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5 SECRETS TO DEVELOPING A HIGH-PERFORMING TEAM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By **Patrick Sanaghan & Jillian Lohndorf**

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TO THRIVE, HIGHER ED NEEDS HIGH-PERFORMING, ADAPTIVE TEAMS

Higher education will face daunting and complex challenges over the next decade, and campuses will need high-performing teams, *especially* a high-performing senior team, in order to face those challenges.

Building and nurturing a great team is a daunting and noble task for any leader. It takes courage and care, perspiration and aspiration, and investment of time and attention—all of which are in short supply on campuses.

The good news is that **the effort is almost always worth it** because an exceptional team, especially a senior team, can do amazing work; it makes the campus feel alive and energized. People talk about all the possibilities that can be realized. The gift that a stellar senior team gives their campus is that they model the way for others, not with platitudes and pontifications, but with a more powerful teaching model—their actions.

The senior team's behavior has a trickle-down effect: if everyone on the senior team learns how to operate as a real team, they can then teach their direct reports how to be a real team. Those direct reports can, in turn, teach their own direct reports. This cascading learning process creates extraordinary leverage throughout campus. We have examined several campuses that have great teams at the director level—which is where most of the real work lives—and in each of those cases, they learned how to operate this way because their senior team modeled the way.

The challenge for campus leaders is that few of them have ever been taught or trained to actually build and create a team, so most leaders rely heavily on assumptions and on commonly held myths.

We recently conducted extensive interviews with several stellar teams including: award-winning research teams cutting-edge technology companies among other organizations, in order to learn what makes them tick. In the process, we uncovered several destructive myths about what makes a team great. In this paper, we will:

- Expose 6 potentially destructive myths about teams
- Help you create a new plan for developing a high-performing team, presenting 5 strategies used by some of the highest performing teams across sectors

We hope our advice will prove useful as you prepare your team—and your campus—for the challenges ahead.

6 POTENTIALLY DESTRUCTIVE MYTHS

#1: THE MYTH ABOUT TALENT

Too many leaders believe that really smart people will automatically "gel" into a high-performing team.[1] This rarely happens. In fact, really smart people can often find it difficult to work on a team. There are several reasons for this:

- Often, they have large and rather fragile egos that go along with their high intelligence.
- They may think that solutions to complex challenges are "rather obvious," when they rarely are.
- They can be quite stubborn because they are enamored with their own conclusions and are convinced that they are right. Thus, they don't give in easily, even when there are better ideas in the room.
- They believe that by just applying "logic" to a problem, the right answers will be found. Unfortunately, most real problems are sticky, complicated, and very human. Logic has limitations that the most intelligent minds tend not to see.
- They rarely ask questions because they assume that they already have the answers. Questions just muddy the waters for them.

It takes more than a high IQ to perform at high levels. A variety of skills, experiences, and perspectives are necessary, along with high levels of trust, open communication, emotional support, and mutual accountability—all of which are very hard to establish and maintain. One differentiator of an exceptional team is a high level of curiosity where questions (not hidden criticisms) are prized.

With the right mix of people and talent, "regular" folk can produce great results.

#2: THE MYTH ABOUT FOCUS

There is a prevalent myth in higher education (often promoted by leaders who lack the courage and skill to build a real team) that by "gettin' 'er done," somehow, a team emerges. Yet, too often, the focus on simply getting the task done stunts the process of building the "relational capital" that teams need in order to continue accomplishing tasks.

In our observations of exceptional teams, we found something both surprising and revealing: stellar teams allocate their time in an unexpected way. They spend two-thirds of their time on the task at hand (gettin' 'er done) and a full one-third on the "process" or relational aspect of the team's functioning. This process includes making sure everyone feels heard, showing respect and appreciation for others, listening carefully, seeking other perspectives (especially when there is conflict), and clarifying the rules of decision making. This one-third is crucial, because it is in the process, in the relational aspect of team functioning, that most teams fail.

> "In over twenty-five years of consulting with senior teams in higher education, I have never been brought into a situation where a cabinet needed help with getting their tasks done because they didn't have the talent. I have almost always been brought in because the relational aspects of the team had broken down (e.g. members unable to deal with conflict, people being disrespectful to each other, no trust)."
>
> - Pat Sanaghan

1 You can learn more about the dangers of this myth in Pat Sanaghan and Kimberley Eberbach's How to Build an Exceptional Team (Amherst: HRD Press). 2014.

