

# Causal Looping Team Killers

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# **CAUSAL LOOPING TEAM KILLERS**

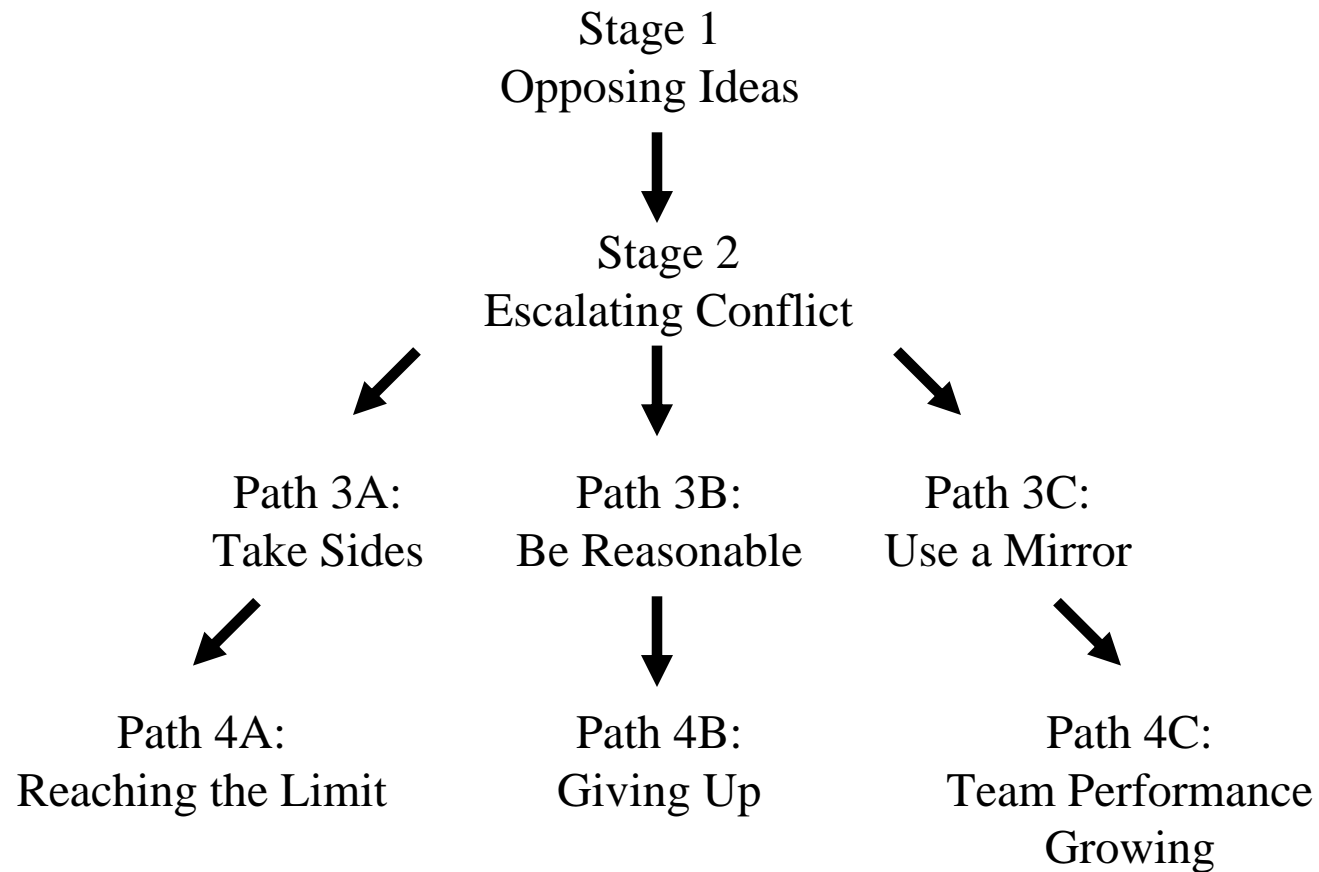
**Alan Slobodnik, Kristina Wile, Charles Malovrh**

## **Classic Case #1 – Unresolved Overt Conflict**

Few of us have escaped the experience of being on a team where two people in particular seemed to have the same argument over and over, without resolution, its effect arresting any progress we may have hoped to make. This is a classic Team Killer – or archetype. (See sidebar for a full list of the “Team Killers.”) Below we describe this commonly occurring pattern of behavior and its development over time, the intuitive interventions (which don't work), and some alternatives. See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

## **Unresolved Overt Conflict Evolution of a Team Killer**



## **Stage 1 – Birth of an escalation**

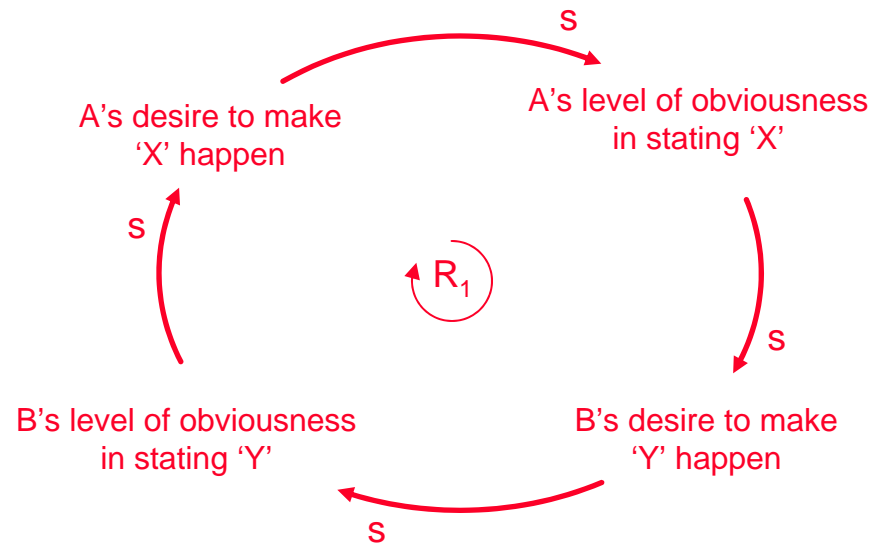
There are several people on a team including person A and person B. Person A makes a proposal or suggestion to do 'X'. She is the Mover, or initiator, in this transaction. (See sidebar for a full explanation of the four Team Roles.) A earnestly believes X is the right thing to do for the problem – for the team. She may sound something like: "Obviously, what we need to do is... ." Her solution is different from what B earnestly believes is the right thing to do, and B responds with a Challenge: "You are wrong. Clearly, we need to do Y, not X." Not only does B sincerely think X is wrong, he resents A's implication that her solution is so obvious. So, he feels it necessary to advocate, with equal force, his solution, Y. This only increases A's resolve to push her solution, and a reinforcing cycle of conflict is created.

