

Collaborating in Teams

Every success rests upon a successful team. In fact, virtually everything we do and everything we experience is in relation to one or many other people. Virtually no circumstance arises in isolation. No thought or emotion springs forth from eternal solitude. Every achievement can somehow trace its roots to another's influence. Every good decision or transformative action benefits from a collective effort.

Teams and team members ultimately want to share three results:

1. They want to accomplish what they set out to do.
2. They want to continuously build shared commitment, trust and values.
3. They want to feel good about the team process and satisfied that the effort was worth their time, attention and energy.

This image depicts the different levels and tasks required to build strong, durable, accomplished teams.



Laying the Foundation

Strong teams are built on a foundation of strengths, positivity, candor, vulnerability and trust.

Strengths-Focus: Great teams know and rely on the unique strengths of each team member. For example, people know each other's Myers-Briggs personality type or other ways people work best. Team members share with each other the things that drain or exhaust each team member. They also share their strengths with each other, so they know what gives each person energy. Strong teams leverage that information by re-assigning a task or adding extra support if someone has to employ a weakness and, assigning people tasks that allow each individual to utilize their strengths. Great teams talk about weaknesses and strengths often. They get to know each other weaknesses and strengths at deeper levels and use that knowledge to the team's advantage.

Positivity: Positive psychology emphasizes that our individual perspectives and mental frames directly correlate with our personal life circumstances, including physical and emotional health, quality of relationships and life and work satisfaction. Researchers Barbara Fredrickson and Marcial Losada found that a team's perspective and frame of thinking can have similar results in the workplace.¹

In one set of studies,² these researchers videotaped team meetings and analyzed every word spoken by every team member at every meeting to compare poor-functioning teams with successful ones.

First, they identified success as:

- Achieving desired results.
- Getting good evaluations from others and from themselves.
- Achieving work with long-range staying power.

Second, the researchers noticed the successful team spoke and behaved differently than their unsuccessful peers. Specifically, successful teams did three things in their meetings:

1. Team members displayed an equal balance between stating their own perspectives, opinions and ideas and eliciting the same from each other. Everyone had an equal voice.
2. They balanced an inward, "what's in it for me?" focus with an outward, "how might this affect or benefit others? And how does this support our organization's goals?"
3. Team members used significantly more positive words than negative words suggesting they used a positive frame. Unsuccessful teams complained frequently and framed things as unreasonable or impossible. Conversely, successful teams said, "This is hard but we can figure it out." Or "This is really going to benefit people in the long run."

¹ [Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing.](#)

² Ibid.

Candor: Strong teams and strong organizations depend on candor, a culture and shared commitment toward being sincere, honest and straightforward about anything that supports the organization's success. Candor requires:

- Determining the business interest underlying whatever issues emerge so that your candor is relevant to the business goals at hand.
- Striving for honesty, even if the feedback or conversation is tough.
- Being respectful and kind and making sure your feedback is intended to help.
- Emphasizing the strengths of the individuals or issues at hand, remaining positive, and focusing on solutions.
- Committing to or having the courage to tell the truth, raise important issues, and continuously improve.

Vulnerability: Social work researcher, Brene Brown, offers a somewhat gut-wrenching but valuable set of truths that apply in all facets of our personal and professional lives: vulnerability is strength, not weakness; vulnerability reveals our shame, insecurities and imperfection as well as our passions and joys; vulnerability is excruciatingly uncomfortable, no matter how much we practice it; vulnerability demands steadfast commitment and courage; and vulnerability is the birthplace of creativity, innovation and change.³ This means no matter how socially unacceptable or hard it is, meaningful team accomplishments require that team members express and support vulnerability. Teams will only achieve their goals, build shared commitment, trust and values and feel satisfied with the process when vulnerability is embraced.

Trust: Brene Brown also conducts extensive research on trust and breaks down the precise actions that either betray or build it.⁴ Likening trust to a marble jar, Brown suggests we add marbles with each act of trust and remove marbles with each act of betrayal. These marbles are often the smallest, seemingly inconsequential actions. We feel safe and connected to those who have earned a jar full of marbles over time.

Brown suggests seven specific actions that constitute the anatomy of trust. These seven actions spell out the acronym **B.R.A.V.I.N.G.:**

- **B**oundaries: Being clear about our own boundaries and the boundaries of others.
- **R**eliability: Keeping our promises and commitments time and time again.
- **A**ccountability: Owning up to our mistakes, apologizing, making amends and allowing others to do the same.
- **V**ault: Respecting each other's stories and exhibiting global confidentiality, keeping sacred stories that are not ours to share.

³ Brene Brown's book, [The Power of Vulnerability](#).

⁴ Brene Brown's book, [Daring Greatly](#).

- **I**ntegrity: Choosing courage over comfort; choosing what’s right over what’s fast, fun or easy; and practicing, not merely professing, our values.
- **N**on-Judgment: Allowing ourselves and each other to express genuine emotion, be in struggle ask for and receive help without judgment.
- **G**enerosity: Assuming the best intentions for ourselves and each other and then checking those assumptions directly.

Building a Team that Thrives

Prioritize fostering these traits to build a successful team that thrives.

