

Learn to Break Interaction Cycles That Drive Groups Apart

Resolving cross-functional conflict by understanding your own role in the drama

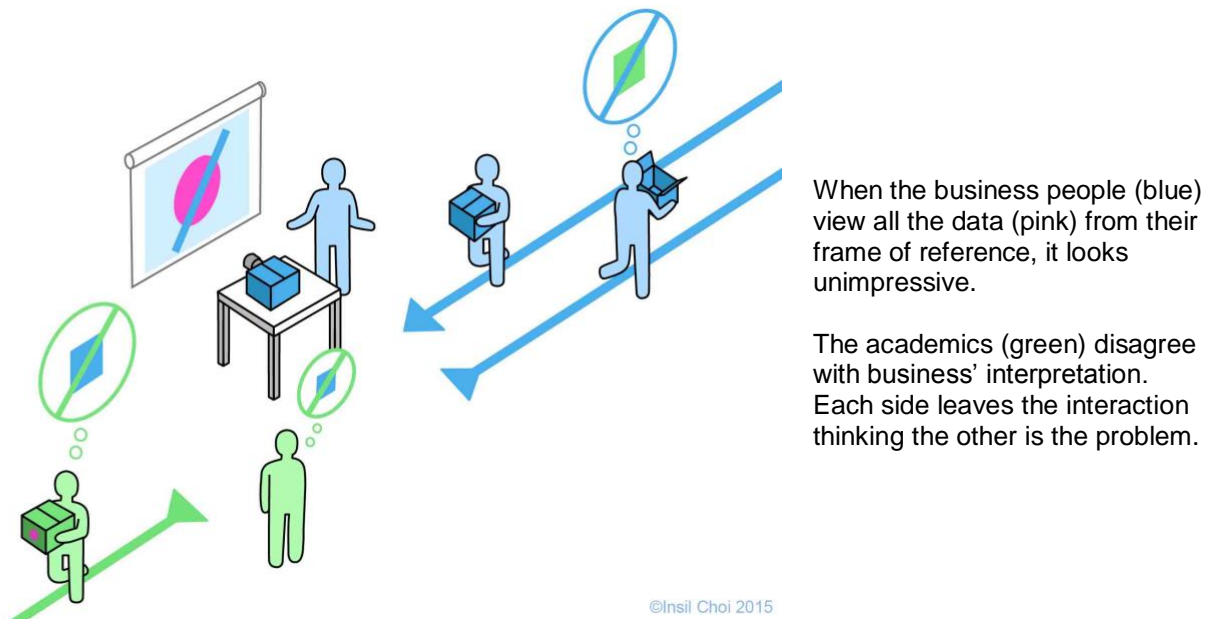
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I'd like to share a surprising but consistent interaction pattern I've observed over many years. When one group thinks that another doesn't get it, the other group invariably thinks the same of them. When one group tries to bypass the other, the first group finds itself cut out the next time around.

To break the cycle, leaders can practice a new mindset. They reframe others from "they don't get it" to "they see it differently." They seek to learn, not just to convince.

The Bypass Loop

A real case brought to one of my leadership classes exemplifies the pattern. Brian, a program director at a disease foundation, was leading a partnership program with an academic Institute and a large Pharma. Each partner had run clinical trials for this first-in-class therapy, but using different designs. Looking at the aggregate data, the Pharma partners wanted to stop the program, while the academic partners felt that there was sufficient reason to continue.



Brian shared a frustrating conversation from a recent team meeting to resolve conflicting views of the data. He had recently joined the foundation after spending 14 years in industry, while veteran program scientists Adam and Andrea had come to the foundation straight from academia.

Brian: This data really is not that impressive, all the trials show a continuing decline in function.

Adam: Yes, but Pharma's trial was poorly designed. They used too low a dose despite what the experts at the Institute told them. They used patients from India. If you exclude them the effect looks much better.

Andrea: The trial run by the Institute showed a bigger effect.

