

## WHERE TRUE COLLABORATION BEGINS

BY BEATA C. LEWIS, JD, MSC

### BRIDGING THE GAP

People tend to experience a gap between their idea of collaboration and their actual experience of it. In theory, collaborative relationships catalyze greater innovation and higher levels of problem solving. As an idea, they promise more excitement, responsiveness and aliveness in our work together. In practice, we may find a gap between how we think about collaboration and how we actually embody its practices.

When collaboration matters, how can we bridge the gap? Here are some essential practices to review and renew in your own collaborative efforts. They are adapted from two resources I highly recommend:

- *Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Overcome Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships*, by James W. Tamm and Ronald J Luyet,
- *The Human Element: Productivity, Self-Esteem and the Bottom Line*, by Will Schutz, Ph.D.

### 5 ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR BUILDING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

#### *True collaboration begins with SELF*

True collaboration begins in each individual and – by their interactions and conversations – is cultivated throughout an organization. True collaboration is rooted in an authentic, non-defensive presence. It takes conscious attention, intention and practice to convey an authentic, non-defensive presence. This is especially necessary and challenging when the stakes are high and communication is difficult. It can be tempting to wait until the circumstances are better, with an atmosphere free of intrigue, mistrust, and betrayal. However, waiting, avoiding or denying what's happening rarely changes it. Instead, defensive dynamics become the pattern and invisible culture.



#### *Focus on awareness and choice*

What actually happens when you work and partner with others? To an astoundingly high degree, our actions take place below our level of conscious awareness and choice. You can really only make new choices about what is in your conscious awareness. To realize more of the inherent creativity and opportunities for positive growth and change in any situation, pay attention to what you notice, your interpretations about what you notice, what matters to you, and what choices you make.

You cultivate true collaboration as you develop mastery embodying five essential skills: 1) collaborative intention, 2) truthfulness, 3) self-accountability, 4) self-awareness and awareness of others, and 5) problem-solving and negotiation.



COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP AND COLLABORATIVE EXCELLENCE

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## 1 – COLLABORATIVE INTENTION

Individuals stay in the **GREEN ZONE** (see below), maintain an authentic, non-defensive presence, and make a personal commitment to mutual success in their relationships

## 2 – TRUTHFULNESS

Individuals commit to both telling the truth and listening to truth. They also create a climate of openness that allows all people in the relationship to feel safe enough to discuss concerns, solve problems, and deal directly with difficult issues.

## 3 – SELF-ACCOUNTABILITY

Individuals take responsibility for the circumstances of their lives, the choices they make either through action of failing to act, and the intended or unforeseen consequences of their actions. They would rather find a solution than find someone to blame.

## 4 – SELF-AWARENESS AND AWARENESS OF OTHERS

Individuals commit to knowing themselves deeply and are willing to explore difficult interpersonal issues. They seek to understand the concerns, intentions, and motivations of others, as well as the culture and context of their circumstances.

## 5 – PROBLEM-SOLVING AND NEGOTIATING

Individuals use problem-solving methods that promote a cooperative atmosphere. They avoid fostering subtle or unconscious competition.

These five essential skills can seem self-evident when things are going well and people feel safe. What happens to your capacity to collaborate when the relationship or environment in that moment feels unsafe? The biggest collaborative challenges happen when it feels too dangerous to tell the truth and take full responsibility for your choices and actions. Those are instances where our mastery is tested and forged as an indispensable personal practice.

## BEING GREEN

### PRACTICING AN AUTHENTIC, NON-DEFENSIVE PRESENCE

The **RED ZONE** and **GREEN ZONE** summarize two alternative mind-sets and intentions that produce substantively different practices and outcomes. Each of the five essential skills can be practiced in either zone. Even when we know to be green, our conditioning can betray us. It's critical to notice and be responsive where you actually find yourself. **RED** or **GREEN**. When both are at play, what's in the lead?

All of our behavior is motivated by beliefs and attitudes. First ask yourself: *“What is my intention?”*



## BASIC INTENTIONS

### RED ZONE

BEST USED ONLY AS AN EMERGENCY RESPONSE  
(GREEN ZONE FOR DAMAGE CONTROL & HEALING!)

