

Challenge

Top 10 threats that kill results

Challenge is the opposite of threat. Challenge turns on the PFC, while threat shuts it down. Think about the last time you were under physical threat: Maybe a person in a dark parking lot made you feel uncomfortable. Maybe a snake slithered across your foot. Maybe the airplane dropped unexpectedly because of turbulence. Maybe you heard your child scream. I'm guessing you didn't pause and consciously evaluate whether the threat was physical, emotional, or psychological so that you could respond accordingly. Most likely, your heart rate increased, your jaw clenched, you responded with a knee-jerk reaction, and you may have used descriptive language.

Just guessing.

A few years ago, I traveled to Boston to facilitate a workshop. (I'm from Texas, which is an important detail for this story.) It was the middle of winter in Boston, which looks very different from the middle of winter in Texas. Around 3 a.m., the fire alarm went off in my hotel. I came out of a dead sleep and reacted the way any sane person from Texas would—I ran outside into three feet of snow. No coat. No shoes.

Needless to say, the wait for the fire truck was not only miserable but also a little embarrassing. Though there were several of us standing out in the cold, unprepared, others had the forethought to put on shoes and wrap up in a coat; a few overachievers even grabbed hats and gloves.

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We'll come back to that story later. For now, it demonstrates some important points. First, my brain, like any brain, simply reacted to threat. In that instance, as in so many others, I never paused to reflect on what kind of threat I was facing. I reacted. In the same way, I don't pause to reflect on the kind of threat I am facing when a ball is flying at my head, a car swerves into my lane, or someone humiliates me in public.

My brain reacts. So does yours. In our reacting, we "lose" our full ability to exercise higher-order critical-thinking skills. The brain simply reacts to threat, whether it is physical (like a poisonous snake) or psychological (like a poisonous comment).

So, what are the top threats that impact performance in the workplace? What are the threats that cultures high in threat allow and cultures high in challenge should be on the lookout to prevent and work to minimize? My list of the Top 10 threats lurking in the workplace are those I have observed, consulted and coached on, and developed learning solutions for over the course of more than 20 years.

Threat #1: Social rejection

In 2011, the University of Michigan studied similarities of physical pain and the pain of social rejection using fMRI—functional magnetic resonance imaging scans. As one article described, during the rejection task, participants who had experienced an unwanted romantic breakup within the last six months viewed a photo of their ex-partner and thought about their feelings.

Challenge

During the physical pain task, a thermal stimulation device, attached to the participant's forearm, either gave a painful but tolerable stimulation or a non-painful, warm stimulation. The result? Not to over-simplify, but the study found "pain" and "hurt" are very closely related. Similar to Big Deal #2, this study established that in the brain, physical pain and the pain of social rejection are virtually identical. Both "hurt" in very similar ways. The study demonstrated an overlap between these two experiences in two brain regions—the secondary somatosensory cortex and the dorsal posterior insula.

Social rejection can exist in any culture where humans are involved—at any age, of any ethnicity or background, with any title or socioeconomic status. From the team member who feels excluded to the child bullied on the playground, relationships and a feeling of being accepted matters.

Threat cultures exclude; challenge cultures include. Challenge cultures know the value of a sense of belonging and seek ways to ensure that happens. Through formal programs like precepting and mentoring and informal exercises such as teambuilding and interaction with leaders, challenge cultures address the importance of feeling connected to others.

Threat #2: Change

Good or bad, change presents an element of threat. A few years ago, my dishwasher died, and I had a new one installed. Good change, right? Energy efficient, quieter,

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holds larger loads, blah, blah, blah. The design was different from my old one, causing a major interruption to my OCD-like tendencies of stacking the dishes just so.

My new dishwasher caused me to reevaluate, make adjustments, and learn a new system—to slow down a bit before I could speed back up. Such is the nature of change. Whether it is an improved piece of technology, an adjusted swing for a softball player, or a new organizational chart, change causes a hiccup in the flow of life. Your brain strives for homeostasis, the tendency for processes and systems to stay stable and consistent. This is an awesome quality for your blood pressure and body temperature. It can, however, be a major obstacle when it comes to changing thoughts and well-established behaviors.