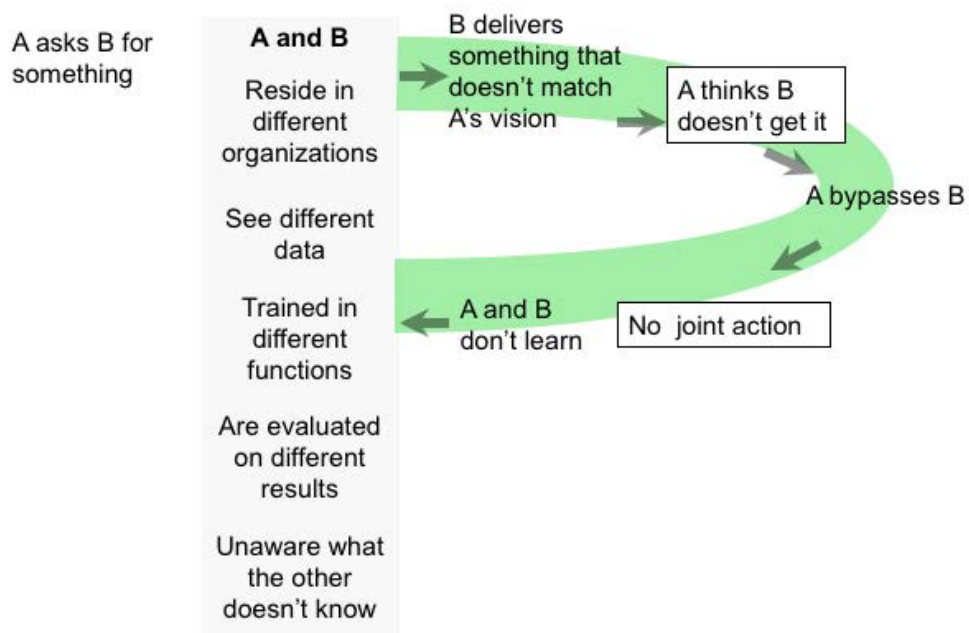
Brian: Still, don't you think this isn't very impressive considering the risks? Would you take this if you were a patient – or give it to your child?

Adam: Yes, I would. The right trial will show a better effect. The company just doesn't want to do this or provide the material. The Institute's team doesn't think the company has any idea what they're doing. We should listen to that because they know this area better than anyone.

Functional boundaries make it natural for people to bypass others

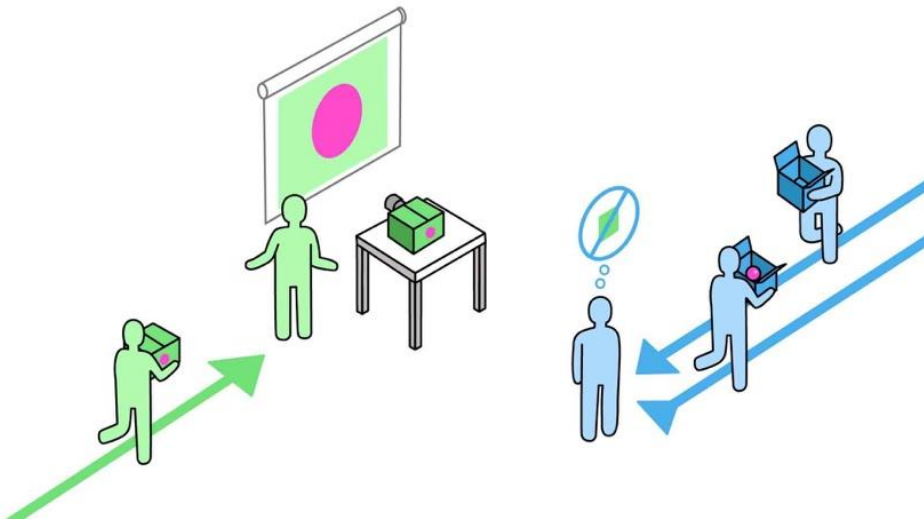
Mapping the interactions in a cause-and-effect diagram is instructive. The gray column shows that the academics (A's) at Institute A and the business' people (B's) at the Pharma reside in different organizations, and thus see different information on a day-to-day basis. Their people are trained in different functional disciplines and are evaluated on different results. Neither side is aware of what the other doesn't know.

In the meeting, the A's have asked for the results of B's trial. Because of the differences in perspective, the results don't match Adam and Andrea's vision. They think that the B's don't get it, and recommend bypassing B's recommendation.



