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*Scripts from the
Working**Together** Learning Project*

Components of Instructionless Teams

from MP3 programs #64-73

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Working Together against Instructionless Teams I

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of **EvolvingSuccess**. Today I want to open up what may be the most significant topic of the whole **WorkingTogether** Learning Project Library. This is the beginning of a subunit that focuses on the interplay of two modes of internal group interaction as it relates to forming successful teams.

The first mode of interplay works through our emotions. When humans interact we most often interact with each other to create an emotional effect of some kind. We want to change one or more emotions in another person. This is exactly what all great apes do when they want another individual to start a new and specific behavior, stop a current behavior, or change the action of a current behavior. All great apes have crude ways of conveying a range of their desires to another member of their group. These methods are extremely inefficient because, just like those screaming human babies on airplanes, wild great apes have no language to convey exactly what they want. All they can do is create the emotional change in the target individual until by trial and error that individual finally stumbles onto the desired behavior.

This pattern is vital for understanding most human small group behavior. Among human great apes it is **STILL** the most commonly used form of group management, and it is still just as **IN**-efficient in human groups as it is in chimp or gorilla groups. This pattern is what we call the **instructionless group**, or in business contexts, the instructionless team.

The second mode of interplay uses symbols, most often language but also other symbol systems like mathematics or musical notation. Through the use of symbols we can refine the mental changes we want to produce in someone else’s head. For simplicity, let’s keep this focused on language. Through language your team can, for example, identify and carefully define a problem that you all face. That’s really hard to do if you are limited merely to flinging threatening gestures around the table at each other. Your team can use language, instead, to formulate a response to the problem. As a team you can use language to compose a solution and build a plan of execution. Now, as a leader you can either scream and holler in an instructionless fashion until your team coughs something up by trial and error, or you can facilitate the use of clear language to capture constructive ideas in the most efficient manner your team can achieve.

The business **DIS**-advantages of operating through emotion as an instructionless team are **HUGE**. If a group you compete with is using good language to beat you they could be as much as a factor of ten more effective and more efficient than your group. A **FACTOR** of ten, not ten percent.

In the short programs of this subunit we will work through small group leadership issues that differentiate an emotion-driving instructionless leader from an issues-based, solution-oriented leader. The productivity differences are more than merely astounding.

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Pre-wired Human Obedience to Alphas

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of **EvolvingSuccess**. People form groups and teams all the time. They do it for all kinds of reasons. But why? Well, there’s no real mystery to this. Groups can accomplish things that individuals can’t. And even if a single person could do a given thing, some activities work vastly better when people COLLABORATE on them. Even among primitive primate groups, the value of the strengths and skills of individuals is multiplied through collaboration. The better these individual strengths and skills can be coordinated, the greater the value of the group’s effort multiplies. This subunit on instructionless teams is all about improving team coordination and multiplying the value of efforts. In short, this subunit is about optimizing collaborative efforts to achieve the greatest value from them.

In the previous installment we identified two modes for group interaction. There was the mode, or pattern, of the instructionless group, where the primary management technique is unrefined, poorly targeted emotional manipulation. In contrast to this, we identified the symbol-based mode of interaction, usually using language, which is the basis of a group that can turn ideas into efficient and successful action.

Let’s drill down on this idea of instructionless teams. Why do so many teams operate through emotional manipulation, most usually through intimidation or fear? The answer, unfortunately, is fairly discouraging. Our emotional wiring presumes that this is the only way any signaling between group members can be accomplished. This mental wiring pre-supposes that the animals attempting to interact do NOT have a capability like language to make things work better. This also means that instructionless teams are the DEFAULT mode of human interactions. We can’t help but to start with this pattern. In fact, this pattern is so strongly wired into our emotions and behaviors that most people, including many business people, never use any other pattern.

More importantly, instructionless teams do not simply pop out of some kind of instructionless leadership style. Not at all. You see, the whole group of people involved is pre-wired to respond to these types of instructionless directives. So moving an instructionless team into a more efficient, language-based mode of interaction is much more involved than merely setting the team leader straight. All of the rest of the team members also have to set aside their group-stimulated emotional habits and develop habits that promote the exchange of ideas.

There are, of course, attitudes and patterns of behavior that an instructionless team leader often uses to perpetuate the instructionless mode. In the next few short programs we will look at a handful of these attitudes and patterns. Suggestions for keeping an eye out for these will be offered. Practical guidance to change them will be made where good examples can illuminate the process.

