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BY GINKA TOEGEL AND JEAN-LOUIS BARSOUX

**I**n 2008, Theranos engineer Aaron Moore created a mock ad for a prototype of the company's blood testing device. Intended as a prank to amuse his colleagues, his ad described the device as "mostly functional" and included "leeches" among its "blood collection accessories."<sup>1</sup>

Now, with hindsight, we can interpret his spoof not just as a joke but as a desperate bid to raise a taboo subject: The company's device didn't work and the leadership team was hiding that fact. Moore's actions spoke volumes about the undiscussables at Theranos.

Undiscussables exist because they help people avoid short-term conflicts, threats, and embarrassment. But they also short-circuit the inquiries and challenges essential to both improving performance and promoting team learning. Our consulting work with dozens of senior management teams has taught us that a team's ability to discuss what is holding it back is

THE

ANALYSIS

The authors reviewed various streams of research on team effectiveness and dysfunction, connecting the dominant management and social psychology perspectives on teams with the often-neglected psychodynamic literature on groups.

Along with their consulting work with senior management teams, the authors have studied group dynamics in elite sports teams, orchestras, medical teams, and a hostage negotiation team.

Their insights have been validated and refined by participants in executive education programs at IMD over the past 10 years.

what drives its effectiveness. We have observed this dynamic in a wide variety of settings and have drawn on this experience to propose a framework, a set of diagnostic questions, and some targeted solutions to help teams address their own undiscussables. This approach enables team leaders to identify the dominant undiscussables in their businesses and kick-start the necessary conversations to bring them to light.

At Theranos, CEO Elizabeth Holmes and her top team were unwilling even to acknowledge concerns that were obvious to many of their engineers. It was significant that Moore didn't share his misgivings directly with his bosses but expressed them sarcastically and anonymously.

When Holmes was told about the prank ad, she launched an investigation to identify the culprit. Instead of triggering debate, her actions reinforced the message that problems with the company's product were not to be discussed. Within months of being reprimanded, Moore resigned, frustrated and disillusioned.

The Theranos case illustrates what can happen when questioning voices are silenced and topics placed off-limits. At Theranos, that created a culture of fear and denial that ultimately led to false claims made to investors and customers, as well as decisions that jeopardized patient health. The once-inspiring Theranos story ended with criminal fraud charges filed against Holmes and the collapse of a startup previously valued at \$9 billion.

While Theranos represents an extreme case of a dysfunctional organization, the underlying issue — team undiscussables — is all too common. And it's getting worse as increasingly virtual and globally distributed teams find it harder to pick up signals of discomfort and anticipate misunderstandings. With fewer opportunities to raise undiscussables face-to-face (casually, over lunch or coffee), it becomes even more important to identify and air concerns before they escalate and team and organizational performance begin to suffer.

**A Misunderstood Problem**

When the leadership teams we work with struggle with undiscussables, the symptoms they present to us range from unresolved conflicts among team members and uneven participation in meetings to destructive groupthink and employee

disengagement. We have studied group dynamics in numerous nonbusiness settings, too — including elite sports teams, orchestras, medical teams, and a hostage negotiation team — and the pattern holds across contexts and levels: The more undiscussables there are, the more difficult it is for the team to function. If they aren't discussed collectively, they can't be managed intelligently.

Yet team leaders tend to overestimate the risks of raising undiscussables. They assume incorrectly that talking about negative subjects will sap team energy, reveal issues they cannot resolve, and expose them to blame for the part they played in creating the problems the group faces.

In reality, we've found that discussing undiscussables brings relief, boosts energy, and bolsters team goodwill.

Team leaders also underestimate the consequences of doing nothing to address undiscussables. Ignoring them invariably results in strained working relationships that produce ineffective meetings marked by a lack of debate. This leads to bad decisions that are made worse, because without open, honest discussion, a team cannot learn from its mistakes or correct course. Left unmanaged, undiscussables contaminate the team, choking its problem-solving abilities and capacity to learn and adapt to change.

