

The Invisible Conspiracy

How self interest holds back team performance and saps morale

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Summary

1. The Invisible Conspiracy refers to situations where self-interest leads to behaviours that can significantly hold back team performance.
2. These behaviours are referred to as the “Invisible Conspiracy” as those engaged in the negative team behaviours are harming the organisation, and yet are blind to the impact that they are having.
3. The paradox is that the Invisible Conspiracy is highly visible to other people in the organisation.
4. Invisible conspiracy behaviours have a negative impact on team and organisational performance and they sap morale.
5. It takes courage to eliminate Invisible Conspiracy behaviours. Specific actions include:
 - a. making the “invisible behaviours” visible to the team
 - b. communicating expected, positive behaviours
 - c. coach for positive behaviours
 - d. If necessary, re-deploy or remove people who continue to engage in undesirable team behaviours.

I was watching my favourite television program, American Idol. They were down to about 100 talented, young people, all dreaming of being America's next Idol. The challenge in this round was to form groups of around 4 people, to practice for less than 24 hours, and then to perform a song in front of the judges. They all knew that their survival depended on them working as a team to wow the judges. Little did some groups know that they were about to be embroiled in an Invisible Conspiracy that would lead to them being ejected from the competition. Let me explain.

This is what millions of people in the audience saw. Some teams clicked immediately. They chose their songs, worked out their routines and spent lots of productive time and energy working towards the goal – for the team to shine in front of the judges and for each contestant to shine as well. At the other end of the spectrum, there were teams that could not agree on how to perform the song. Members of these teams wasted a lot of time wanting to put their individual points of view across as to how they should perform their chosen song. Arguments flared as egos took precedence over achievement of the team objectives. Some team members gave up on giving their suggestions while the more dominant ones fought it out. The individual team members did not know it, but they were engaging in an “Invisible Conspiracy” which would, ultimately, lead to poor performance and ejection from American Idol. The Invisible Conspiracy had shattered their dreams.

So what is the “Invisible Conspiracy”? The “Invisible Conspiracy” happens when team members act in their own interests rather than the interests of the team. It takes place when “me” behaviours take priority over “we” behaviours. The conspiracy among teams in American Idol was **invisible** to the team members as they either did not know, or did not appreciate the harm that their behaviours were having on team morale and on the achievement of the ultimate goal. This is exactly what happened in American Idol. Team members wanted to be the next Idol. But amidst the “me-focused arguments”, team morale was sapped and team performance suffered. There were more ejections from Idol from groups that became victims of the Invisible Conspiracy than from those that worked as a team.

The conspiracy was invisible to team members because they either did not know nor appreciate the harm that their behaviours were causing

The negative impact of Invisible Conspiracy behaviours is visible to third party observers... but not to the players in the conspiracy

The Invisible Conspiracy Paradox

In the fable, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” an Emperor is duped into believing that he is wearing a suit of fine clothes that are invisible to those who are unfit for their positions, or who are stupid or incompetent. He was fooled by two weavers into believing that he was wearing the finest clothes. No one said anything when the Emperor paraded his new “outfit” in public, until a young child shouted out that he was wearing nothing at all! There are similarities between this tale and what was happening on American Idol. We, the viewers, could see very clearly that the behaviour of the Idol team members was destructive. And herein lies the Invisible Conspiracy paradox: the negative impact of Invisible Conspiracy behaviours on the achievement of team goals is obvious to third party observers, but it is “invisible” to the players in the conspiracy. Their judgement of what are the best behaviours is clouded by self-interest. In short, we, the audience could see what the arguing contestants could not see.

The Invisible Conspiracy in Corporate Life

The Invisible Conspiracy is very much alive in corporate life – from the most senior levels through to teams much lower down the organisational ladder. We were called in to work with a company which was groaning under the weight of alpha male egos on the senior team. The only time that some members of this team communicated was by attending senior executive committee meetings. Apart from formal meetings, they did not interact. They focused on their own short term Key Performance Indicators with little line-of-sight to organisational goals. They, and their teams, did their own thing, according to their own agendas. Silos were formed with barriers that seemed higher than the Berlin Wall.

Apart from formal meetings, the senior team members did not interact

Common Invisible Conspiracy behaviours include superficial communication and selective sharing of information

There were some common behaviours associated with the Invisible Conspiracy. These included superficial communication, withholding of information or selective sharing of information. The team goal – of winning in the market place and serving customers more effectively to make a handsome financial gain – became lost amid a sea of “me” focused behaviours among the senior team.

