

THE WORKPLACE

The "Red Zone" Organization: How to Turn Defensiveness into Success and Satisfaction

By James W. Tamm

Are you stymied by the collaboration void in your workplace? Wonder why, when you've struggled to hire the best and the brightest, tempers flare and productivity often grinds to a halt?

You may have a "Red-Zone" workplace: An environment where turf is guarded and defensiveness abounds.

Red-Zone organizations are made up of individuals who are short on trust and who lack a spirit of collaboration and cooperation. When a project fizzles or fails in a Red-Zone workplace, people turn to shame and blame—focusing not on *what* went wrong, but on *who* did wrong.

No Energy. No Spirit. No Fun.

A Red-Zone organization isn't a fun place to work. People aren't excited to be there. Most everyone favors victory over solutions. And they waste more time and energy on self-preservation than they spend on bottom-line priorities.

To stand a chance of keeping their stars, Red-Zone organizations often dangle carrots such as bigger and better pay, perks or benefits. Still, productivity and morale suffer because Red-Zone attitudes fog the corporate culture.

Greener Pastures

Contrast all this with a "Green-Zone" environment. Here, the organization *is* a fun place to work. It is a place that has trust, optimism and goodwill. Employees work together to pursue a shared vision. They value collaboration and get the job done with a strong sense of teamwork and excellence.

Sure, Green-Zone qualities can't save a company that makes terrible products or offers lousy customer service. Yet, studies show when all else is equal, Green-Zone organizations enjoy long-term profitability and growth, while their Red-Zone counterparts suffer in all areas. Some companies even "Red-Zone" themselves right out of business.

Changing Colors and Cultures

So can Red-Zone organizations become Green-Zone organizations? And can employees at all levels learn to collaborate? Absolutely!

Collaboration isn't magic. It's a mind-set *and* a skill-set—both of which can be learned—that can make a big difference to a company's bottom

line.

Five Key Steps for Building Collaboration

A 15-year initiative teaching collaborative skills in highly adversarial Red-Zone organizations reveals five essential skills for building successful collaborative environments:

1. **Think win-win.** Foster a non-defensive attitude among employees, and reward people who care about others' interests and needs as much as their own. Mutual success is the hallmark of positive, long-term relationships—and living and working in the Green Zone.
2. **Speak the truth.** Dishonesty poisons the workplace. If you're serious about changing your corporate culture, you must speak—and vow to listen to—the truth. Green-Zoners are open, honest, and "out there" with their intentions, observations and feelings, and they receive the same candor in return. They're also excellent listeners; behavior you must model if you want others to follow suit.
3. **Be accountable.** There's no room for shame or blame in the Green Zone. Promote a culture in which people take responsibility for their performance and their relationships. Encourage everyone to change what's not working. And recognize employees who focus on solutions.
4. **Be self-aware and aware of others.** Work hard to understand your thoughts, feelings, emotions, intentions and behaviors—and work just as hard to understand those around you. Create an environment where people feel free to ask "what's up?" when they don't "get" someone else's attitude or behavior.
5. **Learn from conflict.** All relationships bump up against conflict once in a while—especially when deadlines and other pressures loom. The key is to use conflict to learn and grow. Focus on understanding everyone's underlying interests, then seek mutually beneficial solutions. When you hit a wall, take a time-out; consider what's going on with you and those around you; and then start over.

About the Author

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Evaluating Your Company's Culture