**Four Layers of Undiscussability**

Executives often talk about undiscussables as though they were all the same: views people hold and choose not to air in public. They are typically described as the *elephant in the room*, the *800-pound gorilla*, or the *dead moose*. Thinking this way both overlooks their complexity and makes them more fearsome. We propose a multifaceted view of undiscussables. The thinking-saying gap (Theranos engineers knew their device didn't work but couldn't say so) is just one category. There is also the saying-meaning gap, the feeling-naming gap, and the doing-knowing gap. (See "Mind the Gaps.")

Each type of undiscussable has its own drivers. Some emerge from cognitive barriers, others from emotional ones. Some are known to everyone on the team, while others are sensed only by a few or are utterly unknown, existing outside the team's collective consciousness. Different types of undiscussables

need to be surfaced in different ways. Some can be drawn out through direct questions; others must be inferred from patterns of behavior and then validated with the team. (See “Diagnosing the Problem: A Checklist,” p. 40, for questions leaders can ask to identify their teams’ undiscussables.)

Although the following categories overlap somewhat, differentiating between types of undiscussables can help you tackle them more effectively.

**1. You THINK but dare not say.** Undiscussables are most commonly associated with risky questions, suggestions, and criticisms that are self-censored. You may joke about them (as Moore did at Theranos) or discuss them confidentially but never openly.

For example, the incoming CEO in the Australian subsidiary of a global information company quickly noted her new team’s wary exchanges in meetings and team members’ disconcerting tendency to nod approvingly in public only to criticize in private. They were unaccustomed to speaking their minds. Coming in with a tough change mandate, the CEO needed her team’s honest input and wholehearted buy-in. She had to address its cautious behavior.

Views are left unspoken mostly when people fear the consequences of speaking, whether the risk is real or imagined. The main driver of this fear is often team leaders with an emotional, erratic management style and a reputation for responding harshly when people disagree with them. That makes team members feel unsafe.

As research by Harvard professor Amy Edmondson has shown, a critical barrier to psychological safety is the weight of hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> Power and status differences tend to discourage team members from bringing up issues or concerns they think the leader may view as disruptive or even none of their business.

**Beginning the fix:** How can leaders minimize those power differences and make it safe to speak up? By explicitly acknowledging they may unwittingly have created a climate of fear or uncertainty, inviting discussion about sensitive issues, drawing out concerns, promising immunity to those who share dissenting views, and lightening the weight of their authority in the room.

In the Australian subsidiary, the CEO took several concrete actions. To model her commitment to

## MIND THE GAPS

Teams struggle with undiscussables when they...

... **THINK** but dare not say

... **SAY** but don’t mean

... **FEEL** but can’t name

... **DO** but don’t realize

openness and reduce mistrust, she asked the team to submit anonymous questions in writing about her style and her intentions. She then asked the HR head to run an honest dialogue session with the team (while she was absent) to encourage productive disagreement. The session focused on the difference between *straight talk* and *fight talk*.<sup>3</sup> While both styles of communication are based on candor, straight talk distinguishes clearly between the individual and the issue; fight talk conflates them.

In subsequent meetings, with the CEO present, whenever the team seemed reluctant to push back on a proposal, she would say, “I feel there might be something else. ... Let’s see if it would help for me to leave the room. And when I come back, I want you as a team to share your concerns.” This helped free people from their inhibitions. Eventually, as the team realized the CEO really did want constructive push-back, leaving the room became unnecessary. She also replaced the rectangular meeting table with a round one to signal a more egalitarian environment and foster more intimate interactions.

To encourage genuine give-and-take, team leaders must play a supportive role and be very conscious of how volubly they express themselves during discussions. They should avoid stating their preferences or opinions at the beginning of team discussions and refrain from immediately judging the contributions of others. They also can show

**DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM: A CHECKLIST**

Here are some signs that your team may be struggling with one or more of the four types of undiscussables.