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Profile of the Human Alpha

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of **EvolvingSuccess**. At this point we’re going to take a closer look at the small group, or team, leader. In an instructionless team, the dominant mode of interaction is based on emotion. The exchange of ideas operates only minimally. In emotion-driven groups, the person who appears to be in charge got there through a drive satisfaction strategy called alpha climbing. This is a competitive strategy based largely on the emotional domination of the group. As such, the person who appears to be the leader is in fact not leading at all. Instead, this person has taken functional ownership of all the people in the group. And the group has pretty much let that happen.

If an alpha climber is successful, the climbing process will often leave him or her with both an extremely high sense of self-esteem and new-found drive to preserve his or her status as the alpha. This drive to preserve status contains a certain, obvious sense of insecurity for the alpha as well. This combination of attitudes in the alpha tends to be pretty hard on the rest of the group’s members, but the resulting behavior of the alpha is tolerated because, competitively speaking, he or she earned that top spot.

So what kind of behaviors might these alpha types exhibit? From the high self-esteem you might see various brands of cockiness. They will carry little respect for people. They will be difficult to please, almost to the point of being unwilling to be pleased. These alphas might also start acting a bit lazy.

OK, all of that will be a pain. But what will be a bit more damning are the behaviors that come out of an alpha’s sense of insecurity. You might expect back-stabbing and sabotage from an alpha. Sure, that’s bad. But let’s look at some other things. Why will most alphas insist on maintaining the instructionless team? Why is it impossible to please many alphas? Why is it that so many alphas don’t know what they want until they see it?

Well, doesn’t ANY change have the potential to break the alpha’s top status in the group? Of course it does, and no alpha is going to take that chance. This is precisely where we uncover the difference between alpha climbers and true leaders. A leader views a team as partners against a tough environment. An alpha climber views the team AS IF it WERE the environment. The team itself is the source of the alpha’s resources, not the real world. In business, this means that most alphas aren’t really out to participate in a real-world market. They just want a stable group nearby to feed from.

There are many implications out of this, and we’ll only cover a few of the main ones in this subunit. The main point is that in an instructionless group, little ever changes until a new alpha takes over. And if the new alpha likes things as they are, then don’t expect much change from that person, either.

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Alpha Cockiness

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of EvolvingSuccess. In the next few programs in this subunit on instructionless teams we’re going to look at alpha climber characteristics more closely. What those characteristics are aren’t going to surprise anybody. What might be surprising, though, is the willingness we have to work under those characteristics. Alpha climbers only get where they do because we’re all wired to let it happen.

Item One: Alpha climbers tend to be pretty cocky people. A leader doesn’t have to be cocky if the group has learned to operate on the basis of ideas instead of emotional manipulation. We as group members, however, don’t take alpha climbers seriously unless they ARE cocky. How does this usually work?

Ordinarily, people dislike making decisions. There’s a whole bunch of evolutionary psychology reasons for that, too. So what happens if a decision needs to be made? The person with the audacity to make the decision gets up and makes it. And what does the rest of the gang do? After they get over their initial surprise, everyone kind of sort of goes along with the decision. Maybe they like it. Maybe they don’t. Maybe all of a sudden a few people come up with ideas, BUT, too late! The decision has already been made.

Now, if the audacious decision maker gets used to this routine, he or she becomes more cocky. Challengers are behind the curve at this point. For the most part, challengers have lost the right to make decisions, or otherwise direct the activities of the group. They didn’t act decisively enough quickly enough. Furthermore, only the alpha gets to be cocky as far as “the public” is concerned. If you ain’t in charge, you’re just another slob like the rest of the members of the group.

You see, we’re wired with the emotional space for one cocky alpha in our environment at a time. In fact, there’s a bit of an emotional vacuum in the lives of those whose group environment doesn’t include a cocky alpha of some kind. A cocky alpha brings a form of focus to the group. A cocky alpha creates a simple structure by his or her simple presence. We’re all wired to some extent with the desire to look up to the alpha.

SO...still think the jerk at the top doesn’t deserve to be there? I beg to differ. If there’s a functional alpha in the group, and by that I DON’T mean effective leader, then that alpha has earned the emotion-based consent to be there from YOU and the rest of the group. He or she might be sucking you all dry. That’s to be expected. That’s the way THEIR personal drive satisfaction strategy works.

You have three choices in dealing with alphas. You can remain subject to them. You can challenge them, which will require a great deal of preparation. You can leave them to find a group with a more acceptable alpha, or one led by a true leader.

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The Alpha Lack of Respect for Others

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of **EvolvingSuccess**. In the previous program of this subunit we discussed the unsurprising characteristic of alpha climber cockiness. Let’s look at a few other characteristics that stem from this feature of alpha psychology. We’ve got four characteristics to think through, all of which help to maintain the state of instructionless interaction within a group.

