



# How to Build a Winning Team

In America, our DNA is laced with a fierce sense of independence, a legacy earned and cherished since our Founders' sacrifices in 1776. Yet time and again, I've witnessed—both in history and the boardroom—that success at scale is reserved for those who master the art of team building.

This white paper distills what I've learned from decades working alongside leaders who orchestrate teams greater than the sum of their parts, offering practical steps for today's high-stakes leadership landscape.



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## The Leader's Challenge

Leading is getting harder in every walk of life. Stakeholders demand improved performance and bottom-line results faster than ever before. Leadership tenure is shrinking everywhere, from CEOs to head coaches, leaders of non-profit organizations, and even academic institutions. The pressure for performance continues to rise.

Some leaders try to pull the easy lever by surrounding themselves with people who agree with their every decision and who do what they are told. The temptation to fall into this trap is greater than ever given the increasing need for fast results, even when the leader knows better. In the heat of the battle, while tackling urgent challenges and opportunities, execution is likely faster when direct reports fall in line with the wishes of the leader. But this trap saps an organization of vibrant energy, innovation, commitment,

and, ultimately, ownership of results. If everyone is merely following and managing up, the leader's capacity becomes the bottleneck that throttles the success of the whole organization.

On the flip side, another tempting easy lever is to follow the guidance offered by one of the most “liked” calls to action on LinkedIn: “Hire great people and get out of their way.” Many people who “like” this statement are just tired of being micro-managed. However, this is a dangerous leadership principle because it can translate to an abdication of responsibility.

Leadership is a contact sport. Certainly leaders should not be in the way, but they'd better be in the game orchestrating their team.



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## What Matters Most

Individuals play the game, but teams beat the odds. Full disclosure: I borrowed that from the U.S. Navy Seals, an organization I respect and admire. The best leaders surround themselves with the most talented people they can possibly find, and they are secure enough to hire people who are better than them in key areas of responsibility. Most importantly, they build high performing cross-functional teams with complementary skills.

Building a high-performance team is as much art as it is science. The best leaders think like an engineer and feel like an artist. Teams are a lot like living, breathing organisms that respond to many variables that leaders should persistently influence and balance. These variables should be attended to as vigorously as a master gardener who weeds, fertilizes, waters, and prunes the garden. The old days of promoting people onto teams based entirely on relationships or individual results are over. Of course results matter, but how results are achieved matters more than ever when building a team because we know that tapping into individual behavioral preferences and core values to create team synergy can make all the difference.

Consider the performance of the 2014 San Antonio Spurs. The Spurs won the 2014 NBA finals by defeating the Miami Heat in five games, winning the series 4-1 even though Miami was loaded with superstars and were heavily favored to win. All four of San Antonio's wins came by at least 15 points, which was an NBA finals record. Just as the Spurs toppled superstar teams by out-executing with synergy, business teams rise to the next level when

members' strengths, feedback, and clear roles are aligned—and when a leader orchestrates rather than micromanages or abdicates.

Before we dive into how to build a high-performance team, I'll define what success looks like.

## The Ten Most Important Traits of High-Performance Teams

- 1 **Synergy:** complementary strengths and behavioral diversity
- 2 **Commitment:** egoless pursuit of team success
- 3 **Constructive Contention:** open, passionate debate with unified commitment
- 4 **Accountability:** shared leadership, peer-to-peer standards
- 5 **Purpose:** shared goals and stakeholder alignment
- 6 **Rewards:** collective and proportional recognition for excellence
- 7 **Transparency:** candid, consistent information sharing
- 8 **Collaboration:** cross-functional teamwork triumphing over silos
- 9 **Growth mindset:** curiosity, feedback, and peer development
- 10 **Ownership:** personal and collective responsibility for results

When a team exhibits these ten traits, it is firing on all cylinders. The chain is unbreakable. The outcome will be extraordinary results that fuel positive feelings and tangible rewards shared with respected comrades.

Unfortunately, many teams fall short of expectations. These lower performing teams typically suffer from some if not all the following shortcomings.

