



# Part 2: The Distance Between Them and Us

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In part one of The Distance Between Them and Us I went into some detail about the fact that it does not take much for someone to feel disconnected from a group. On paper they have a defined position on the team, but in reality they feel like an orbiting satellite set at a fixed distance with occasional communication.

The archaic way of thinking is to just get over it and deal with the situation. This view is based on ignorance in the light of the findings from different scientific fields. It is akin to saying the the Earth is the centre of the known universe and basing our decisions on such a falsehood.

## Ep5 Part 2: MINDtalk - The Social Brain & Dysfunctional Teams

Unfortunately, I still find this thinking rooted in the number of organisations I collaborate with. We no longer have to guess what the fallout is when teams fragment and 'them vs. us' thinking takes root. It is detrimental and destructive any way you cut it.

Over the last 15 years working with teams, I have found that complicated management theory and personality tests tend to cloud the waters and over-complicate the issue. These tools have their use, but unless the underlying faults in the human relationship are resolved it's like painting over a wall to hide the cracks and mold. Eventually, what was hidden will come to the surface. It's just a question of time.

The fact is social pain is real and it triggers specific structures and functions in our brains. This in turn, affects the quality of our communication, collaboration, decision-making and so on.

If concrete actions are not taken within a team to address the issues causing social pain this only puts more pressure on already expanding fissures between members of a team. One of the issues, in a fixed cluster of issues, I'd like to address in this post are cognitive biases.

### **COGNITIVE BIASES IN WORKING RELATIONSHIPS**

A cognitive bias (CB) is a mental short-cut the brain makes to come to a decision more quickly by forgoing time-consuming analysis. Mental short cuts have their advantages by saving time and mental energy. The downside is when there is not enough cognitive investment in situations that require it.

We fall into rigid thinking patterns that severely restrict our ability to respond with flexible thinking.

There are a number of CBs that fragment teams and if not addressed can literally create deep dissension in it's ranks. I want to address three particular CBs that are relevant to this topic.

## **IN-GROUP OUT-GROUP BIAS**

The first is In-Group, Out-Group Bias where the tendency is to favour members of the in-group over those of the out-group. This is quite evident when you see a team begin to fragment into smaller cliques.

When we fall into this CB we tend to no longer see what traits we have in common or that we share a common purpose or goal. What begins to stand out are the things that make us different. I am not talking about individuality, but instead the walls that will define our separation. We actively seek those traits, and not always consciously, that help us to push them further away from us. This is the moment when that point 'us-versus-them' thinking crystallises. This triggers the second CB.

## **FUNDAMENTAL ATTRIBUTION ERROR**

Fundamental Attribution Error is the tendency to assign mistakes we make to the situation, whereas we assign any mistakes made by those outside of our group to their personality. This means we blame situational factors for our own behaviour and blame personality factors on other's behaviour. This can lead us to think any negative behaviour is the result of personality rather than situation. For instance, I cut someone off in traffic because I was late for a meeting. But the driver who cut me off 5 minutes earlier was simply a lousy driver and inconsiderate bonehead.

In a team setting we become hyper aware of any gesture, remark or action to that leads to a mistake and attribute to the person and not the situation. It becomes that much easier to distance ourselves from them. This is where the third CB comes into play.

## **CONFIRMATION BIAS**

Confirmation Bias causes us to focus only on events and information that support our negative beliefs about the personality of the other person. It causes us to discount or ignore information that goes against our beliefs.

That is, we have a tendency to see only what we want to see. Confirmation bias is even stronger for emotionally charged issues, which is synonymous with dysfunctional teams. So over time, we are convinced that the personality of the out-group is the cause of all the team's problems, and we won't be convinced otherwise.

In conclusion, half of the battle of turning a dysfunctional team back into a functional one is the awareness of the underlying mechanisms of the brain and cognitive biases function in relationships. It is only by knowing what is really going on that we can to the right corrective measures to address to the problems that are inherent in most teams.

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