Threat cultures plow through change with very little consideration for processing time, additional training and support, or giving the compelling reasons for the alterations. They are rarely successful in implementing large-scale changes and blame others or outside forces for the failure. Challenge cultures know that change is easy until it involves humans. Therefore, they evaluate the resources needed for a successful change, allow adequate time and provide support, and follow a calculated, proven change management process.

Threat #3: Unrealistic standards

I've noticed that when people I coach are faced with standards they do not have the resources or capabilities

Challenge

to meet, the result can leave them feeling devastated and hopeless. They begin to use words like “drowning,” “overwhelmed,” “frustrated,” and “discouraged.” It’s easy to catastrophize these situations because not meeting expectations is threat and hinders the brain from working at peak performance.

Situations where we are caught in the trap of unrealistic standards always reminds me of one of my favorite books, Joseph Heller’s classic novel *Catch-22*. Essentially, a Catch-22 represents an unrealistic standard, an unsolvable problem, a lose-lose situation. It is a crazy-maker. It shows up in all areas of life: Professionally, as a demand to produce more without the necessary time and resources. Academically, as a requirement to pass a standardized test without the resources to prepare for the test. Personally, as a desire to please an addicted spouse whose erratic behavior cannot be pleased. Catch-22 situations can pop up in any area of our lives. And when they do, our brain is under threat.

In threat cultures, standards are unrealistic—sometimes they cannot be humanly accomplished, and sometimes they are unclear or elusive, moving targets. In challenge cultures, however, not only are standards clear and measured, they also reflect the values by which the standards are to be accomplished. People have involvement and ownership in establishing such standards, and accomplishments toward achieving them are recognized and rewarded.

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Threat #4: Lack of resources

I often say Threat #4 is the best friend of Threat #3 because the two are virtually inseparable. The threat of unrealistic standards is most often felt because of a lack of resources. Threat results when there is a lack of any resource: time, money, health, and people.

The father of brain-based learning, Eric Jensen, is passionate about educating teachers in the differences among children living and learning in impoverished areas. He points out in *Teaching with Poverty in Mind* that the poverty problem is not solely about money, as most people assume. Rather, these children are at a disadvantage because of a number of inadequate resources. They lack stability as they move twice as often and get evicted five times as often as other children. They lack safety as they are six times greater to be in pedestrian accidents as other children. They lack encouragement as significant adults in their lives, such as teachers, do not expect them to achieve as they do for other children. Additionally, they lack health resources, moral support resources, nutritional resources, and on and on.

The cumulative effect of these deficiencies impacts performance of all types—academic, relationship, individual accomplishment, and so forth. A lack of resources can create a vicious cycle of threat culture, underperformance, and hopelessness. With many groups I encounter, expectations are high but resources are unreasonably minimal. Clearly, there is a fine line. We

Challenge

want to streamline and operate as leanly as possible to maximize resources and maintain a competitive edge. Threat happens when the culture is streamlined to the extreme, with employees doing jobs that once were fulfilled by two or three or more people.

Working recently with one of my client organizations, team members were expected to acquire the skills to implement a new piece of medical equipment, but there was a freeze on training and professional development.

Budgets are always tight, and this trend is likely to continue. It's not all bad, because it forces organizations to run lean, be innovative, and exercise good stewardship. We do have technology that, in theory, should allow us to do more, more efficiently, with fewer assets. In reality, however, the workload increases at lightning speed while the people, financial, and time resources plummet. Unlike threat cultures, challenge cultures assess and address the resources necessary to meet the expectations.

Threat #5: Risk of loss

Clearly, loss represents threat. And it can appear in innumerable ways. One that is common in organizations is job loss. But while job loss may initially seem an obvious threat, a job represents much more than a literal place where a person is employed, receives a paycheck and health benefits, and participates in a 401K plan.

Certainly, losing any of those things is a threat. But a broader context has, sadly, begun to take shape more frequently in our society and daily news cycle, and I faced

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it on the very day I wrote this chapter: I attended a friend's funeral. She had been shot by an employee whom she was terminating. He killed her, then killed himself. It was such a sad, needless ending that should elevate awareness of mental illness and the seriousness of acknowledging the impact of threat.

A person's job can be his identity, her safety net and means of security, her place in life, or his position in life. After all, one of the most commonly asked questions after small talk about the weather with a new acquaintance is, "What do you do for a living?" For better or worse, in so many ways our jobs define how others see us and how we see ourselves.

