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# How to Build and Maintain Effective Teams Through Every Stage of Your Business





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Let's face it: Forming a team is hard and building an effective one can be even harder. As leaders, it's important to focus on constructing a strong team from the start so members can work together seamlessly and productively no matter what's going on in the business.

At ClearSight Leadership, we've encountered all kinds of teams across a variety of industries and have partnered successfully with clients to develop strategies to improve team effectiveness. We've captured some of our best tips, tricks, and guidelines in this e-book to help leaders like you develop and maintain effectiveness throughout the life of a team. Whether you're a first-time team leader or an experienced collaborator looking to inject efficiency into an existing team, these tactics are designed to help you wherever you may be in the team-building process.

## CHAPTER 1: WHY IS TEAMING SO HARD?

There are two distinct reasons why teaming can be difficult:

- 1. Leadership teams are comprised of domain experts who take their technical expertise seriously.** The knowledge these experts possess is the reason why they were hired. Their expertise defines the value they believe they bring to the business and it's also part of their personal identities. Effective teaming, however, may not require the use of technical expertise. In fact, the skills required for leadership and collaboration often differ and, in some cases, may require leaders to step into roles that oppose or are dissimilar to their regular positions.
- 2. Every team member brings their own unique style, preferences, skill sets and ways of approaching problems to the team.** This diversity, while known to help teams innovate and think outside-the-box, also makes it challenging for members to align and adapt to a common work style. To collaborate effectively, members must value, adapt to, and leverage their differences to create synergy—the state where a team is truly greater than its parts.

Fortunately, we've captured several team-strengthening strategies that leaders can use to build and maintain team effectiveness from the start.

### Defining Team Dynamics: Why It Matters

Often, the biggest barrier to team effectiveness is the lack of a clearly defined team structure and process. Many leaders are tempted to skip this step because they believe that the team's structure will be innately understood and assumed by its members. In reality, this is rarely—if ever—the case.

Teams are made up of human beings, which means the interpersonal aspect of working together can't be ignored. To be effective, team members must dedicate time to defining the team's structure. Without a strong foundation or plan of action, a team will eventually exhibit disruptive behaviors such as inadequate trust, lack of accountability, poorly defined roles, weak conflict management, and ineffective communication.

When this step is put off in favor of jumping right into the work, a team will quickly flounder as it tries to cope with erupting operational dysfunctions. For example, instead of working together to solve problems, members may start to meet informally—outside of regularly scheduled team meetings—to resolve issues, causing misunderstandings and resentment. This type of divisive behavior hinders a team's effectiveness and breaks trust, causing communication to break down and progress to stall.

A team that is handicapped by one or more of these challenges can only yield low productivity, frayed relationships, and burnout. Even worse, these adverse behaviors will cause disturbances within the larger organization through leadership dysfunction, which in turn, raises employees' doubts, increases tension and erodes engagement, resulting in talent attrition.

## The Six Characteristics of an Effective Team

Understanding the importance of defining team dynamics is critical when building a new team. As a leader, you can set the tone by creating an environment that encourages open communication.

To establish the norms of the team, start by thinking about how the team will work together. As a leader, ask yourself these questions:

- What is the purpose of this team?
- What are our rules of engagement (the processes and procedures that dictate how the team will plan, make decisions, handle conflict, use meeting time, communicate and share information)?
- Which decision models will be used?
- How can trust be developed and nurtured between members?
- What communication tools and strategies will be used?
- Are the roles and responsibilities of each member clear?

## TAKING ACTION

Next, take your answers to the team itself. Start by leading a discussion around defining the six characteristics of an effective team:

1. Declare its purpose.
2. Define the roles of its members.
3. Determine its communication tactics and strategy.
4. Clarify its decision-making process.
5. Outline its rules of engagement.
6. Determine how trust within the team will be developed.

What input do the other members have that could improve the ways that the team will work together? Do members see any potential roadblocks or challenges? Work together to find solutions to any problems. Once the discussion is complete, document the outcome and formally present the team's six characteristics at the next team meeting.

