

Team Focus: Awareness of Interactive Communication Styles Contributes to Team Vitality and Resilience

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A challenging task for team leaders is to cultivate the energy and vitality of the team long term. Fostering team vitality is about supporting the capacity of all members to stay engaged, focused, dynamic and connected to the mission and to each other - all of which requires collaboration, resilience and effective interpersonal communication.

Alpha Element Institute offers tools that support team leaders and their teams in their efforts to communicate effectively. In this paper we discuss applications of Alpha Element Platform tools to strengthen interpersonal communication as well as self-leadership to reduce burn-out, misunderstandings and disconnection among team members.

First we discuss the influence of internal dialogs on vitality, resilience and interpersonal communication and outline reactive and proactive engagement styles of the Alpha Element Vitality Types. We include a brief discussion of the concept of self-leadership along with overviews of two Alpha Element Platform tools - the Interpersonal Style Questionnaire and the Element Style Questionnaire. Next, we provide examples of how Alpha Element tools can be applied to facilitate teambuilding by inspiring self-leadership and clarifying differences in interpersonal communication.

The influence of internal dialog on vitality, resilience and interpersonal communication

It takes resilient teams to collaborate effectively and achieve extraordinary results. The team capacity to thrive in spite of adversity is built by members who are able to interact authentically and communicate constructively in spite of their differences. Resilient teams are able to proactively deal with setbacks and challenges, using these situations as opportunities to learn, creatively problem-solve, reset or even rally to overcome the toughest of obstacles.

Good communication is the key to success for any team, but it is especially important when the going gets tough. Communication is most commonly thought of as exchange of information with others. However, an often overlooked aspect of communication is our internal dialog. How we communicate with ourselves influences how we communicate with others; indeed it is perhaps the most important form of communication we engage in. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and others, impact our confidence

which in turn affects our vitality, performance and overall well-being. Thus these stories influence our relationships by coloring how we perceive, communicate, engage and connect with others. If we want to practice good external communication, we must first learn to practice good internal communication.

The four Alpha Element Vitality Types offer an opportunity to reframe our inner dialog and engage with ourselves and then others in a new way. They do this by providing clear categories and a common language for differentiating between four styles of proactive and reactive engagement.

Each of the four Alpha Element Vitality Types represents a distinct pattern of engagement, a way of processing information and engaging with others resulting in different interactive communication styles.

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Information Processing Linked To Interactive Communication Styles





Vitality Types SIGNALS	 CATALYST	 TORCHBEARER	 PATHFINDER	 PRAGMATIST
KEY QUESTION	What if?	What?	Why?	How?
FOCUS	Discovery	Accomplishment	Development	Completion
VERBAL CLUES	“Why not?” “Let’s try it.”	“Go for it!” “Any action is better than no action.”	“I’ll think about it.” “We can consider it.”	Silence – “No.” “Not so fast.”
WAYS OF LISTENING	Listens for Possibilities	Listens to Take Action	Listens for Meaning	Listens for Accuracy
DRIVE	<u>Vision</u> Explore new opportunities!	<u>Impact</u> Show me results!	<u>Connect</u> There are many perspectives!	<u>Quality</u> Consider the consequences!
SENSE OF TIME & PACE	Now Hasty	Future Fast	Endless Slow	Past-Present Steady
SOCIAL CUES	Spontaneous Unstructured	Assertive Forceful	Yielding Methodical	Concise Resolute
NEEDS	Variety	Challenge	Connection	Stability
CONTRIBUTION	Ideation	Initiation	Process	Structure
INFORMATION PROCESSING	Multi-directional	Urgent	Methodical	Linear
INTERACTIVE STYLE	Impulsive Social Lively	Restless Fearless Charges Ahead	Calm Cautious Low Key	Predictable Reliable Tenacious

Figure 1

Applying the patterns of the four Vitality Types – Catalyst, Torchbearer, Pathfinder and Pragmatist – to our inner dialog offers a neutral language to sort through reactive tendencies in ourselves and others. The Vitality Types provide a context and language that is less offensive and a more

diplomatic process for recognizing and shifting negative behavior. Applied as a tool to facilitate team development, this language starts by influencing our inner dialog to create a shift in self-perception which then impacts external communication.

