



Team Workshop Using the FIRO-B

An eye-opening half-day workshop to improve the effectiveness of mission-critical teams.

by Debra L. Howard

Organizations rely on teams—executive teams, management teams, project teams, committees, and departments—to accomplish their goals. Some teams are effective, with high levels of trust, clear accountability, open communication, and the ability to surface and handle disagreements productively. Most are not.

Team members are rarely trained in understanding and managing group dynamics, which are powerful, underground forces that easily derail meetings and bog teams down. The symptoms of struggling teams are easily recognizable:

- Team members avoid attending meetings, or come late and leave early
- Some talk too much; others not at all
- Members are more interested in their phones and laptops than the agenda
- When a decision is made, it's mysteriously never implemented; sometimes no decisions are made at all
- People blame other team members instead of taking responsibility
- The team leader feels as though he or she has to do everything and has no support
- The group complains that the leader isn't stepping up and leading the team

FOUR LEVELS OF LEARNING

The FIRO-B Team Workshop is a half-day, no-nonsense way to introduce teams to the previously undiscussable expectations and forces that have been undermining their effectiveness. It provides four levels of learning:

Individual Insights

Exploring how team members interact with others, the unconscious signals they send about what they want from their colleagues, what disappoints and derails them, and what others appreciate about and resist from them.

Relationship Compatibilities and Tensions

Discovering where there are disconnects and opportunities for misunderstanding, resistance, and conflict, and what to do to improve communication.

Team Profile

Adding up the total FIRO-B scores for the team, and discussing how to make the most of the team's strengths and bolster the team's weaknesses.



Organizational Impact

Discussing how the team's profile might affect the rest of the organization. Is the team insulated and out of touch? Does anyone outside the team know what the team is doing? Conversely, is the team too easy for powerful outsiders to influence, or is it sharing too much sensitive information with the outside?

The workshop is based on the time-tested principles of group dynamics, team development, and systems theory, and uses the FIRO-B, an instrument developed in the 1950s that was the most popular personality preference assessment in the world until the 1980s, when the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator eclipsed it. It is unfortunate that the FIRO-B isn't more widely used today, as it's particularly powerful and relevant for teams, and even the most skeptical executives find it believable, interesting, and useful.

ABOUT THE FIRO-B

To avoid biasing the assessment results, it's best if people don't know much about the FIRO-B (which stands for Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation—Behavior) before taking the assessment. The FIRO-B examines the interpersonal plate tectonics—expectations, needs, and behaviors—operating at a deep, usually undiscussable level in all groups. Depending on what's missing or what's overabundant, team members typically use phrases like the following to describe their frustrations:

- “Micromanaging”
- “Too much processing”
- “Too touchy-feely”
- “Nothing gets done”
- “Not collaborative”

- “Abdicating responsibility”
- “No follow-through”
- “Lack of trust”
- “No accountability”
- “Poor communication”
- “Paralyzed by indecision”

The FIRO-B gives everyone a common framework and language to understand what's underlying these statements, and what can be done to improve the situation.

The FIRO-B is a neutral, nonjudgmental instrument that helps people understand their personality preferences, and how differences between their preferences and those of other team members can sometimes result in confusion, tension, and even conflict. The FIRO-B doesn't limit or pigeonhole people—instead, it helps broaden their frame of reference to include others who need different things and who operate in different ways.

The FIRO-B complements the Myers-Briggs instrument, and I often use the two together when working with teams.

TAKING THE FIRO-B: TWO OPTIONS

There are two ways to prepare for the workshop:

1 Advance Interpretation Sessions for All

All team members complete the assessment online two weeks before the workshop, and have an hour-long individual interpretation session with me a day or more before the workshop begins. The advantage is that everyone has a chance to digest the results before sharing them with the rest of the team.



This is the preferred approach for people who don't enjoy taking risks or who don't like surprises, especially in public.

2 Advance Interpretation for the Team Leader, Only

Everyone takes the assessment online, but only the team leader meets with me to interpret it in advance. The advantage of this option is that it gives the leader more comfort with and confidence in the results so that he or she will be more relaxed in sharing them with the full group. It's also less expensive, and less time-consuming for the other participants.

WORKSHOP MODULES

No matter which option is selected, the FIRO-B Team Workshop includes the following modules, which I can customize to address the specific interests of the team.

Discussion of Team Effectiveness

First, we quickly brainstorm the team's strengths and weaknesses, and document them on flip charts for use later in the workshop. What does the team do well? Not as well? What would be an improvement? What would others in the organization say about this team?

Volunteers Share and Validate Their FIRO-B Scores

Instead of showing a string of PowerPoint slides to explain the FIRO-B, which is a complex, subtle instrument, I validate and interpret the scores of volunteers one after another to demonstrate and teach how the model works. (The leader of the team, if there is one, has already agreed to volunteer, so he or she often goes first, if no one else jumps at the chance.) No team members are required to volunteer their scores—it is unethical to

coerce them to do so. But once they see the scores of their colleagues, and how I analyze and discuss them, they almost always feel comfortable participating.

