



Can we declare a breakdown?

Have you ever been working on a project and felt bogged down, stuck or frustrated about the lack of progress? Perhaps you pushed harder, conducted more meetings or sent more emails, and still no real traction. When a project suffers a series of setbacks, delays, or miscommunications, you may wonder if you're losing more ground than you're gaining.

If this sounds familiar, you've probably experienced the stress and frustration of having a project or initiative stall. It is inefficient and disruptive, regardless if it's a solo endeavor or team pursuit.

Instead of duct taping a short term fix to the issue or ignoring the telltale signs – I invite you to declare a “breakdown”.

Now, before you interpret that as opening the floodgates to an emotional breakdown, or that in some way the world as you know it will come to a screeching halt, let me explain what I mean by a breakdown. When we keep doing the same things in the same way without achieving the results we want, we often only get more discouraged and entrenched in our patterns. In other words, we get stuck. We might find ourselves or our teammates getting more stubborn, defensive, making more excuses, avoiding or procrastinating. It's also a sure fire way to sabotage a project and deteriorate relationships.

What is a “breakdown”?

A breakdown in this context is a shared acknowledgment that there is an impasse; that there are obstacles derailing or hampering project success. It's a recognition that the current approach, attitudes or behaviors are not producing the desired outcomes. It's a forthright reality check – and an opportunity to hit the “reset” button.

What's the benefit?

Done well, declaring a breakdown can be a powerful and respectful way to cultivate a culture of continual improvement. It deconstructs what's really happening, not just



individual perceptions. It can serve as an opportunity to re-evaluate the approach, the resources, or gain clarity about the project's objectives.

Oftentimes people are uncomfortable admitting mistakes or shortcomings. By having a culture that values progress over ego, you foster growth and accountability. When people have permission to respectfully question the status quo with the intent of creating forward momentum, you have a leaner organization. Declaring a breakdown allows teams to regroup and channel their energies in a new, more effective way; bringing a sigh of relief and putting a halt to the wasteful allocation of resources.

What it is NOT

It's critical to note what "declaring a breakdown" is NOT. It is not finger pointing or blaming. It's not shirking one's responsibilities. It's not over-processing or over-analyzing a situation. It's not about stalling on decisions or actions. It's not coddling or making excuses about non-performance for ourselves or others. It's not failure. It's simply a method to accelerate generating the results you want.

Suggested Ground Rules

WARNING: Attempting to "declare a breakdown" without having a shared vernacular about what that means will likely prove to be counterproductive! This concept needs to be introduced and thoroughly explained before utilizing it to get unstuck and change the trajectory of a project or relationship gone awry. Below are a few things to make sure you incorporate if you're going to declare a breakdown:

- All messages are delivered and received with **respect**
- **Do not take things personally**
- Be **direct, clear and candid** in defining the issues
- **Do not make assumptions**
- **Seek to understand** – what are your and your team members' frustrations, obstacles, understanding of the scope of the work? Practice true empathetic listening. Ensure that each person is heard.



- **Get to the root cause.** This can be tricky because it often is emotionally-charged. However, if you don't clean the wounds by raising awareness of ineffective communication styles, attitudes and behaviors, you'll soon be repeating the scenario.
- **Come from a place of seeking solutions, not searching for blame.** It's not about making someone wrong, but inviting participation for the team's betterment. This ultimately enhances the working dynamic.
- **Find alignment.** Where is there common ground? What do you agree on? Where do you share a commitment? What are you ultimately trying to do or impact? Gain clarity about what defines project success. This is the place to always come back to when challenges arise.
- **Define a new, clear and compelling way to move forward together.** Create full, enthusiastic buy-in by all team members.
- Bring **transparency to roles and responsibilities.**

How do you know when it might be time to declare a breakdown?

Simply put, it might be time to declare a breakdown when you feel like the project or initiative is not gaining the ground you had anticipated. Some common indicators: you sense there are water cooler conversations deteriorating trust and relationships; tensions are high; the client isn't satisfied; or you're not making money. If your gut tells you it's time to have a conversation, it is.

Take the K Challenge:

If you are truly committed to something, breakdowns are a natural occurrence. They are expected by-products of tackling challenges, personality differences, team dynamics, etc. If you reiterate your commitment to the results and allow for robust discourse, declaring a breakdown (*the right way*) can actually get you unstuck from unproductive patterns, reinvigorate the team and result in better utilization of resources.

Ultimately, declaring a breakdown is a learning moment. Build it into your culture. Make it your modus operandi to learn, adapt and excel. Life is an experiment, if something isn't



working, you have the capacity to change it. That change can be initiated with the simple invitation of, *"Can we declare a breakdown?"*



Karen Natzel serves as a business therapist to leaders who want to create healthy, vibrant and high performing organizations. Karen helps her clients navigate change and growth by serving as a confidential sounding board; as facilitator, trainer, conflict-resolver, relationship-builder, awareness-raiser, communicator, coach and strategist. Her passion is inspiring others to cultivate their potential.

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