#3: THE MYTH ABOUT CONFLICT

While disrespect is unacceptable, exceptional teams know that some conflict is inevitable. This may seem like a counterintuitive perspective, but in fact, when you have a diverse and highly motivated team with different viewpoints and strong opinions, you will have conflict. Exceptional teams see conflict as a resource, not something to be avoided.

Having this perspective enables high-performing teams to investigate conflict and find out why and where it is happening. They want to deeply understand what is going on and work through the conflict constructively. They believe that conflict can build team cohesion and produce better solutions if it is worked through carefully and respectfully.

Leaders need both the skill and the courage to deal with conflict on their team, as well as the understanding that everyone on the team needs to be involved in its resolution. Several of the exceptional teams we worked with invested time and effort in building the team's skills regarding conflict resolution. They used information from two books we would highly recommend: *Crucial Conversations* (2011)[2] and *Crucial Accountability* (2013)[3]. These two resources will help you build your conflict management skills as a team.

#4: THE MYTH ABOUT OPENNESS

Part of the relational process includes openness. We have heard the phrase "My team members can tell me anything" time and time again from ineffective leaders. These leaders suffer from the belief that they are open to honest feedback and that their people will "tell it like it is," when this is rarely true. Instead, they are victims of the "*seduction of the leader*" syndrome frequently seen in higher education.[4] This dynamic occurs when a leader does not have access to honest feedback about their ideas or effectiveness because people will not tell them, *even when they ask.*

2 Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & McMillan, R. (2012). Crucial conversations. New York: McGraw-Hill.
3 Patterson, K. (2013). Crucial accountability: Tools for resolving violated expectations, broken commitments, and bad behavior.
4 Sanaghan, P., & Eberbach, K. (2014). The seduction of the leader in higher education. Denver: Academic Impressions.

This occurs for several reasons:

- Due to the "collegial" and polite nature of most campuses, people simply don't feel comfortable providing honest feedback, especially if it is negative or critical.
- Many people are reluctant to be honest, because it might hurt someone's feelings.
- People don't want to "lose their seat at the table" and fear that they risk doing so if they are truly honest.
- People realize that the leader really isn't open to honest feedback, even as the leader professes to want it.

REALITY CHECK:

How comfortable would you be providing your team leader with these kinds of feedback?

- "I think that you might need some coaching on how to facilitate our team meetings. Lately, I believe that they have been ineffective with one or two people dominating the discussions."
- "I feel like you need to show more appreciation for the team members' efforts and accomplishments. To be honest, we only hear from you if someone has dropped the ball or missed a milestone."
- "The deep conflict between Larry and Pat is a destructive element in our team meetings. You have to deal directly with this ASAP. It won't go away by itself. Something needs to be done."

If you are comfortable giving this kind of feedback to your team leader, you are on a high functioning team. If you can't provide this kind of feedback, then the culture of your team does not support this kind of honesty, and won't be a stellar team.

To avoid the seduction dynamic, the team leader needs to be proactive in creating the mechanisms and promoting the culture that supports healthy dialogue.

#5: THE MYTH ABOUT SAMENESS

It's often assumed that likeminded people and people with similar backgrounds are easier to work with and will perform better than more diverse teams. However, the exceptional teams we studied explicitly sought out a wide range of diversity—in background, experience, gender, race, age, and thinking styles. **These teams saw diversity as an asset** and avoided sameness.

One of the pervasive team dynamics that every team leader needs to be aware of is **"comfortable cloning."** This happens when we select people to be on our teams who have similar backgrounds to ours. These individuals are "comfortable" to us and we believe this comfortableness will help create team cohesion. It might—but it rarely creates an exceptional team.

If a team is to achieve strategic thinking, a multiplicity of perspectives is needed and that can only happen if the team is diverse. Actively seeking out people with different backgrounds, learning styles, and personalities can help create the creative tensions needed to achieve stellar problem solving and performance.

One of the high-performing teams we observed had an age range from 24 to 59 and consisted of nine internal staff members and two external consultants. The team members had a wide range of experience with implementations of technology, as well as a wide range of management expertise. Yet because they leveraged these differences effectively, this team was able to facilitate and implement a companywide Enterprise Resource Planning ERP system on time and under budget for the first time in the company's history.

Many diverse teams report that they had some real challenges initially with all the "differences" on the team. But they stuck with it because they believed that if they were able to tap all the resources of the diverse team members, they would achieve amazing results. They chose to see their differences as assets and not as liabilities; this is a powerful notion to remember.