There are many life events that carry the same losses we suffer when a job ends. Divorce, death, health issues, relocation, the empty nest, and retirement often involve the loss of identity and security. And all these life situations impact our workforce each day they enter the building. In challenge cultures, risk of loss is certainly a threat that leaders are mindful of, not only for the impact it can have personally but also for the impact it has on those they seek to lead and influence.

Threat #6: Humiliation

Humiliation is the act of degrading, disgracing, and shaming. It is a threat that is too often very real in our workplaces, schools, and homes—like Supervisor Jim, humiliated over the cheesecake incident. In another case,

Challenge

I knew a bright young girl who struggled with tests. She scored below the designated percentage on a standardized test and wasn't allowed to go on the end-of-school field trip with her class. She was humiliated. I also recently encountered a supervisor who, behind closed doors, continuously referred to one of his team members as "that goofy bastard." That's humiliating, and the employee didn't even know it.

In challenge cultures, humiliation, whether public or private, is a non-negotiable. No one should be exposed to such unacceptable behavior; it may be the most severe and crippling of all threats. A challenge culture establishes values and holds people accountable for not only what they do but how they do it.

Threat #7: Micromanaging

On the surface, micromanaging comes across as a lack of trust in others. One client of mine had a boss who asked her to take minutes in meetings but would rewrite her minutes before distributing them to the team.

When we micromanage, it can appear that we do not have confidence in the ability or ethics of those who work with and for us. In reality, however, micromanaging really occurs because we do not have confidence and trust in ourselves.

That may sound odd. And it should. People tend to micromanage when they are trying to control. And people try to control when they feel insecure. On the one hand, we

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believe that micromanagers have overwhelming confidence in their own ability and believe that they—more than anyone else—possess the ability to make the “right” decision or get the job done “right.” On closer reflection, though, our need to control situations and people is always rooted not in confidence but in fear—fear of the unknown, fear of the future, or fear in our ability.

One of my favorite learning scenes comes from one of my favorite movies, “Apollo 13.” The engineers realize the astronauts are slowly being poisoned by carbon monoxide gas. The lead engineer upends a box of random items the astronauts have at their disposal onto a table and gives very simple instructions to the team. It’s a literal square-peg-through-a-round-hole problem.

The engineering team dives right in, no micromanagement necessary. NASA’s upper management wasn’t concerned with charts, graphs, or reports. In today’s terms, they never asked to see an Excel spreadsheet or a PowerPoint presentation. The Apollo 13 engineers simply had a clear direction and knew their available resources. Upper management delegated full authority to get the job done. And they did.

A threat culture is one where leadership is suspect of others’ capabilities, delegates small tasks rather than authority, and is fueled by ego. In a challenge culture, leadership trusts they have hired capable professionals, gives them the freedom and authority to be capable professionals, and supports rather than controls the team.

Challenge

Threat #8: Lack of trust

In *Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything*, author Stephen M.R. Covey explains trust as that space where character overlaps competence. If either is missing, or if both do not exist consistently over time, there is not trust.

Consider this scenario: you have an upcoming surgery—it's rare, risky, and potentially fatal if all does not go as planned. There are only two doctors on the planet available to be your surgeon. You have to choose.

Do you go with Doctor #1? She created the procedure and is world-renowned for her attention to detail. However, she is arrogant, rude, and unwilling to listen to you, your family, or the hospital staff. Though she has performed hundreds of successful surgeries, her unwillingness to listen to others' input has resulted in past surgery complications and fatalities.

Or do you go with Doctor #2? He didn't pioneer the surgery but has a successful track record. He listens to your concerns fully, explains details in a way you can understand, and receives high marks for bedside manner. He has compassion for his patients and their family, and is an excellent communicator with hospital staff.

I'm willing to bet that most of us would be inclined to choose Doctor #2. Why? While Doctor #1 has demonstrated competence, Doctor #2 has demonstrated competence and character. Most often we have choices in physicians, so in some ways that's an unfair example. But rarely do we have

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a choice with teachers, government leaders, or bosses (and definitely not with our parents). In those cases, we “get what we get.” Hopefully, these people have both character and competence. When they are missing one, trust is low and threat is high.