Let’s call this Item Two: Alphas respect no one. Now, we should ask, “Why should they?” You see, from the alpha viewpoint, he or she is looking at a group that has given up their share of responsibility in group decision making. The rest of the group are either sheep, or lazy, or stupid, or all of the above and more, from the view of the successful alpha. An alpha does not have any peers as far as they’re concerned.

Now, here again is where the rest of the group comes in. There are all kinds of reasons why people fear challenging the alpha. Sometimes an alpha has enforcers who can hurt you or kill you. OK, that’s a problem. Sometimes there’s a religious or moral prohibition of some kind that forbids challenging an alpha. How convenient if you’re on the top! For most of us, it comes down to a paycheck. Challenging a classic alpha is usually considered a career-limiting, if not a career-ending, move.

So, if the alpha has leverage against us, we keep ourselves in line. But what about those times when alphas DON’T have that kind of leverage? What if out of habit or pre-wiring we simply accept that lack of respect? Or put this in terms of further advantage for the alpha. Can the alpha afford to drive good people out of the team? Isn’t that expensive...especially if the good people are leaving most often? Is the lack of respect FROM the alpha weakening the team? Would the infusion of respect from the alpha build a better team?

That depends. What would YOU do if all of a sudden a hard-as-nails alpha developed a streak of respect? Most people, it seems, would begin to distrust the alpha. They’d wonder what the alpha is up to. They’d be upset that the alpha has become unpredictable from an emotional standpoint. You see, alpha disrespect is a commonly accepted attribute in most primate groups, and that continues down into human groups in modern times. Kind of scary, huh? You’re wired to expect to be dissed!

So, creating a good team isn’t merely about getting a real leader. We all are emotionally programmed to expect a brow-beating alpha to call the shots, NOT some enlightened prince. Our expectations on this specific point need to be reviewed with dispassionate intellect if we are going to become part of a team that we can enjoy, and where we can feel that we make a full contribution. We need to break our long-standing habits of accepting a disrespectful alpha when what we really want is a leader who will help us make the most of our skills in his or her team.

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The Unpleasable Alpha

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of [EvolvingSuccess](#). You might as well say that we’re in the middle of a subunit within a subunit. We’re working AGAINST instructionless teams because they are extremely inefficient. In our sub-subunit we’ve been picking on alphas. But not only that, we have also been picking on the groups that let them do what they do, and behave the way they behave. Alphas get away with what they get away with because the group is pretty well wired to respond with compliance when an alpha shows up. We stated briefly at the onset that this is a matter of different Drive Satisfaction Strategies. Alphas have one type of strategy, and the rest of the group has a strategy that takes advantage of the presence of the alpha.

As concerns alphas, here’s Item Three: Alphas are unwilling to be pleased. “Why?,” you might ask. Obviously, ...there is no UP-side in being pleased. People will stop hopping if you’re pleased. There is no improvement on the status quo if you find yourself pleased. And furthermore, there is no advancement in the group or team if the alpha is pleased. Progress for the entire group is predicated upon the DIS-pleasure of the alpha. This is one of the primary controlling features in instructionless groups that actually makes them work, even if in a limited way.

And so, as we’ve pointed out in the previous segments on alphas, there is a benefit to the group that causes the group to allow alpha control to persist. This lack of pleasing the alpha creates a need for new ideas. These ideas might not only improve the alpha’s living conditions, but the innovations used to explore the alpha’s desires might produce spill-over benefits for the lower members of the group.

Of course, that’s the up-side on the unpleasable alpha. The negative side also works to the betterment of a group. For instance, I was recently on a sail boat in the Mediterranean Sea where German was the crew’s language. I have no training in sailing, let alone having a knowledge of German nautical terms. However, as most Americans might do in similar circumstances, the captain yelled at me with increasing volume until by trial and error I discovered her intention. Not a pleasant process, and not particularly efficient, but we never hit anything (well, at least not that *I* was responsible for).

As it turns out, in primate groups, where language is not available as a tool for refining intentions and desires, unpleasantness from the alpha serves as a directive. And it still works that way in everyday human life, too. And it REALLY works, even if in a limited way.

But this is a key difference between an instructionless group and a group that operates on clear, language-based communication. An hour’s training in the ship’s operations plus an hour in German terminology would have helped me be a more effective member of the crew. Without it, we were just another boatful of pre-historic monkeys the water.

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Alpha Narrow-mindedness

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of [EvolvingSuccess](#). There’s another reason why instructionless groups receive so little instruction.

