

Business Special: Teamwork

How to deal with denying forces

When people work together there is usually quite a potential for conflict, because different worldviews, opinions and experiences collide. What many team leaders and team members are not aware of is that there are mostly 3 prevailing forces in a team:

1. The assertive force
2. The neutral force
3. The denying force

In this context force means the purpose, attitude, energy and the spin a person brings into a team. It doesn't matter if it is about a team working together in an office all day long or about a group of people gathering temporarily in a meeting. It can actually also be applied to a meeting with friends and family. As soon as several people gather in a room and talk about a shared topic, the 3 mentioned forces will show pretty quickly through different people. What are the characteristics of these 3 forces?

The 3 forces and their characteristics

1. The assertive force

People representing the assertive force are the doers in the team. They are usually convinced of the topic, the project or the proposal and support it. This means that they actively contribute. They are committed, take responsibility and go forward. If a new topic or a new idea is brought up, the assertive forces are those people being open and welcoming the new and going along with the idea. They develop creative ideas and are ready to start, to explore and to experiment. These are people who are able to convince or drag others along just by their enthusiasm. The assertive forces are very important in a project in order to creatively and effectively move forward. However, the assertive forces can sometimes also dash forward too fast and miss small, but very important details just because of their enthusiasm.

2. The neutral force

Neutral forces are people who haven't made up their mind yet with regard to a certain topic. Instead they first of all gather information without judging and let everything sink in. They are oftentimes silent observers and take a back seat in the meeting. They first find out how the land lies, before they decide for or against something. This force is also called the "forceless force" or the "sustaining force", because this force brings a certain calmness and stability into the team, which is important for evolution and they also balance the more bubbly assertive and denying forces. Without the neutral force in the room, it may easily happen that the other two forces get into a heated debate. Oftentimes the pure presence of the neutral force in the room is already enough. They don't have to say much.

3. The denying force

The third force is the one, which many people might call the „most difficult“ one. Having a person in the team, which represents the denying force can be pretty challenging if you don't know how to deal with such a force.

The denying force is a person, which in projects or meetings is first of all against a specific procedure, idea, agreement or decision. They have a rejecting attitude and either clearly express their concerns or back out by crossing their arms in front of the chest and grumbling inside. Such team members might remark that for example:

- something is bad/wrong.
- something cannot work
- something is impossible in the way suggested
- they cannot /want not /will not work under these circumstances
- a project should better be stopped

Denying forces tend to judge things quickly to be bad, wrong, or impossible. They are people, who find the hair in the soup or look for and find the needle in the haystack. They express their concerns if not even their outrage about a certain topic. These team members are often titled “grouzers“ giving others a hard time. They might also be called „tail lights“, who – according to the other team members - haven't gotten yet what the whole meeting is about.

You might have heard or even said the following sentence yourself: „Oh man, if he/she wasn't on board everything could be much easier.“ The assertive and neutral forces in a team often perceive the denying force as uncomfortable disruptive factor, which should best be eliminated.

However, fact is: **The denying force is necessary!**

Let this sink in for a moment. The denying force is absolutely necessary in a team! If you don't have a denying force on board then it might well happen that you have an euphoric team, which easily loses ground below the feet and due to their enthusiasm doesn't consider important aspects. The denying force helps a team to not drift away from reality. Oftentimes denying forces bring up valuable criticism, which might lead to an extra discussion or planning round, but at the same time helps creating a more stable basis for the project or developing even more effective ideas.

Most of the employees try to get rid of the denying forces, overrule them, hush them or ignore them. Yet, by doing so, the team loses valuable potential and genius. What stays in the end is subliminal resentment. In addition to that the crux is the following: As soon as you have eliminated the denying force, it won't take long until the next denying force shows up. If for example you lead a meeting in which one person is a strong denying force and this person leaves – for whichever reason – the meeting at a certain point, you will notice that the mood changes in the short run. However, it actually doesn't take long until somebody else takes on the role. And be careful: If you cannot spot a denying force in the room, take a look at yourself. The probability is pretty high that you are the denying force. Alternatively it may happen that another denying force from the outside

will show up in the form of another person (e. g. the CEO who suddenly intervenes in the project) or in the form of new revealing information or circumstances the team hasn't paid attention to.

It is important to mention at this point that a person does not take on the role of one of the three forces permanently, i. e. they are not constantly the assertive, neutral or denying force. In fact the roles change, sometimes even in light speed. Thus it may happen that a person is in a meeting the denying force at first, but then gets new clarity, information and distinctions on a topic/project and changes to become a neutral or assertive force.

The interesting question is: How do you deal with denying forces? **The highest art is to integrate the denying force.** If you don't manage to integrate the denying force into the team then you have a person on board working against you and unconsciously undermining the entire team or project.

So how do you manage to integrate the denying force? Here are some possibilities:

- **Be a total YES for the person:**

To be a YES for a person starts with your inner attitude. If for example a denying force expresses „I hope you don't mean this seriously!“ or „I can definitely not agree at all to this decision/proposal!“ then it may easily happen that your ego (your box) feels attacked. The own ego then reacts to the denying force with a defense-mechanism and thoughts like „What an idiot.“ or „What kind of problem does she have?“ or „Is this necessary now?“. What happens in that moment is an immediate degradation of the denying force. That means that you are in resistance yourself and automatically the denying force with regard to the denying force. Another reaction could be that you get frightened and fall into some kind of rigidity, because somebody expressed denial.

Nevertheless, in the moment the denying force shows up, it is essential that you keep the energy rolling WITHOUT (!!!) putting the denying force into the center of the event and aligning the meeting with them. This may start by you consciously identifying „Ah, there is the denying force.“ and welcoming them in your thoughts. Be grateful that they show themselves. Thus you stay open for impulses this person might bring in instead of reacting with resistance to this denying force.