The Value of Being Aware of Differences in Interpersonal Communication Styles

Differences in interpersonal communication styles can significantly influence collaboration, team productivity and cohesion. When people are aware of these differences, they are better equipped to be objective and distinguish between the discussion taking place and the personalities involved. As team members explore the patterns linked to each of the Alpha Element Vitality Types, a new appreciation of differences emerges. This awareness has an impact on internal dialog about oneself as well as others. As a result, applying the Alpha Element language in team communication can cultivate collaboration and team vitality.

Learning about the attributes and shadow aspects of the four Vitality Types allows team members the opportunity to recognize that a lack of awareness of one's own communication style and pattern of engagement can fuel toxicity and team dysfunction. When there is no outlet, awareness or language for a person to constructively explore what is bothering them or how to break a negative behavior pattern, both internal and external dialogs can escalate out of control.

A significant distinguishing factor of resilient people lies in how they approach situations. By generating self-awareness of proactive and reactive patterns of communication, the language of the Alpha Element Vitality Types provides a strategy for individuals to reframe their internal dialog along with tools to approach situations proactively. Hence this awareness can contribute to individuals' resilience as well as team cohesion.

Patterns of proactive and reactive engagement influencing interactive communication

Differences in interactive communication styles can be identified by distinguishing between patterns of proactive and reactive engagement. The Alpha Element platform introduces the symbolic language of four Alpha Element Vitality Types as a neutral framework to link four distinct patterns of engagement to interactive communication styles, outlook and behavior.

Figure 2 is an overview of attributes as well as shadow aspects associated with each of the Alpha Element Vitality Types. Attributes describe engagement styles associated with constructive and proactive interactions while shadow aspects represent negative behaviors and attitudes that commonly lead to reactive, less constructive interactions.

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Catalyst

Proactive Engagement: The engagement of Catalyst Vitality is open, vivacious, flexible and non-linear. People who lead with Catalyst interactive communication style tend to be inventive, unpredictable, upbeat and fun to be with. Their disposition is generally extroverted, animated and bursting with ideas. Catalyst Vitality is like a spark and what it seeks is to discover new possibilities and to create excitement.

Shadow Aspects: Potential negative and reactive aspects associated with Catalyst interactive style include erratic behavior, self-indulgence as well as unpredictable, impulsive actions that leave others feeling disconnected.



Torchbearer

Proactive Engagement: The engagement of Torchbearer Vitality is typically passionate and dramatic, independent, direct and on a mission. Fueled by their strong opinions, people who lead with Torchbearer interactive communication style are motivated by seeing results. The proactive engagement of Torchbearer Vitality is about generating transformation and having an impact.

Shadow Aspects: Potential negative and reactive aspects associated with Torchbearer interactive style include behavior that can be restless and belligerent, careless and thoughtless. Hence, this interactive style can be overwhelming and intimidating to others.



Pathfinder

Proactive Engagement: The engagement of Pathfinder Vitality is low-key but persistent. People who lead with proactive Pathfinder interactive communication style are process-oriented and thrive on connecting the dots with a zeal for substance and meaning. The proactive engagement of Pathfinder Vitality is to have a calming effect on their environment.

Shadow Aspects. Potential negative and reactive aspects associated with Pathfinder interactive style are avoidance and feelings of being overwhelmed. This can lead to lack of engagement and disconnection from others.



Pragmatist

Proactive Engagement: The engagement of Pragmatist Vitality is composed, reliable and tenacious. People who lead with proactive Pragmatist interactive style are resolute and to the point. They provide stability and structure and are often more engaged than they can come across.