Others mirror the bypass

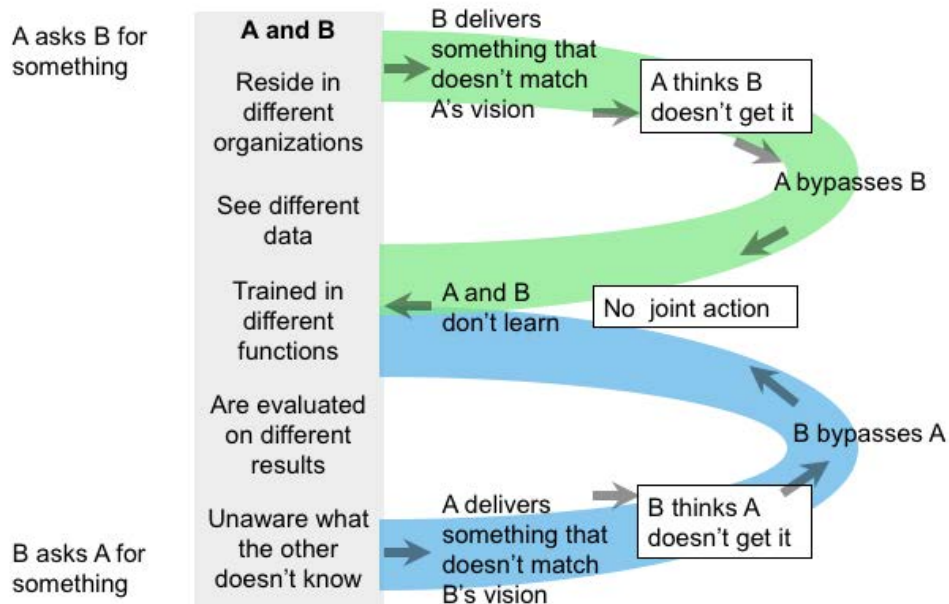
However, the A's don't realize that the bypass dynamic had already started long before the team meeting.



When the A's had first presented the results from their initial trial, the B's had come in with their own frame of reference (the empty blue box).

Pharma B was interested in the treatment but had their own methods for evaluation. They brought the material to their own R&D organization and designed a different trial.

Adding the first episode to the diagram, you see at the bottom left that Pharma B had asked the Academics for data on the new treatment, but A's design didn't match B's vision. The B's had thought the A's didn't get it, and bypassed A's recommendation on dosing.

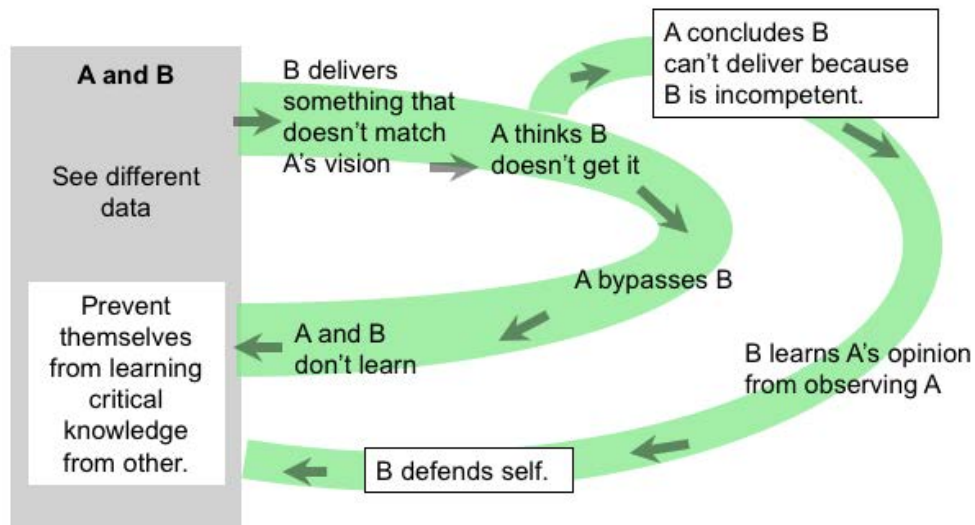


Since the late 1990's, when I first mapped and tested this analysis in working groups, we discovered that the bypassed group virtually always bypasses the other, because the conditions that gave rise to the disconnect remain.

Over time, a loop about incompetence emerges

If the bypass loop continues unchecked, the groups move from thinking that others *don't* get it to thinking the others *can't* or *won't* get it.

At the beginning, the two sides don't learn from each other simply because they bypass each other. When they converse, they find out that others frame them negatively. This leads to a defensive cycle where each side digs in deeper.



When Adam says that Pharma B performed poorly with their trial design, it's clear he doesn't think much of B's capabilities. Brian, who has spent most of his time interacting with B's, picks up on Adam's disdain and feels the need to defend his side.