- Avoidance of difficult issues
- Political maneuvering
- Passive aggression and lack of candor
- Settling for mediocrity
- Underutilization of talents
- Stagnation (fixed mindset, lack of learning)



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# Learned Paradigms

Why do team members behave this way? Mostly because this is how they were taught to handle contentious issues by parents, teachers and role models. It's helpful for leaders to realize that many of us learned two dominant paradigms for dealing with stressful situations and confrontations in our youth:

Passive	Aggressive
"I get along by going along."	"It's important to be a winner."
"Don't rock the boat."	"If I win, then the other person must lose."
"It's important to be liked, and they'll like me more if I give in."	"It's important to be tough. If I change my position, I'll look weak, and I can't let that happen."

What can leaders do to move teams from low to high performance? The best leaders understand these paradigms and manage them proactively by modeling and teaching a more productive way of dealing with conflict that I call constructive contention. Specifically, they help their team:



The best leaders model and teach a more productive way of dealing with conflict that I call constructive contention.

## 1 Maintain and build mutual self esteem

- Avoid attacks that threaten self-esteem
- Seek opportunities to reinforce teammates
- Catch, highlight and reward healthy debate and productive resolution of different points of view

## 2 Maximize information flow

- Encourage extensive sharing of team knowledge about problems for purposes of growth
- Seek deeper understanding and clarify by asking in-depth questions
- Be open to other opinions, and accept that you cannot know everything
- Listen deeply to fully understand an opposing point of view rather than rebuff
- Summarize what you have heard to ensure accuracy and show that you are listening

### 3 Foster creative solutions

- Welcome diversity in personal style and in ideas
- Seek different perspectives, and encourage contrarian points of view
- Go beyond the first solution, and challenge solutions with alternatives

### 4 Help people find the higher business purpose

- Avoid turf battles and parochial power plays
- Proactively seek areas of common ground and shared business purpose
- Ask the question, “If our customers or consumers were here, what would they say?”

If you need to form a high-performance team, I strongly advise giving advance consideration to team chemistry and the ability of individual players to proactively navigate contention constructively. Here is my ten-step process:



Members of higher performing teams learn to lean on each other's strengths to synergistically achieve a higher level of performance.

## How To Build a High Performance Team

- 1 Assess individual strengths and behavioral preferences
- 2 Assemble members to complement and balance the team
- 3 Define charter, roles, and goals
- 4 Proactively foster psychological safety and trust
- 5 Instill regular team training to tackle real challenges
- 6 Set and track lead/lag metrics
- 7 Establish feedback norms and decision mechanics
- 8 Secure external stakeholder support
- 9 Establish ground rules and execute
- 10 Regularly course-correct with team sessions (See The 4 Disciplines of Execution by Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling for an excellent model)

We all have individual strengths that enable us to perform certain roles and tasks more comfortably than others. Members of higher performing teams learn to lean on each other's strengths to synergistically achieve a higher level of performance than could be achieved by operating individually or in silos. They also understand that differences challenge assumptions, and assumptions are sometimes blind spots. Unbalanced teams will have more blind spots, unproductive conflict, and unforced errors. The team leader needs to constantly assess the balance the team is achieving and orchestrate it proactively.

Every team has the potential to achieve extraordinary results with the right attention to these dimensions. For deeper dives or to discuss how these principles apply to your organization, reach out at [jdrrowthpartners.com](http://jdrrowthpartners.com).



## About the Author

Jude Rake is the founding principal of JDR Growth Partners, a consulting firm that helps family-owned businesses, boards, chief executives, and their leadership teams achieve improved results and sustainable growth. Before founding JDR, Jude served in multiple C-level roles including CEO for fifteen years. Jude is also the author of *The Bridge to Growth: How Servant Leaders Achieve Better Results and Why It Matters Now More Than Ever*. Find out more at [jdrrowthpartners.com](http://jdrrowthpartners.com) and [The Bridge to Growth](http://TheBridgeToGrowth.com).



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