

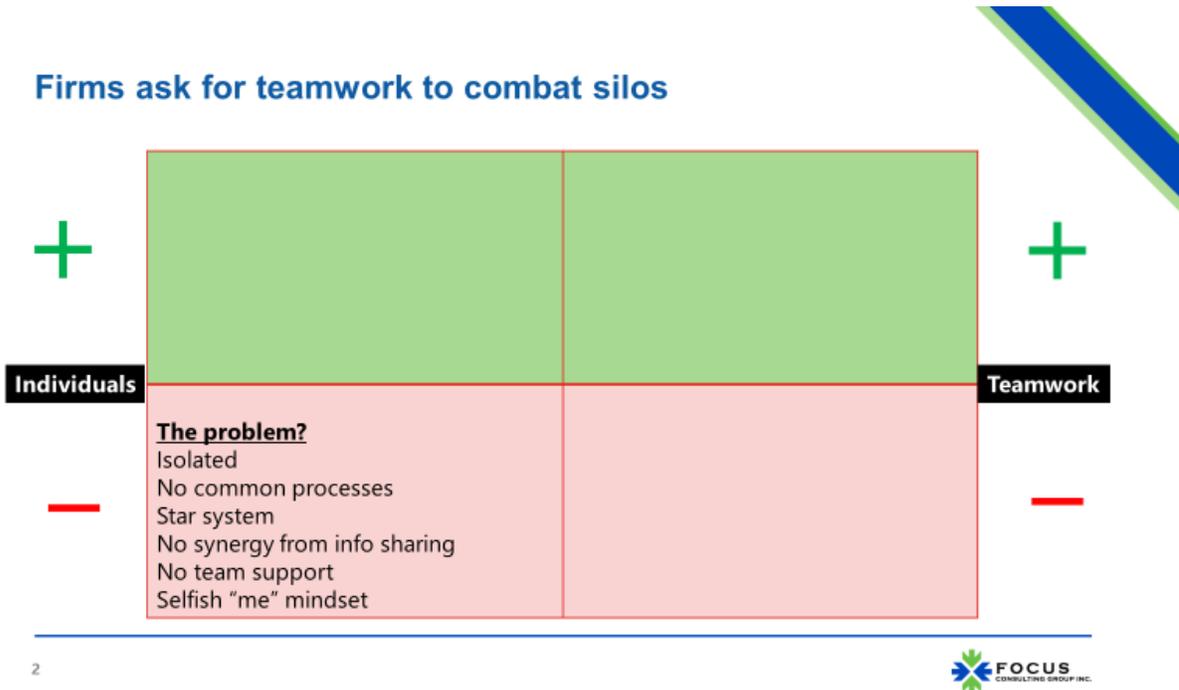
December 4, 2017

**LOL: Teamwork is NOT the answer**

“What!”: shocked response from paying client. “We hired you to improve our teamwork! Where was the discussion about “not the answer” during the sales pitch for team development!?”

Deep breath. Relax. Teamwork IS important to success. Now more than ever. But teamwork must not be thought of in a simplistic fashion. As with most aspects of life, teamwork has an upside and a downside. Each must be considered as a firm aims to improve performance.