| <b>1. DO TEAM MEMBERS THINK THINGS THEY DARE NOT SAY?</b>   |  |
|---|--|
| Do they agree publicly during meetings but disagree (and vent) privately?                                   |  |
| Do they often use sarcasm, silence, or nonverbal gestures to signal disagreement?                           |  |
| Do they focus on managing up in meetings?   |  |
| <b>2. DO THEY SAY THEY SHARE CERTAIN VALUES BUT FAIL TO PRACTICE THEM?</b>                                  |  |
| Are team meetings too undemanding and unrealistically upbeat?   |  |
| Do people cling to an image of cohesiveness, frowning on any criticism of the team as a sign of disloyalty? |  |
| Do they always seem to adopt similar perspectives on problems?  |  |
| <b>3. DO THEY HAVE NEGATIVE FEELINGS THEY CAN'T NAME?</b>   |  |
| Do meetings feel antagonistic (tempers fray; disagreements become personal)?                                |  |
| Are people reluctant to comment on issues outside their direct responsibilities?                            |  |
| Do team members organize themselves into rigid factions?  |  |
| <b>4. ARE THEY UNWITTINGLY ENGAGING IN UNPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIORS?</b>  |  |
| Does the team have trouble identifying root causes for its ineffectiveness?                                 |  |
| Does it spin its wheels on minor issues?  |  |
| Do important items often get postponed or fall between the cracks?  |  |

that they are part of the group by sharing their mistakes and engaging in *maintenance behaviors*, including saying “we” rather than “I,” encouraging team members to voice their concerns, and acknowledging their contributions.

In short order, the Australian information company’s team meetings grew more productive as these new expectations and processes were internalized and became routine. The CEO was able to execute her change mandate successfully, and team development, both individual and collective, accelerated. Team members took the functioning of their team more seriously and carried the same principles into meetings with other teams.

**2. You SAY but don’t mean.** Alongside unspoken truths, there are spoken untruths. These undiscussables reflect discrepancies between what the team says it believes or finds important and how it behaves (what academics have described as gaps between *espoused theory* and *theory-in-use*).<sup>4</sup>

Teams often proclaim but fail to follow certain values, objectives, or practices that are supposed to guide and inspire them and create a sense of togetherness. The disconnect between what’s said and what’s done is visible to all, but no one points it

out for fear of endangering the team’s cohesion, even if that cohesion is based on a shared illusion.

Here’s an example: The top team of a Scandinavian paper giant struggled with plunging demand for paper caused by digitalization. In response, the tight-knit leadership team declared its commitment to “reinvent the company.” In reality, all the team talked about in meetings and retreats was efficiencies and cost cutting.

The chief concern in such teams is protecting the group, as opposed to protecting the individual in the *think-but-dare-not-say* category of undiscussables. Silence is not based on fear as much as on an unquestioned and distorted sense of loyalty to the team, its leader, or the organization. Drawing attention to the disconnect between intentions and actions would feel like letting down colleagues and killing team spirit. This false positivity, which people express by simply mouthing accepted values, practices, and objectives — the espoused theory — hides any concerns that the team might be incapable of making the necessary changes to the organization and that people might lose their jobs as a result. This protective impulse may appear innocent, but in the long run, it undermines learning and leads to disillusionment as people stop trusting the value of one another’s words and commitments.

**Beginning the fix:** Team leaders must first expose the hypocrisy of *saying but not meaning* and acknowledge their part in the charade, collecting anonymous examples of empty proclamations and challenging the overprotective mindset that inhibits the airing of criticism. They can initiate the process by asking the team to complete this sentence: “We say we want to . . . , but in fact, we . . . .”

As the paper company prepared for yet another round of downsizing, it was becoming increasingly difficult to pretend that the team was reinventing the business. The cognitive dissonance between the mantra and the reality became too great for the CEO to accept. “In one of these endless group executive meetings,” he told us, “I listened to myself and all my good, hard-working colleagues, and then I lost my temper and I said, ‘What are we doing here? We’re telling the same story time and again: How tough life is. How the government doesn’t understand us. The customers are tough; the competition is unfair. We’re talking, talking, talking about what the world is doing to us.’”

The CEO acknowledged that the team was not, in fact, doing what it said it was doing nor what the company needed: reinventing its business model and processes. In this way, he demonstrated the level of candor and self-criticism needed to break the team out of its slump, closing the gap between *meaning* and *saying*.

His frankness also freed the team to reflect on other delusions that were keeping it idling. It soon concluded that its capacity for reinvention was constrained by the group’s homogeneity.