Believe it or not, this type of dialogue is as important as talking about company strategy, execution, innovative ideas, and quarterly sales results. As a result of this discussion, team members will realize that their colleagues are operating from a high level of integrity and commitment because they've taken the time to discuss how everyone will work together. From here, trust within the team will grow.



**To achieve an outcome that matters, members must engage not only in what the team will do as a whole, but also in how the work will be done.**



## CHAPTER 2: NURTURING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

Teamwork, like any other relationship, needs tending. Without it, a team's dynamics will wither. How members communicate, make commitments, state their accountability, make decisions, engage in difficult conversations, and manage conflict acts as fertilizer for any team. With careful attention, commitment and an understanding that this work takes time, a team will flourish. While working together can be difficult, collaborating becomes even harder if mutual respect and trust aren't nurtured and boundaries aren't set.



### The Importance of Trust Within A Team

One of the most common obstacles to stellar team performance is a lack of trust. When trust is weak, team members are incapable of delivering their best, causing team performance to suffer. Unable to operate optimally, the team will start to run at a deficit: problems will go unsolved, members will become disengaged, and decisions will be avoided or made with dissent or lack of true buy-in. Overall, the experience of working together feels difficult, dissatisfying, and frustrating to everyone on the team.

As your team develops, keep these high- and low-trust team traits in mind to ensure your team stays strong:

- ✓ **In high-trust teams**, positive intent is assumed, team members actively listen to each other, relationships are healthy, and diverse opinions are valued.
- ✓ **In low-trust teams**, negative intent is assumed, over-advocacy becomes the norm, relationships break down, and different perspectives lead to unresolved conflict.



### Building Trust Through the Six Core Competencies of Effective Teamwork

Trust and respect are key components for building an effective team. Without them, it's impossible for team members to work productively together. As a leader, you can build and nurture trust and respect by introducing team members to the six core competencies of effective teamwork and helping them understand that, to be effective, they must:

1. Understand their purpose within the team in order to clarify their commitment to the team and its goals.
2. Understand each member's role and the team's rules of engagement.
3. Trust one another.
4. Communicate productively.
5. Embrace and manage conflict.
6. Make good—and timely—decisions.



Where attention goes,  
awareness flows.

## Taking Action

As a leader, you can help your team strengthen these competencies by taking a few key steps:



**Act as a role model.** Model the behavior you expect to see from all team members; make sure the things you say support your own behavior. Acting as a role model will help foster commitment and engagement, and will encourage members to follow your example.



**Plant seeds of trust within the group.**

Be transparent, honest, and forthright with your words and actions.



**Find ways to bolster inclusivity and collaboration.** Solicit opinions, be open to new ideas, and ask for feedback. Acknowledge individual and team contributions. Show humility and vulnerability by asking others for assistance.

## Trust as an Indicator of Effectiveness

Trust comes from believing in the capabilities and character of another person. Together, capability and character generate the behaviors that drive the perception of trustworthiness. Fortunately, trustworthy behaviors such as listening, acknowledgment, acceptance, and inquiry can be learned.

To measure the current level of trust within your team, ask yourself these questions:

- Do team members openly challenge each other without displaying high levels of reactivity?
- Does everyone on the team participate when issues are debated?
- Do team members understand each other's motivations?
- Do team members complain about each other outside of the team environment and/or team meetings?
- How do team members handle conflict? Do participants act in a direct and respectful manner or do people shut down and try to ignore conflict?

**Remember:** Where attention goes, awareness flows. If you and your team members pay consistent attention to how the team as a whole is working together, that awareness—and the overall impact of the team—will flourish.



