A team is any group of people working together in pursuit of a mutual goal. That includes a finance team in a large company or the faculty at an elementary school, but it could also be the entire company or school. Working in an organization is a team sport. Putting together teams that perform well in tough circumstances remains a frustrating goal because we overlook the most important piece of the puzzle: conversational capacity. If we continue ignoring this critical variable, nothing will work the way we intend. We’ll say nothing when we should speak up. We’ll quarrel when we should inquire. We’ll remain reticent when we should be resolved. We’ll be closed-minded and critical when we should be open-minded and curious.

If we want to build healthier, more capable teams we must pay far more attention to a key piece of the puzzle on which every other aspect of teamwork depends. I refer to it as conversational capacity. Put simply, conversational capacity is the ability to have open, balanced, non defensive dialogue about tough subjects and in challenging circumstances. A team with high conversational capacity can keep its performance on track, productively addressing even its most difficult and contentious issues. But when a team has low conversational capacity, even a petty disagreement can throw team members off balance and derail their performance.

There is a “sweet spot” in any meeting or conversation where the dialogue is open, balanced, and nondefensive. Good work gets done here. While it’s easy to remain balanced when talking about routine and comfortable issues, when a difficult subject hits the table our tendency is to move out of the sweet spot toward the extreme ends of the behavioral spectrum. Some people shut down. Others heat up. A team with high conversational capacity can stay focused on learning, and do work, even in difficult situations, because team members don’t allow their emotional reactions to pull them off center.

We know we’re communicating in an open, balanced, nondefensive way when there is balance between candor and curiosity. We don’t mind sharing our ideas and perspectives and we’re equally interested in exploring the ideas and perspectives of others. If we let our candor drop, for instance, our behavior becomes more cautious- we shut down, cover up our views, water down our concerns, change the subject, or feign agreement. On the other side of the spectrum, when we let go of curiosity, our behavior grows more arrogant and aggressive- we heat up, argue our point, stop listening, and push our perspective at the expense of others.
Conversational capacity doesn’t replace our natural fight-or-flight reactions; they are hard-wired, and no amount of skill is going to eradicate these instinctual drives. Our only option is to better recognize them and manage them. This discipline is not a simple gimmick, something we can easily master with minimal effort and practice. It’s a conversational martial art, and earning our black belt—the ability to remain balanced in the toughest of circumstances—takes dedicated focus and practice.

**Curiosity Skill 1: We Test our View**

Given our brains’ self-serving biases, it’s impossible to effectively test our thinking *with our thinking*—it always looks good. The best way to test our thinking is by bouncing it off other people—especially people with contrasting perspectives. Rather than treat our views like truths to be evangelized, we put forward our views—our positions and thinking behind them—and treat them like hypotheses to be tested. When we test our hypotheses, we don’t sit back and hope others will share contrasting perspectives—we actively encourage them to disagree, to share how and where they see things differently.

- What’s your take on this issue?
- What does this look like from your angle?
- Do you see it differently?
- How does what I’m suggesting feel to you?
- Is there a better way to make sense of this?
- What’s your reaction to what I’ve put forward?

**Curiosity Skill 2: Inquiry**

When people push back, disagree, put forward a position without explaining it, or simply haven’t shared their view at all, we inquire to invite more of their thinking into the conversation. Skilled inquiry is not just asking a single question; it’s the process of asking as many questions as necessary to get the other person's view into the pool of information being used to make sense of the issue we’re addressing.

- What are you seeing that leads you to that view?
- Tell me more about how you’re looking at this issue
- Help me see through your lens. How do you making sense of X?
- What does this look like from your perspective?
- Help me expand my thinking of this. Tell me how you see X.
- What have you seen or heard that leads you to think X?
- Can you give me an example of X?