#6: THE MYTH ABOUT MOTIVATIONAL METAPHORS

How a team deals with differences and manages conflict stems from how team members relate to each other and to the team leader. Often, ineffective leaders don't speak plainly to their teams, but mask direction and motivation in overused sports analogies. However, many people have never been on a sports team, and find it difficult to relate to these strange analogies. As a result, many of these analogies have become cliché and have lost any actual meaning. This contributes to team members not knowing how to talk with their leaders when real issues arise.

There is another reason that sports analogies don't contribute to (and may detract from) a team's dialogue around crucial decisions. It's because the original analogy is usually a false one. Sports teams are *artificial* creations that work within specific (and short) time frames. These teams understand strongly reinforced rules of play with concrete punishments for breaking the rules, and they have a way to keep score, minute by minute. Most non-sports teams don't operate under these conditions.

Also, if you watch a sports team perform, you will notice that they have lots of coaches—sometimes more than the number of players. These coaches provide ongoing feedback and advice, shout instructions, cajole, and praise the players constantly. Does that sound like your workplace? Can you call a timeout when a meeting is going downhill and you feel overwhelmed?

Team leaders need to talk to their teams in a way that relates to that *specific* group of people, instead of just projecting a single experience onto the group. Involving the members themselves is crucial to creating a shared environment. One of the best ways to build a real team is to have each team member share their own metaphor for how they would like the team to operate. Maybe a member imagines the team working like a jazz ensemble, where people create in the moment and where everyone contributes.

Inviting this input from the team itself will generate powerful and evocative pictures of people's expectations and hopes for the team—and will help you establish more of a shared language.

After everyone has shared their metaphors, the team should distill some lessons or themes that can be applied to their existing team. For example, you might find that many of the metaphors talk about everyone having a meaningful role to play or a "gift" to contribute. Or perhaps the common theme is one of creating a safe environment where risk taking and possible failure are supported. These are real aspirations that can inform how people want the team to function and can help you create some "ground rules" for moving forward.

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ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS

5 STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING A STELLAR TEAM

Recently, we facilitated a one-day conference between business leaders and university presidents, entitled: "The Future Skill Set Graduates Will Need to Thrive in a Complex Workplace." Although there were points of contention, many robust and open conversations took place. At the end of the day, we asked both groups to present a summary message for the other group to consider.

The business group's summary message was telling and strikes at the heart of this issue. They said:

"We appreciate the caliber of student you produce. They are smart, ethical, and hardworking individuals. But, if they can't work in a team-based environment or be effective working with collaborative, cross-boundary groups, we don't need them." And by the way, "Where do you teach that in your curriculum?"

So how *do* you build a high-performing team?

Let's review 5 specific strategies that you can integrate into the day-to-day work of the team:

1. Make your team a learning team, by creating an internal article or book club.
2. Define the rules for decision making.
3. Create working agreements or "ground rules" for the functioning and support of the team.
4. Establish a mechanism for regular, anonymous evaluation of team meetings.
5. Conduct a leadership "audit."

1. MAKE YOUR TEAM A LEARNING TEAM

Great teams often incorporate an article or book club, giving the team a forum for discussing relevant ideas that can have an impact on their work.

The idea is a classic one. People with a shared interest in a book convene monthly to share their thoughts and reflections. This simple idea works well for campus leaders who want to build their team without making team-building activities feel like "team building." Each member of the team selects an article or book for the group to read that has personal meaning for them and has some relevance to the team. For example, the article might be focused on leadership, change management, or effective teams. It's best to start by reading articles before progressing to books.

Once a month, the team should gather for breakfast or lunch and have a "working" meeting where they also discuss one of the articles or books that a team member has suggested. This takes about an hour and a half to do well. (If you read this and think that there is no way you can carve out an hour and a half, once a month, you are already in big trouble.)

Once you have gone through a round of articles, you might want to move toward reading a book a month. Follow the same process where each team member selects a book to read and discuss with their colleagues.

SUGGESTED READING

- *Leadership in a Permanent Crisis* (2009) by Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Graham & Marty Linsky[5]
- *The Work of Leadership* (HBR, December 2001) by Ronald Heifetz & Donald Laurie[6]
- *How Will you Measure Your Life?* (HBR, July 2010) by Clayton M. Christensen[7]

The following books have been very informative for a number of teams I have worked with.