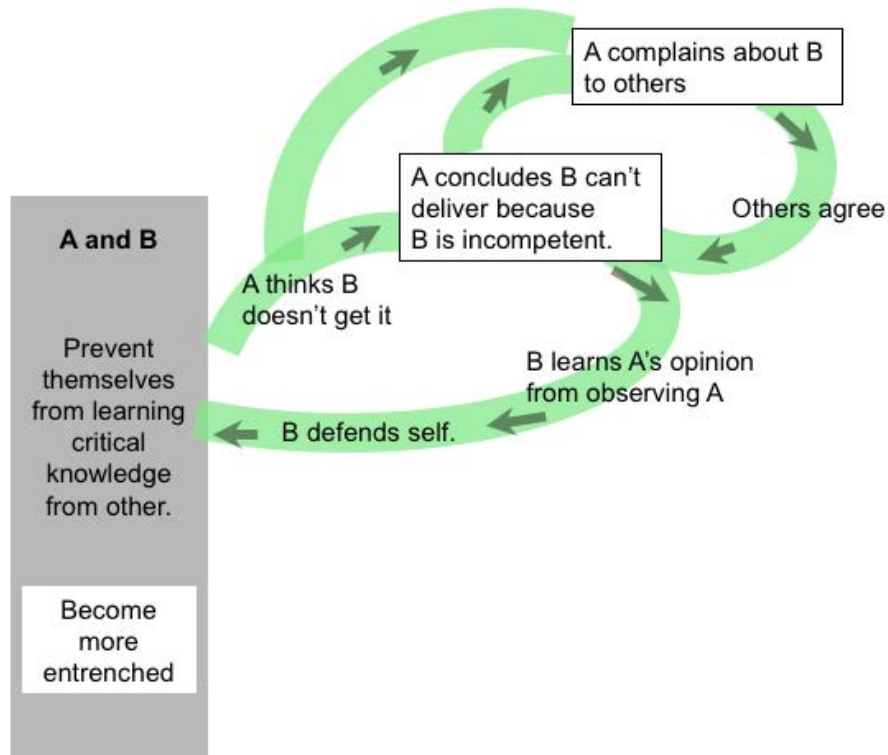
The A's come back with their judgement of B's motives – "the company just doesn't want to do this," and repeat their contention that the company has no idea what they're doing.

With their repetitive counter-advocacy defenses, the three speakers actively prevent themselves from learning from each other. The new loop about incompetence makes the old bypass loop worse. Organizational silos strengthen.

Complaining intensifies polarization

Direct interactions fuel the cycle. But we have discovered that conversations about others are even more powerful forces creating silos. It turns out that what you say about someone and not to them creates barriers to learning between groups. In fact, we have learned that simply listening to complaints about others feeds inter-group divisiveness.

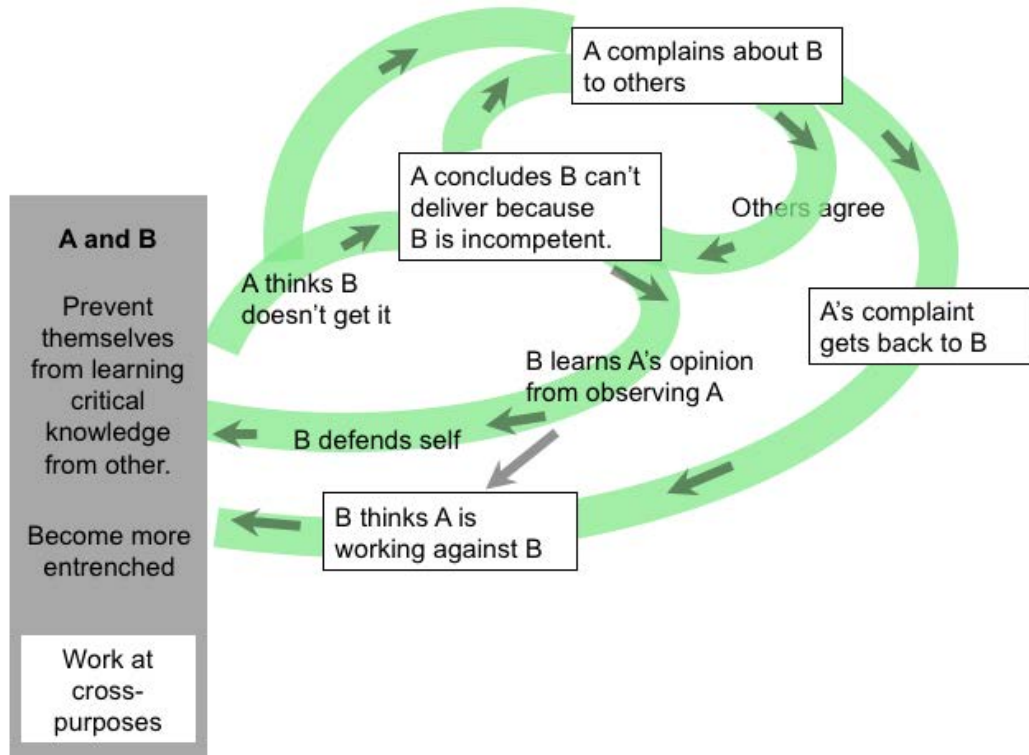
The new loop at the upper right shows what happens when Adam and Andrea hear Institute A complain about Pharma B. Without any input from B's, their opinions are reinforced. Adam and Andrea become primed to advocate to Brian that Pharma B is wrong.