Nonetheless, A and B's statements initially stem from altruistic motives. Persons A and B are usually intelligent, experienced people. Often they are either formal or informal leaders. During this escalation, A or B may even cite their experience and knowledge as a way to build their case. These factors help to increase A and B's confidence in their solutions, and they genuinely believe they are pushing for the right thing for the team. See Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Stage 1 – A and B each think they have the right idea, and both genuinely want to do the ‘right’ thing



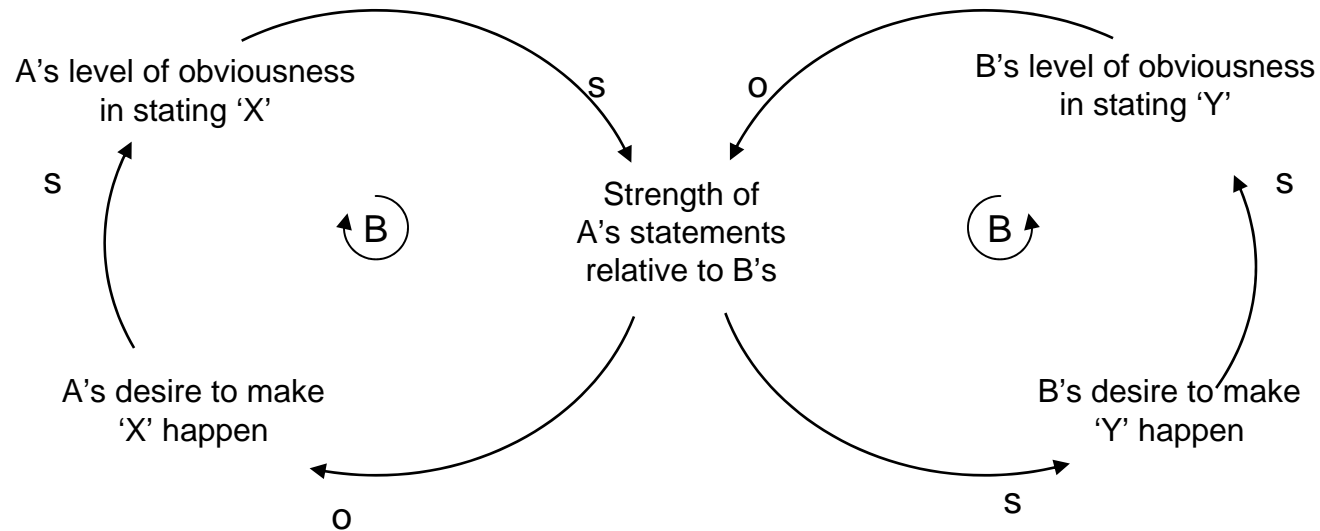
R<sub>1</sub>: A's desire to make 'X' happen causes him to increase the level of obviousness of his statement. This fuels B's desire to make 'Y' happen, leading to an increase in her level of obviousness, which further increases A's desire.

From a structural standpoint, this is a classic escalation pattern formed primarily by what is being said, by communications, in the Left Hand Column. It can take the form of a single reinforcing loop, where A's statements lead B to increase his resolve, which leads A to increase hers. (Alternatively, it can be represented as an archetypal escalation with two balancing loops. See Figure 3.)

**Figure 3**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Stage 1 – This stage can also be represented as an archetypal escalation



## Stage 2 – How stuck is stuck?

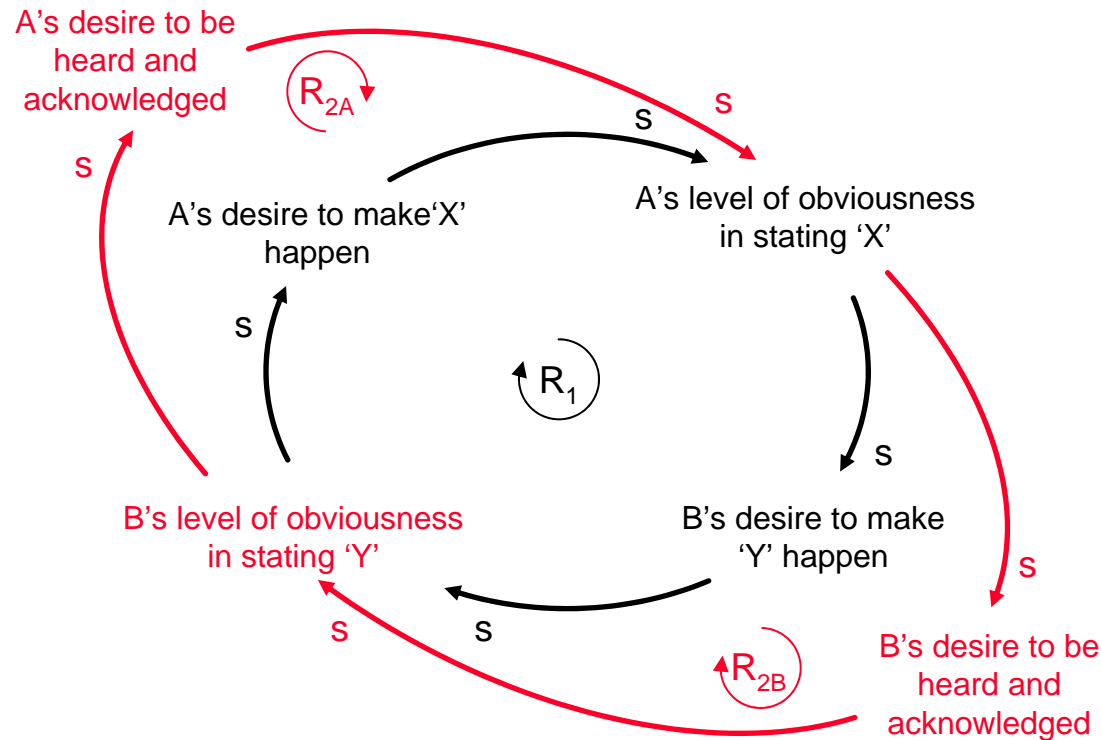
In the second stage, the stakes get higher for A and B. Their motivation goes underground, becomes the unspoken in the Right Hand Column, and it usually has to do with the basic human need for affirmation – to be heard. A second reinforcing feedback loop takes control as the escalation begins to increase in its level of 'stuckness' or its level of *entrenchment*. See Figure 4. As time goes on, it becomes extremely difficult for either A or B to concede, as each feels their reputation is at stake, or they are not being respected.