Item Four: Alphas are pretty narrow minded, often bordering on being stupid about a great many things. This fact helps us open up some important observations. Alphas want the world to operate in a very specific way. They want the world, and especially the group they run, to cater to them at a very personal level. Anything outside of that is, at best, FLUFF. Now, this might look completely self-absorbed by the non-alphas watching things, but to the alpha, their Drive Satisfaction Strategy is all about having the world and their local group cater to them. Nothing else is of interest.

Now, in our modern context you might say, “Well, Tom, business leaders and team leaders are pretty smart people. How can you say they’re narrow minded?” And I’d respond, “Well, no, they’re not particularly smart people.” Didn’t expect that, did you? Here’s the deal: At the completely emotional, non-language level, modern alphas know how to operate a group in these pre-historic, primitive primate modes. They don’t need to know anything else, and they’ll be happy to tell you that. Remember, being emotionally unpleasant and impossible to please gets them RESULTS. Screaming and hollering works within the teams that they have PERSONALLY composed. Efficiency and productivity aren’t the issues here. Alphas don’t know there’s a better way, and most of them don’t care. The system they have built is serving their Drive Satisfaction Strategies just fine, thank you very much!

What YOU have to learn to make THEIR Drive Satisfaction Strategy work is unimportant to an alpha. They simply want to tap you as part of their base of resources. They’re happy to have you learn all kinds of great things, as long as your learning leads to better ways to satisfy THEIR drives. And for many people, focusing on serving the alpha provides these people a sense of security. As long as the alpha is reasonably good about rewarding the results provided by lower group members, the rest of the group will perform to the level that the alpha prefers. This is one of the trades that members make to obtain relative security from group life or work.

Of course, this lack of interest in information in general also helps to perpetuate the instructionless mode of the group. There’s no new information to share, and therefore no NEW ways to do things are ever discussed. If there aren’t any new approaches needed for the alpha to achieve personal drive satisfaction, then you won’t have to worry about keeping up with things either. That is, unless or until the alpha decides they just aren’t satisfied with things any more. So unless YOUR alpha sees something that some other alpha has that he or she doesn’t, you don’t have to worry about being interested in much either. Just watch out for that new sour mood when the alpha stomps in some morning.

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Alpha Laziness

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of **EvolvingSuccess**. One last negative point to make about alphas:

Item Five: As a natural part of their psychological make-up, alphas are lazy. And like the other notable characteristics of alphas that keep instructionless groups going, all of the rest of us members of the group help to feed that laziness. How do we do that?

Well, let’s look at our primary wiring concerning drive satisfaction. We’re wired to act in ways that fulfill our most basic animal drives. Those drives arose over time within animals to simplify our responses to our immediate surroundings. Our drives help to make our responses as efficient as possible despite the wild range of uncertainty that all environments create. Used to be, all of us wild animals had to compete against just about everything to get by. Now, all of us wild human beings have to compete against one another to get by, and that’s about it. While Nature still knocks us around really good every once in a while, like with earthquakes and hurricanes, for the most part we don’t have to contend directly with Nature much any more.

OK, what does that have to do with lazy alphas and how we group members make them that way? Well, when we were wild animals the whole environment was our source of drive satisfying resources. Now, human groups themselves are the primary source of resources. If an alpha wants a nice piece of fruit, someone else in the group needs to cultivate it or find it, pick it, wash it off, and bring it to the alpha. If the alpha wants nice gold bangles, then someone else in the group needs to mine the gold, refine the gold, smith the gold, and bring the bangle to the alpha. The alpha doesn’t care about the commerce within the group unless it poses a threat to the resources that the alpha wants.

So basically, the alpha more or less sits around while the rest of the group is off being industrious. The alpha feeds off the group, and the group continues to funnel its products up to the alpha. From our ancient primate roots, we are wired to behave in a way that supports this structure. A form of social stability appears that allows group members to pick a little bit out of the supply chain that works its way up to the drive satisfaction of the alpha. If the alpha gets too greedy, then he or she earns a revolt. This has been documented in modern great ape troupes, and when they got tired of eating cake, it happened in France (and other places), too.

So there IS something of a give and take between alphas and the members of the group that supports the alpha’s personal Drive Satisfaction Strategy. But for the most part, this ancient system of great ape culture directly supports the lifestyle of the alpha, while the rest of the group’s members have to adjust their personal Drive Satisfaction Strategies to make do. For the most part, in most times and places in human history, this is the default pattern creating a social structure, including work place social structures.

