

ASK Bookshelf

Here are descriptions of two books that we believe will interest ASK readers.

How NASA Builds Teams: Mission Critical Soft Skills for Scientists, Engineers, and Project Teams, by Charles J. Pellerin (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009)

Since 2003, roughly two thousand NASA personnel and contractors have used the NASA Academy for Program/Project and Engineering Leadership's team-building support services. In *How NASA Builds Teams: Mission Critical Soft Skills for Scientists, Engineers, and Project Teams*, Charles Pellerin details the method he and his colleagues have developed for helping to improve the effectiveness of teams at NASA.

The heart of *How NASA Builds Teams* deals with assessing and understanding healthy and unhealthy team contexts. Pellerin begins with the story of his tenure as director of astrophysics at NASA at the time of the Hubble Space Telescope launch. He recounts the pain of discovering shortly after launch that the telescope had a spherical aberration, and his astonishment at learning that the technical problem had a basis in the organizational cultures of NASA and its contractor. "It took me several years to realize that I was as culpable as the technician who spaced the null corrector incorrectly," he writes. "I was in charge of NASA Astrophysics during the period when P-E [the contractor] withheld measurements that suggested we had a mirror problem. I was a full party to creating Hubble's flawed social context."

This communication breakdown led to what Pellerin calls a "red storyline"—the sum of the negative thoughts and expressions that team members shared. Healthy, or "green," storylines are a sum of mostly positive shared views. Although storylines seem true to the participants, he cautions that they should not be mistaken for truths because they are not indisputable.

The key to improving a negative context, he writes, is cultivating eight behaviors that healthy teams practice: expressing authentic appreciation, addressing shared interests, appropriately including others, keeping your agreements, expressing reality-based optimism and being 100 percent committed, resisting blaming and complaining, and clarifying roles and responsibilities. The transformations necessary to

cultivate these behaviors do not take place overnight, and they typically require skilled facilitation through a combination of team workshops and individual coaching and mentoring.

This methodology relies on short, individual assessments online to determine the extent to which these behaviors are present. A picture of the team's health emerges from the composite of individual assessments. After workshops or coaching, follow-up assessments measure progress on the eight behaviors.

The good news for people who find themselves operating on project teams with red storylines is that they can overcome negative contexts with effort and commitment. "You have several options to change your culture," Pellerin writes.

Games at Work: How to Recognize and Reduce Office Politics, by Mauricio Goldstein and Philip Read (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009)

Goldstein and Read analyze the all-too-common games that undermine the morale and effectiveness of organizations. "Gotcha" (identifying and communicating other people's mistakes), "Marginalize" (exiling people who don't "fit"), and "No Bad News" (suppressing negative information) are among the interpersonal games they consider. They also describe games played by leaders, including "Kill the Messenger" (blaming the person who brings you bad news) and "Token Involvement" (pretending to consult with people after you've made up your mind).

The authors know how hard it is to stop game playing once it becomes part of an organizational culture, but they offer solid advice on how to try. Recognizing which game is being played is key. That makes it possible to short-circuit the game by calling attention to it or choosing not to play the expected "role."

Anyone who has spent time in organizations will be familiar with some of these games. *Games at Work* is a helpful guide to countering their destructive power. ●