In the structural view, the initial reinforcing feedback loop recedes in its strength and a new, related reinforcing feedback loop takes over. B's statements increase A's desire to be acknowledged and A's ever more forceful statements increase B's desire to be heard. The initial Mover-Challenger interaction has degenerated into a stuck Challenger-Challenger pattern.

**Figure 4**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Stage 2 – A and B begin to feel threatened which raises the stakes in the argument for X and Y



$R_{2A}$  and  $R_{2B}$ : As A's level of obviousness in stating 'X' increases, B's desire to be heard and acknowledged also increases. This additional emotion also results in an increased level of obviousness in the statement of B's position. This loop exists from both A and B's perspective.

### **Stage 3 – Common interventions**

In the first two stages, this conflict seems to be about solutions X and Y, or if it has been going on long enough, A and B's inability to 'get along'. Usually, the other team members will respond or intervene in a number of ways.

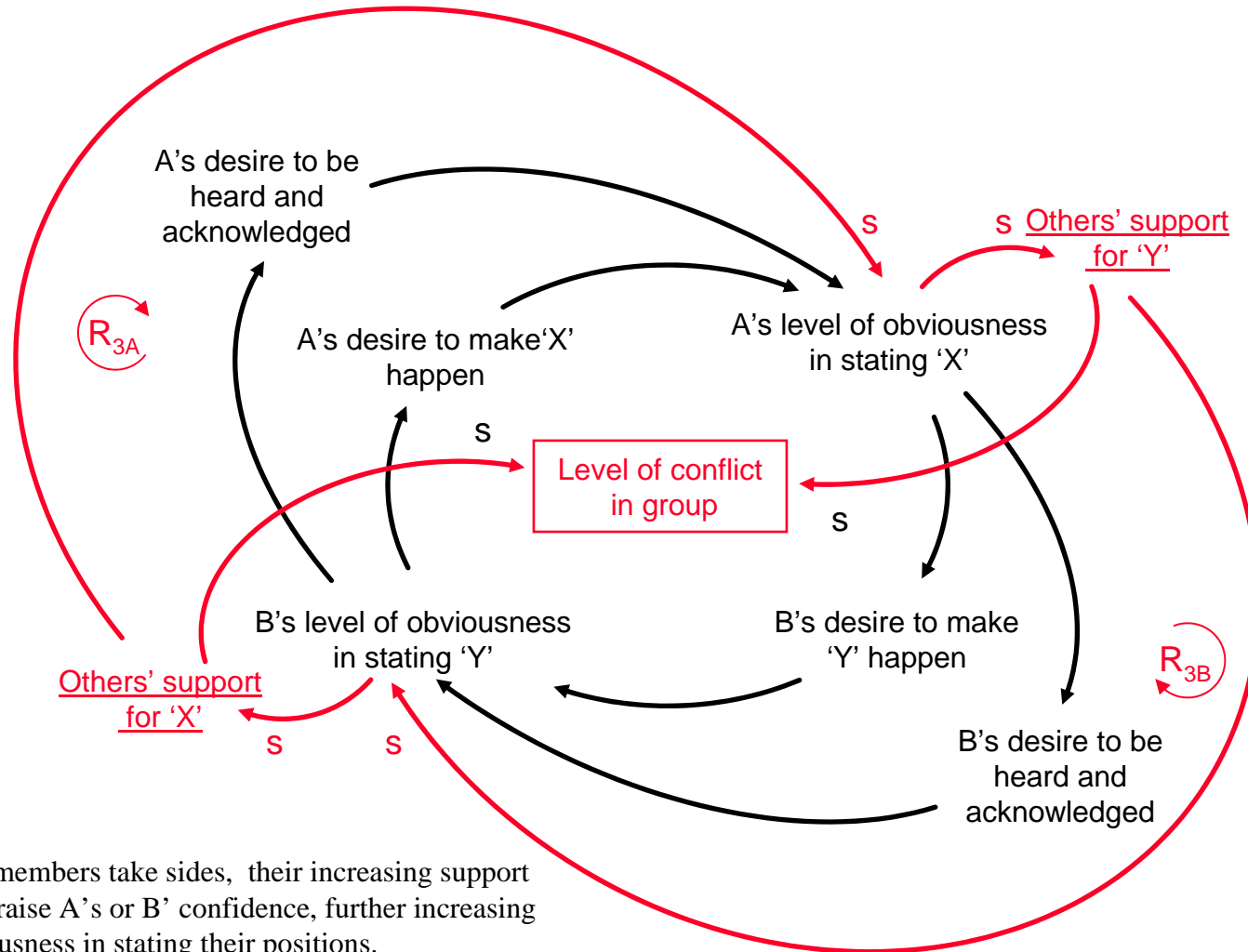
#### **Path 3A – 'Taking Sides'**

The most common response from other team members to is to support either A or B. While on the content level, this may seem like the right thing to do, this action strengthens the reinforcing process and causes the players to become more entrenched. 'Taking sides' actually is quite a reasonable action, *the first time* the group explores a particular issue together. But when it becomes a *pattern* this action only contributes to the dynamic of conflict. Additionally, the particular issues may vary, but when A and B's unmet need to be acknowledged is driving the dynamic, a simple democratic maneuver like weighing in will backfire. See Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

# Unresolved Overt Conflict

## Path A – Supporters contribute to an exponentially increasing level of group conflict



R<sub>3A</sub> and 3B: If team members take sides, their increasing support for 'X' or 'Y' will raise A's or B's confidence, further increasing their level of obviousness in stating their positions.

Sometimes a team member, C, will propose an alternative solution, Z, that is different from both X and Y. What happens? A and B now have *evidence* that they are not being listened to, and argue for their solutions even more strongly. This intervention always evokes a defensive reaction, usually from both A and B. C can become a third party to this escalation, creating his own reinforcing feedback process with one of or both A and B.