Shadow Aspects: Potential negative and reactive aspects associated with Pragmatist interactive style include rigidity and judgement along with harshness and a hyper-critical demeanor. This can lead to intimidation, stagnation of collaboration as well as non-constructive dialog.

Figure 2

Alpha Element Platform provides a framework and neutral language for facilitating a constructive, open dialog about the sensitive terrain of issues related to interpersonal communication and collaboration.

It is during times of stress that our negative, shadow aspects trigger our worst behavior. While we may be keenly aware of the negative impact of other team members' shadow aspects, we may be less aware of the impact of our own shadow sides or the transparency of our internal dialog during the ups and downs of a team's life cycle.

By illustrating both positive and negative aspects of each Vitality Type, the Alpha Element Platform provides a framework and neutral language for facilitating a constructive, open dialog about the sensitive terrain of issues related to interpersonal communication and collaboration.

Alpha Element tools applied to stimulate vitality through self-leadership

Creating and sustaining team vitality takes not only good team leadership; it also takes self-leadership by every team member. Self-leadership means learning how to maintain one's own energy, vitality and overall performance. The capacity of self-leadership has been significantly related to higher psychological functioning and a series of positive attributes such as effective coping, greater optimism, enhanced communication, effective work relationships and greater perceived wellness.

Self-leadership is essential to building team resilience because the communication style and level of engagement of one team member influences all others on the team, ultimately impacting productivity and results. Self-leadership requires self-awareness and understanding of the impact of one's personal presence, behavior and communication style on team vitality and cohesion. A first step in self-leadership is to understand and monitor one's internal dialog; a next step is exploring differences in interactive communication styles.

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Below are examples of two Alpha Element Platform tools that can be implemented in teams to shed light on individuals' proactive and reactive patterns of interpersonal communication and stimulate self-leadership.

Feedback from the ISQ and ESQ provide opportunities for rich conversations and meaningful shared experiences. Team members gain a new framework and language to use in their inner dialog as well as in their interpretation of interpersonal communication and behavior.

Interactive Style Questionnaire (ISQ)

The ISQ is a 25 item questionnaire that benchmarks a person's interactive style according to the four Alpha Element Vitality Types' patterns of engagement. By completing the ISQ, individuals can explore the range of engagement patterns they bring into their interactions with others. As a self-development and team-building tool, the ISQ self-assessment provides a common language and generates new awareness about how individuals' engagement patterns can impact their efficacy, confidence, personal presence and interpersonal communication. This new awareness is valuable to individuals and organizations because, when explored during team building initiatives, it provides clarity and increases interpersonal understanding.

Element Style Questionnaire (ESQ)

The ESQ is a 24 item questionnaire that offers a comparison between the proactive and reactive engagement styles an individual brings into their work environment compared to the engagement style they tend to use in their private lives. The benefit of these two perspectives is reduced stress through a new outlook on how individuals use their internal energy resources along with a new awareness of how they apply their energy at work versus at home. This fresh perspective is further explored by participants in the accompanying Alpha Element workshops through individual assignments, small and large group activities and discussions.

The ISQ and ESQ scores represent a baseline for how people view themselves and their interactive style; how they talk, listen and respond. The scores can also generate awareness of internal resources to draw on. By offering a new language to notice and sort out proactive and reactive engagement patterns at work and at home, these self-assessments create personal and professional benchmarks as well as a framework to identify and contextualize stressors. These benchmarks can be applied to set goals and better manage one's energy to create desired shifts.

Scenario: Vitality Types applied as a common language in a team setting

An Alpha Element workshop and coaching program was implemented in a sales office with a staff of fourteen including a company executive leader, director of sales, salespeople and assistants. To foster authentic collaboration across all levels of a team, it is important that leaders as well as key members of support staff join the rest of the team at Alpha Element training. The goal of this training was to provide a shared experience that gave leadership and team members an opportunity to learn something new about each other along with tools to stimulate self-reflection and enhance collaboration.

