

“Team” is one of those words we use too loosely. Or maybe we’re just hopeful that calling a group of people a “team” will magically make them act like one. But becoming an effective team takes intentionality, skill, and hard work.

Whether it’s a project team, a management team, or an operational team, here are four foundations to build a team on:

- 1. The shaping of the *culture*.** This is two-fold: The sub-culture of the team itself and the culture of the organization the team operates within. If the organization’s culture is a barrier to the team’s success, find ways to insulate the team from the organization’s cultural roadblocks. The classic example is Lockheed’s launching of an independent “skunkworks” in the 1940s to rapidly develop fighter planes without being burdened by Lockheed’s bureaucracy.



Strong teams develop sub-cultures of their own. That can be good or bad, but has a lot to do with a team’s success. A healthy culture takes intentional effort to create. A culture of trust, or a culture of suspicion? A culture of learning, or of blame? A culture of mutual support, or where egos reign? The latter happen automatically, the former take intentional effort.

- 2. The selection of the *people*.** We naturally tend to select people who have the hard skills and responsibilities needed on the team. We can’t ignore those, but we start off on the wrong foot if that’s all we consider. The values of the team members matter. Does the blend of risk-takers and worry-warts support the desired outcomes? How about the blend of creativity with practicality? Outcome-drivers and process-builders? Encouragers and provocateurs? Big-picture and detail-oriented?

Diverse perspectives can lead to healthy outcomes – unless they result in battle lines being drawn. We need players with good emotional intelligence to capture the full potential of that diversity. If it’s hard to find that emotional intelligence amongst our candidates, maybe our organization needs to be putting more effort into cultivating it.

- 3. The clarity of the *purpose*.** A team draws its energy from their passion to fulfill a shared objective. Everyone needs to have the same, clear vision of what success looks like. Otherwise, they’ll start pulling in different directions to achieve their own idea of success. Their mission needs to be clear at the outset and proactively kept in the forefront.
- 4. The commitment to the *processes*.** Which processes are implemented are less important than the team members commitment to them. No one gets away with just paying lip-service to the processes the team uses to get things done and create accountability. Team meetings, task tracking, status reporting...even if a process makes my job more difficult, I’ll do it if it helps others do their job better and moves us in the right direction. Self-sacrificing commitment to the common good must be the only path to personal success.

It takes more than just being in a room together to make a successful team. Lay the foundations for success and continually build upon them.

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