10 ways...
to build a
successful team

A practical guide by Phil Bartlett

Talking about a team is simple. It’s one of the most overused terms in many business environments, and our industry is no exception. Your company is a team. Your part of the company is a team.

Brand teams, agency teams, sales teams, cross-functional teams, teamwork, team ethic, team everything: each one of us is part of several loosely defined teams. If you’re a brand manager, for example, you need to be a part of the brand team, give direction to the agency team, as well as enthuse and motivate the sales team talking about your brand.

During my working life so far I’ve had the good fortune to work for and with some pretty inspirational people, and also to learn from the mistakes of some less-than-inspirational ones. As a result, I’ve tried to learn something from everyone I’ve worked with or for: identifying what has worked well and trying my best to implement them while trying to avoid the pitfalls I’ve witnessed along the way.

What follows is not a list of rules that guarantee that a team will work well or which, if missed, will make a team collapse. It is more a collection of observations which seem to make sense to bear in mind when building a team...
The Webster Online Dictionary gives the following definition of a team:

**team** (team) – noun
1. A cooperative unit
2. Two or more draft animals that work together to pull a vehicle.

“So what?” I hear you ask. Well, what we can take from this is pretty simple: sometimes being part of a team can feel like a mutually supportive exercise, while at other times it can feel more like you’ve been pointed in a certain direction for some unknown reason and are occasionally being hit on the backside with a stick to make sure you’re not slacking. Which is a bad thing, in case you’re wondering.

The way a team works is often defined by the way it is led. But team leaders aren’t just found at the top of the pile: fairly obviously the teamleaders of tomorrow are the people doing a damn good job of getting things done today. Even in well-established teams, the team dynamic can be influenced from anywhere. Let me give you an example.

We’ve got someone within our agency who likes to hug (I wouldn’t name and shame normally but Vicky will know it’s her regardless). She can be pretty insistent about it at times, so as a result we’ve become quite a huggy agency. We like a cuddle. This was not a directive from our lords and masters in Paris; nor was it something we planned out when we started up the agency. It just happened, as a result we’ve got someone within our agency who likes to hug (I wouldn’t name and shame normally but Vicky will know it’s her regardless). She can be pretty insistent about it at times, so as a result we’ve become quite a huggy agency. We like a cuddle. This was not a directive from our lords and masters in Paris; nor was it something we planned out when we started up the agency. It just happened, and it happens to work for us.

But I’m sure a lot of people wouldn’t like it so much. They would see it as over-sentimental, or silly or needy, or just too touchy. And if they came into the team then they would affect it as a result.

It is a simple example, but one that applies if you take it away from hugs and apply it to obsessive attention to detail, or a need for wide, open ‘big thinking’, or a coffee fixation. Whatever it is and wherever it comes from, it can affect the team dynamic.

There is no magic spell for being a good team member or team leader, and I’m not claiming to be the best team leader on the planet. Far from it. I can make mistakes and I’m sure I annoy people and like everyone else I occasionally have to apologise for jumping to a conclusion too quickly or reaching it too slowly. But I’m always trying to learn from those mistakes, and from the people who work for me and with me and for whom I work. And if there is a trick to building a strong team, then I guess that’s it.

Each one of us is part of a team(s) and we are all called upon to run teams in some capacity. Your input is what makes the team you’re involved with feel like the first definition rather than the second.

1. LOVE THY TEAM MEMBER AS THYSELF

My mum always used to tell me to treat others as I would like to be treated, which as a youngster just sounded like I should be showering everyone else with expensive yet thoughtfully chosen gifts and telling them how wonderful they were.

As I got older and wiser, I soon realised she was simply talking about compassion for and connection with one’s fellow man, something summed up by the poem Muhammad Ali came up with when he addressed a Harvard graduation ceremony (supposedly the shortest poem in the English language): “Me? We.”