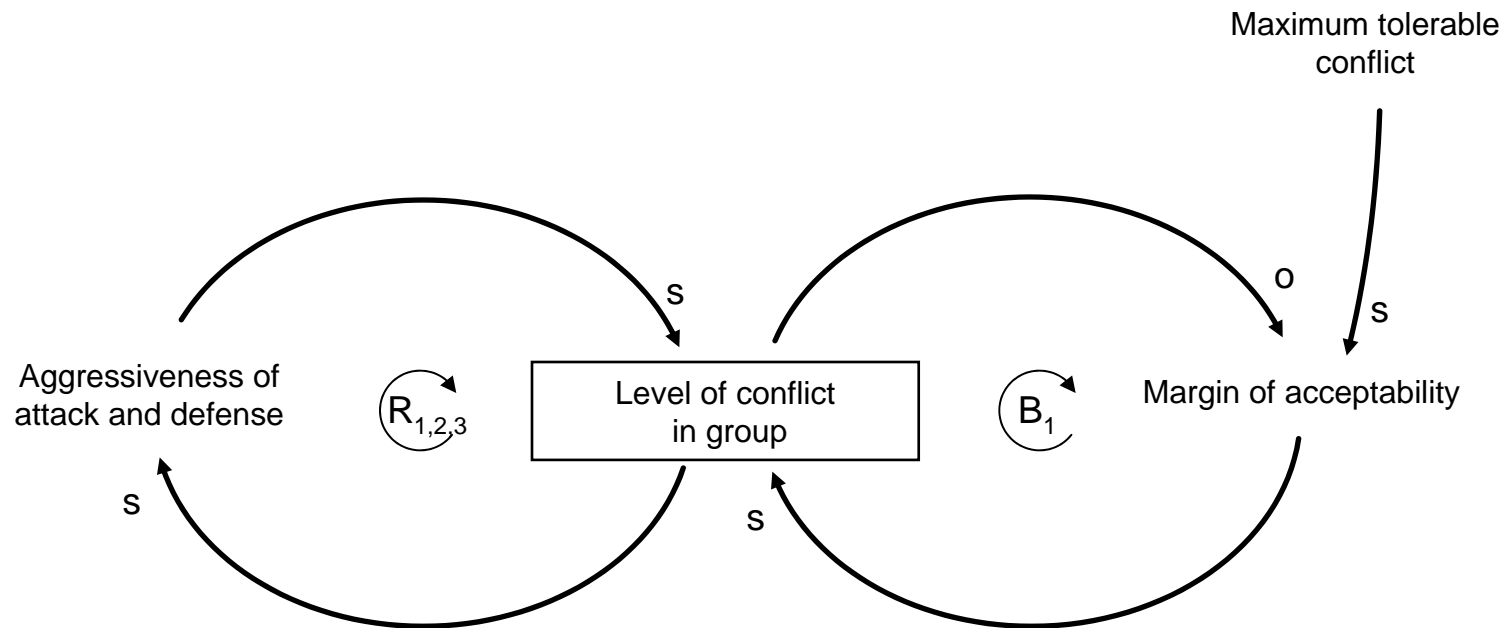
#### **Path 4A – Taking the conflict to the limit**

Others may respond to the merits of one of the solutions outlined by A or B. They may also have strong opinions about the direction the group should take. As they voice support for one plan or the other, the conflict evolves from a "personality" conflict to a group conflict. See Figure 5. The dynamic may become war-like, with the discussion taking a marked departure from the merits of the plan and turning to openly personal attacks. The conflict becomes a group level reinforcing dynamic that is unpleasant indeed. This level of group conflict cannot be sustained over time. The organizational limit on the absolute maximum level of conflict asserts itself. See Figure 6. This limit may be embodied in the notion of professionalism for a particular kind of work, or it may be an organizational force of culture. What often happens is that the group will reach that limit in their discourse, and adjourn. When the group reassembles, the same dynamic occurs. The group conflict increases in an S-shaped pattern, then drops off, then increases again.

**Figure 6**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Path A's Conclusion – The growth in conflict is limited by the maximum allowable conflict in the organizational culture – usually stemming from some understanding of professionalism



$B_1$ : The escalating level of group conflict does not continue indefinitely. As it approaches a maximum tolerable level, the margin of acceptability with respect to group norms decreases causing pressure to reduce or curtail increased escalation.

### **Path 3B – 'Be Reasonable'**

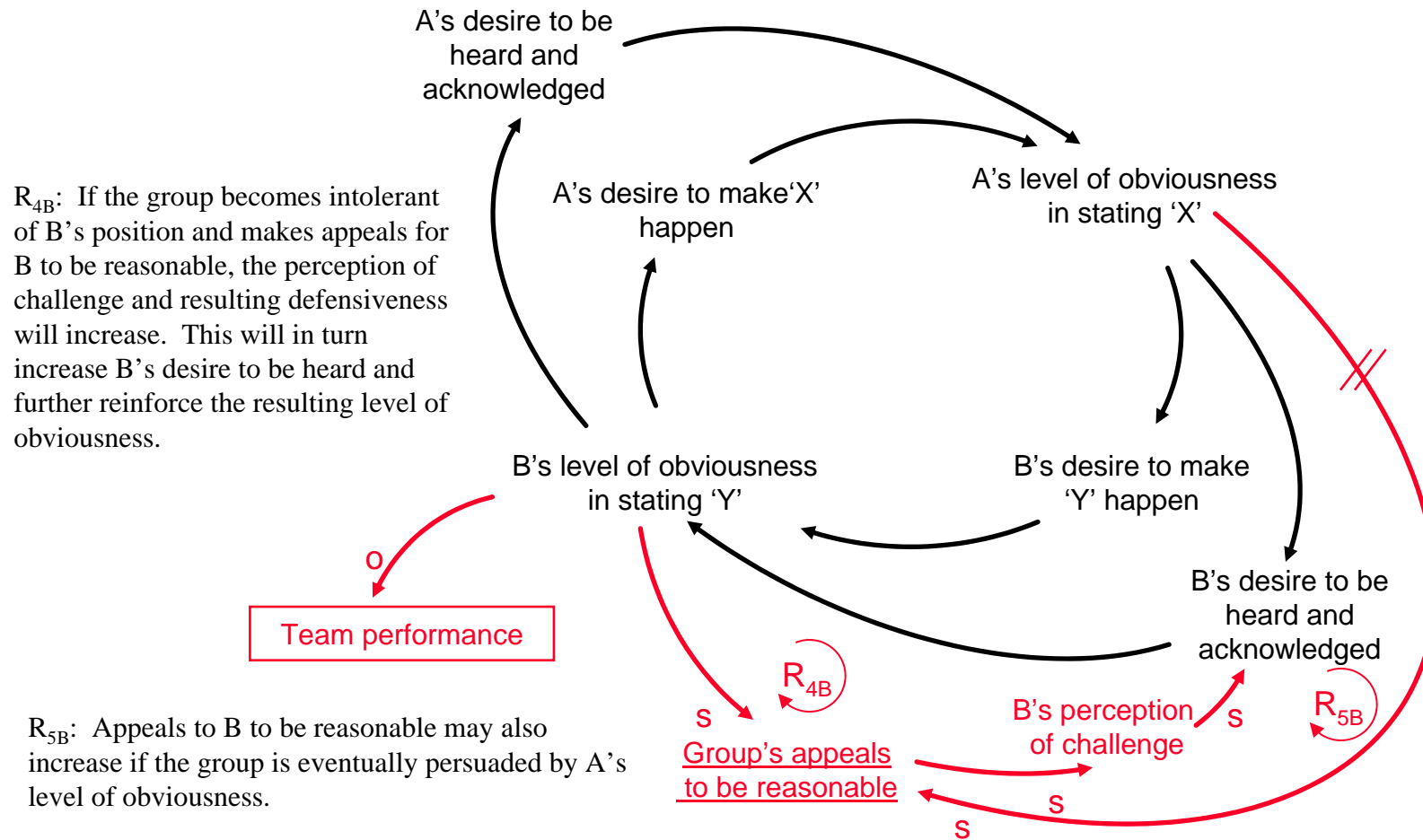
Another common intervention is an appeal from another team member to A and B to "be reasonable". Often this person realizes that the problem may not be the content of X and Y, but the process – the way A and B are interacting. This appeal is usually perceived as an insult and a Challenge to A and/or B. See Figure 6. A and B each think their solution is the most reasonable, the most logical, and downright obvious. The effect of a "be reasonable" appeal is usually a redoubled effort on the part of A or B to state his or her case.

