

BASICS OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT



For decades, working in teams has been realized as the ultimate way to get results in the workplace—and the team-focused approach to work has only grown.

Today, companies invest in open office floor plans, group chat programs, and off-site team-building activities in efforts to foster collaboration among employees. In fact, a recent study revealed that the amount of time that managers and employees spent at work engaged in collaborative activities has increased by more than 50 percent over the past two decades—and at some companies, colleagues only spend 20 percent of their time working individually, not in meetings, on the phone, or answering emails.¹

Clearly, teamwork has been treated as a workplace panacea.



But not all teams are successful. For many employees, team-based projects suck up valuable resources and precious time. When a company doesn't invest smartly in building successful teams and developing winning team dynamics, all of these teams—and thus, the company itself—suffer.

It doesn't have to be that way; great teams have the power to transform organizations.

This guide serves as an introduction to the basics of team development. In the following pages, you'll learn about recent research that challenges long-held assumptions about teams, the foundation for high-performing teams, and how you can implement key changes in your own teams for world-class results.

THE DEFINITION OF “TEAM”

At its most essential, the term “team” refers to a group of people who are associated by a joint action. On the playing field or in the boardroom, a team of people work together toward a common goal—whether it’s winning the game or winning the bid on a huge contract.



In the business world, teams can be permanent, a central fixture within a company, or they can be temporary, formed only in order to work toward one project before they are disbanded. They can be cross-functional, composed of colleagues from different departments who bring a wide array of skills and knowledge sets to the table, or they can be interdepartmental, where every team member shares a similar knowledge set about his or her business segment. Essentially, however, a team is action-oriented; a team with nothing to do—no challenge to tackle or problem to solve—isn’t a team at all.

However, there are good teams and bad teams and a world of difference exists between the two. A bad team may work toward a common goal, but often fail to reach it, due to a lack of focus, poor communication, absent leadership, or unchecked egos—or, more commonly, a combination of all these factors and more. A good team, more often than not, works toward a common goal and actually achieves it, though not without struggle, conflict, and hard work. The difference between a good team and a bad team, is that a good team is able to work through those struggles together—whether they’re struggles with the project or the team dynamic itself—rather than abandoning ship as soon as the water becomes a little rough.

A third type of team exists, one rarely found but much sought-after: a world-class team.

WHAT MAKES A WORLD-CLASS TEAM?

From the creation of the first Disney animation to the development of JavaScript, much of the world's most joyful and disruptive innovations were the fruit of team efforts. What is it, however, that makes one team incredible enough to create Snow White while others just flounder? Do the world's best teams share any common characteristics? A particularly curious company launched a mission to find out.

Google's Quest for the Perfect Team

A recent in-depth report by the New York Times² recounted a years-long crusade by tech giant Google to form not just a world-class team but a perfect one. It's no surprise that Google embarked on this quest; the company has long been dedicated to optimizing the performance of its employees, with its stellar People Operations department leading the way. Now, though, with more and more work being performed in groups, Google has honed its focus in on not just optimizing employee performance but team performance as well. Google quickly found out that this quest requires quite a different approach from that of typical personal development training.

In 2012, Google launched its team-focused investigation, called Project Aristotle. Researchers began by questioning long-held assumptions about teams, like:

Were the best teams composed of people WHO SHARED SIMILAR INTERESTS OR PERSONALITY TRAITS?

Did members of the best teams SOCIALIZE OFTEN OUTSIDE OF WORK?

Were strong teams largely HOMOGENOUS IN TERMS OF GENDER, or did a 50/50 gender split produce the best results?

They performed data-based analysis on the makeup and performance of hundreds of Google teams in search of answers. What the researchers found, however, was truly unexpected.

It's About the "How," Not the "Who"

Their analysis of data on the makeup of teams revealed no distinct patterns. Who made up teams, from a demographic standpoint, seemed to have no bearing on team outcomes. Instead, a different kind of pattern emerged; researchers noticed that established "group norms"—the unwritten rules that governed behavior in groups, or what could be described as a group's "culture"—varied greatly.

For example, some teams were made up of members who constantly interrupted one another and went off on multiple tangents during meetings, while other teams were composed of members who patiently waited their turn to speak and were headed by leaders who immediately stamped out any tangents deemed unrelated to the team goal. These two types of teams adhered to very different group norms. Turns out, how a team was run mattered far more than who made up the team.



The next step for Google researchers was to figure out how influencing group norms could also influence the success or failure rate of teams. The challenge? Each team was governed by multiple group norms, and some of these norms could be found in both good and bad teams. But researchers eventually pinpointed one group norm in particular that all good teams seemed to share: "psychological safety," or the idea that team members can trust that they won't be ridiculed or embarrassed if they spoke up.

If psychological safety could be fostered within a team, that team would become more cohesive, trusting, and—crucially—more creative.

