

# Does Your Leadership Reduce Learning?

BY ROGER SCHWARZ

**H**ave you ever been in a situation like this? You need to give someone some negative performance feedback and you are concerned that you might get a defensive reaction. To reduce this possibility, you begin by sharing some positive feedback, then give the negative feedback, and then finish with some more positive feedback. For example, you might begin by saying, “Jan, I think you’ve done a solid job addressing the difficult issues on the ABC project.” After a few sentences of praise, you might say something like, “But I’m concerned you haven’t taken steps to develop your team’s capacity; as a result your team isn’t producing as much as it should be.” After sharing your thoughts on this subject and perhaps developing a plan of action, you finish by saying something like, “Keep up the good work on the ABC project; the clients are really satisfied with the work.”

Many leaders use this “sandwich” approach to feedback when they’re faced with a challenging conversation. (Even if you don’t use it, you’ve probably experienced it as a recipient.) The reasoning underlying the strategy is that starting off on a positive note makes the person more comfortable and more receptive to hearing negative feedback and less likely to challenge you; ending on a positive note maintains the person’s self-esteem and reduces the potential for anger.

But the approach creates unintended consequences. People often discount the positive feedback and feel set up, which leads them to distrust you. By controlling the conversation to reduce the chance that someone will express concerns, you also reduce your chance to learn how differently your colleague may be thinking about the situation. Consequently, you may think you have commitment to change when you don’t.

This article is adapted from “The Facilitative Leader” in *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, new and revised edition, by Roger Schwarz (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002) and from *The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook: Tips, Tools, and Tested Methods for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches*, by Roger Schwarz, Anne Davidson, Peg Carlson, and Sue McKinney (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

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Finally, for your approach to work, you have to withhold your strategy for having the conversation, which also leads to distrust. To be transparent, you'd have to say, "Jan, I called you in here to give you some negative feedback and I want to let you know my strategy for doing this. First, I'm going to give you some positive feedback to make you feel more comfortable and get you ready for the negative feedback. I think this will make you less defensive about the negative feedback and less likely to disagree with me. Then, I'll give you the negative feedback, which is why I called you in here today. Finally, I'll give you some more positive feedback so you'll feel better about yourself and won't be as angry with me. Will that work for you, Jan?" If you're thinking it would be absurd to share this strategy—you're right. And that's the point. If it's absurd to share your strategy in a conversation designed to help your colleague, then there's a fundamental problem with your strategy. Even if you don't use the sandwich approach, research results dating back to Chris Argyris and Don Schön's work in 1974 (and my own experience with executives) suggests that almost everyone uses some strategies that create the same unintended consequences—and they use them regularly in challenging situations.

Much of your leadership occurs in the conversations you have, both one-on-one and with groups. It turns out that the way you think about these conversations can undermine your ability to lead and learn. I've worked out a system I call the "Facilitative Leader approach" that can help you think differently, create better results, and build better relationships.



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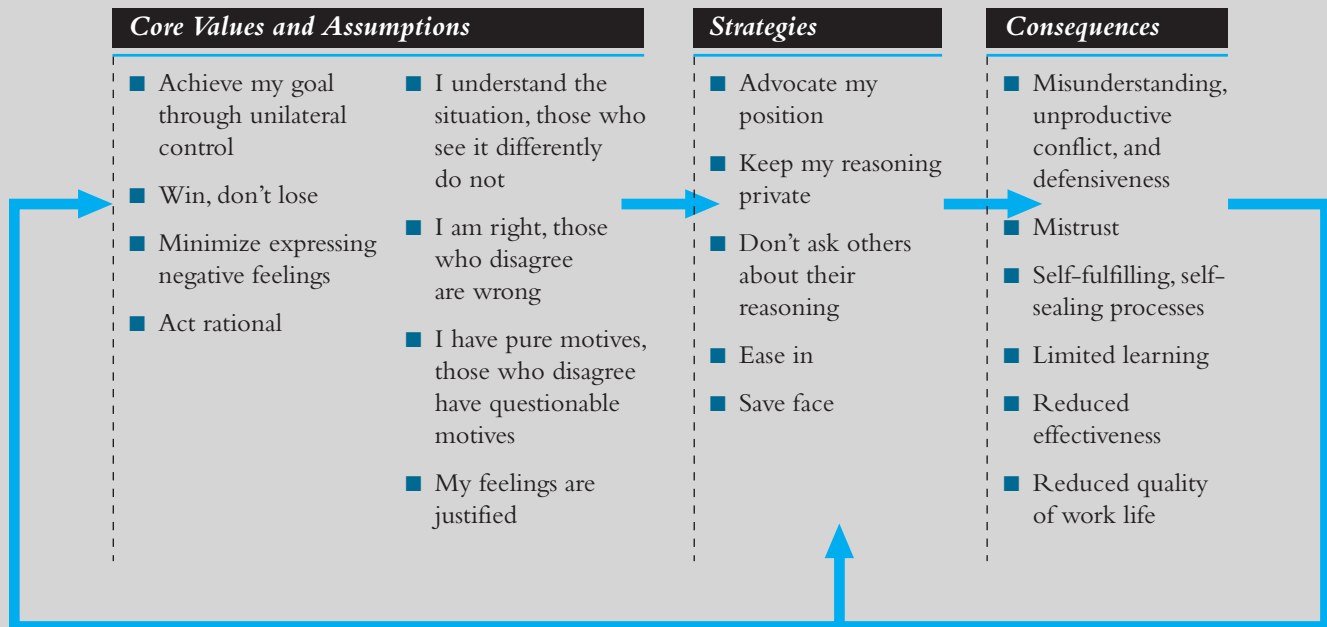
## How Leadership Can Reduce Learning