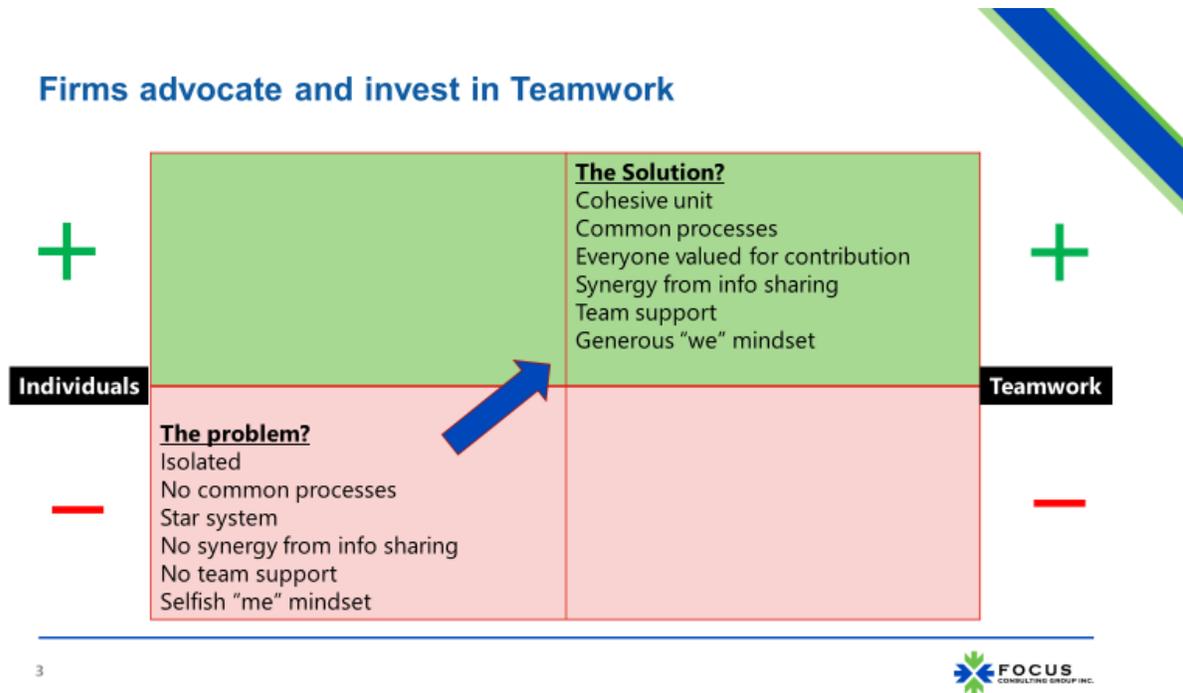
Let’s follow the path of teamwork in the following charts, inspired by Barry Johnson’s work on polarities.<sup>1</sup> Firm leaders come to FCG asking for guidance in building strong teams. We are happy to help. We have wonderful diagnostics to determine what aspects of teamwork need attention. Typically, the presenting problem is described below:



The staff members are mostly acting as individual contributors. They are producing good work, but missing all the opportunities offered by teamwork: sharing information, learning from one another, establishing common processes, building a strong culture, and so on. In brief, they operate in an isolated way, sometimes resembling a star system, in which the competitive juices are turned inward and morale suffers. Understandably, leaders recognize the limitations of this arrangement and decide something must be done. So, “who ya gonna call?” (theme from Ghostbusters...) FCG gets a call to change the focus from individual to team.

<sup>1</sup> **Polarity Management**, Barry Johnson

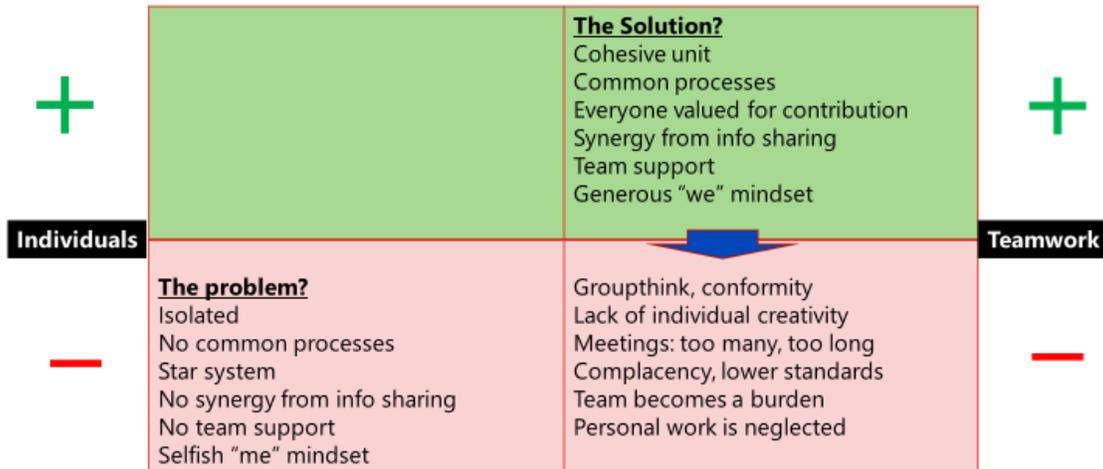
FCG has had success moving a team to the upper right quadrant, where the positive aspects of team are operating, shown below:



If FCG has done its job right, there is a more cohesive unit, with common processes. Instead of promoting stars, leaders promote teamwork by emphasizing the important role that each person plays. Further, there are benefits from synergy—sharing information and processes—and from aiding co-workers when necessary (i.e. family issues, medical emergencies, and so on). The selfish “me” mindset becomes more of a “we” mindset. So, all good, right? Well, yes. This phase of teaming is good. And teams that achieve it benefit. Productivity and morale improve.

However (there is always a “but” right?), almost inevitably this wonderful state of teaming turns south at some point and shows its negative side. The downside of teaming is shown below:

**At first Teamwork is good, then predicable problems...**



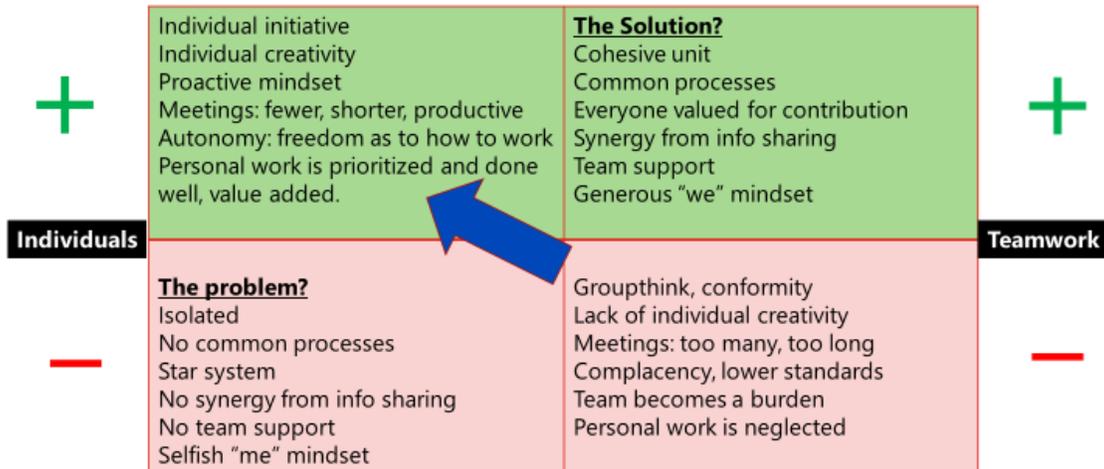
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Often FCG is called in to address these teamwork problems, that is, the opposite of too much individual focus: too much focus on teamwork. Teams can become complacent and stifling, canceling out individual initiative and creativity. Efforts to create team spirit become tedious: bowling parties, scavenger hunts, and the like. The emphasis on teamwork sucks time away from important think time. Knowledge workers need uninterrupted periods of concentration. But the ethos of a team says, "Isolating yourself is bad. You must spend time collaborating with the team." This team emphasis can limit creative and productive work.

So, eventually a "crusader" (someone who recognizes the need for change) will push for more individual and less team. This push for individual will often be met by a defender of the merits of team. The argument from the defender is, "Team is great, we just need to return to being a GOOD team." (i.e. move back above the line) But then, the crusaders will argue that neither form of team allows for enough individuality. What's needed is a return to the benefits of participating as an individual. So, the dynamic of the four-square changes once again, this time to the upper left: strong individual performance, which looks like:

**Which then points back to stronger individual role**

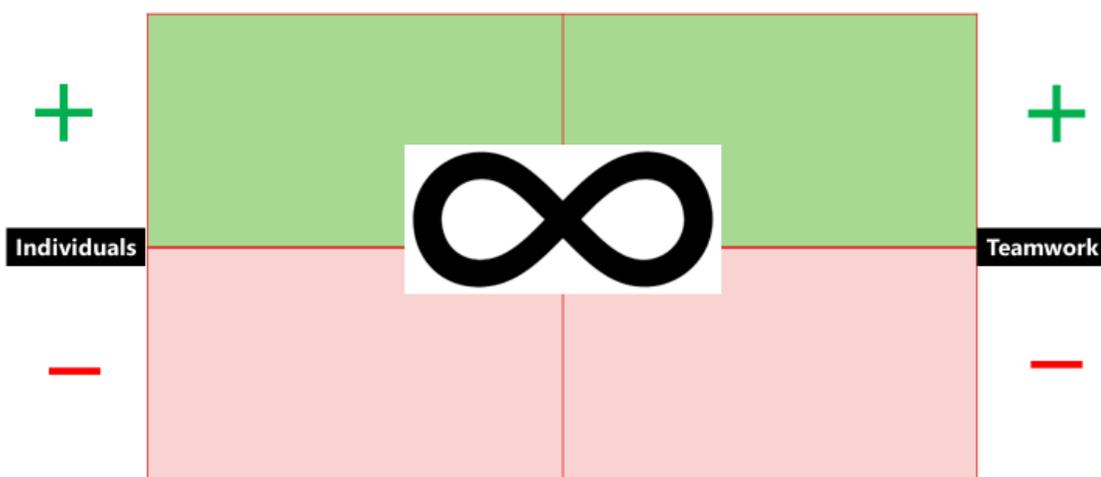


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Hence, we've come full circle from the individual mindset being the major problem to the individual mindset being the solution. The difference, of course, is realizing the positive side of the individual, not the negative. When individuals are untethered, amazing things can happen. More creativity, more initiative, more value-add. Typically, individual orientations allow for more time to do the work and less time taken up by questionable meetings. Engagement is high and productivity is strong.

So, is the upper right box the answer? No. The point of polarity management is that there is no final resting point, no final solution. In this dynamic situation—individual vs. teamwork—leaders will have to continually manage it. The goal is to spend as much time above the line—in the positive zones—as possible. But the dynamic movement will represent an infinity loop, as shown below.



Notice the placement of the infinity symbol, slightly above the middle line. That placement represents ideal management of this polarity system. Watch the dynamic circle around from one quadrant to another, all the time working to manage it back above the line in the positive quadrants.

In the investment world, there are numerous examples of polarities, which need to be managed NOT solved (i.e. once and for all). Below are some common polarities that FCG has encountered. In each case, there is a positive and negative for each pole.

<b>Polarities</b>	
Growth of assets (“sales-centric”)	Performance of funds (“investment-centric”)
Short term	Long term
Centralized decision making	Decentralized
Owner interests	Client interests
Individual rewards	Group rewards
Creativity	Structure
Decisiveness	Flexibility

So, how does one manage polarities effectively? Johnson recommends these 5 steps:

1. An awareness of the difference between a solvable problem versus a polarity to be managed.
2. An awareness that there is an upside and a downside to each pole.
3. Sensitivity to the downsides as they are experienced.
4. A willingness to move from the downside of one pole to the upside of the other, knowing the process will return to the present pole in the future. (The quadrants cycle, or “infinity loop”)
5. An understanding of the two dynamic forces involved in all the dilemmas (**Crusading** for the new quadrant vs. **Defending** the merits of the status quo). This includes an ability to be effective in Crusading, Defending, and mediating between the two.

For any polarity that leaders are wrestling with—like the one discussed above with individual and teamwork—it’s useful to create the four-square and spell out the pros and cons of each. Identify which quadrant you are currently in. Then devise a strategy to remain above the line, knowing that you will dip below it periodically. When viewed this way, leaders move from a simplistic “either/or” solution to a more sophisticated “both/and” approach.

And that is why “teamwork is not the answer.” It’s part of a system that needs to be managed.

Curiously,

JW