These two traits are important ingredients in trust. As Covey suggests, leadership success is the result of character and competence in balance. Leadership failure is always the result of imbalanced character and competence; one or the other is lacking. The third ingredient I would add, a third “C” in this trust equation, is consistency. Trust is character and competence, lived out consistently over time. Consistency is key. As we’ve all experienced, trust can take a lifetime to build and a millisecond to destroy.

Threat cultures are low-trust cultures, and low trust in a culture carries serious costs. Author Francis Fukuyama compares low trust to an unnecessary tax, a powerful metaphor. High trust societies get to avoid the tax; low trust societies must pay the tax.

The question is, “What tax, or unnecessary costs are you paying because of low trust?” Low trust is like second-hand smoke, a toxic poison in the culture. Low trust produces blaming, finger pointing, criticizing, condemning, complaining, and dissension. Professionally or personally, we have all witnessed the consequences of low trust and the devastating tax that naturally results.

Challenge cultures simply do not have to pay the tax that threat cultures do. Relationships in challenge cultures

Challenge

do not suffer the consequences that relationships in threat cultures do. Threat kills, steals, and destroys. Trust yields life, speed, and quality.

Threat #9: Favoritism

My daughter plays softball in select or “club” organizations. Where we live, fastpitch softball is wildly popular, competitive, and, at times, cut-throat. I’ve jokingly said throughout the years that I sold my soul to the softball gods; how easily it became overly competitive and all-consuming for me. Nevertheless, I pack the cooler, load the car, and spend most weekends sitting behind the cage in a folding chair with the rest of the crazy Softball Moms.

I’ve learned there is only one thing more insane and unpredictable than a Softball Mom—a Softball Dad. Because their daughters have the ability to play ball, these dads believe they have the ability to coach. And coach they do. We moms fondly call this phenomenon “Daddy Ball.”

When tryouts roll around and teams post that “all positions are open,” they are telling a partial truth. What they really mean is that all positions are open, except for the positions reserved for the daughters of Daddy Coach #1, Daddy Coach #2, and Daddy Coach #3. Such favoritism will diminish the enthusiasm of the other players, hinder the coaches from being objective and effective, and ultimately hold the team back from performing at its best.

This example is similar to what we see in a workplace with a threat culture. Favoritism shows up in multiple

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forms, such as to whom projects are assigned (or not assigned), to whom special privileges like telecommuting are afforded (or not), rewards and recognition given (or withheld), and so forth.

The impact on a workforce parallels that of the softball world. The enthusiasm of other team members diminishes, the leader's objectivity and effectiveness is hindered, and the team, as well as the company, will never achieve its best. The other high-performing "players" will seek to "play" for another team.

Threat #10: Lack of meaning

As a consultant, I work with companies interested in keeping talented employees and keeping them engaged. Not surprisingly, the most frequently cited reason for leaving a position is due to leadership. Have you ever left a job because of your leader? I have.

What is the most frequently cited reason for staying? What is the most frequently cited driver of engagement? Oftentimes, the most frequent answer falls under the heading of "meaningful purpose." This is especially true for millennials. People want to feel like they are making progress and are contributing to something greater than themselves.

We will delve more deeply into this topic in the next chapter, but for now, let's just say that meaning matters. It matters at all ages and in all situations. In threat cultures, people work for a paycheck. In challenge cultures, people work for a purpose. Attention is given to communicating

Challenge

the impact of great work on the team, on the organization, in the community, and in the world. Because purpose is as important as pay, team members in challenge cultures have a greater sense of mission and commitment to the vision.

Threat culture vs. challenge culture

A challenge culture results when threats are recognized, addressed, and minimized on purpose. This creates a safe environment where people can be their best self.

Rather than social rejection and exclusivity, challenge cultures actively promote acceptance and inclusion. People have a voice, feel valued and appreciated, and have a sense of belonging. All are welcome to bring their whole self, including their differences, to every situation.

Rather than ignoring the impact of change, challenge cultures acknowledge change and seek ways to turn it into exciting opportunities. Resistance is anticipated, expected, and processed in a healthy way, with transition time, along with appropriate training, resources, and tools provided to ensure the change is successful. Wins of all sizes are acknowledged and celebrated.

Rather than unrealistic and unclear standards, challenge cultures clearly and continuously communicate expectations, as well as live out and model them. Training, resources, and tools are in place to reach these expectations. Progress is measured, recognized, and rewarded.

Rather than insufficient resources, challenge cultures provide the right resources at the right time. Team