Measuring a Team's "Collective IQ"

But what can team leaders do in order to make team members feel psychologically safe? A Carnegie Mellon study on why some teams perform better than others may hold the answers.³ Researchers conducting the study wanted to see if teams really did have a higher "IQ" than individuals. Essentially, they were testing whether or not the sum was really more than the parts, which they dubbed the "collective IQ." The researchers broke people up into teams and had them perform a series of tasks that required collaboration in order to reach a goal. They found that high-performing teams shared two main characteristics:

1. Every team member spoke for about an equal amount of time. On some high-performing teams, members interjected and jumped in and out of the conversation, while in others, members patiently took turns speaking on the parts of the task they had the most expertise in—but no matter the conversational style of the high-performing teams, at the end of the day, every voice was heard.
2. Team members possessed a high "average social sensitivity." They were able to intuit how other team members were feeling with relative ease by picking up on non-verbal cues and tone of voice.

What did this research reveal?

That to an outside observer, a team with a high collective IQ may actually seem inefficient—the team members may talk over one another, go on tangents, and chitchat before and after the meeting (and even during!). On the other hand, a team that stays on task and rapidly checks off its meeting to-do list may actually have a low collective IQ.

An Unintuitive Approach to Team Efficiency

Putting efficiency to the side for the sake of connection (time spent chitchatting, sharing personal anecdotes, and engaging in emotional conversations) actually makes teams more efficient. This may sound surprising at first—but it shouldn't. Doing so allows team members to get to know their colleagues not just as co-workers, but as actual people. When they don't have to be intimidated by their teammates' professional accomplishments, and when they don't have to put on that work “mask” themselves, team members can let their guard down—and *that's* when big breakthroughs happen.

We use teams in order to solve problems because we assume that two heads (or three or ten) are more creative than one. The Google and Carnegie Mellon researchers proved that assumption correct, but only when teams operate under certain creative- and connection-rich conditions. Creativity cannot flourish in a stifling environment.

Yes, it's a little ironic that data-driven Google came to the conclusion that emotional connection and psychological safety are what produce world-class teams—but having hard data and research in order to back up what talented leaders have always known about teams is certainly validating.

Team-building activities that foster trust and respect among colleagues and professional development courses that focus on the importance of effective and emotionally engaging communication are the bedrock for building great teams, not “fluff” training.

In fact, engaging, interactive, and emotionally resonating team training activities can be far more productive than traditional “show and tell” training presentations. Now savvy, forward-thinking executives and HR representatives have strong data and research from one of the world's most well-respected companies to point to.

THE SEVEN CORNERSTONES OF TEAMWORK

If, as Google's research suggests, psychological safety is the bedrock of a world-class team, what is the rest of the foundation made up of? At Eagle's Flight, we've expanded on research surrounding team dynamics by identifying and developing what we've found to be the seven keys to effective teams. Dubbed "the seven cornerstones of teamwork," these keys lay the groundwork for building efficient and effective teams. If any one of these cornerstones is missing, the whole team dynamic will crumble. But when every cornerstone is upheld throughout the entire team project—and when each and every team member is truly devoted to operating within the cornerstone framework—the chances of team success skyrocket.



THE SEVEN CORNERSTONES OF TEAMWORK ARE:

LEADERSHIP

Holding team members accountable for work that needs to be done while still taking responsibility for the team's final results. Making sure the project experience provides opportunities for team members to develop new skills.

UNANIMOUS FOCUS ON A COMMON GOAL

Making sure all team members understand the goal and why the goal is important, while ensuring the team doesn't expend energy working on things unrelated to achieving the goal.

CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES FOR SUBGROUPS

Creating subgroups headed by a designated subgroup leader, who'll ensure the subgroup makes working toward the team's overall goal the top priority.

SHARED RESOURCES

Encouraging team members to share soft resources (like ideas and insights gained from experience, plus even more intangible resources like energy and enthusiasm) and making sure hard resources (like the money, materials, and tools needed in order to get the job done) are readily available and appropriately shared among the team.

EFFECTIVE AND FREQUENT COMMUNICATION

Communicating information the team needs in order to do its job well and providing frequent updates about issues and challenges that may hinder the team's work toward the goal. Crucially, every team member must agree that communication is being carried out effectively and frequently enough.

CONSISTENT, UNITED, AND ENTHUSIASTIC EFFORT

Encouraging every team member to operate at his or her fullest potential while keeping the team goals top of mind. Ensuring that all team members understand that this effort is everyone's responsibility.