## CHAPTER 3: GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR TEAM AS IT DEVELOPS

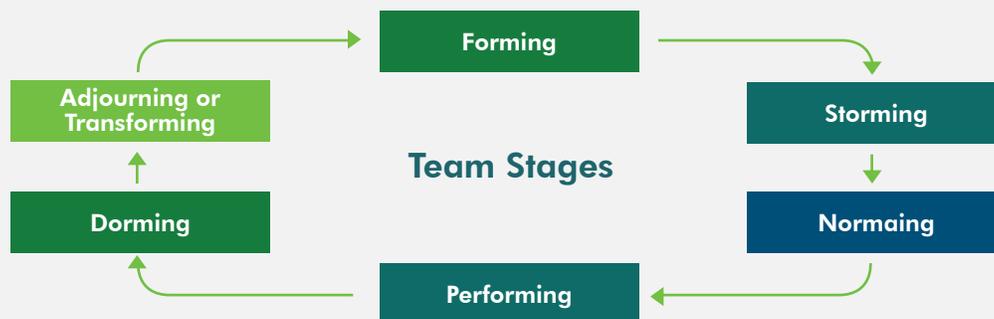
Through our experience as leadership coaches at ClearSight Leadership, we've encountered a common developmental hurdle, which we refer to as "leadership agility." That is, the ability to adapt one's leadership style to meet a staff's needs. To help our clients overcome this hurdle, we developed a unique approach designed to improve leadership agility and boost team effectiveness. What makes this approach different is that we're able to adjust our tactics to fit the current development stage of any team.

In 1965, educational psychologist Bruce Tuckman first published his findings on the various stages that all teams go through over time. He initially found four stages, which were later refined into the following six:

- 1. Forming:** The initial stage of a team's formation, characterized by ambiguity around the team's structure.
- 2. Storming:** In this stage—which is unavoidable—members compete with each other for status and acceptance of their ideas, causing conflict within the team.
- 3. Norming:** Here, the team establishes—and agrees to follow—specific rules of engagement, information-sharing protocols, conflict resolution processes, and other tools and practices.
- 4. Performing:** In this stage, the team practices and progressively improves its ability to apply agreed-upon norms and is able to self-evaluate and self-correct on a regular basis.
- 5. Dorming:** Once the team works well for an extended period, it settles into stagnation and may become lazy in its processes or self-evaluation practices, causing performance to slip.
- 6. Adjourning or Transforming:** At some point, the team will either disband, change in composition or become exposed to new challenges, which will force it to rejuvenate and revitalize itself.

## Taking Action

As a leader, there are several steps you can take to boost your team's effectiveness during each of these phases. Start by identifying which stage the team is in. Then, ask each team member to state their opinion on the current stage of the team and see where members may agree or disagree. Where there is a difference in perspective, talk it through together. Once members agree on the team's current stage of development, take the appropriate steps as outlined in the chart below.



Team Stage	How to Boost Team Effectiveness
------------	---------------------------------

- |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| <p>1</p> <p><b>Forming</b></p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Clarify the team's purpose, its mission, and its goals. Facilitate the definition of the team's vision, values, roles, and responsibilities while capturing each member's input.</li> <li>➤ Meet 1:1 with all team members to discover their personal goals and interests. Ensure that these objectives are met, at least in part, during the course of the team's work.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>2</p> <p><b>Storming</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Help the team address conflict as it arises, working through interpersonal problems so that members are able to settle into their roles and responsibilities, and are able to function both independently and together. <b>Note:</b> You may choose to limit decision-making autonomy and independence within the team until members have begun to work together smoothly.</li> <li>➤ When conflicts arise, take time to discuss, foster acceptance of, and negotiate each team member's needs. Ensure members respect differences in perspective and ask them to put the team's goals above their own. <b>Note:</b> During this time, you may need to coach some members to be more assertive and others to be more effective listeners.</li> </ul> |
| <p>3</p> <p><b>Norming</b></p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Help the team clarify and apply the team's rules of engagement. Support members in applying these norms consistently and in valuing the differences in perspective that emerge. Show participants how this practice leads to improved decision-making.</li> <li>➤ Encourage members to help each other (and the team as a whole), rather than focusing exclusively on their own functional issues.</li> <li>➤ Motivate members by sharing initial results and indicating whether their work is on track. Sharing of this information will encourage strong performance and ensure the team moves successfully into the "Performing" stage.</li> </ul>  |

**4 Performing**

- Help the team develop new habits of regular self-evaluation.
- Motivate members by recognizing and rewarding any emerging gains in the team's performance, productivity, collaboration, and achievement.
- Empower the team to self-manage changes and hone the decision-making and problem-solving processes within their own activities—without leader involvement.