Every participant was required to complete the ISQ self-assessment prior to the first team meeting. Results showed a predominance of Pathfinder engagement among the leadership while the ISQ scores of salespeople and the support staff showed a predominant tendency to lead with Torchbearer engagement. This distribution of ISQ scores indicates a leadership team that is supportive, methodical and values building consensus. However, a negative aspect of this leadership style can be that these processes take time which can lead to frustration among staff with high ISQ scores in the Torchbearer category. A high Torchbearer ISQ score is associated with a sense of urgency and focus on taking quick action. There was only one person on the team with predominant Pragmatist engagement. There was no one with a predominance of Catalyst engagement and overall very low Catalyst scores across the whole team.

To start off the meeting, participants were asked to share their ISQ scores along with a goal, observation or question that came to mind. During preparatory meetings for this workshop, the leaders and facilitators had agreed that the company executive would start off the meeting by sharing openly about her reaction to her score in each of the four categories - Catalyst, Torchbearer, Pathfinder and Pragmatist - including her observations about what shadow aspects she recognized in herself. When leaders actively participate and show themselves as vulnerable in front of their team, it builds trust and engagement.

First, the company executive explained why she felt like she resonated with her high Pathfinder score and described attributes of the Pathfinder engagement pattern she recognized in her leadership style. For example, she said, it was no secret that she preferred to investigate and take time before making a decision; she also said she resonated with Pathfinder qualities of being methodical and valuing inclusivity and consensus-building. As far as shadow sides go, she openly shared that one of her take-aways from the ISQ was a new awareness of how she tends to withdraw while under stress and even has a tendency to avoid confrontations. She shared that she has as a goal to bring in more Catalyst Vitality in her life and try to have more fun at work and at home.

As each team member shared their goals, scores and perspectives on their ISQ results, everyone listened attentively and engaged positively in the conversation. Next, the team was divided into four groups and asked to discuss how they might handle a scenario of reporting to a new boss. The “new boss” of each group came with a predominant engagement style of one of the Vitality Types.

The small groups discussed the likely behaviors and preferences associated with the engagement style of the new leader they were assigned. They explored what they thought their reactions might be to this leadership style and debated the changes this might lead to in their team culture.

After ten minutes the groups switched and had another ten-minute discussion exploring the scenario of having to adapt to one of the other Alpha Element leadership styles. Afterwards each group shared key take-aways of their discussions with the large group. The objective of this activity was to familiarize team members with the engagement and interpersonal communication styles of the four Alpha Element Vitality Types. This interactive activity allowed leaders as well as sales and support staff to listen to each other as they discussed how they might interact and adapt to the various leadership styles.