Brian's story is a mirror image. Before talking with Adam and Andrea, he has talked with the Pharma partners, priming him to come into the meeting even more convinced that the results don't support investment.

The illusion of confidentiality spawns mistrust

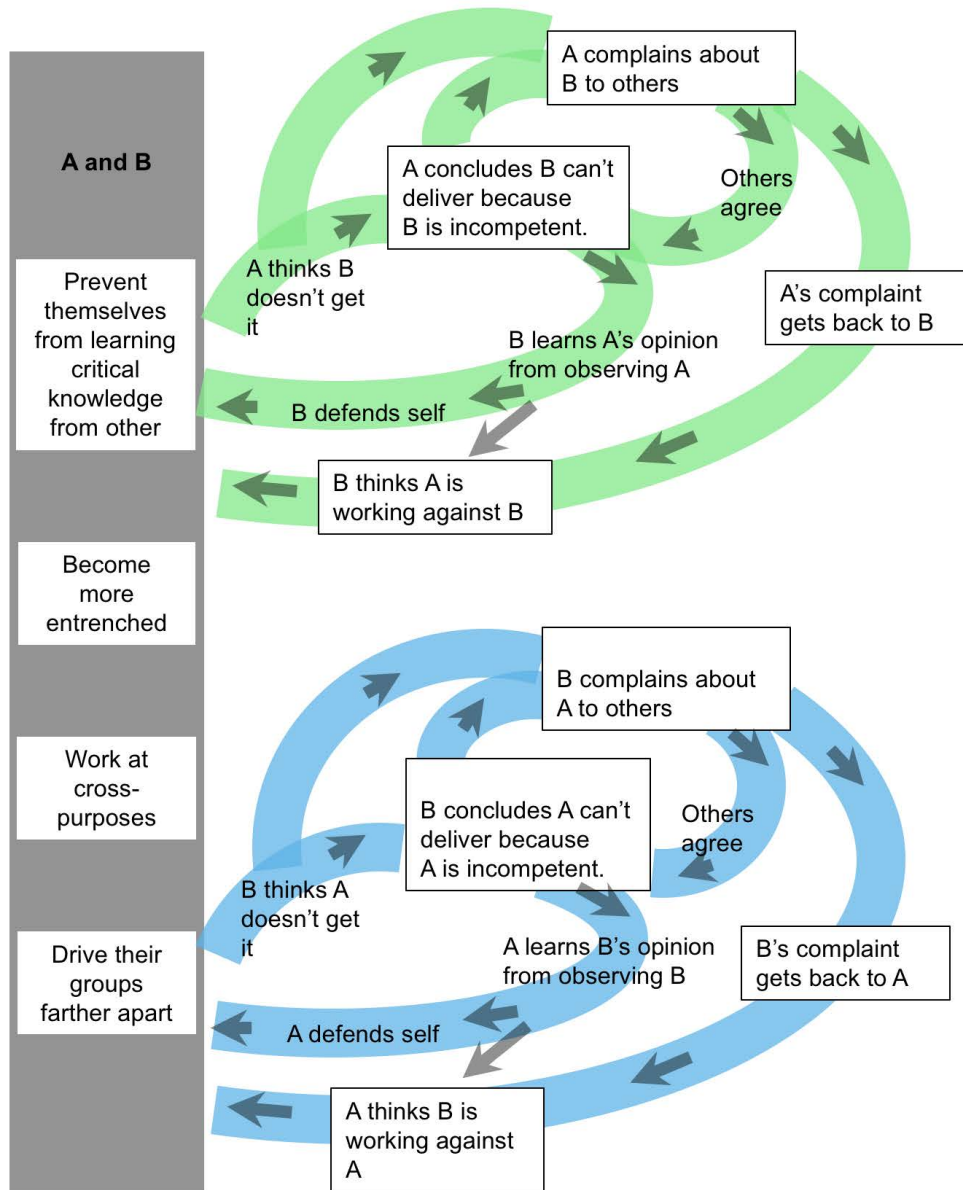
A second-order consequence arises from what I call the 'illusion of confidentiality.' One listener invariably reports the results of the in-group conversation to someone else, and word spreads. Fairly quickly, someone who's not allied with A hears it, passes it on to someone allied with B, and B learns what was said. B begins to infer that A is working against B, further motivating B to cut A out of the picture.