**W**hy would you use an approach that creates distrust and reduces commitment and learning? Because in difficult situations—ones in which you feel some potential threat or embarrassment, including situations where you have a high stake in the outcome—almost everyone operates without thought or awareness from a set of values and assumptions that create these consequences. This approach is called the "unilateral control model" (illustrated in Figure 1 on page 42) and consists of three parts: *values and assumptions*, which you use to generate *strategies or behaviors*, which in turn lead to *consequences*.

**Core Values.** Beginning with values, you try to achieve your goal (through unilateral control) as you defined it before the conversation. You see the conversation as a contest in which you seek to win, not lose. Every comment that someone makes that is consistent with your goal is a small win; every comment that introduces information that may challenge your goal is a loss. You try to minimize the expression of negative feelings, believing that if people start expressing negative feelings, it will only make things worse. Finally, you act rational. You think that the way you are approaching the issue is perfectly logical. And if it isn't completely logical, you should act as if it is.

**Core Assumptions.** You operate from a matching set of assumptions. You assume that you understand the situation and those who disagree don't. In this model people can't understand the situation and see things differently. Consequently, you are right and others are wrong. You often question the

**FIGURE 1. THE UNILATERAL CONTROL MODEL.**



*Note: I derived this model and the one that follows from the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön (1974), who originally labeled them as Model I and Model II, and from adaptations by Robert Putnam, Diana McLain Smith, and Phil MacArthur at Action Design, who refer to them as the Unilateral Control and Mutual Learning Models. Action Design is an organization and management development firm that has built on the work of Argyris and Schön. Putnam and McLain Smith are coauthors with Argyris of Action Science.*

motives of those with different views, while believing your motives are pure; you see yourself simply as a steward for the organization, while others are trying to advance their careers or otherwise meet their own needs. Finally, you assume that your feelings are justified. If you get angry, you have a right to be angry; others don't understand, are wrong, and have questionable motives. Remember—all this is, at best, at the edges of your awareness—you usually don't realize you are holding these values and assumptions in the moment.

*Strategies.* This combination of values and assumptions leads you to design strategies that control the conversation and win. You don't fully explain your point of view because it might lead others to question and challenge it. You don't ask others to explain their points of view (ex-

cept to shoot holes in them) because they may consider things that you hadn't, which would put your goals in jeopardy. To minimize the expression of negative emotions, you may ease in by asking leading questions ("Don't you think that . . .") or making comments designed to get the others to understand what you are privately thinking without your having to say it. If someone raises negative feelings you may say it's not relevant or productive, or you may suggest addressing it at a later time (privately thinking the right time will be "never"). Because you assume that you understand the situation, you act as if your reasoning is foolproof without bothering to test with others whether your assumptions and data are accurate. Together, these strategies enable you to unilaterally control the situation and protect yourself and others. Through all this, you keep private your strategy

for controlling the conversation because telling others would thwart the strategy, and often because you are not aware of the strategy you are using.

*Consequences.* Ironically, by trying to control the situation, you contribute to creating the consequences you are trying to avoid. You create misunderstanding because you assume that the situation is as you see it, and you base your actions on untested assumptions about others. If you make negative assumptions about someone's motives and do not test them, you generate your own mistrust of others and vice versa. This leads people to be wary and cautious in their responses, which you see as defensive. In this way, you create a self-fulfilling process, generating the very consequence you set out to avoid, sealing off the opportunity for learning how your own behavior may be contributing to the team's reduced effectiveness. All this reduces your team's ability to learn, its effectiveness, and its quality of work life. The quality of decisions decreases, the amount of time needed to implement decisions increases, the commitment to those decisions decreases, and the quality of relationships suffer.

