leader have misunderstood their own leadership role.

Individuals can create their own safety. How you ask questions or raise the real issues has an enormous effect on how others respond, and therefore on how safe you feel. Often when people react badly, it is not because of what was said but how it was said: a leading question, jumping to action, piling on. You can assume the environment is unsafe when in fact you mishandled the conversation. The more skilled you are, the more you shape your own environment.

Where the coach comes in. The coach's job is to help the leader, the team, and each individual do all of these things. A team rarely develops these capabilities on its own. The coach is what makes that development happen.

5 Develop the team in the flow of the real work.

Foundational capabilities get built upfront, but real growth happens in the flow of real-issue conversations, where the coach reinforces candor and helps the group recognize and overcome work avoidance. This simultaneously accelerates the team's growth and progress on the real issues. In the early months, the coach corrects directly. Over time, by design and by prior agreement with the team, the coach shifts from correcting to inviting the team to correct itself. By the end of the engagement, the team is doing the work the coach was doing. It is self-correcting.

6 Push as hard and fast as the team can hold, no more, no less.

Push too hard and the team breaks down or rejects the work. Push too softly and the team stays comfortable and never grows. The productive zone is between the two: what we at Holzman call Productive Tension. Our coaches are trained to read what the team can hold and push accordingly, through years of experience, well-developed instincts, and training in Bob Kegan's developmental levels, which enables us to assess team maturity. We also contract with the team upfront to help co-manage the tension. Periodic check-ins during and between meetings keep us honest.

7 Be the kind of coach this work requires.

The Method demands coaches who are not driven by fear, ego, or status-seeking. They are driven by one thing: advancing the team's ability to do the real work. That work demands a particular set of qualities: courage, candor, curiosity, compassion, and collaboration. Our coaches do not just embody these qualities; they role-model them in every interaction with the team and every member of it. And they are not just process facilitators; they are experts in much of what the team needs to learn.

8 Pay attention to what happens outside the meetings.

Team effectiveness is determined as much by how members interact between meetings as by what happens during them. Off-line conversations, informal alignment, post-meeting venting, peer-to-peer accountability: all of it shapes whether the team operates as a team or as individuals who happen to share a leader. The Method develops the team's capabilities and tracks its dynamics across both contexts. Coaching only the formal meeting misses much of where the real work gets done.

9 Use conventional tools as means, not ends.

Norm setting, diagnostics, personality tools, trust-building exercises, and off-sites all have their place. They serve the real work, not the other way around. The risk is that conventional tools become a way for the team to feel productive without doing the work. The Method does not let that happen.

10 Coach the team to lead beyond boundaries when needed.

Some leadership teams also have work to do with leaders, teams, and groups outside their team and organization. The work comes in two forms:

- Collaborating with them to address tough enterprise dilemmas.
- Mobilizing them to tackle their own adaptive challenges.

This is systemic work. It builds on the capabilities the team has developed for its internal work, and extends them: spotting organizational defensive routines, naming system-level work avoidance, recognizing the dynamics by which the wider organization will try to split the team, and designing cross-boundary interventions.

The Method delivers this in three moves. First, foundational training in leading beyond boundaries. Second, concerted time on meeting agendas to address cross-boundary issues, with the coach guiding the team through collective diagnosis and intervention strategy. Third, realistic role-play with in-the-moment coaching to prepare the team to intervene successfully.

FROM THE FIELD

Where I Fell Short: A Message from Our Founder

I worked with the CEO and his leadership team at a global pharmaceutical company. The team needed to become substantially more effective, both in how they worked together and in how they led the organization.

The engagement was deemed successful by the client, and we are proud of what the team accomplished. But I ran afoul of two of our own commandments. I started team coaching before the team had built sufficient candor capabilities and work avoidance fluency. And I did not push hard enough to ensure the real issues had concerted time on the agenda.

The team made meaningful progress despite this, but it took longer, it was harder, and the gains were smaller than they could have been. The shortfall was on me, not the team or the client. It is part of why our current discipline on foundation-building and agenda is tighter than it was.