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Breaking Instructionless Group Habits I

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of EvolvingSuccess. Up to this point we’ve spent a lot of time picking on alphas. However, we also pointed out that alphas get to operate the way they do because the rest of the group’s members support, contribute, and otherwise ENCOURAGE alpha behavior. This is because, you may remember, that the presence of the alpha creates a form of social structure, or social stability. Under an alpha, the rest of the group’s members CAN create some kind of a personal drive satisfaction strategy that delivers adequate payoff. For the most part, even under a greedy alpha, it’s easier to make a living within a group than as a lone agent out in the untamed wilds of Nature.

Now at this point many folks might be tempted to say, “Well, let’s get those greedy alphas out of the picture and replace them with real leaders!” Not so fast! The presence of alphas works because despite the high cost of maintenance, they are part of an emotion-based system that we ARE ALL built to support as the default form of social structure. Alpha-dominated structures don’t work because the rest of us are just SHEEP. They work because we’re emotionally wired to make them work. We’re active collaborators, NO JOKE, in forming and maintaining alpha-dominated structures.

This means that if we REALLY want to step out from under an alpha-dominated social structure, we have to stop performing along the emotionally easiest and simplest pattern. And in order to do that, MOST of us are going to have to sit down for ourselves and THINK about what we want that would actually make a real difference. Do you merely want to take the alpha’s place? If so, then you need to learn how to fight, and bring a good fighting team with you. If you’re not comfortable with that, what else is there?

Well, that’s what you have to stop and think about. What ELSE IS THERE? Emotionally, we’re ALL quite stuck on this alpha at the top, the rest of us below structure. And contrary to popular opinion, a change of viewpoint as radical as breaking the alpha pattern requires THINKING. Something else needs to be designed ON PURPOSE. It just can’t happen on its own without purposeful design and experimentation. THIS IS HARD!

The thing that makes a group operate differently depends on the members of the group, not the alphas, nor even any true leaders that MIGHT make a difference. The difference between the relative performances of groups lies within the group members themselves. Groups grow out of the natures and characters of their members, not the other way around. Powerful groups find good leaders because they demand it. Weak groups get captured by alphas who believe they then OWN the group as a personal resource.

In the next few programs we’re going to look at a powerful group, and pull out the characteristics that CAN be replicated in most business situations. How they designed and implemented their path to success will be highlighted. **(Ed. note, these programs have not been composed at this time.)**

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Breaking Instructionless Group Habits II

Welcome! This is Thomas Meylan of **EvolvingSuccess**. In our last program we talked about the difference in characteristics that causes one group to perform one way, and another group to perform differently. We pointed out that alpha based structures, which largely suppress the use of instructions, are based on our primitive primate emotional wiring. To break out of this emotion-driven pattern, we stated the necessity of sitting down ON PURPOSE and designing another approach to group structure, dynamics, and performance. Who’s going to know that it needs to be done, who’s going to know how to do it, and who’s going to be able to get some group on board and execute on this new design for group structure and behavior?

Well, let me be somewhat less than modest and look at my personal history to provide an example. I hit a point in my career as a graduate student in astrophysics where an emotion-based approach to dealing with my academic environment led me to a crashing dead-end. I’d lost my father at a very early age and my academic advisor Ingemar had become a father figure for me. As often happens with fathers and sons (and mind you, all of this was strictly on MY end), fathers have advice, and sons think fathers are idiots. I decided the day after we both almost took a shot at decking the other that I was quitting the program. “That’ll show him,” I thought. “In fact, that’ll show them all.” I was a genius, and they weren’t smart enough to see it.”

Then I started THINKING about the situation. No, I wasn’t going to show them anything at all. If I left in a self-righteous huff, the department and my fellow students would have spent about 30 seconds thinking, “Geez, too bad Meylan washed out,” and that would have been the end of the impact of my departure.

So I kept THINKING about the situation. If I REALLY wanted to create an impact, I’d have to make a GENUINE impression, and a genuinely good one at that. So I determined at that point to figure out how to be the most notable graduate of the program. That took MORE thinking. It took planning. It took strengthening current skills, and adding new skills in a hurry as they became necessary for success. And in 1990 I succeeded in achieving my goal. I went back to visit my old department during a vacation in the Fall of 2006. Hal McAlister, one of the nation’s most innovative observational astronomers, told me that I had become the pattern for the department’s policy of taking on alternative students. This is because not only had I been the best up to that point, but I was actually undertaking this advanced degree as a career change. I was considered quite OLD to be making such an investment of time and study in a new field. But they took me anyway.

The point? I was able to break out of an un-useful emotional pattern and create a different approach to success. The story that’s going to follow is filled with people who were able to do the same things for themselves, and for the teams that they joined. Hang on for a great ride! **(Ed. note, these programs have not been composed at this time.)**

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