**Note:** As a leader in this stage, you can delegate much of your work and concentrate more fully on developing team members through mentoring and coaching.

**5 Dorming**

- Watch for signs of process inefficiency, stagnation, or disengagement on the team. Share these observations with the team to boost self-awareness. Invite the team to add their own observations, diagnose what's going on, and determine any actions needed.

**6 Adjourning or Transforming**

- **For time-limited team engagements**, the team's work will eventually come to an end. As a leader, set aside time to fully celebrate the team's accomplishments and capture any learnings (both in terms of the work itself and the collaboration) that contributed to those achievements.
- For teams with ongoing mandates, eventually the team will need to self-transform. When team composition changes—or a major challenge emerges, requiring new skills or capacities from the team—plan a strategic offsite meeting to formally re-launch the team. Use this event as an opportunity to lead the team through the refreshed "Forming" stage and invite members to recommit to capitalizing on this new, time-limited opportunity. A strong team leader will instill a sense of urgency and excitement at this stage of revitalization.



Agile leaders are able to adapt their leadership styles to fit others' needs.





## CHAPTER 4: RECALIBRATING TEAM DYNAMICS DURING TIMES OF EXTREME CHANGE

In business as in life, change is inevitable. At some point, every company—regardless of industry—will experience some type of change, ranging from subtle modifications to times of extreme change or crisis. These situations can happen as the result of a change in leadership structure, company acquisition or a shift in strategic direction that impacts the entire organization.

In times of extreme change or crisis, strong and steady leadership is critical: employees (as individuals and as team members) will look toward management for guidance, information, and reassurance. As a team leader, it's your job to make sure the team continues to function effectively, even when goals are shifting.



**As a leader, it's your  
job to ensure your team  
functions effectively, even  
in turbulent times.**

### TAKING ACTION

During periods of extreme change or crisis, make sure your team takes time to recalibrate—and refocus on—its dynamics (instead of just focusing on the work at hand). Start by asking yourself these questions:

- In the wake of change, does the team understand its purpose or reason for existence? Does it need to realign around any changes or new courses of direction?
- Are the roles of each team member clear? (Think beyond job titles. Consider the boundaries of accountability and responsibility as well.)
- Does the team's current communication strategy lead to desired outcomes?
- How effective is the team's decision-making process? Are decisions clear and timely? Are all team members in agreement?
- Have regular meeting norms and explicit rules of engagement continued? Does the team need to redefine acceptable and unacceptable behaviors? Do team members actively call attention to unacceptable behavior when it appears?
- Has trust become a challenge for team members as they cope with change? (Pay attention to indicators such as egocentric behavior, lack of reliability, lack of perceived credibility, and avoidance of difficult conversations.)

Once you've taken time to evaluate the status of the team, open the lines of communication between members during the next meeting. Give everyone an opportunity to share their observations and feelings about the current state of the organization, how recent changes are impacting the team, and how members are dealing with feelings of uncertainty. Ask members what adjustments might need to be made to cope with change. How can members help each other? Have any negative habits cropped up that need to be addressed? Capture all of the team's concerns and suggestions before taking action.



## CHAPTER 5: **MAINTAINING TEAM EFFECTIVENESS DURING TIMES OF EXTREME CHANGE**

In times of change, conflict, stress or uncertainty, it's common for people to fall into habitual, automatic behaviors such as making sarcastic remarks or sending knee-jerk emails in response to events unfolding outside the team. Without mindfulness from team leaders and members, these reactions can send damaging ripple effects throughout a team. During periods of intense firefighting, for example, it's common for a team to jump immediately into problem-solving and forget all about the team's rules of engagement, devolving into advocacy, poor decision-making or information withholding. These destructive behaviors can erode trust and weaken a team's foundation, causing teams to break down and stop being productive.



