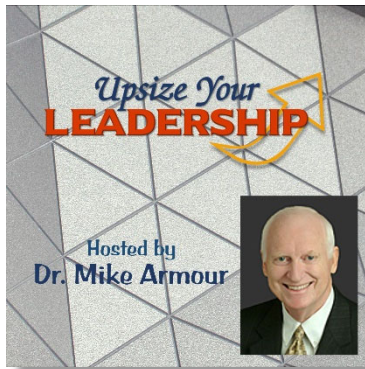


Eleven Traits of Great Teams

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode UYL2015

Podcast Date: July 21, 2020



Today's episode borrows from a project to which I'm devoting tremendous time and energy this year. I'm preparing an online masterclass on how to develop a high-performing team. The course is slated to be available this fall.

Needless to say, this means that I've been thinking continuously of late about the qualities of good teams. And that's the focus of this episode. Building a strong, vibrant team is a sure-fire way to upsize your leadership.

It's fashionable today for managers to refer to their employees as their team, whether the group actually functions as a team or not. That's unfortunate. It blurs what makes authentic teamwork distinctive. It cheapens the meaning of "team."

As a result, many so-called teams are not really teams, at all. They are simply a collection of individual contributors who happen to work together. They are what we might call workmates or shipmates or officemates. But they are not truly teammates.

True teams – especially exceptional teams – embody certain traits and characteristics. These qualities are always evident, whether you're speaking of a sports team, a research team, a self-directed work team, a special forces team, a management team – any kind of team which genuinely deserves the name.

While there are many characteristics of good teams, let me share eleven which are particularly important. As we touch on each one, think about your own team. Ask how well your team manifests the trait.

First and foremost, team members put the best interests of the team above personal self-interest. This does not mean that they ignore self-interest. Instead, they subordinate it to the best interests of the team.

This attitude is a primary distinctive which separates teams from a mere collection of individual contributors. Individual contributors pride themselves on "what I have accomplished." Teams pride themselves on "what we have accomplished."

But this attitude may not develop quickly, at least not with everyone on the team. Self-interest is deeply embedded in human nature. It does not readily relax its grip. Thus, on most teams – especially those

which are newly-formed – a “team first” attitude may take time to emerge. Still, team-builders should promote it untiringly at all times, even from the very outset of the team-building experience.

The second quality of genuine teams is a clear and unifying sense of purpose. Self-interest only gives way to team-interest when there is a strong motivation – some compelling reason – to set self-interest aside. The team’s unifying sense of purpose provides this motivation, this compelling reason.

Moreover, a sense of purpose gives meaning to what team members are asked to do. It offers the rationale for the contributions and sacrifices required of them. When we are given a task, but no meaningful “why” for performing it, the task quickly devolves into little more than busy-work. And nothing is more certain to destroy morale and enthusiasm than an abundance of busy work.

Therefore, great teams are always crystal clear about their purpose. And to a person, they are committed to it. Moreover, they word their purpose as something other than a mere list of goals. Goals and objectives are vital, to be sure. But they are not adequate to serve as the purpose of a team. A team’s purpose expresses the higher end – the greater outcome – which the team is pursuing. It provides the ultimate “why” for the team’s existence and for what’s expected of its members. It is therefore indispensable.

The third trait of great teams is trust. Trust within the team. Trust in the leader. Trust on the part of the leader toward his or her team. Patrick Lencioni, who has studied dysfunctional teams extensively, identifies the absence of trust as the root cause of team dysfunction.

Where trust prevails, communication is open. Opinions and ideas flow freely. There is no fear of censure or ridicule. No fear of being ostracized. People know that they can count on one another, that the team has their back. Collaboration comes naturally. Conflict is more easily resolved. And a spirit of camaraderie is everywhere.

The fourth attribute common to great teams is a results orientation. Effective teams are acutely attuned to what needs to happen and when it needs to happen. And whenever they assess their efforts, these teams measure themselves, not by their intentions or their level of activity or by how much work they put in, but by the outcome which they achieved. Was the outcome appropriate? Was it timely? Did it meet the proper quality standards? Was the output adequate in terms of quantity?

Goals and objectives are therefore essential to any team which aspires to greatness. The team’s leader must see that goals and objectives are adequately defined, continually monitored, updated as needed, and used as the ultimate measure of team effectiveness. At the end of the day, results are the only team metric which truly counts.

In meeting goals and objectives, the fifth characteristic of strong teams is accountability. Being accountable means the timely and thorough fulfillment of commitments, duties, expectations, and standards of performance which are inherent in a given responsibility. This is true whether the responsibility was assigned or volunteered for. The team as a whole has an accountability. And each person on the team has individual accountability, as well.

The best teams practice mutual accountability. That is, they hold each other accountable. The leader is even accountable to the team. Where mutual accountability prevails, performance frequently exceeds

expectations, because the culture of accountability keeps the work of the team on track and on schedule.

The sixth trait is defined roles. Teams commonly tackle a problem jointly, acting as a whole. But there should be complete clarity as to who does what, and when. I often illustrate this by pointing to aircraft operations on a carrier. If you watch video of air ops, as they are called, you see a flight deck on which every crew member wears a brightly colored vest or shirt.