Open Communication: Teams must share information, ideas, options, perspectives, plans, decisions, expectations, assumptions, reactions and responses all the time. Teams have to talk to get things done (and yes, “talk” includes any kind of verbal or electronic method as long as people can readily share and fully understand and engage with the message and its meaning). Whether you’re a team leader or team member, you can model and spearhead open communication simply by doing it. Share information. Describe your perspective or motivations. Give your preferences. Ask others about theirs. Explore assumptions. Genuinely listen. Then, talk some more. Some people are naturally better communicators than others, but everyone can learn how to say, “This is where I’m at. What about you?”

Decisiveness and Clarity: We all, including teams, need to make clear decisions. This can be difficult in a world full of conflicting information and ever-changing directions, especially when we crave assurance. Yet, indecisiveness can create challenges at work. It stymies innovation and change, breeds frustration, erodes credibility and leaves people either out on their own or too unsure to act.

Leadership guru, Patrick Lencione, says getting too hung up on *certainty* is one of the surest ways to get mired in indecision.⁵ We will rarely be certain, yet we must decide anyway. Then, we must communicate that decision clearly and begin moving forward. Remember, you may need to revisit and adapt that decision later, but strong teams make up their minds and act. They also learn and adapt as they go.

Attention to Results: Patrick Lencione also advises we pay attention to what really matters: results.⁶ Don’t measure things that may allow you to feel busy or important, but don’t genuinely contribute to the results you seek. Don’t fixate on quantitative indicators that don’t have true meaning. Don’t waste time tracking who’s sitting at their desk and when they’re sitting there if those data don’t measure what they’re accomplishing. Even productivity data can be meaningless if it doesn’t contribute to other data that show your target market is receiving the right services, at the right time, in the right amount and with the right outcomes. Focus on results.

Wholehearted Accountability: Hold yourself, each other, and your team accountable to the goals and

⁵ In Patrick Lencione’s book [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#).

⁶ Idib.

results you collectively set. Don't save "accountability talks" for formal performance reviews. Instead, say it in the moment and be as specific as possible. Don't generalize, cloud or soft-pedal an issue. Conversely, don't make a personal attack. Focus on the specific questionable performance or behavior as soon as it happens and be clear about the problem and what you expect instead.

Accountability is a form of respect for yourself, your decisions, your team and for others who are faithfully doing what is required. Accountability may be hard or uncomfortable. There might be potential conflict when you and the other person disagree about expectations. It requires vulnerability to admit, "We're not all perfect, including me, but you were supposed to do this." It may also require managerial commitment to a decision that you, personally, don't like. Yet, accountability is the fastest way to build credibility, commitment and trust. Sustain the courage to do it routinely and to do it well.

Healthy Conflict: Strong teams disagree at times. In fact, the stronger the team, the more willing they are to address tough topics especially topics related to clashing opinions, values and perspectives. The best decisions benefit from diversity. Diversity among strong and equal partners will naturally lead to healthy conflict. Learn your own style and comfort-level with conflict. Then, learn how to engage in conflict with others in ways that feel safe and brave, deepen respect and appreciation and invite passionate ideas, options, and decisions. We inevitably face conflict with our own beliefs, experiences and sometimes baggage, so learn how to navigate it effectively.

Exercises for Effective Collaboration

Positivity: How often does your team engage in the ways Marcial Losada suggests contribute to team success? In other words, during your team meetings how frequently do you:

- Equally balance people sharing their own perspectives and asking others to share theirs?
- Equally balance talking about impacts on the team and how decisions or actions affect others or contribute to the company's mission.
- Shape positive frames, even when faced with formidable challenges.

You may find it helpful to keep a tally over a couple of months. You can record with a simple check or add marbles or pennies to a jar each time the team fulfills those three conditions. The counting method isn't important, but the act of counting may reveal your typical conversation patterns and help you consciously shift toward improved team collaboration and success.

Candor: Identify two key concerns you have related to team performance or current changes.

- Have you expressed these concerns directly to those involved? If so, how were your concerns successfully addressed? If not, why? And how might you successfully express those concerns?

Vulnerability: Is your team a vulnerable safe and brave place?

- If so, reflect upon instances when you and others could be vulnerable and how did it contribute to team success?
- If not, why? And how might you help the team grow more willing to be safely and bravely vulnerable and how might you imagine it will strengthen the team?

Communication: How might you handle the following scenario?

You just fired a beloved, long-time staff member. Although she had good skills and fostered loyalty among others, she also had a long history of not fulfilling responsibilities, not documenting appropriately and not consistently demonstrating sound judgment or boundaries.

You inherited this staff person or teammate when you were promoted to supervisor, and her file was full of mixed reviews. Your new boss and Human Resources (HR) fully supported you throughout the disciplinary and firing process.

However, rumors are flying around and her loyal followers are upset. You, your boss, and HR have decided to talk to your staff directly about what has become an elephant-in-the-room issue that won't go away. Prepare your speech; use the following bullets if they help:

- This is a personnel matter with privacy rules. Yet, a cared-about staff member abruptly left and not acknowledging that can fuel rumors and concerns.
- Here's what we can tell you...
- Here's what we can't tell you...
- This is what's important for you...
- This is what we expect related to the rumors...
- This is what you can expect from us as supervisors and HR...
- This is how we're moving forward...

Clear and Decisive: Identify and describe significant instances where your team is not being decisive.

- Why might that be?
- How might you make and stick to a decision even when facing uncertainty?

Accountability: Identify and describe instances where you are not holding each other sufficiently accountable for expectations.

- Why are you not holding each other sufficiently accountable?
- How might you improve holding each other accountable in that regard?
- How might you strengthen your team's culture of accountability?