PERIODIC AND TEMPORARY SUPPRESSION OF THE EGO

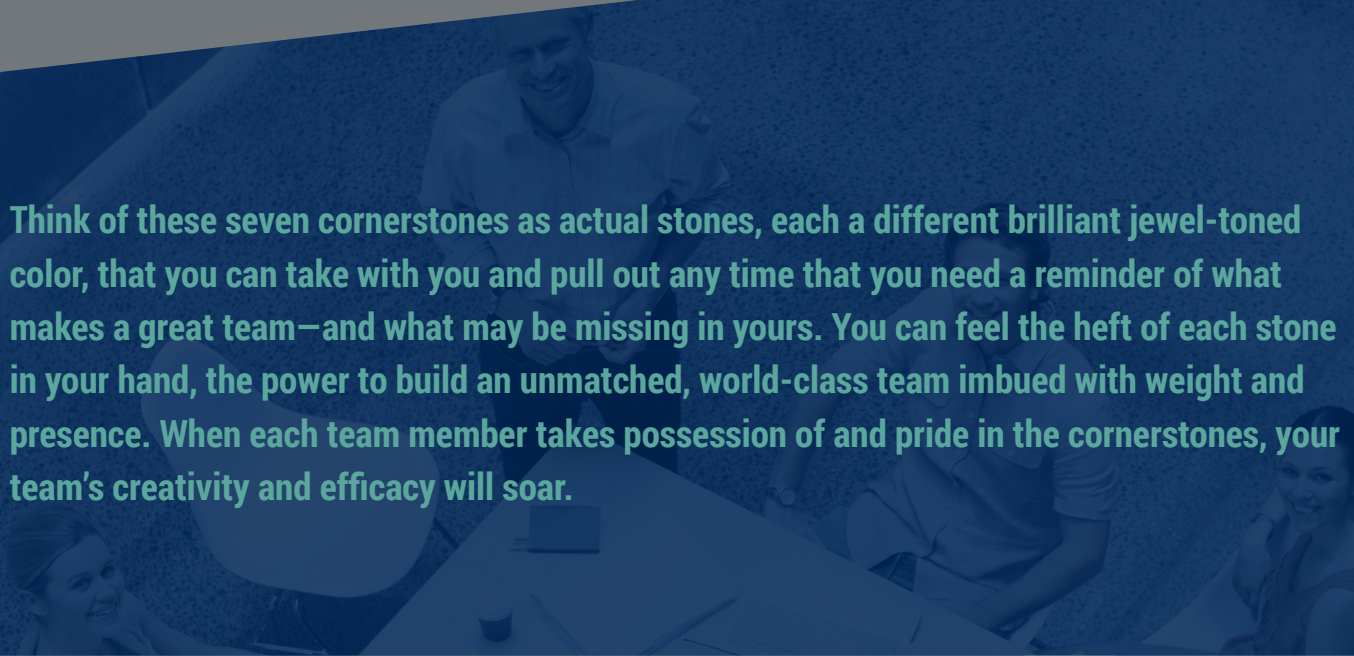
Making sure every team member keeps his or her ego under control while fostering a team atmosphere that's welcoming of ideas, thoughts, and constructive criticisms on how to make the team more effective.

How to Implement the Seven Cornerstones of Teamwork

Because these cornerstones lay the groundwork for effective teams, they should be reviewed and reinforced as a new team is being formed. During a team kickoff meeting, spend plenty of time introducing each cornerstone and discussing how it'll be implemented within the team.

It's easy to lose sight of the cornerstones, however, as the team begins to really dig into a project—that's why the cornerstones should be revisited at every team meeting. This is called a "Stones Check." The team leader should call for a "Stones Check" at some point during the meeting as a means of taking the team's "temperature" and in order to keep every member on track. At the end of the meeting, the team leader should then take a moment to set a cornerstones intention for the next meeting, asking the team: "When we next meet together, what's the one area we should try to improve upon?"

Choosing just one cornerstone to focus on at a time increases the chances of actual improvement—team members can concentrate much of their energy and enthusiasm on improving a single cornerstone, rather than diffusing that energy over all seven. Often, but not always, which cornerstone should be chosen for improvement during a "Stones Check" is self-evident, based on what the team is struggling with the most at the time. For example, if several team members unwittingly duplicated efforts on one area of the project, thus wasting time and resources, the team should work on the "Clearly Defined Roles for Subgroups" cornerstone in order to avoid another duplication-related setback.



Think of these seven cornerstones as actual stones, each a different brilliant jewel-toned color, that you can take with you and pull out any time that you need a reminder of what makes a great team—and what may be missing in yours. You can feel the heft of each stone in your hand, the power to build an unmatched, world-class team imbued with weight and presence. When each team member takes possession of and pride in the cornerstones, your team's creativity and efficacy will soar.

GET STARTED

So, how do you build a world-class team? It starts with top-notch team development. At Eagle's Flight, our team development programs recognize that while every team is different, certain team tenets must be met in order to achieve world-class results. Through innovative and interactive training and events, we help team members clearly define their roles and recognize how different roles are connected to one another, improve team cohesiveness, and articulate the importance of a team vision. From team performance diagnosis to drawing up a plan of action, we've optimized every stage of team development.

Our programs aren't the dry "chalk and talk" training of the past. Your team members will have FUN working with one another in a safe, supportive environment while developing their strengths and learning to support the strengths of others. If you're ready to skyrocket your teams to success by working with an experienced company that gets results, request a quote today. Eagle's Flight has created more than 350 customized programs and has worked with organizations in more than 45 countries—we'd love to spark transformation in your own company next.



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