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**Exercise:** Team Toxins**Dimension / TPI:** Constructive Interaction**Supplies:**

- Tape to create a 4x4 matrix
- Floor labels for the 4 Team Toxins

**Time:**

15-20 minutes

**Set-up:**

Put a matrix on the floor with the tape and have the floor labels ready to put down on the matrix one at a time.

**Context:**

The brilliant work of psychologist John Gottman and his colleagues points to 4 communication styles that when they are present over an extended period are poisonous to relationships. The goal of this exercise is to raise awareness of these and their impact and help the team come up with a structure to address the presence of these toxins in their everyday work.

**Instructions:**

Set the context: research by John Gottman into sustainable relationships. These 4 communication styles are toxic to relationship and destroy relationship over time when they are actively present.

If you recognize some of your own behavior here, don't panic! Most people use these from time to time without much ill effect. It is the steady use of these toxins day in and day out that is destructive to teams and relationships

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Put one floor label down at a time as you introduce the Toxins.

- Criticism/Blame
- Defensiveness
- Stonewalling
- Contempt

In each quadrant have participants take on the body posture or their favorite toxic face or use a gesture. Have participants repeat what people say in that box — what their kids say, what co-workers say. The goal is to establish an embodied experience for each of the four. Be playful with this. Encourage participation. Compare the experience between any two: “What was your breathing like in Criticism and Blame? How was it different in Defensiveness?”

Notice when Defensiveness turns into blame: “It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It must be...his fault.”

Notice how quiet it gets in Stonewalling. There is a cold energy there. People may be smiling but it’s just a shell. Ask about typical Stonewalling behaviors at work.

Remember to tell them that Contempt causes physiological damage and when Gottman and his colleagues observed it in relationships they aborted the research because they couldn’t, in integrity, expose people to conditions they knew could be damaging to their health.

### **Debrief:**

After participants have experienced all four ask them to find the one that feels like “home.” It is their default — probably the one they learned in their family as a coping mechanism. Let them re-experience it — wear it like an old familiar coat.

Finally, have the team come up with a code word or gesture/signal to let team members know a toxin may be present. Repeat: that a toxin may be present. This is designed to open up a conversation about team behavior, not label someone.

Examples of code word or signal/gesture:

A team in Europe used “Yellow Card” – a reference to European football. Everyone on the team knew that was a warning.

“Time out” gesture: one hand on top, palm down; the other hand vertical, forming a “T”.

Debrief question: how can you use what you’ve learned about these four toxins?