And, as you might have guessed, the Invisible Conspiracy was very visible to people who were not directly involved. Morale was at a low ebb in the company. At an organisational level, customer service levels fell, customer satisfaction went down and this was reflected in their financial performance. TMI was called in to help to break down the barriers and to rebuild ONE Team.

Another example – and probably the worst case of the Invisible Conspiracy that I have witnessed – involved divisive behaviour by the CEO. Alliances were formed. You were either in “the CEO’s circle” or you were not. Being in the circle meant that you had more privileged access to information than those outside of the circle. The results on the organisation were deplorable.

Let’s take a quick time out here. Can you imagine the impact if a football club like Manchester United was to break up into a number of on-field alliances? The defence alliance versus the attack alliance, or the alliance that was on the coach’s inner circle and those that are outside of that circle. No sporting team can hope to be successful under these circumstances. And the same goes for a corporate team. There are more than enough challenges and distractions created in the competitive world. It just does not make sense that the Invisible Conspiracy puts shackles on organisational performance. But it happens.

Managers and departments end up playing the game to win for themselves rather than for the team

The Invisible Conspiracy can happen at all levels

The Invisible Conspiracy is not restricted to senior leadership teams. It can happen at all levels in the organisation. The root causes are the same – self-interest, ego-centricity and unresolved conflicts. The same behaviours take place that invisibly conspire against team and organisational success – restricted communication between managers, and actions which demonstrate a lack of shared goals. Managers and departments end up playing the game to win for themselves, rather than to win for the team.

How to avoid Invisible Conspiracy Behaviours

I was talking to a Senior Manager of a multinational company. He had inherited an under-performing territory outside of Malaysia. For years before this Senior Manager arrived, the selfish, ego-driven Invisible Conspiracy almost lead to a closure of the office and major loss of jobs. The Invisible Conspiracy Behaviours continued because those involved did not take responsibility for the damage that they were doing.

His role was to turn the territory around. If he couldn't do this, he would have to close it down. He observed the interactions and behaviours of the team for the first two weeks in his new job. He then called a team meeting. It was then that me-focused players involved in the Invisible Conspiracy came out in full force. This gathering soon deteriorated into a verbal boxing match between various people in the room. Growing impatient with what he saw, the Senior Manager stepped in and said, "Stop!" He explained that if the team continued to behave as it had been, the office would be closed. He was the team's last chance.

A key starting point to overcome the Invisible Conspiracy is courageous communication.

The Senior Manager engaged in courageous communication with his team. He took a number of key actions that broke the Invisible Conspiracy.

- **He made the conspiracy public:** He publicly identified the behaviours that were not acceptable – back-biting, lack of co-operation and a gross lack of meaningful communication.
- **He identified and communicated the positive behaviours** that he wanted to see among team members, and between departments.
- **He was vigilant on follow-through:** He did not allow Invisible Conspiracy behaviours to continue. He coached team members one on one to help them improve.
- **Tough decisions:** A small number of employees were not coachable. They were removed from the organisation.
- **Inspiration:** He expressed continued confidence in the team's ability to be ONE Team.

By the time the Senior Manager had been transferred to another assignment in another territory, the team had one common goal, was communicating well and was performing to a high level. The invisible behaviours had been made visible, and they had been made “public enemy number 1”. And, in the space of three years, the territory made a major positive financial turnaround. The Invisible Conspiracy had been replaced by a feeling of ONE Team.

The highest results are achieved by groups that display the best team work – departmentally and inter-departmentally

If you supervise or manage people, or if you are on the senior leadership team of your organisation, you have one thing in common: you are paid to achieve results. In most job functions and departments, the highest results are achieved by groups that display the best team work – departmentally and inter-departmentally. “We” is always more powerful than “me” in any organisation or team. You may see behaviours that are destructive to team results. The “easiest” route is to sweep these Invisible Conspiracy behaviours under the carpet. This certainly is the lowest stress, lowest conflict route. But it is definitely not the best route if you are serious about achieving the best results possible.

It takes courage to eliminate invisible conspiracy behaviours, but you will unleash the power of ONE team

Open your eyes to what is happening around you. And if you see evidence of the Invisible Conspiracy around you, then engage in courageous communication with the relevant parties. This WILL take courage. And when you do so, and take actions to eliminate Invisible Conspiracy behaviours, you will unleash a powerful force – the power of ONE team. Until next month.

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Our focus is on **implementation and application of skills in the workplace** through measurement, training, workplace application processes and coaching.

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