**Discussing how everyone can work productively together is as critical as figuring out how strategic challenges can be solved.**

### TAKING ACTION

To ensure your team has the tools it needs to engage productively whenever conflict or extreme change arises, take these four steps:

- 1. Review the six core competencies of effective teamwork.**
- 2. Identify the highest potential competency your team needs to strengthen** (i.e., a competency that may be weak or infrequently used).
- 3. Make a list of any ineffective team behaviors you've witnessed related to this competency and note how these actions connect to results that matter.** For example, if decision-making is the team's weakest competency, you might note that decision-making discussions begin without a clear understanding of how the decision will be made, resulting in time wasted by members talking in circles.
- 4. Schedule time on the team's agenda to share these observations.** Without naming names, ask the team if anyone else has observed this behavior. Clearly explain how this behavior negatively impacts results and ask if this is a problem that needs attention. If the team is motivated to act, ask members to identify new strategies and determine how those strategies will be used.

Keeping a handle on habitual reactions during times of crisis or extreme change can be challenging. By directing the team's attention to its own behaviors, fostering members' awareness of what's working and what isn't, and exploring the motivation to act on and rectify these behaviors will help everyone respond more skillfully to whatever challenges exist.

## CHAPTER 6: IMPACTS OF CONSTANT CHANGE WITHIN WORK ENVIRONMENTS

In today's fast-paced world, it's common for businesses to experience ongoing and rapid change. For many companies, this state is constant and it creates a work environment that is as stressful as it is exhilarating for employees. When change accelerates to the point of being ever-present, it creates unique challenges for leaders and their teams.

People exposed to rapidly changing or unstable work environments often experience "VUCA" (volatility, uncertainty, complexity or ambiguity), which triggers a sense of overwhelm. As a result, employees may begin to feel mistrustful of senior leadership; frustrated, disengaged, and confused; mired in unsolved problems, and distant from their coworkers. In addition, "churn" often appears, manifesting as rework, conflicting directives or a lack of alignment or agreement within teams and organizations.

### Using Awareness to Combat Conditions of Constant Change

As change accelerates and employees experience overwhelm, they may unconsciously fall into "auto-pilot" mode as a defense mechanism, reverting to old habits of thinking, feeling, and working that drive reactivity rather than responsiveness. Instead of getting caught up in the chaos of reactive behavior, it's possible to step out in front of it and gain control by raising awareness within the team.

In the chaotic conditions of constant change, awareness is a critical element that's often lost once people subconsciously shift into auto-pilot and automatically react rather than thoughtfully responding to what's unfolding in front of them. For teams to be optimally effective when working together, multiple levels of awareness are required:

- **Self-Awareness:** Each team member needs, at a minimum, a level of awareness of their internal state (their own thoughts, feelings, emotions and needs) as well as their external state (how others experience or perceive them).
- **Peer Awareness:** Each team member needs some understanding of the internal state of their colleagues (the emotional states and needs of other individuals on the team) as well as their colleagues' external context (their team members' goals, objectives, and perspectives).
- **Team Awareness:** Each team member needs to maintain awareness of the overall team's internal state (the team's vision, culture, structure, work processes and rules of engagement) as well as the team's external conditions (the context in which team members are operating, the results they're achieving, and the commitments they've made).



## TAKING ACTION

To raise a team's level of self, peer, and team awareness while simultaneously increasing its overall effectiveness, practice targeting the team's attention toward the following:



- **Self-Awareness:** Pay attention to the thoughts, feelings, body sensations, and emotions that you're feeling as an individual. What do you notice?



- **Peer Awareness:** Pay attention to any verbal and non-verbal influencers that are expressed during team meetings. Notice any expressiveness, emotions, gestures, body language, tone, and aggressive behaviors that are demonstrated by members. What perspectives are they articulating? What topics or situations seem to matter most to them?



- **Team Awareness:** Observe where the team's attention is focused—and where it is not. What does the team see and what is it oblivious to? For example, are team members focused only on solutions or only on problems? What do you perceive to be the team's greatest need and what can be done to shift the team's attention?

Ask team members to share what they've noticed at each awareness level. Encourage them to "check in" with themselves and their teammates to maintain consistent awareness. Build an "awareness check" into meeting agendas to help ensure awareness is practiced regularly. Ask team members to speak up when they notice a lack of awareness within the team.





