

The Swimmer, the Whale, and the Sea

FACILITATOR NOTES

Objective: To explore power dynamics, culture, and communication patterns within teams.

Step 1: Set the Stage (4 mins)

Facilitator reads or shares the short story aloud or in presentation form. Ask participants to listen reflectively — not analytically (yet).

Step 2: Team Reflection (2 mins)

After the story, ask the following questions to the team and allow them time to reflect:

- *Does the man find his voice in the culture (the sea) you're currently in?*
- *Does the whale learn to share the space in the culture (the sea) you're currently in?*

Step 3: Small Group Discussion (15 mins)

Break into small groups (3–5 people). You may show slide 9 again to help prompt the small group discussion. Ask each group to discuss:

- *What kind of behaviors feel "whale-like" in our team or organization?*
- *What are the swimmer dynamics — who navigates or gets overlooked?*
- *How does the sea (our culture) allow this to happen?*

Encourage examples without naming individuals — focus on **patterns**, not blame.

Take it a step further:

- *What other behaviors does your culture **ENABLE** that you believe should not be enabled? (eg interrupting others. "Some people interrupt others' and the culture, unfortunately, enables this.")*
- *What are some behaviors that your culture does **NOT ENABLE**—and that you're actually glad it doesn't? (eg micro-managing, gossip "I'm glad that my culture takes action against those who spread malicious gossip.")*

Step 4: Map Your Team's Sea (10 mins)

Back as a full group, facilitator draws a large "sea" diagram on a flipchart or whiteboard.

Ask:

- *What "currents" are part of our team culture?*
- *(e.g., "Interrupting is common," "We value speed over clarity," "Only loud voices are heard")*

Write these into the "sea" graphic. You can even draw a whale and swimmers if you want a visual metaphor map.

Step 5: Personal Commitment (5-10 mins)

Ask each person to write down one thing they can do next week to:

- *Swim with more intention (ie make the quiet voices heard)*
- *Notice or challenge a whale behavior*
- *Shift the sea — even slightly*

Encourage voluntary sharing if time allows.

Optional Debrief Questions:

- *What surprised you about this metaphor?*
- *How do we support swimmers without attacking whales?*
- *What would a more balanced sea look like in our workplace? Include all the behaviors mentioned by the team.*

Bonus Variation (for Leaders): *Ask leaders:*

- *"What role do you think your team would say you play?"*
- *"What signals do you send that shape the sea?"*

Examples of “The Swimmer, the Whale, and the Sea” in your office. It’s encouraged to allow the participants time to think on their own, but if they feel stuck, feel free to share a few examples from the below lists:

“The Swimmer” is the one trying to stay afloat—navigating personalities, politics, and pressure with limited influence. Examples include:

- *A junior employee with great ideas who’s constantly talked over in meetings*
- *A new hire trying to adjust to unspoken team dynamics*
- *A quiet team member who observes more than they speak, but is often underestimated*
- *A middle manager stuck between conflicting demands from above and below*
- *A talented contributor who isn’t self-promoting enough to get noticed*
- *A burned-out team player who keeps giving without recognition or replenishment*

“The Whale” is the one who takes up space—often without realizing it. They’re not always malicious, but their presence can dominate. Examples include:

- *A senior leader who unintentionally monopolizes meetings*
- *A well-meaning expert who “knows best” and leaves little room for other input*
- *A long-time employee who resists change and drowns out new voices*
- *A charismatic teammate whose ideas always get picked—even if others contributed first*
- *A project manager who steamrolls ahead without inviting feedback*
- *A strong personality who sets the tone, even unofficially*
- *A loud communicator who unknowingly drowns out softer-spoken colleagues*

“And every team has a sea.” *The culture: what’s allowed/enabled. Examples include:*

- *Who gets credit (and who doesn’t)*
- *How mistakes are handled*
- *Whether feedback is welcomed or feared*
- *What’s celebrated vs. what’s quietly discouraged*
- *Are there sub-groups in teams?*
- *How people talk when the boss isn’t around*
- *Whether silence means safety—or discomfort*

“What Flows Beneath the Surface” *in a team culture. Examples include:*

- *Unspoken hierarchies – Who really holds power, regardless of title*
- *Fear of conflict – Smiles on the surface, tension underneath*
- *Quiet resentment – Built from unmet expectations or unequal treatment*
- *Loyalty vs. burnout – People staying late not out of passion, but pressure*
- *Bias – Subtle preferences for certain voices, styles, or personalities.*
- *Avoidance – Difficult feedback or conversations that never happen*
- *Self-protection – “Yes-men”: Withholding ideas, opinions, or emotions to stay “safe”*
- *Survival mode – Just get through the day; don’t rock the boat*

Bottom Line:

Every workplace has swimmers, whales, and a sea.

The challenge isn't just about individuals, it's about the environment we all create.

When we don't notice who's being swallowed or sidelined, we become part of the current that allows it. But when we pause, notice, and choose differently, we create space where everyone can breathe, contribute, and rise.

Culture is not a given. It's a choice.