In the structural view, the group gets frustrated after listening to several rounds of this debilitating conflict. Usually a member will make a plea to A and/or B to "be reasonable". In Figure 7 the plea is made to B. B may perceive that he is being called unreasonable and feel challenged. This further increases his desire to be acknowledged, and reinforces the conflict. This intervention is similar to a "Fixes-That-Fail," except the fix doesn't work at all. It just exacerbates the problem.

**Figure 7**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Path B – Group may respond to conflict by making appeal to A and B, which unintentionally increases their defensiveness



R<sub>4B</sub>: If the group becomes intolerant of B's position and makes appeals for B to be reasonable, the perception of challenge and resulting defensiveness will increase. This will in turn increase B's desire to be heard and further reinforce the resulting level of obviousness.

R<sub>5B</sub>: Appeals to B to be reasonable may also increase if the group is eventually persuaded by A's level of obviousness.

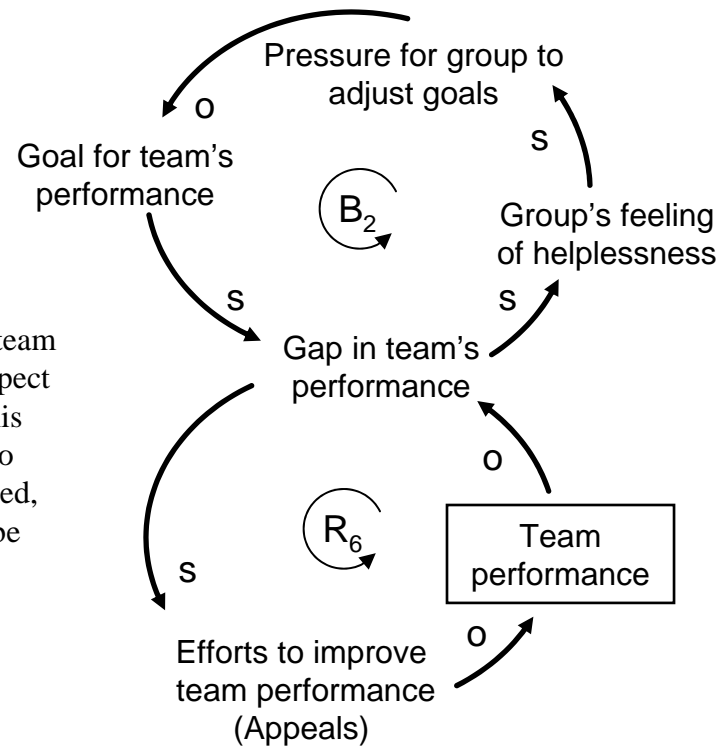
## **Path 4B – Giving up and Dropping Out**

While the level of persistence in team members varies, sooner or later they realize the solutions outlined above do not work. Most commonly, the team members eventually give up or drop out. See Figure 8. This is a classic eroding goals scenario. Members of the group find it too hard to get the team to operate as effectively as they would like, so they adjust their expectations. Considered as part of the whole team dynamic, this giving up and dropping out tacitly supports and condones the reinforcing conflict. The team members are responsible for their own expectations, and the first step in a team turnaround is to raise the bar back up.

**Figure 8**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Path B's Conclusion – A dysfunctional variation on an Eroding Goals structure leads to giving up or dropping out



R<sub>6</sub>: The efforts to improve team performance (through appeals to be reasonable) actually cause a decrease in team performance, increasing the gap with respect to the goals for team performance. As this gap in team performance grows, efforts to improve the condition are further increased, but the actual performance continues to be reduced.

B<sub>2</sub>: As the gap in team performance grows, the group's feeling of helplessness increases and the pressure to adjust the goals builds. The increasing pressure to adjust the goals results in the goals being reduced over time as team members give up or drop out.

### **Path 3C – Introduction of the Process Mirror**

The predominant thinking by group members during these escalations is that there is something wrong with A and B. But the other group members are probably equally stuck on evaluating the content level of solutions X and Y, or developing their favorite alternatives. To solve the escalating pattern of behavior, the group must start focusing on the process rather than the content. This takes some skill and training on the part of group leaders and members, and may even require an outside facilitator.

Note that three of the four team roles have been represented so far in the conflict. A was the original Mover with her proposal. B was the Challenger with his disagreement and counter proposal. The other team members either became Supporters of A or B's position, or became Challengers to them by proposing additional alternatives or asking them to "be reasonable." The fourth team role, the process Mirror, was conspicuously absent during the escalation.

The first intervention in either scenario is to make a process observation from the Mirror Role. Progress is not possible unless the group is willing to observe that it is stuck. For a Mirror to be effective, the framing of the conflict must be systemic and include the contributions of all the team members, not just A and B. All judgments, blame and scapegoating must be removed from the description. If the Mirror can appeal to A and B's underlying feeling of not being heard, he or she will be even more effective.

One possible example of an effective Mirror observation might be:

“We seem to be going around in circles. A and B aren’t feeling heard, and the rest of us are just joining in the fray or dropping out. There must be a better way to have this conversation.” (We need another example here, I think.)