Does any of the unilateral control model seem familiar to you? When I describe it to leaders, they often smile; they recognize themselves in the picture and the way much of their organization operates. When I described it to one group of leaders, they told me that not only was this the model they often used, but that their organization had been rewarding them for this behavior for years! They were trying to change, but didn't have another approach to replace it with. Unfortunately, you are usually unaware when you are using

the unilateral control model, although others can see it clearly in you. Fortunately, with practice, you can identify it for yourself and begin to learn a more effective approach.

### **The Facilitative Leader: Different Thinking, Different Consequences**

What would it look like if you approached challenging situations without using a unilateral control model? In the feedback example, you might begin by saying, "Jan, I want to talk with you about some concerns I have about your team not being as productive as I think it needs to be. Let me suggest an approach for our conversation and get your reactions: I want to start by giving you some specific examples of what I've seen, share what I think the causes are, and see if you see any of this differently. I'm open to the fact that I might be missing some key information. Then I'd like for us to come to a common understanding of the situation, and jointly figure out what, if anything, needs to be done differently. Any concerns about doing it this way? Anything else you think we need to discuss in order to address this topic?"

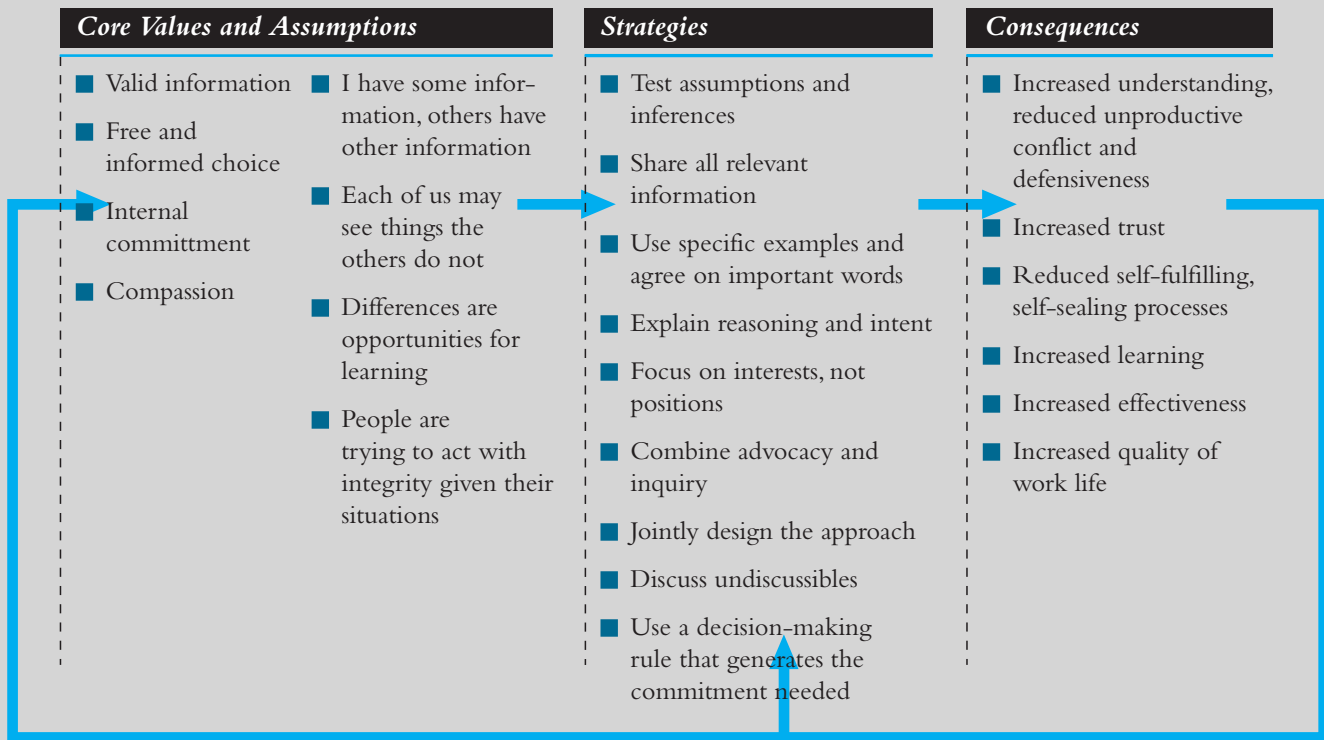
The example illustrates the Facilitative Leader approach. At the heart of this approach is the mutual learning model (see Figure 2 on page 44), which can generate long-term positive results that unilateral control cannot. The Facilitative Leader approach is not only for formal leaders; anyone can use it. Your team's effectiveness can dramatically increase as all members learn to use it. Like the unilateral control model, the mutual learning model has a set of values and assumptions, strategies, and consequences. As its

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**FIGURE 2. THE MUTUAL LEARNING MODEL.**



name indicates, the model focuses on creating learning rather than winning and control.