In the case, Adam and Andrea report the Institute's complaints about Pharma B to Brian. This reinforces Brian's negative opinion even more, because he identifies with Pharma. More emotion emerges. "Would you give this to your child?" reveals that Brian thinks the A's are working against the ultimate interests of patients.

Toxic loops reinforce organizational silos

Brian's remark triggers Adams's expression of a similar level of distrust of Pharma. "The company just doesn't want to do this or provide the material."



They're stuck in a toxic loop where every interaction drives the groups farther apart.

Learning to break the cycle

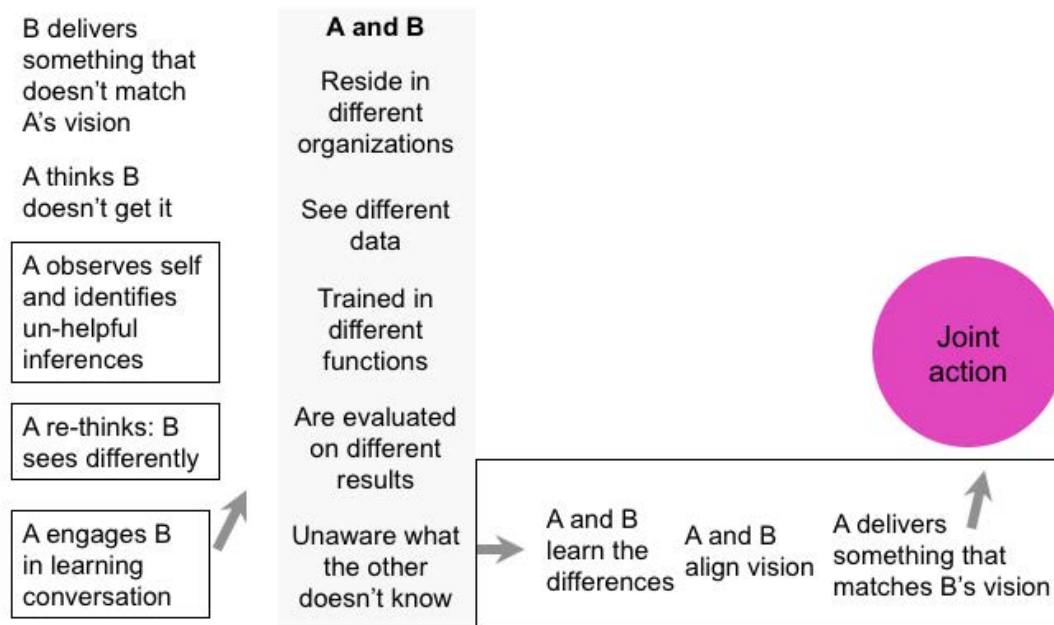
The key to breaking the cycle is preventing the bypass that starts it. This requires observing your own thinking, and getting curious about the others when you find yourself thinking “they don’t get it.”

When you receive something that doesn’t match your expectation, your brain is likely to default to the conclusion that the person who delivered it hasn’t done it right. When you notice that thought, slow yourself down.

Practice reframing the others from “they don’t get it” to “they see it differently.” Remind yourself that they don’t know your thoughts, and you don’t know theirs.

Adopt the goal of learning the differences before discussing the action to take.

Moving from bypassing to learning



When others counter-advocate, practice taking a stance of curiosity about their knowledge.

Instead of repeating your conclusions, step through your data and ask for their reactions at each step.

What information do they have that you don't?

What experiences have they had in similar situations?

What goals do they have to meet?

Once the different visions are out in the open, it is possible to move from mistrusting motives to identifying the barriers that each party faces. Working to remove the barriers is more productive than trying to convince others to do something that doesn't make sense to them. It's more work at the beginning, but it prevents the bypass loops that eat up time, energy, and trust over time.