So the team decided to assign the reinvention challenge to a more diverse group of 12 people who included more women, people with experience outside the paper industry, and non-Nordics. This team would function as internal consultants. Handpicked from 160 internal applicants, the

group was eclectic and far better equipped to imagine out-of-the-box solutions. Eight years on, the organization has transformed itself into a company specializing in renewable materials. According to the former CEO, the dynamics within the team also changed dramatically. “I think we have a very open dialogue now. We don’t argue anymore about ‘Is the world changing or not?’ It’s already changed. Now, it’s all about, ‘Can we get ahead of the curve? Can we change the world for the better?’”

Team leaders play a key role in initiating the soul-searching, ensuring that the organization’s stated goal is the real goal, stressing a collective responsibility to keep one another honest, listening to alternative viewpoints, and breaking down the unproductive and misconceived connection between criticism and disloyalty.

**3. You FEEL but can’t name.** Some undiscussables are rooted in negative feelings — such as annoyance, mistrust, and frustration — that are difficult for team members to label or express constructively. But manifesting one’s anger or resentment is not the same thing as discussing it.

For example, the top team of a German-based high-tech company was thrown into turmoil by unspoken tensions between two colleagues: one a fast-rising CTO, the other a recently hired COO. Following a series of clashes, they had stopped talking. Each felt the other was behaving unreasonably.

The behavior or comments of colleagues with divergent perspectives can trigger allergic reactions, often based on misunderstandings. Research shows that healthy disagreements over what to do or how to do it can morph quickly into interpersonal conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Too easily blamed on a vague “lack of chemistry,” these feelings can infect the whole team, especially when the pressure is on. Just one touchy relationship is enough to generate a malaise



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## Healthy disagreements can morph quickly into interpersonal conflicts. Just one touchy relationship is enough to generate a malaise that hinders team deliberations through emotional and social contagion.

that hinders team deliberations through emotional and social contagion.<sup>6</sup>

Faulty perceptions mostly go uncorrected because the antagonists don't test their inferences. Based on their own worldviews and self-protective instincts, they presume they know why the other party is acting in a particular way and let that drive their behavior. This leads to escalating tensions.

**Beginning the fix:** The feuding parties need help to investigate the differences — in personality, experience, and identity — that sustain and fuel their apparent incompatibilities, their so-called lack of chemistry. The team leader's role is to ensure that individuals feel equally welcome and accepted within the team and promote diversity as a source of insight, not friction. One strategy is to ask team members to complete the sentence "I feel ..." to literally put a name to the feeling to surface whatever is bothering them.

A neutral coach can help team members open up by asking essential follow-on questions and probing for clarification when needed. This process can be augmented with a formal assessment tool that captures individual team members' personality profiles and a common framework that helps people understand the roots of their colleagues' behaviors.

In the case of the German high-tech company's CTO and COO, a striking contrast in their profiles offered insight into some of the difficulties they were having. On one dimension of the personality assessment, the COO favored big picture thinking and gravitated toward new ideas, while the CTO was extremely detail-oriented and practical, leaning toward the tried-and-true. This insight helped explain why the CTO constantly raised objections to the COO's sweeping solutions to problems.

In the process of discussing how their personality scores tallied with their self-images, another factor emerged: The COO saw himself as a problem

solver, while the CTO defined himself as a self-starter, relying on his own independent judgment.

These differences in self-image helped explain why the valuable experience of the COO was resisted by the CTO, who resented interference and dreaded becoming "dependent." At the same time, the COO felt frustrated that he was being prevented from solving the problem. The CTO appeared to the COO as a know-it-all; the COO saw the CTO as someone who could not and would not take advice. Unwittingly, each behaved in a way that refuted the other's core work identity. Inevitably, they drove each other crazy.

To diminish such tensions, you must try to disentangle intent from impact. Even if feedback and advice are well intentioned, they may challenge another person's self-image as competent, honest, or likable, triggering a strong, negative emotional response.

Once you understand where colleagues are coming from, it becomes easier to value and leverage their input without taking their comments or behavioral quirks as attempts to show off, frustrate, or take advantage. But self-knowledge is equally valuable: When you can see and describe your own tendencies accurately, your colleagues are less likely to take *your* quirks personally.