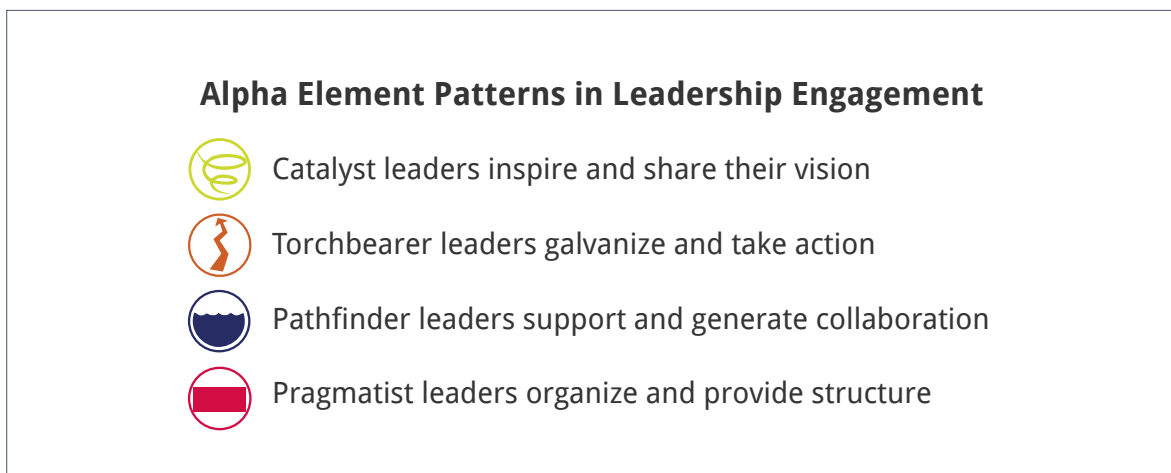


Figure 3

The intangible aspects of leadership can determine its effectiveness. The Alpha Element language offers leaders concrete tools to expand on their leadership style and hone in on “soft” skills such as increased awareness of self and others, their perception of group dynamics, energy and cohesion. Leaders can strategically use Alpha Element platform tools to create a space that motivates team members to adapt and embrace differences. By understanding the impact of their own engagement patterns and starting a dialog about differences in communication styles, leaders provide clarity while building trust and cohesion.

Alpha Element applied in self-coaching

As part of the program set-up, the day after the workshop, each team member was scheduled for a one-on-one coaching session. The objective of the individual coaching was to offer each team member a chance to privately explore their proactive as well as reactive engagement, ask questions and learn how to take advantage of the Alpha Element Vitality Types as tools for self-coaching. When practiced consistently, self-coaching leads to self-leadership.

Director of Sales' Perspective: In contrast to other leaders in the organization, the director of sales did not believe there was significant tension between members on his team. He dismissed the need for additional team development activities and thought it was unlikely that his team would burn out. He recognized that other divisions in the company had retention issues, but not his team. When asked about preventing future retention issues, he blew it off as nothing that would happen: "We have strong players on our team."

During his one-on-one coaching session, this director described his leadership style as open and responsive, always making it a point to spend time with his team members. In reviewing his ISQ scores he felt his scores generally reflected his engagement style. Like the executive leader, his highest score was also Pathfinder Vitality Type, which, on one hand, did not surprise him because he recognized a number of Pathfinder qualities in his engagement with others. On the other hand, he was surprised that his Torchbearer score was not higher as he, in his role as a leader, enjoyed a challenge and strongly identified with the drive and intensity represented by the Torchbearer proactive engagement style. However, in reflecting on the range of his ISQ scores during individual coaching, he admitted that having to be the cheerleader to fire up his team was draining. He acknowledged a tendency to take on everyone else's problems (a Pathfinder shadow aspect) and recognized that he needs time to process so as not to become overwhelmed.

Sales Team Member's Perspective: During the one-on-one with a team member, a different view was presented. This team member's highest ISQ score was Torchbearer Vitality with Pragmatist Vitality as a close second. Reflecting on his high Torchbearer scores, he recognized that his style of engagement is direct and that he likes to quickly figure out what needs to be done and then do it. However, his impetus to act fast and independently had created conflicts in the past with his sales director. In his coaching session, he expressed frustrations about the director's unwillingness to make quick decisions.

During Alpha Element training, the team member observed that the conflict he is experiencing with the director of sales in part is reflected in the differences identified by their ISQ scores. Torchbearer and Pathfinder Vitality Types differ significantly in their sense of time, how they process information and their styles of engagement (See Figure 1). The sales director steps back to view all angles and then sits on it - sometimes for several days. The team member, on the other hand, admitted that he does tend to make quick decisions and roll with it. He also pointed out that he recognized his boss had some Pathfinder shadow aspects related to avoidance, "He has his head in the sand about a number of people on our team."

The team member pointed to the differences in distinctions in sense of time not only as an ongoing problem between him and the director. He contended that the process of waiting is an issue that creates restlessness as well as frustration for the whole sales team. He said that when a decision eventually is made by the director, the team members often feel that important momentum has been lost. To illustrate, he described a recent change to the company's delivery process. Over the past couple of months the company had been testing a new logistics system that he felt had complicated the customer installation process, negatively impacting

customer satisfaction, adding billable time to his customers, shrinking the project margins and hence his bonus. He posed the following question to his Alpha Element coach: “I hear first-hand what the customers want. How can I get my boss to see my point of view without spending hours in endless meetings to discuss?”