- *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, by Ron Heifetz[8]
- *Quiet*, by Susan Cain[9]
- *Leadership is an Art*, by Max DePree[10]
- *The 5 Dysfunctions of a Team*, by Patrick Lencioni[11]

5 Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009, July-Aug). Leadership in a (permanent) crisis. Harvard Business Review.
6 Heifetz, R., & Laurie, D. (2001, Dec). The work of leadership. Harvard Business Review.
7 Clayton, C. (2010 July). How will you measure your life? Harvard Business Review.
8 Heifetz, R. A. (1994). Leadership without easy answers. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
9 Cain, S. (2012). Quiet: The power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking. New York: Crown Publishers.
10 De, P. M., (2004). Leadership is an art. New York: Crown.
11 Lencioni, P. (2002). The 5 dysfunctions of a team: A leadership fable. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

The key in making this "working lunch" effective is for each team member to take turns facilitating a discussion about the contents of the article or book they chose for the team. You don't want this discussion to either meander or be stifled by too much structure. Here are examples of guiding questions that can help support a good discussion:

- It would be helpful to hear what "resonated" most for people as they read the article or book. This could be an intellectual or emotional resonance. In short, what mattered? What did they learn?
- Did anyone have contrary opinions about the content of the article/book?
- Are there potential implications for the team (such as things we could apply to our team, things to remember as we work together, or ideas that support what we already do)?

In an hour and a half working lunch you can cover a great deal, have a robust discussion, and learn from and about each other in a non-threatening way. This is the easiest way to build a more effective team. Try it.

2. DEFINE THE RULES FOR DECISION MAKING

This sounds simple – but when actually put into action, it is a game changer. When team members are unsure about who makes which decisions, this causes confusion and creates distrust. Team members may wonder if they can influence decisions in a meaningful way or if their input is even valued.

The team leader can clarify this by implementing a simple decision making model that classifies different levels of decision making – and then by always stating which level applies to a given decision:

LEVEL I DECISIONS

The team leader tells everyone upfront that a specific decision is theirs to make. This could be about resources allocation, compensation, or communication to external stakeholders. No negotiation or input is needed. It is theirs to make. (If you want a high-performing team, keep Level I decisions to a minimum.)

LEVEL II DECISIONS

The team leader engages the team in an honest and robust discussion about the decision to be made but states upfront that they have the final say about the decision. It is important to state this before the discussions and debate get started.

LEVEL III DECISIONS

The leader communicates that the decision to be made is "ours" to make as a team. This means that the leader is willing to be a "peer of the realm" and have one "vote" in the process.

This level of decision making is where a team should spend most of the time. It is a positive sign that the team leader trusts the competence and character of the members and is willing to support a team decision. Exceptional teams live in this space a great deal.

LEVEL IV DECISIONS

This is where the team leader "delegates" the decision making process to the team. They set the expectations and communicate the outcomes they want from the decision-making process up front. They trust that the team will carry out the process effectively.

We would suggest that you use this model for one month in your team meetings, then evaluate its effectiveness with members. If you receive positive feedback about this change, then continue to clarify your decision rules as you move forward.

3. CREATE WORKING AGREEMENTS OR "GROUND RULES"

Everyone on a team has expectations for each other—everyone. For example:

- "It's obvious that only one person should talk at a time in team meetings"
- "People should come prepared to all team meetings" or "be on time."
- "We should review commitments and actions before we leave our team meetings."
- "We need to make data-based decisions when we're making a priority decision."
- "The team leader should explain how the team is going to make decisions."

These expectations are often tacit rather than explicit. Although we have them, we rarely put them on the table to be discussed, negotiated, and agreed upon.

In contrast, stellar teams usually have three to four agreed-upon ground rules that they truly live and that they hold each other accountable to. They agree on both task and *process* ground rules to create a sense of balance. For example, one *task* ground rule might be "Distribute an agenda for the meeting ahead of time." One *process* ground rule might be "Use active listening when there is a disagreement."

4. EVALUATE YOUR TEAM MEETINGS ANONYMOUSLY ON A REGULAR BASIS

Most teams meet on a regular basis to discuss progress, identify challenges, keep people informed, and build a sense of community and connection. These team meetings can be a powerful mechanism for enhancing team performance—or not.

When we observed meetings conducted by high-performing teams, we witnessed several important things:

FULL PARTICIPATION

There was full participation by everyone on the team. People pitched in, asked questions, brainstormed together, and took responsibility for an open and robust discussion.

NO LOOSE ENDS

Toward the end of their meetings, they created time to do two things:

- They tied up any loose ends by ensuring that actions and assignments were clear and that everyone knew what was expected of them.
- They took some time to appreciate each other's contributions.