## CHAPTER 7: EVALUATING TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

As mentioned earlier in this e-book, every team member brings their own unique skills, experiences, motivations and desires for change to a team. It's important to understand how these elements impact the needs and focus of a developing team. Without a method of measurement, it can be difficult to determine whether a team's development efforts are effective.

### Informal vs. Formal Measurement Strategies

Once your team has worked together for a while, consider conducting an effectiveness evaluation. A valuable tool used by leaders to evaluate team effectiveness is measurement. To measure team effectiveness, leaders can take either a formal or informal approach.

When using an **informal measurement approach**, the indicators are observational. For example, you might measure the degree to which effective active listening, inquiry, and decision-making are observed or the degree in which a positive emotional culture exists on a team. To measure these particular indicators, ask yourself the following questions:

- › **Active Listening and Inquiry:** Do team members inquire about each other's individual perspectives and positions in a non-confrontational way? Do they interrupt each other? Are they advocating for their own positions instead of inquiring? Do conversations end without resolution?
- › **Decision-making:** Does the team understand how decisions will be made? Do members explicitly employ decision-making tools or models? For example, is it understood that decisions will be made after collecting input or based on team consensus? Is it clear why a particular decision is being made and on what information the decision will be based on? Has the team agreed in advance to the information that will be used?
- › **Team's Emotional Culture:** Do team members feel comfortable sharing their perspectives? Are they able to challenge each other without fear of retribution? Are team members comfortable sharing and admitting to mistakes or is the team only open to sharing good news? Is the team's culture overly polite in person but prone to side conversations outside of team meetings?



Leaders opting for a **formal measurement approach** often implement diagnostic surveys, which are completed by team members. There are two surveys we've found to be particularly valuable at ClearSight Leadership:

- The **Team Diagnostic Survey** is a team effectiveness assessment based on the research of J. Richard Hackman, formerly at Harvard, and presented in his book, "Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances." The assessment identifies the degree to which the six enabling conditions or "essentials" of team effectiveness are present, offers ways to help teams develop greater awareness, and describes the norms needed to strengthen any missing or weak conditions. This assessment also helps teams understand how these conditions impact key task processes and affect the key dimensions of team effectiveness. **Note:** For maximum benefit, we recommend running this survey when a team is first formed and then repeating it several months later, after the group has had a chance to work together and has implemented improvement practices.
- The **Team Emotional Intelligence Survey**, featured in the March 2001 Harvard Business Review article, "Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups," is based on the research of Dr. Vanessa Druskat and Dr. Steven Wolff. The survey instrument, developed through studies of over 140 teams, enables assessment of team emotional intelligence norms, team fundamental processes, and team social capital. This survey can help teams:
  - ✓ Increase their awareness of the norms and behaviors that improve performance.
  - ✓ Uncover any hidden problems or concerns preventing the team from achieving optimal levels of performance.
  - ✓ Identify ways to build a team culture that fosters trust, effective processes, and continuous improvement.

Like any form of leadership development, learning how to work together effectively as a team is a journey, not a destination. Keen awareness and vigilance toward the behaviors and actions exhibited—and taken—by team members is necessary.



**Learning how to work together  
is a journey, not a destination.**



## Leading Teams to Effectiveness

As a team leader, the value of your role and expertise comes from:



**Managing the attention of the group and ensuring that the team's dynamics get noticed—and are talked about—during moments of positive and negative interaction.**



**Modeling commitment to a growth perspective through the team's work.** For example, sharing your own areas for development or providing insight into how senior teams in the organization are improving their effectiveness shows team members how others are behaving within teams.

For teams to work effectively, members must remember that their work is about two things: the content of their work coupled with how well they work together. Leaders who implement the practices and insights provided in this e-book will keep their teams productive and strong through every phase of the business, including times of stress, uncertainty and ever-present change.



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ClearSight Leadership develops the resilience and agility in leaders to meet the speed and complexity in your organization, helping you achieve unprecedented results from organized chaos. We provide senior executive coaching and team effectiveness programs, leadership workshops, and HR thought partnership that cut through uncertainty and complexity to create outcomes that matter.



To schedule a free consultation and learn more about the strategies and tactics ClearSight Leadership uses to help businesses boost productivity through team effectiveness, visit

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