Be aware that behind the resisting attitude of the denying force there is a feeling, which is often anger, fear or sadness (e. g. about the upcoming change, which might force the person to let go of old things, take over more responsibility or go into unknown territory, etc.).

- **„Yes AND...“ instead of „Yes, BUT...“**

To include the denying force in the further course requires a certain intuition and depends on the kind of resistance the person shows. No matter what the denying force says, a true magic bullet is the simple phrase „Yes, AND...“ instead of „Yes, BUT...“. As soon as you react to a comment of the denying force with „Yes, BUT...“ you shoot down what the person just said so that the resistance of the denying force even increases. As of now, just try to use „Yes, AND...“ (Actually no matter with which kind of person or force you are talking. This is a really interesting experiment).

- **Appreciation of the being qualities**

What denying forces expect least is appreciation, because in the business context - and actually generally in modern society - it is common to either defend a position or destroy a disturbing position. Appreciation of the denying force can for example start with you sincerely appreciating that the denying force expresses their doubts („Thank you for your clarity and openness of bringing up this issue.“). Instead of only seeing the concerned ego of the other person (which is nothing else but their survival mechanism), you focus on the being qualities of the denying force. Probably the person has a special sense for and the quality of vision, clarity, attentiveness, precision, discipline, or others, which are important and useful for the team.

- **Completing communication**

In order to include a denying force, it is furthermore crucial that this person feels heard, i. e. that their communication is completed. You can complete their communication by using a so called completion loop. This means that you basically repeat back – in your own words, not like a parrot – what you heard the other person say, paying attention that you make it a statement (going with your voice down at the end of the sentence) and not a question (you would question what the person just said). Formulating a statement gives the repetition a completely different spin than formulating a question and the denying force can confirm the statement with a simple “yes”. This “yes” completes the communication so that the person can go to the next deeper level and probably reveal what’s behind their concerns. Thus a very open and intimate space can develop in which the team grows more and more together. *(Details about communication and completion loop can also be found in the book „Edgeworker: Beyond Leadership – It’s Time For The Management-(R)Evolution!“)*

- **Picking up and integrating**

Another important aspect with regard to integrating a denying force is to involve their expertise, their knowledge and their ideas. If for example a person is against a proposal, the next question for this denying force could be: „Which other possibility do you see? You have... years of experience. What would make sense in your opinion?“

To pick up the denying force can also mean to ask them what they need in order to support a new decision/a new proposal. Ask them directly: „What would you need in order to also take this step?“ or a little bit more indirect (for some people it is easier to answer to a seemingly theoretical question): „If you had the chance to name everything you need in order to support the project, what would this be?“

All these options for integrating denying forces in a team are usually very effective. However, there are 2 special kinds of denying forces, which are worth mentioning at this point and which might require a different kind of approach.

3.1 The silent denying force

There are denying forces that don’t express their resistance, but instead remain silent sitting in the room though with a noticeable deprecative or goatish attitude. It would certainly be very easy to let them sit there, but you don’t do yourself a favor. Ignoring or passing over denying forces, sooner or later comes back to you like a boomerang.

Notice the denying force, but don't make them the center point. It is essential that you simply use part of your attention to perceive this person as part of the team and energetically include them instead of exclude them. Sometimes this is already enough, because denying forces oftentimes digest information for themselves, before giving up their resistance. And they can unconsciously perceive whether you include or exclude them energetically. Just pay attention that the person stays with the team and doesn't fall asleep or drift off.

In case the person doesn't express anything at all during the meeting, include them by addressing them directly: „How are you doing with the topic?“ or „It is important to me to also hear your opinion on that.“

3.2 The manipulating denying force

Another very special form of denying force is the manipulating denying force. Such a person uses so called shadow principles, to e. g. follow their own interests, take revenge on somebody, wield power or exclude others. Some manipulating denying forces are generally against everything in the first place in order to get attention, be in the center and let all team members dance after their pipe. Shadow principles are for example resentment, being right, better knowing, destruction, revenge, jealousy, envy, greed, manipulation, abuse of power, ignorance, arrogance, mobbing, etc. How do you deal with that?

- **Starting a meta conversation**

When you notice that a denying force tries to manipulate the team and the above mentioned possibilities for integrating them don't work, it could be very useful to start a so called meta conversation. A meta conversation is a conversation about the conversation. This means that you leave the initial content of the meeting and say what you perceive in the very moment. You can either address the denying force directly or land your perception in the entire space. You could e. g. say: „I would like to hook in for a moment. I perceive that in this room a subtle game starts which is headed for „I win – you lose“. I am more interested to sail into the same direction with all of you. What do you perceive?“ Just the fact that you name the game from your point of view („I perceive that...“ or „I realize that...“) without judging anybody brings the energy in the team into a certain flow. By revealing the game of manipulation and bringing it to everybody's consciousness, the denying force cannot continue playing this game unseen.

- **Asking dangerous questions**

Another possibility is to ask the person representing the manipulating denying force a dangerous question, which is e. g. the question about the purpose of their acting. You can do this elegantly by again talking from yourself and thus introducing the question: „I perceive your resistance as manipulation right now. Can you say more about what your purpose is?“ Ahaaa, this a very dangerous question for the denying force (and you might actually feel fear when asking this question, because you can't know what will happen next), yet this kind of question opens the door for a very interesting conversation.

With this distinction about the 3 forces in a team you have as of know the possibility to include all team members and sail together into a new direction. Just pay consciously attention to the different

forces and let yourself be surprised by what becomes possible in the team when you manage to include the denying force.

In this sense, have a lot of fun experimenting!

(Author: Nicola Nagel)