*Core Values.* The mutual learning model has four core values. First, you seek to create valid information. Valid information includes all the relevant information you have on the subject (whether it supports your position or not) and, ideally, can be independently validated by the people concerned. Second, you seek to create free and informed choice so that people agree to do things because they have the relevant information and because they believe the decision makes sense, not because they feel manipulated or coerced into it. You seek internal commitment to the decisions, which often flows from the first two values—with this level of motivation people will do whatever is necessary to implement the de-

isions. Finally, you value compassion, which means temporarily suspending judgment in order to appreciate others' perspectives. It means having empathy for others and for yourself in a way that still holds people accountable for their actions rather than unilaterally protecting others or yourself.

*Core Assumptions.* As a facilitative leader, you assume that other people may see what you miss and vice versa. You assume that differences are opportunities for learning rather than conflicts to be avoided or contests in which to show you're right and others are wrong. And you assume that people are trying to act with integrity given their situations. You see these interactions as an intriguing puzzle—everyone has some pieces to offer and the task is to jointly figure out what the puzzle looks like.

Compare these core values and assumptions with those of the unilateral control model.

Several key principles are associated with the mutual learning core values and assumptions. *Curiosity* is a desire to learn more about something. It motivates you to find out what information others have that you might be missing and to explore how others came to a different conclusion rather than simply trying to persuade others their conclusions are wrong. *Transparency* is the quality of sharing all relevant information, including your strategies, in a way that is timely and valid. It includes sharing with others your strategy for how you want to have the conversation with them, so together you can jointly design the strategy and make a free and informed choice about how they want to work with you. *Joint Accountability* means that you share responsibility for the current situation, including the consequences it creates. Being accountable means you are responsible for addressing your problems with others directly with them, rather than avoiding them or asking others to do this for you. These three principles are interwoven with the core values and assumptions of the mutual learning model. Together they are put into action in the strategies that follow.

*Strategies.* The strategies that facilitative leaders use to implement their core values and assumptions are actually ground rules for effective groups. (For more information, see “Ground Rules for Effective Groups,” by Roger Schwarz, [www.schwarzassociates.com/articles.html](http://www.schwarzassociates.com/articles.html).) Many of these ground rules are designed to generate valid information. For example, you test whether the assumptions that you are making about others are valid before

you act on them as if they are true. You share all the relevant information you have about an issue (whether or not it supports your position) by using specific examples, by explaining the reasoning that led to your conclusions, and by explaining the underlying needs, interests, or criteria that are important for you to meet. You create learning for yourself and others by asking others to identify things you may be missing after you have shared your thinking. To increase free and informed choice and internal commitment, you jointly design next steps with others. And you raise the undiscussable issues that have been keeping the team from increasing its effectiveness.

Using these strategies does not mean that you have to make decisions by consensus. Although that is an option in the Facilitative Leader approach, it’s not a requirement.

*Consequences.* My clients get the following consequences when they apply the mutual learning model: increased understanding, reduced defensiveness, and increased trust. When they share their reasoning, other people make less inaccurate assumptions about what they’re thinking.

They’ve all learned more from each other, which has increased the quality of the group’s decisions, their commitment to implementing the decisions, and their working relationships.

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## **Becoming a Facilitative Leader**

**H**ow can you move from unilateral control to becoming a facilitative leader? First, recognize when you are using the unilateral control model. (See sidebar: “Are You Acting Unilaterally?” on page 46.) Then shift your mind-set to use the mutual learning core values

## Are You Acting Unilaterally?

In difficult situations, virtually all of us act unilaterally; it's just a matter of when. It's difficult to see when we're using the unilateral control model, but here are some simple ways to find out and begin to change.