Lesson. *The commandments are not optional. We learn this the hard way, sometimes on engagements we are otherwise proud of.*

SECTION 5

The Method's impact

1 Massive progress on the real issues.

By the end of an engagement, the team has made profound progress on the tough organizational and business problems that are central to executing the company's strategy. Inside the team itself, inside its own organization, and beyond it when the team's real work is systemic.

2 A self-sustaining team.

The team can spot and overcome work avoidance, hold productive real-issue conversations, and make meaningful progress without the coach in the room. The capabilities they built with us are now their own. We are not needed to maintain what they have become.

3 A profound effect on every individual around the table.

Each person leaves the engagement a wiser leader: more courageous, candid, curious, compassionate, and collaborative. The capabilities travel with them into every interaction and every room they walk into, creating a profound ripple effect across the organization.

4 Bonds that last.

The team comes out of the engagement deeply connected and committed to each other. The trust they have built is real, personal, and durable. They are immensely proud of what they have accomplished together.

5 A role model for other teams.

Other teams in the organization see how this team operates and want what it has. The leadership team's way of working spreads downward and outward, without anyone having to be told to copy it.

FROM THE FIELD

Global Pharma Senior Team Running a \$2 Billion Business

The starting state: an absence of candor, time-consuming meetings producing no decisions, members undermining each other, and no performance review discipline in place. The team needed to become substantially more effective, both in how they worked together and in how they led the organization.

This engagement is a clear example of doing this work well. Rock-solid leader contracting. Foundation-building before in-the-room coaching. Concerted agenda time on the real issues. Real-time development in the flow of the work. Discipline on what we measured.

A significant part of the work was coaching the team to lead beyond their authority, particularly in how they interfaced with the leadership team above them to shape decisions, escalate the right issues at the right time, and influence enterprise direction. The team made profound progress on gnarly organizational and business problems central to executing their strategy.

OUTCOMES

- Candor and communication: from low-performing to high-performing.
- Meeting efficiency dramatically improved; the number of meetings was cut in half.
- Performance discipline instituted: regular tracking against metrics, with root cause analysis and action planning.
- Decision undermining eliminated.
- 8 of 11 members report feeling energized by the team's work together.

Lesson. *When all ten commandments hold across an engagement, the impact follows.*

SECTION 6

Multiplying the good we can do

Holzman Leadership has built the Method, trained its own coaches in it, and can certify coaches at other firms as well.

For organizations that want to scale the Method, we offer a certification in the Method, administered by Holzman, across our clients' approved team coaching providers. The Method becomes a shared standard. Vendors keep their independence. The client gets consistency at the level of how the work is actually done, not just at the level of which tools are used.

The motivation is straightforward. We believe the Method is powerful, and we believe more teams would benefit from it than any single firm can serve directly. By certifying coaches at other firms, we extend its reach.

This is how we multiply the good we can do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Holzman

Todd Holzman is the founder of Holzman Leadership, whose Real Work Method is used by Fortune 500, FTSE 100, and Global 1000 companies including American Express, Bristol-Myers Squibb, British Telecom, Editas, Nestlé, and Red Bull to transform their leaders, teams, cultures, and business performance.

A former leadership coach to IBM's top executives, Head of Organization Development at Honeywell, and a fellow with McKinsey's Change Center, Todd has trained government leaders from around the world at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, developed doctoral students at Columbia University, and built a global faculty of experts in the Method.

He and his global faculty have helped tens of thousands of people deepen their leadership capabilities and solve their toughest problems using the Method. They have also enabled clients to achieve scale by training, certifying, and supporting hundreds of coaches and trainers in the Method.

A Forbes Coaches Council member, LinkedIn author, and SHRM keynote speaker and podcast guest, Todd holds a B.S. in Industrial and Labor Relations from Cornell University, an M.A. in Organizational Psychology from Columbia University, and an Ed.M. in Leadership and Adult Development from Harvard University. He is also:

- An expert in Argyris's Organizational Learning Methodology
- An A.K. Rice Trained Group Dynamics Facilitator
- A Kegan Vertical Development Levels Trained Assessor
- A McClelland Social Motives Certified Achievement Scorer
- A Professional Life Coach, Certified Life Coach Institute
- A Member of Heifetz's Adaptive Leadership Network