Note that the introduction of the Mirror itself breaks up the stuck Challenging between A and B that is supported by the other group members.

Getting other group members involved in the solution is the key to eliminating the roadblock. The balance of power must be shifted away from A and B and back to the rest of the group. Someone could follow up the Mirror comment with a suggestion (Move) to get others involved.

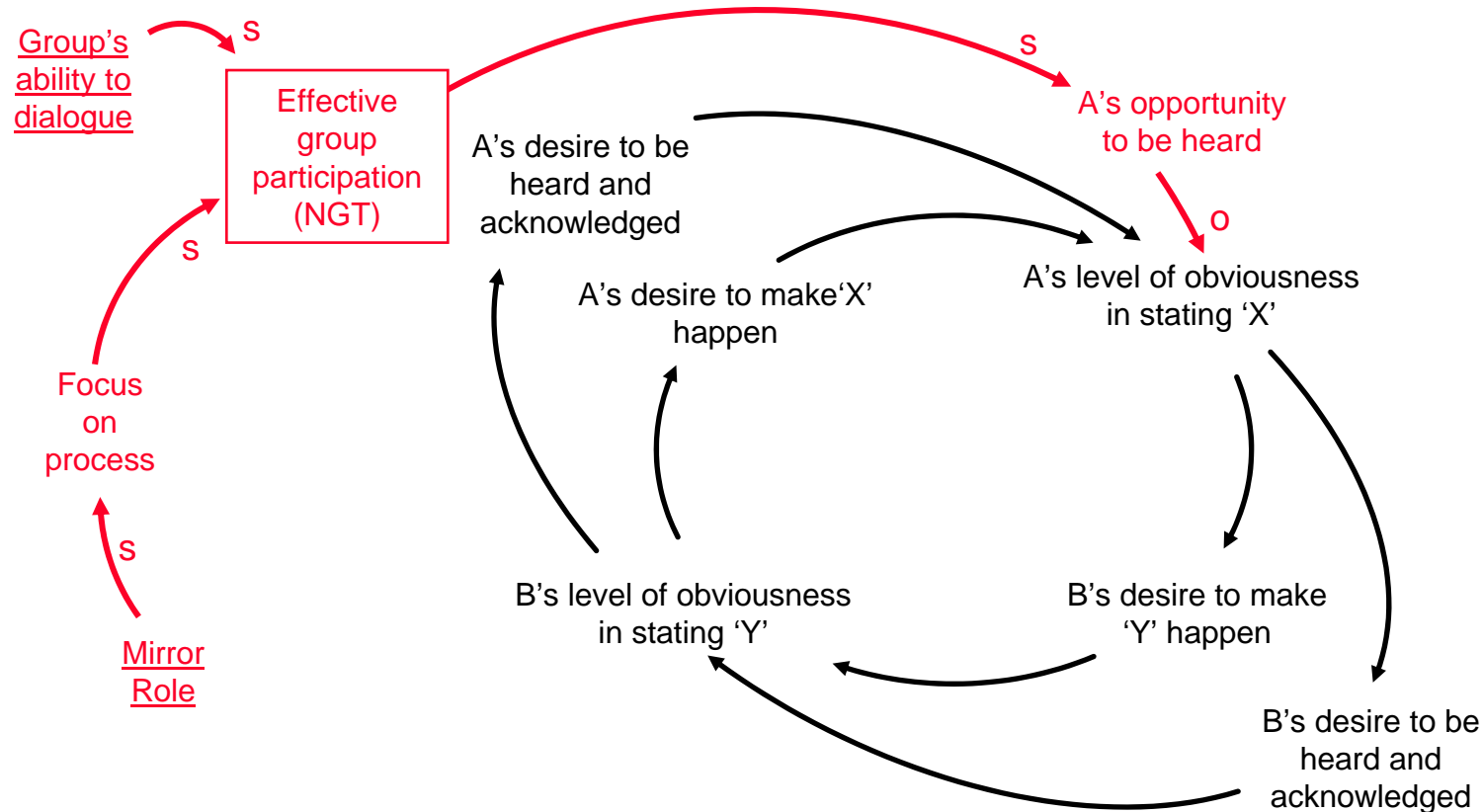
## **Path 4C – Everyone is Heard Through the Nominal Group Technique**

Mirroring is most effectively followed up by another exercise called the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). This approach allows every person to contribute and be heard in a structured way. See Figure 9. Going around in a circle, members share one idea at a time. A talking stick can be used for this, or an informal facilitator can be designated to ensure that A and B do not fall into their usual pattern of communication.

**Figure 9**

## Unresolved Overt Conflict

Path C – Introduction of the Mirror provides process focus, enables effective group participation, and leads to opportunities to be heard



Introduction of the Mirror Role causes the group to focus on the group process. This focus, when coupled with the group's ability to dialogue, can lead to effective group participation. Real group participation increases the opportunity for A (and B) to be heard, i.e., to really be listened to. This leads to a reduction in A's level of obviousness in stating 'X' and begins to break the conflict escalation.