The breakthrough, in the case of the high-tech company's CTO and COO, was a role-play exercise, asking each to put himself in the other's shoes. They proved so adept at describing how the other felt that they ended up laughing. There was no lack of empathy — just very different approaches and priorities. Realizing that their respective behaviors were not malevolent or personal, they were able to start working together more effectively, recognizing the contributions each could make to the other and their organization. They also were able to get feedback from other team members to help them maintain the behavioral changes to which they had agreed.



## The good news is that destructive and unconscious dynamics lose their power when they become visible and a topic for discussion.

**4. You DO but don't realize.** The deepest undiscussables are collectively held unconscious behaviors. These undiscussables are the most difficult to uncover. Members of the team may be aware of isolated problems in their dynamic, but they cannot connect the dots and infer root causes, so they jump to the wrong conclusions about what is behind team inefficiencies and poor performance.

Consider this example: The CEO of a French travel company complained about the dearth of debate and lack of engagement within his team. We sat in on one meeting, and he was right. The trouble was, he was the problem. He was disengaged and easily distracted, and team members unconsciously got the message that they were not important to him.

This is what psychologists call *projection*, wherein we ascribe our own thoughts and feelings to someone else. The CEO was disengaged, so he thought the team was. Of course, the team quickly replicated his behavior, becoming disengaged itself, and the CEO had no idea he inspired it.

Teams instinctively develop defensive routines to cope with anxiety, such as that generated by feeling ignored or undervalued. This allows them to avoid thinking about or even naming the underlying issues. But it also blocks learning, preventing the team from responding and adapting effectively to emerging challenges. Team members at the travel company were unwittingly mimicking their leader; that was their coping mechanism. If they were checked out, they wouldn't be bothered by the fact that he was.

As described by British psychotherapist Wilfred Bion, unconscious and unacknowledged undiscussables manifest in seemingly unrelated team dynamics — hence the difficulty connecting the dots. At the travel company, there were hub-and-spoke exchanges with the team leader that prevented team members from interacting, conversations dominated by the same two people, and a distracting preoccupation with a fake foe. All these

interactions impeded critical self-review.<sup>7</sup> And they disguised the true source of dysfunction.

Behavior patterns that emerge from anxiety begin on an unconscious level and then become part of “the way we do things.” Team members fall into rigid roles, sit in the same chairs, and follow rituals that impair their ability to question assumptions and get their jobs done.

**Beginning the fix:** Though unnoticed by the team, warped interaction patterns may be readily discernible to outsiders. The team leader can invite a trusted adviser from another part of the organization or an external facilitator to observe the team and give feedback on communication habits, including body language, who talks and how often, whom people look at when they talk, who interrupts whom, who or what is blamed when things go wrong, what is not spoken about, who stays silent, and whose comments are ignored.

A trained observer can then engage in what MIT Sloan School of Management's pioneering organizational psychologist Edgar Schein calls *humble inquiry*, in which the aim is to elicit information and feelings important to the team's mission. The questioner's outsider status allows for naive, unthreatening questioning of the unconscious processes at play.<sup>8</sup> The Five Whys technique (asking “Why?” at least five times), made famous in Six Sigma methodology, can help the outsider drill down to deeper levels and surface what the team is avoiding.

Prior to beginning our work at the travel company, we asked to film one of the top team's meetings (this is part of our usual process). We saw that there were lots of side conversations. People slouched and fiddled with their phones during presentations. The impression was of a group going through the motions.

Then, we showed the team a series of clips focusing on all the occasions the CEO was distracted by his phone. Initial amusement turned to embarrassment as the sequence ran on and on, but we

interrupted it after three minutes and told the team, “Tell us what you see.”

The CEO was shocked. “Had you told me I was doing it, I wouldn’t have believed you,” he said. The team members were also surprised, but once the evidence was visible to them, they had little difficulty decoding the message the CEO was sending: a lack of respect and appreciation for other people and their work. Of course, that discouraged open debate. The CEO’s behavior also authorized the team to act in similar fashion, producing the very outcomes — disengagement and unproductive meetings — that he complained about.