*Give yourself the transparency test.* When we act unilaterally, we withhold the strategy we are using to have the conversation. To determine whether your strategy is unilateral, try this transparency thought-experiment: Identify your strategy and imagine explaining it out loud to the person or people you're working with and asking permission to use it. If you find yourself laughing at the absurdity of what you're thinking—or if you're thinking “I could never share that strategy”—you've probably identified a unilateral control strategy that keeps you from being transparent. We usually keep such strategies private because they work only when others don't know what we're doing or when they privately agree to play along. The case about sharing your sandwich approach to feedback is a good example.

*Count your questions.* When you act unilaterally you're not curious. You're sharing your point of view

without asking others what they think, or you're asking them rhetorical questions like “Why don't you just try it my way?” Count the number of times you ask questions in a conversation. If you're not asking questions, you're not trying to learn. Now, for each question you ask, determine whether it's genuine or rhetorical. A rhetorical question is one you ask to make your point, like “Don't you think it would be a good idea if we did X?” A genuine question is one you ask to learn something, like, “I'm thinking it would be good to do X; what problems do you think we might encounter if we did that?” The fewer the genuine questions, the more likely you are to be acting unilaterally.

*Look for systems that are unilateral.* People design organizational systems with unilateral control elements, which make it more difficult to use the Facilitative Leader approach within those systems. A good example is 360-degree feedback systems. Because such systems almost always require the feedback to be anonymous and aggregated by group (except from your boss), there is no way to validate the information. It's difficult to develop profes-

sionally if you can't learn directly from people what they want you to do differently and why. By granting people anonymity in response for their feedback, the system also reduces their accountability for what they say. Often you can redesign a unilateral system by changing a key assumption guiding it. In this case, by challenging the assumption that people need anonymity before they will give honest feedback, you can invite them to share their feedback with you directly as a group.

*Ask others to help you.* Show the unilateral control model to your team and briefly explain it. Then say something like, “I'm curious to know about times you've seen me acting unilaterally. I think I act this way at times, but according to the model, you can see it better in me than I can because I'm probably unaware of it.” If you have examples of when you think you've acted unilaterally, share them. By being transparent and vulnerable, you're likely to increase the chance that others will give you honest feedback. Ask others if they are willing to let you know when you are acting unilaterally. Commit to them that there will be no retribution for their feedback—and always keep this commitment.

and assumptions as a foundation for your leadership. If you only learn to apply the strategies of the mutual learning model without picking up the core values, you will end up using them with a unilateral control model set of values and assumptions, which will generate the same negative consequences you've gotten in the past. Here is an example of the Facilitative Leader approach in action:

### **Creating a Team Willing to Learn From and With Each Other**

James, a VP, and his direct reports, were having trouble implementing their strategic plan. In addition, James wanted to share more of his leadership with the team but felt that they were not sufficiently effective as a team for it to be safe to delegate responsibility. After the team spent two and a half days learning the Facilitative Leader approach, James decided to raise what had been an undiscussable issue with his direct reports. He said, "I want to talk about the fact that whenever we make a strategic decision by consensus in our team meetings, one of you comes to me privately after the meeting and tells me we need to rethink the decision." James gave specific examples and everyone agreed with his description of the situation. James said he was concerned that this behavior was slowing the division's progress toward its goals and eroding the group's ability to work as a team. In the past, he would have unilaterally proposed a solution, but here James said he was genuinely curious about why this was happening.

Team members explained that they entered the team meeting each assuming they were right. When their positions did not prevail in a team meeting they didn't know how to pursue them without generating negative reactions, so they sought to persuade James in private. His reaction in these private meetings had uniformly

been to tell them to raise the issue again in the team, from which they had each inferred that James agreed with their position. Now, in this "undiscussable" meeting, they learned that their inference was false; James had just been trying to get all the information to the team. James said he'd been frustrated that team members did not raise their information in the initial meeting, but hadn't expressed his frustration because it seemed negative. He realized that rather than stopping the process, he was inadvertently reinforcing it.

After a 90-minute meeting, the team had identified the unilateral control values, assumptions, and strategies they had been using and the negative consequences they had created. The meeting challenged their new skills: team members took risks sharing information and making themselves vulnerable. But they developed a powerful understanding of their team dynamics and a commitment to change them. They started viewing meetings as a place to jointly craft strategies that met their combined interests rather than as contests. They began to share their reasoning and test assumptions, and they became curious about why others saw things differently. They agreed to hold each other accountable, while recognizing that everyone was learning this approach together. Within several meetings they had made a number of key strategic decisions that were implemented with everyone's full commitment and in less time than they had expected.

Becoming a facilitative leader means changing how you think so as to change the consequences you help create—for yourself, your team, and your organization. By becoming aware of and closing the gap between how you say you want to lead and how you really lead, you can create results and build relationships you didn't think possible. ■