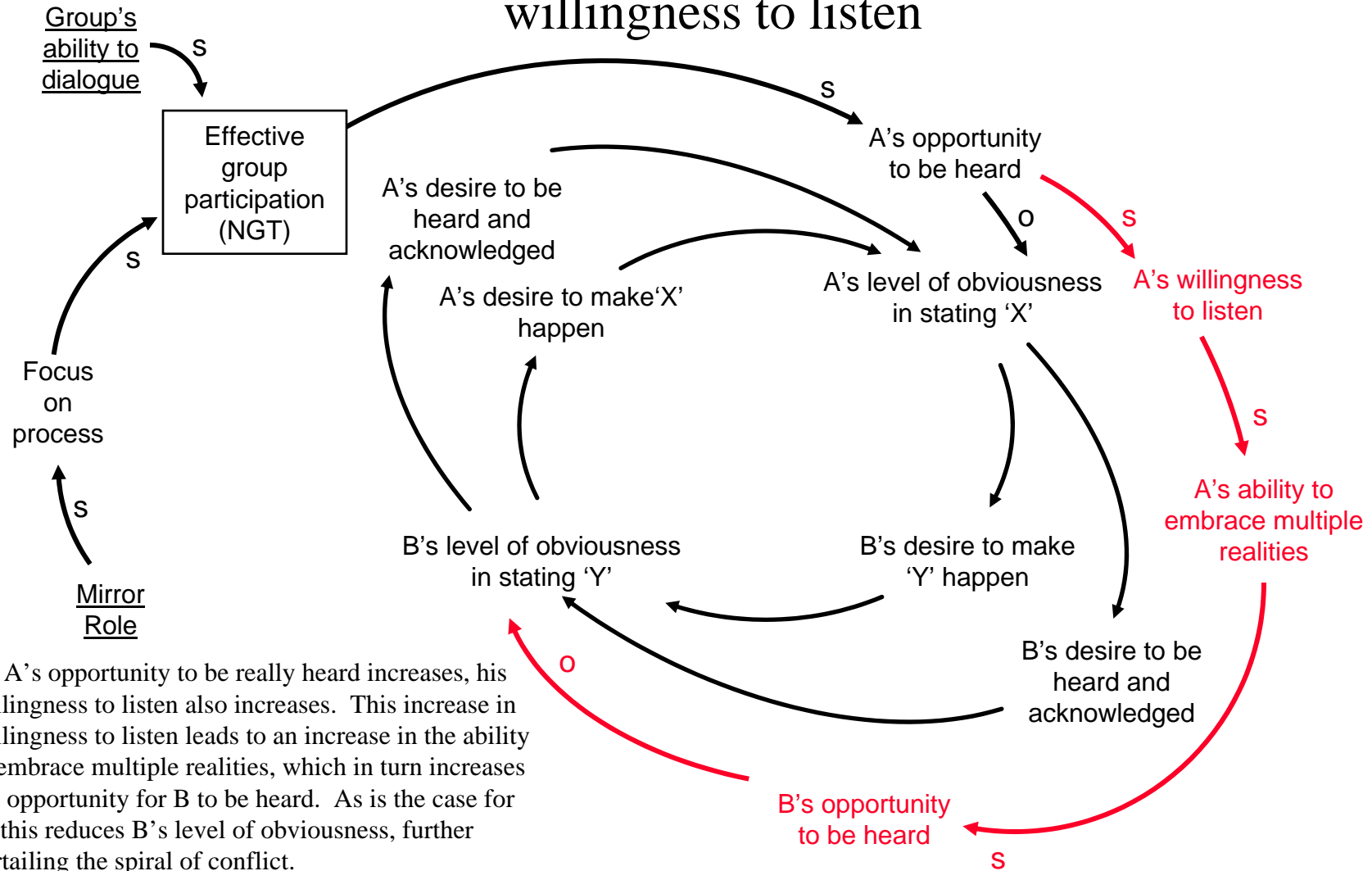
NGT can be used as a process check to find out how other group members feel about the group process. This essentially puts everyone in the role of the process Mirror, and shifts the focus to the things people may be thinking but not saying. Often, helpful suggestions on how to proceed emerge from conversations that start this way.

From a structural view, this intervention provides a new communication structure that breaks the back-and-forth pattern between A and B. It severs the problematic reinforcing loop, and allows new opportunities for A and B to be heard. See Figure 10.

**Figure 10**

# Unresolved Overt Conflict

Path C – The opportunity to be heard also promotes the willingness to listen



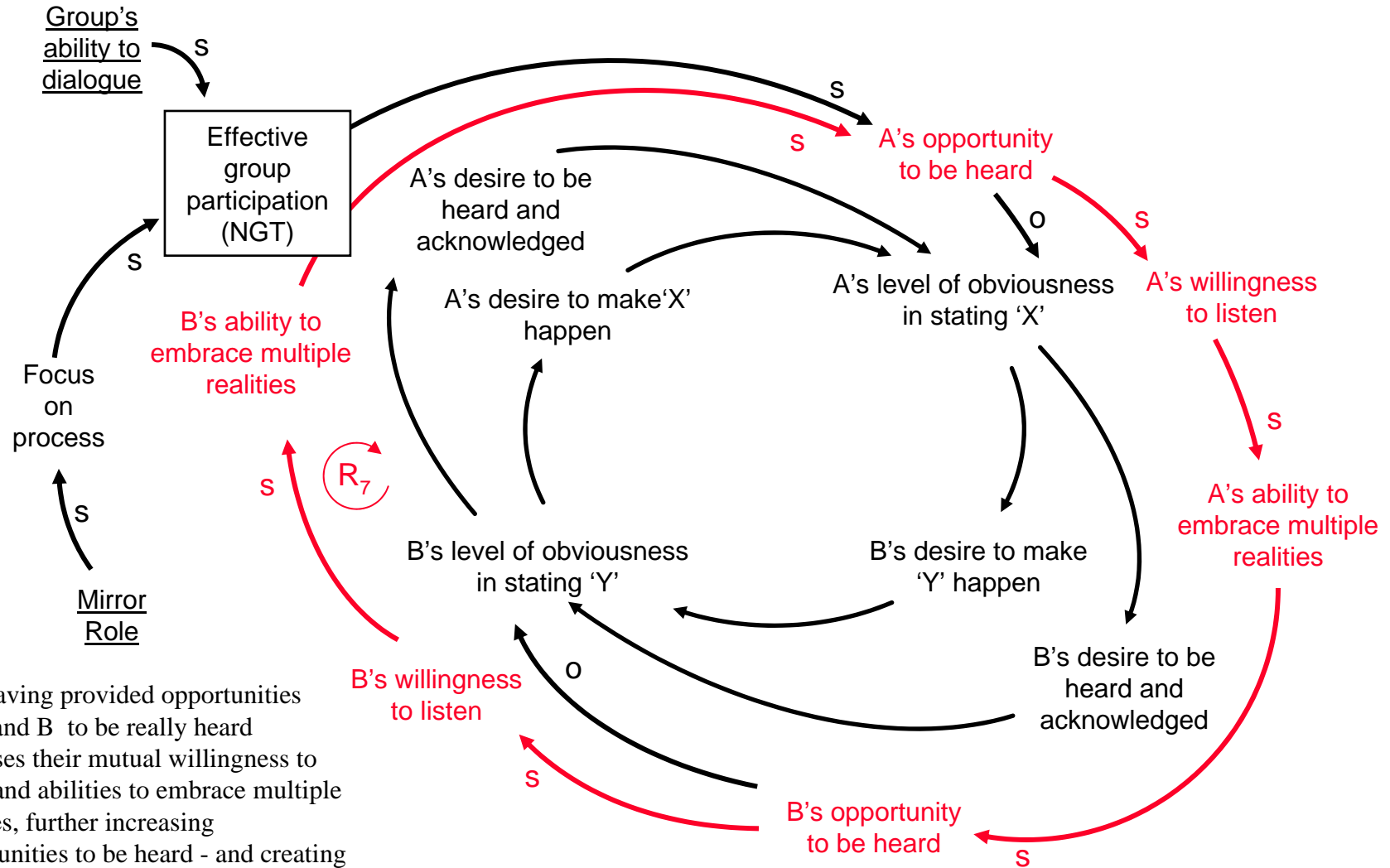
As A's opportunity to be really heard increases, his willingness to listen also increases. This increase in willingness to listen leads to an increase in the ability to embrace multiple realities, which in turn increases the opportunity for B to be heard. As is the case for A, this reduces B's level of obviousness, further curtailing the spiral of conflict.