The good news is that these destructive and unconscious dynamics lose their power when they become visible and a topic for discussion. But, to help reset their behavior in meetings and inculcate new habits, the team members also took two concrete measures: They agreed to a one-month ban on devices in their meetings (with fines donated to charity for violations), and they drew up a team charter clarifying new behavioral expectations that included listening to each other, asking more questions, delaying assumptions, and summarizing conclusions and follow-up actions.

As is often the case, the content of the charter was not particularly original, but it empowered every team member to enforce the new ground rules *in the moment* by pointing to the prominently displayed document they had all signed. Six months later, the CEO told us that the team’s meetings were shorter, more focused, and generating richer debate.

## Team Detox

Most teams have — and suffer from — undiscussables in all four categories. But instead of trying to fix all of them at once, we advise team leaders to take a sequential approach, starting with the two more conscious categories they can have an immediate impact on: *knowing but not daring to say* and *saying but not meaning it*.

**First things first.** The best point of entry is making sure “we do what we say.” This is low-hanging fruit, as the consequences of “not doing what we say” are visible to all and reflect a collective failing rather than an individual one. Also, when the top team is involved, a misalignment between words and actions can have a profoundly corrosive impact

on the entire organization, leading to cynicism, disengagement, and conflicts at all levels.

As team leader, you are well placed to start the conversation about how to improve team processes and address dysfunctional communication patterns. You can engage in some preparatory reflection by asking yourself, “Is this a problem I have helped create?” Acknowledging your own responsibility is a powerful way of unblocking the discussion and setting an expectation of candor.

Easy wins can help team members realize that what they gain will outweigh the pain — generating momentum to move from above-the-surface undiscussables to deeper undiscussables that usually require facilitation or external intervention.

**Team time.** Surfacing and removing undiscussables is never a one-off exercise. To prevent the buildup of new undiscussables, you have to make time for inward-focused team talk, not just outward-focused work talk.

We once studied a Swiss negotiating team specializing in kidnappings and hostage situations.

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Robert W. Holland, Jr.

With the stakes so high, the team could not afford to let undiscussables disrupt its process. The team was outstanding at monitoring its dynamics in real time (with the assistance of a designated observer), as well as reviewing what happened, taking account of feelings as well as facts.

Similar principles hold in business. High-performing teams pay attention not only to what they achieve but how they achieved it by working together. This does not come naturally. You have to work at it and introduce routines and forums to purge your team of undiscussables before they take root and cause problems.

The top team of a fast-expanding European software group we worked with systematically devotes half a day during its twice-yearly retreats to a discussion of how the team is working together. The session is facilitated by the head of HR, who tells them, “You’re all busy running your areas. If you’ve stepped on one another’s toes along the way, now’s the time to get it out on the table.” As a more regular exercise, at the end of meetings, the CEO sometimes asks team members to complete the phrase “I’m concerned about . . .” to try to catch potential issues early on.

We have seen other teams use similarly simple practices to prevent undiscussables from accumulating. Some adopt a check-in routine at the start of meetings to iron out niggling concerns that might be bothering the participants. An alternative is to air these matters at the end of meetings by going around the table three times, asking, “What was helpful?” “What was not helpful?” and “What would you do differently at the next meeting?”

A healthy team must be able to review and revise its own functioning.

**Exception to the rule.** While the pressure to avoid tough issues never lets up, surfacing undiscussables almost always pays off — provided it is done in a constructive manner.

There is just one situation where we would not recommend it: If you’ve inherited a dysfunctional team and have to achieve something fast, spending time diagnosing and unearthing undiscussables may not be an optimal approach.

In such instances, it is often more effective to adopt a positive psychology strategy, applying appreciative inquiry, such as discussing what the team

does well or has done right, with the same forensic rigor you would apply to unpacking dysfunctional behaviors and events, and building from there.<sup>9</sup> The goal in this situation is to find ways to work around any weaknesses and align strengths to develop positive emotions and relationships before taking on the hard work of discussing undiscussables.

However, the takeaway remains the same: In an increasingly fast-paced world, teams desperately need a space to talk about the way they go about their business.

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