Pairs of Volunteers Explore Compatibility

After a short break, I ask if any of the participants want to compare their scores to those of another team member to predict compatibilities and possible areas of conflict. It's not necessary for everyone to do this. There are always a few pairs in the room who are interested in exploring this, and comfortable enough in this setting to do so. This is where I begin to introduce the team to the concepts of interpersonal and group dynamics.

Adding It All Together: Creating a Team Profile and Discussing the Implications for the Team and Organization

Next, we add everyone's FIRO-B scores together and create a team profile. Where are the surpluses? Where are the deficits, or blind spots? What can be done to improve team dynamics, cohesion, and effectiveness? What's working well and should be appreciated and maintained?

Then we look back at the flip charts we made at the start of the workshop, and talk about the strengths and challenges, how they fit (or not) with the team profile, and what can be done to support what's working and to address what's not.

Summary, Action Steps, and Commitments

Participants summarize what they've learned and what they are committed to doing after the workshop. Then the team sets a date for a follow-up discussion to see what's working and what needs adjustment. I send the scores and team tables to all after the session.



BENEFITS

People leave the workshop with a deeper understanding of themselves, their colleagues, and their team leader (who is often their boss). They have new strategies to try with their colleagues, new agreements about how to run team meetings and make decisions, and more patience for some of the ways their colleagues and manager are different from themselves. Some members leave with permission to take more of a leadership role; others leave with the understanding that they need to step back sometimes and make more room for others.

The workshop removes some of the intensity, emotion, and judgment from team meetings, and makes it easier for team members to talk about and resolve whatever disappointments or misunderstandings may occur in the future.

A side benefit is that team members also take away insights they can immediately apply to the other “teams” in their life: their direct reports, their nuclear family, their extended family, and the boards and volunteer committees upon which many of them serve.

EXAMPLES

I delivered the FIRO-B Team Workshop to an executive team that was struggling with a leader who was seen as abdicating responsibility. They liked him, but were constantly disappointed that he wasn't taking a stronger role in leading the team (and the organization). The workshop helped him see—in a supportive way that made it possible for him to hear the feedback and discuss the issue without feeling defensive—where he was letting people down, and gave the group a chance to strategize ways to find substitute forms of leadership for the organization. The

leader left feeling validated and relieved, and the team left with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. Since the workshop, the leader has been focusing more on his external role as a spokesperson for his organization's issues; shepherding an ambitious new strategic plan; and managing his dynamic (and sometimes challenging) board. His executive team is spending much less time trying to influence him to take a greater leadership role, and more time leading internal operations themselves.

In another example, a department of highly independent software developers were struggling to work for their “micromanaging” boss. She was feeling a great deal of resistance from them, which was frustrating her. The FIRO-B workshop helped her see—again, in a nonjudgmental way—how some of her behaviors were backfiring, and helped the team see her in a more humorous, accepting light. There was much laughter, but not at her expense—she joined in and realized that she was liked and respected, even if her strongly delivered requests and instructions were often rebuffed. Since then, the team has been communicating with her and involving her more, which has enabled her to relax and give the team more room to make some decisions on their own.

Finally, I've worked with a number of teams that get along beautifully, but struggle to get things done. For one team of partners, the person with the most passion and skill for taking charge felt she didn't have permission to lead the group, because she was the most junior partner at the firm, and the only woman. During the workshop, her partners gave her unequivocal permission to play a larger role in managing the firm, and expressed their appreciation for her abilities. In addition, the partners agreed on a number of things they would do at every meeting to improve their chances of following through—creating an agenda in advance, agreeing on



decisions and action items, and taking minutes—which has helped the group achieve an impressive number of goals since.

WORKSHOP REQUIREMENTS

This workshop is designed for teams of people who have been together long enough to know something about one another's work habits and ways of interacting. If there are one or two new team members, that's fine—the FIRO-B Team Workshop is an excellent way of onboarding new members into an existing team. The workshop is not appropriate for teams that are in serious trouble, teams with little or no trust, or teams with leaders who are not comfortable sharing information.

Although it is unethical to coerce someone to share their scores, it's important that the leader and most of the team members indicate in advance a willingness to do so. If they are so guarded, skeptical, or disengaged that they don't want to, a different kind of team intervention would be more appropriate.

The FIRO-B instrument takes about 20 minutes to complete online. The scores are confidential; I don't share them without the explicit permission of the participants. The workshop takes four to six hours, depending on how many people attend and whether I meet with all of the team members one-on-one in advance, or only with the team leader.

It is preferable for all of the team members to be together in person for the workshop. However, if necessary, I can deliver it via videoconference. Although it's not as powerful and enjoyable virtually, it is still a helpful tool to build team trust and cohesion. (I don't recommend having some people together in person, and one or more participating virtually.) If we do it virtually, and the team is large, I divide the workshop into two sessions delivered over two consecutive days.

The FIRO-B Team Workshop is effective in any type of organization. I've successfully delivered it in business, government, foundation, and nonprofit settings.





About the Workshop Leader

Debra Howard founded her consulting business in 1991. Since then, she's coached the leaders of businesses, nonprofits, and foundations in the United States and Europe, and the teams reporting to them. In addition to executive coaching, she offers action-packed workshops and training for improving team and individual effectiveness.

Ms. Howard is certified in the Myers-Briggs Step I and Step II, and has received advanced training in the FIRO-B personality preference instrument.

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