This results in an increased willingness to listen and entertain multiple realities which spreads to the rest of the group. See Figure 11.

**Figure 11**

# Unresolved Overt Conflict

## Path C – Introduction of Mirror defuses conflict & promotes dialogue



R<sub>7</sub>: Having provided opportunities for A and B to be really heard increases their mutual willingness to listen and abilities to embrace multiple realities, further increasing opportunities to be heard - and creating a desirable reinforcing loop.

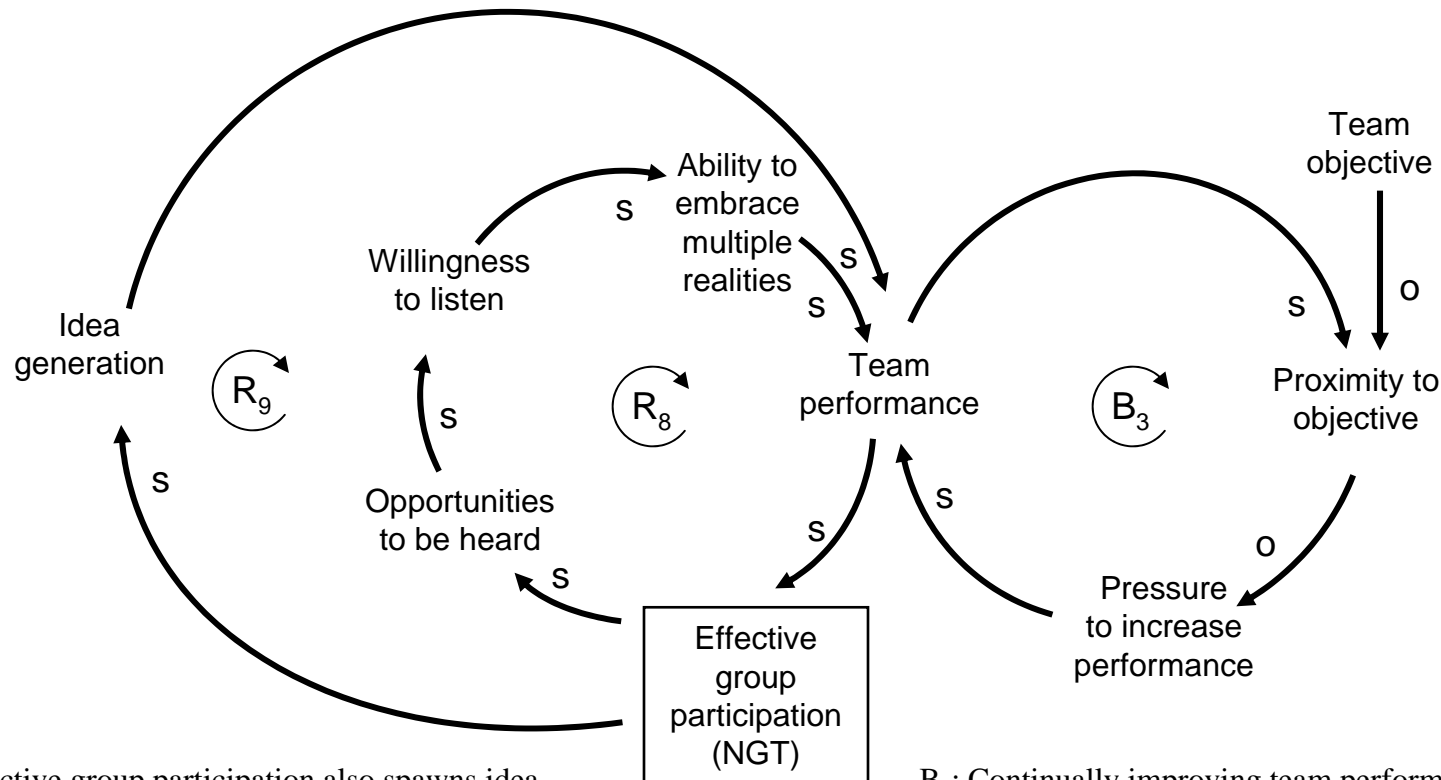
By entertaining a larger solution set, team performance improves until the proximity to the objective increases. See Figure 12.

**Figure 12**

# Unresolved Overt Conflict

## Path C's Conclusion – Team Performance grows until team objective is achieved

R<sub>8</sub>: Effective group participation increases opportunities for both parties to be heard, increasing their willingness to listen, and improving their ability to embrace multiple realities. Increasing this ability improves team performance which provides positive feedback effective group participation.



R<sub>9</sub>: Effective group participation also spawns idea generation, further increasing team performance.

B<sub>3</sub>: Continually improving team performance is eventually limited as the objectives for the team are approached and the pressure to increase performance is reduced.

NGT can also be used for generating ideas, as in a round robin brainstorm. Usually, it creates a higher level view of 'what's going on' which increases the likelihood that A and B can see how their ideas are related. Sometimes this process gives rise to other solutions which are acceptable to all members of the group.

The group can establish appropriate norms for itself, such as setting a goal for win-win solutions, and not proceeding with a solution unless everyone can live with and support the end result. This will encourage the group to work harder on finding creative solutions. The team can develop a structured decision-making process that eliminates polarization.

The team may need training in how to have dialogue instead of discussion, or how to have systemic, non-blaming discussion. Strong Mirror skills must be present in either the team leader or, preferably, the entire group to keep the group on track and prevent them from reverting back to the stuck behavior.

Sometimes getting the rest of the group involved, or establishing new cultural norms will not be enough to contain the conflict between A and B. This is an indication that the level of conflict is significantly entrenched, and that stronger measures are needed. In cases of severe entrenchment, the group may have to develop a Code of Conduct about how people are allowed to speak with each other, and be prepared to enforce it. For example, if A thinks that B has spoken to her disrespectfully, he must apologize before he can participate in further group dialogue. If he is unwilling to do so, the group must enforce the Code by not allowing him to participate until he does apologize. While this may sound extreme, it is the ultimate test of the group taking responsibility for its own process and making sure that each member is accountable for his or her own behavior. That capability is probably the single most important indicator of overall group health.