Often this second step was a simple "round robin" protocol, in which each team member took a turn to share an appreciation, provide positive feedback to someone on the team, or discuss how they felt about the team's performance.

ANONYMOUS EVALUATION

Lastly, almost every exceptional team we observed periodically and *anonymously* evaluated the effectiveness of their meetings. They established a protocol in which team members would answer a simple set of questions after each team meeting.

The anonymity of the answers helped ensure honest responses, which might not have been the case if people had been asked to verbalize what they thought about the meeting while still in the room.

The team leader took responsibility for organizing the data from the meeting evaluations and sent it out as quickly as possible. The answers informed everyone about how the meetings were being experienced *and* how to further improve their effectiveness.

This simple protocol made a significant difference for several reasons:

- It communicated that feedback was valued.
- It modeled continuous improvement and learning.
- It communicated that time spent in meetings was valuable and *worth evaluating.*

If you would like to begin evaluating your team meetings, here is a template that you can adapt for your team:

THE 5 MEETING EVALUATION QUESTIONS

A. On a scale from 1-10, given the purposes of our meeting, how *effective* was it?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Involved				Somewhat Involved					Very Involved

B. On a scale from 1-10, how *involved* did you feel?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Involved				Somewhat Involved					Very Involved

C. What did you like most about the meeting?

D. What did you like least?*

E. Any advice, comments, feedback about the meeting?

* Make it clear that "D" can't be answered with personal feedback like "Pat talks way too much!" Instead, an acceptable form of feedback would be: "We have one person who dominates discussions."

5. CONDUCT A LEADERSHIP "AUDIT"

The notion of a leadership "audit" is a slimmed-down version of a 360° evaluation process, which has been around for decades. The 360° evaluation proactively solicits *anonymous* feedback from different people (e.g., peers, supervisors, clients, direct reports) to gain a holistic perspective about how you are perceived by others. It is a courageous act for a team leader and can provide them with the information they need to grow, develop, and change over time. It also helps neutralize the "*seduction of the leader*" syndrome that we mentioned earlier in this paper.

However, while a 360° evaluation is generally seen as a challenging and effective learning process for leaders, it can also be a complicated and cumbersome process at times, and participants can easily get overwhelmed with too much data to digest.

The leadership "audit" is a simplified version. It involves asking three focus questions—and it is essential that the team members' responses are anonymous to ensure honest answers. The focus questions are:

1. What are four to five things I am doing well regarding the leadership of our team?
2. What is one area of needed development I need to pay attention to?
3. What is one piece of advice you would like to give me that would improve my effectiveness as a leader?

The answers to the focus questions should be submitted to a trusted third party (such as human resources or another leader in the organization) for compilation and synthesis. The team leader then sits down with the trusted third party to review the answers to the questions. Choosing the right third party is important—you want to make the most of this opportunity and ensure that it can be a powerful and challenging learning experience for the team leader.

After the team leader has reviewed the anonymous data, they need to report back in broad strokes what they have learned from the experience. Here are examples:

- "I learned that I am doing a good job facilitating our weekly team meetings."
- "The team sees me as a hard worker who does what it takes to move things forward."
- "I need to deal with the conflict between our team and the development office. I have avoided this for a while but I am committed to addressing it."
- "Most team members see me as a good listener."
- "I need to make myself more accessible to team members outside our regular team meetings."

When a team leader conducts a simple but powerful feedback process like this, several things are accomplished:

- It communicates to the team that the team leader is open to the feedback of others.
- It conveys to the team that their advice and perspective are valued by the team leader.
- It communicates that the leader is a learner who wants to better understand themselves and their impact on others.
- It helps build the credibility of the leader, because members respect the courage it takes to undergo a process like this.

When a team leader undertakes an audit, that is great modeling. In fact, about half of the time that we have used this simple audit process, the other team members have then requested audits for themselves.

THE BOTTOM LINE

It takes more than intuition and singular experience to build a great team. Most campus leaders have strong technical skills, impressive backgrounds, and possess content expertise in their respective fields. However, these took time to accomplish. In much the same way, if leaders invest in paying attention to the relational side of building a high-performing team, they will accomplish important things for their campuses.

Campus leaders need to do more than just practice building teams but learn about high-performing teams through reading and talking about them. They should work at listening to others, relating to their teams, and receiving criticism. With a focus on these skills, they will be able to develop the kind of teams that are ready to face the challenges of the future.

ACADEMIC IMPRESSIONS