These various colors represent the task which a given sailor performs. Red shirts handle weapons. Purple shirts handle fuel. Yellow shirts run catapult operations. Green shirts work directly with the aircraft and monitor the arresting cables. Blue, brown, and white shirts have their designated roles, too. Everything is orchestrated with precision, because team members all know their own role and the role of everyone else on deck.

Successful teams know that anything which is everybody's business ends up being nobody's business. If something is important to the team's work, it must be assigned explicitly to a responsible party.

Thus, comments like, "Somebody ought to do such-and-such" are never passed over with no further discussion. Instead, the team quickly determines whether the action is indeed needed. And if it is, the discussion does not conclude until a specific team member is assigned to follow through on the matter.

A seventh attribute common to strong teams is that the members mutually support one another. They all carry their own portion of the load. But when any team member becomes overloaded, overtaxed, or overwhelmed, they put a shoulder under the teammate's load, as well. They help him or her carry the excess load.

This mutual support also evidences itself in mutual encouragement. Team members lift one another up psychologically and emotionally. They are generous in their commendations of others on the team. They frequently express gratitude to one another for assistance given. They carefully avoid any statement which would tear down a teammate. In short, the prevailing attitude on great teams is "all for one and one for all."

Eighth, good teams see strength in diversity – diversity in skills, diversity in backgrounds, diversity in experience, diversity in viewpoints. They recognize that diversity can be the source of tension. But they are determined to harness tension in such a way that is creative, not destructive.

They see fervent debate as healthy. They believe that the clash of ideas and perspectives, properly managed, helps the team look at challenges and decisions from multiple perspectives. By doing so, they also believe, the team taps its best and clearest thinking, which in turn leads to better decisions and courses of action.

For diversity to produce this kind of benefit, a ninth team attribute is essential, namely, mutual respect among team members. The team never allows differences of opinion or viewpoint to degenerate into character attacks, bullying, belittling, or mistreatment of anyone on the team. Disrespect inevitably breeds disharmony. It puts team members at odds with one another. And teams beset with discord never perform at their best.

A tenth quality of good teams is resilience, the ability to bounce back, no matter what. Things inevitably go wrong, regardless of how thoroughly we plan. Wholesale setbacks do occur at times. When that happens, effective teams are able to regroup and refocus with minimal down time. They find workarounds. They redouble their efforts. They renew their determination to succeed.

Resilience is a product of both aptitude and attitude. The broader the skill set on a team, the more extensive its training, and the deeper its knowledge, the better it is equipped to deal with the unexpected. That's the aptitude part of the equation.

Aptitude alone, however, does not assure resilience. Attitudes will govern whether the team deploys its aptitude resiliently. Of the two, attitude is more important than aptitude. A team determined to overcome a setback will find ways to increase its aptitude or to use its current aptitude more imaginatively. No amount of aptitude, however, assures that a team will have the attitudes necessary for resilience.

Ultimately, the responsibility for instilling the proper attitudes in a team falls on the shoulders of the team leader. The eleventh attribute of good teams is therefore solid leadership. Many a leader has transformed an average team into a superb team. In fact, it's almost impossible to envision a great team without a truly competent leader. Even self-directed teams, if they are genuinely successful, have someone on the team who fills the leadership role, either formally or informally.

In anything but the very smallest teams, leadership is distributed within the team. The manager or person designated as the team leader is obviously in a leadership role. Others on the team, however, also serve as leaders, either because of their influence or because of duties levied on them. On teams which are truly great, these internal leaders are exemplary in their own right. They complement the leadership at the top, so that the team is well-led in every dimension.

Of the eleven traits which we have listed, I would argue that leadership is the most important. The right leader will strive endlessly to instill the other ten attributes in the team. In the absence of good leadership, these qualities are left to chance.

Here, then, is a recap of the eleven team qualities which we have highlighted: They are:

1. Team-interests above self-interest
2. A unifying sense of purpose
3. An atmosphere of trust
4. A results orientation
5. Accountability
6. Clear and defined roles
7. Mutual support
8. Diversity of viewpoints and abilities
9. Mutual respect

10. Resilience

11. Strong leadership

By no means are these the only noteworthy traits of great teams. I've chosen these eleven, however, since every high-performing team must have them at its core. And that includes your team.

The ultimate responsibility for maintaining these core traits in your team rests fully on your shoulders as the team leader. Think of these traits as virtues to be instilled in your team's culture. They will not be instilled by merely espousing them or making a half-hearted effort to practice them. For them to become team virtues, they must be embodied and lived out daily, first by you as the leader and then by every member of your team.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

Upsize Your Leadership is a featured podcast on the C-Suite Radio Network (<https://c-suitenetwork.com/radio/shows/upsized-your-leadership/>). It can also be accessed on iTunes, Google Play/Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, iHeart Radio and many other platforms which distribute podcasts.

Scripts for all episodes can be downloaded at <https://www.leaderperfect.com/podcast/episodes>.

Notice: You are free to duplicate or redistribute this script so long as the authorship and copyright information are retained. This material is not in the public domain and is the intellectual property of the host.