The coach directed the team member to suspend his expectations and instead reflect on the engagement patterns of all four Vitality Types. Each Vitality Type has a distinct motivation and leadership style that can be viewed as a lens (See Figure 3). By thinking of the Vitality Types as lenses, the team member was able to reframe. Instead of seeing his manager as a weak leader, he was able to view him in light of Pathfinder attributes - a person motivated by listening for meaning and connecting the dots.

This shift in awareness was an ‘aha’ moment for the team member that created an opportunity for self-coaching. Instead of attacking his boss by continuing to argue his points, he now approached his boss by making more of an effort to slow down and listen in order to understand more about the motive behind the new logistics process. This shift required the team member to draw on qualities linked to Pathfinder Vitality and focus on being open to being more process-oriented. This self-coaching led to self-leadership which was reflected in his newfound awareness and ability to curb his restlessness; he was now able to hold his horses and listen attentively instead of being impatient and zoning out. He realized that starting out by taking time to listen authentically reduced conflict, ultimately saving time.

Listening is a big part of engagement that is often overlooked. In this scenario, the team member’s self-coaching led him to draw on Pathfinder Vitality to slow down. This gave the director of sales the opportunity to review the new process with his report without feeling that he was being put on the spot. After Alpha Element training, the director now also had new awareness that, as a Torchbearer-dominant person, the team

member was listening to take action fast. With this awareness, the director’s self-coaching strategy was to draw on qualities associated with Torchbearer Vitality during the conversation with his report: Instead of being resentful and defensive, he was now able to proactively push back without feeling defensive when he felt the team member was getting too forceful. As a result of the Alpha Element language, they were able to reframe their expectations and negative energy. By practicing self-coaching techniques and awareness of being self-leaders they were able to maintain positive energy and have a constructive discussion about the new logistics process.

As the scenario above illustrates, the Alpha Element language can be applied to increase interpersonal understanding and mitigate tension through self-leadership. Self-leadership is essential to reduce personality conflicts, stress and burnout. As team members explore the patterns linked to each of the Alpha Element Vitality Types, a new appreciation of differences emerges. As a result, applying the Alpha Element language in team communication can prevent conflicts and burn-out while cultivating collaboration, resilience and team vitality.

By practicing self-coaching techniques and awareness of being self-leaders they were able to have a constructive discussion about the new logistics process.

As team members explore the patterns linked to each of the Alpha Element Vitality Types, a new appreciation of differences emerges.

Concluding Remarks

When there is a gap in awareness of how different communication styles among coworkers impact their interactions with each other, this gap provides fertile ground for misunderstandings and inefficiencies. Arguments and confrontations are stressful; they are usually unwelcome and can quickly become ugly and painful. However, as every project manager and business executive knows, arguments can lead to important discoveries when handled constructively. In spite of bruised egos, time-consuming discussions and drained energy, constructive arguments provide vital information: Information about people-issues, process-issues, market-issues, client-issues, and so forth. Through self-leadership and awareness of differences in the engagement patterns of their team mates and team leader, anyone on the team can contribute to move the discussion from reactive to proactive and create a space of vitality, collaboration and resilience.

When a team is not in synergy, both team culture as well as company bottom line suffer. Awareness of the impact of internal dialogs as well as differences in interactive communication patterns of the four Vitality Types can help leaders and team members generate a shift in perspective. This new view of their internal stories can motivate them to be proactive rather than reactive in their internal dialog as well as their approach to relationships, interpersonal communication and behavior.

When a team is not in synergy, both team culture as well as company bottom line suffer.

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Another article from Alpha Element Institute:

Tom's Story: A Case Study of The Alpha Element Language Applied in Self-Coaching illustrates how the Alpha Element language is applied to facilitate self-coaching and self-leadership.

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