- Protect
- Defend
- Defeat
- Win
- Be Right (Make Wrong)

### GREEN ZONE

BEST USED FOR DECISION MAKING, PROBLEM SOLVING, CREATIVITY, RECONCILIATION

- Grow
- Learn
- Connect
- Mutual Gain
- Understand

You're most likely in the **RED ZONE** when your basic intention is to protect, defend, defeat, win or be right. When **RED ZONE** language and behavior increases, defensiveness increases. When defensiveness goes up, a person's capacity and willingness to take risks, lead, coordinate, solve problems, and be creative goes down. Cultivating resilience is largely about shifting quicker and more consistently from red to green.

There are two important ways to notice what zone you're in – in real time:

- 1) *Self-Talk* and
- 2) *Physical Sensations*.

*Self-Talk* refers to the almost constant inner voice that makes a running commentary about everything in our life. The tone and texture of this self-talk can provide a particularly revealing picture of our own self-concept and deeper unconscious beliefs about the world. *Physical Sensations* indicate either

- *Openness* (sense of safety and inclination towards) or
- *Constriction* (sense of threat and inclination to fight, fly or freeze).

### RED ZONE

#### • SELF-TALK:

- "That's a stupid idea."
- "They're so wrong."
- "This shouldn't happen."
- "They don't care."
- "This is unfair."
- "How dare they."
- "I should not have to deal with this."

- **SENSATIONS:** Numb, cold, clammy, frantic, excessively hot, charged up, shallow breathing ...

- **ORIENTATION:** Aggressive (passive/aggressive), indirect, adversarial, positional, dogmatic, focused only on the short term, ...

### GREEN ZONE

#### • SELF-TALK:

- "That's very different from how I see it."
- "I wonder why they see it that way."
- "I can listen."
- "What do I want to happen next?"
- "I need more information."

- **SENSATIONS:** Centered, calm, alive, alert, attentive, open, full breathing, ...

- **ORIENTATION:** Assertive, receptive, curious, direct, cooperative, open to outside influence, committed to the long term, ...



Collaboration from the **GREEN ZONE** is much more effective and sustainable. Why is this?

Individuals in the **RED ZONE** exhibit defensiveness and fear. Because they often appear to be aggressive and making “power-over” moves, others may fail to perceive that their attitudes and behavior are driven by underlying fears. The motivation is to defeat the other and defend oneself. Positions are often stated in very strong terms, and the other’s views may be only a secondary consideration, if considered at all. Individuals in the **RED ZONE** continually argue the validity of their own position and the fallacies of the other side’s position. They will often take disagreement more personally than warranted. They may need to win at any cost and make the other feel wrong so that they can feel right.

**RED ZONE** protective strategies are often self-defeating. **RED ZONE** behaviors and language arise from fears that produce short-term, reflexive thinking. Conflicts feel warlike rather than like problems to be resolved creatively. Forgiveness is foreign, and apologies are begrudging rather than sincere or heartfelt.

What works to change someone’s behavior? More **RED ZONE**?

From the **RED ZONE** two common approaches for changing behavior are *shame* and *blame*. Language and behavior intended to shame or blame is the *least effective option to choose*. It catalyzes and fuels more defensiveness. Defensiveness escalates until someone or something interrupts the pattern. **RED ZONE** language and behaviors wear people and relationships out. People constrict and withhold their genius. How common and sustainable is this where you are?

How often do you deal with (or go out of your way so as not to deal with) people who are stuck in the **RED ZONE**? It’s likely more than you realize because we (mal)adapt to function in dysfunctional situations in unfortunate ways. What’s actually dysfunctional can seem normal. And then there’s the phenomenon of “learned helplessness.” We figure change won’t happen no matter what and give up. But there is a way!

Centering to be open, present and connected in the **GREEN ZONE** makes you more effective, even when dealing with others in the **RED ZONE**. **GREEN ZONE** attitudes also give people additional skills for responding more effectively to those who don’t *want to* or don’t *know how to* be more collaborative right then. You lead by example, inviting and up-regulating a person’s capacity to be more **GREEN** and receptive and available for true collaboration.

Individuals in the **GREEN ZONE** seek connection from a centered place according to deeply held values and character. Their outer self and their inner self are congruent, meaning their conscious actions are in harmony with their unconscious motivations. When conflict arises, they seek to understand and to grow and they desire mutual gains rather than victory. From the **GREEN ZONE**, people do not perceive potential conflict as threatening, for they have tools and coping methods that allow them to deal with difficult situations in a less reactive way.

**GREEN ZONE** language and behavior is best used for decision-making, problem solving, creativity and reconciliation. An individual’s basic intentions in the **GREEN ZONE** are to grow, learn, connect, achieve mutual gain, and understand. Personal and collaborative mastery are mastery of the **GREEN ZONE**.