Compassion can be difficult to define and get a handle on. That’s why when, in my days as a sales rep, I picked up a list of principles which seemed to make sense, I decided to try and bring them into every relationship I am involved in (professionally or personally), and instil in all the teams I’ve led or been a part of.

They are, in no particular order:
- Honesty
- Openness
- Integrity
- Mutual respect
- Trust.

2. A TEAM NEEDS A LEADER

If you’re going to lead people, you have to have somewhere to go. And let’s be really clear about this: this isn’t the same as finding out where everyone is going anyway and running to the front.

We’ve all come in contact with people who give the impression of leading while just drifting along with the general flow and avoiding making any contentious decisions (what decision isn’t contentious to somebody?), and it’s impossible to keep that up indefinitely.

If the team leader doesn’t know where they are going, then everyone will get lost. And if they don’t instil confidence in the rest of the team, the team members will begin to wander off and see if they can find a better way to move forward.

To be a good team leader you don’t have to be dictatorial, inflexible or afraid to take others’ advice, but you do need to have a vision and a set of values.

3. EXPLORE THE AVAILABLE CHANNELS OF INFORMATION

If the team needs better equipment, get it. If they need new materials, more space, a more in-depth briefing, a better coffee machine, or new pens, then do everything you can to make sure they have it. You
wouldn't expect a surgeon to do an operation with outdated, dirty or inferior tools, and the same should apply here.

If you ensure the team has the best support, data, training and equipment, then you're allowed to expect the best possible outputs from them in return.

4. GET PEOPLE INVOLVED EMOTIONALLY
This doesn't mean everyone has to be prepared to die for their team or project; it also doesn't mean a lot of shouting, hugging or crying. What does mean is that everyone needs to have a reason to care (about the company, the brand, or the project), and as leader you are the person who needs to give them that reason.

If you haven't got a reason yourself, then find one: something, whatever it may be, that you can get passionate about. If you're not emotionally involved then people will see it and they won't be either. If you don't care, why should anyone else?

5. TAKE A STEP BACK
I know, I've just said that you need to be involved emotionally, and yes, that's really important. But you also need to keep enough distance to see the bigger picture; so if something needs changing in the team or organisation you're not a) too operationally close to see it, or b) too involved emotionally to admit it and deal with it. It's a tricky tightrope but no one ever said it would be easy.

6. THE TEAM TAKES THE CREDIT AND THE LEADER TAKES THE BLAME
If the team messes up, it is the team leader's fault. No ifs, no buts. Even if it's not, take the blame and the team will know, and will appreciate the fact that you've put your own head on the block for the mistake.

At the same time, if the team does well, then it's their result - you wouldn't have been able to do it without them, everyone can see who's leading the incredibly successful team, and shouting that is was you doesn't exactly tie in with the integrity or mutual respect mentioned earlier.

7. KEEP IT CLEAR
Let's be clear on what the objective is, and what's expected of each member of the team. Regardless of whether it is a regulatory team, a marketing team, a sales team or an agency team, if people know what is expected of them, they can aim towards that concrete endpoint and know when they have got there.

If the goalposts move, then people are going to have serious trouble identifying and understanding what they are aiming for. It sounds obvious, but think for a second: has it always been clear what your boss expects of you, or what his or her boss expects of them? Obvious then, but not always implemented.

8. LET PEOPLE GET ON WITH WHAT THEY'RE GOOD AT
Just because you are involved in this great team, you don't have to be intimately involved in every part of it. If you were getting an extension built on your house (don't, by the way: it's incredibly expensive and time-consuming and disruptive and much simpler to just move to a bigger house), you would need to tell the project manager what you wanted, but you wouldn't watch over his shoulder as his brickies laid the bricks, or watch the electrician do the wiring or the plumber sort the pipes.

If you are going to pick over everyone else’s jobs, roles and responsibilities, then you might as well do it yourself. Find good people, give them a job to do and let them get on with it. If they are supported in all the other ways then you are allowed to demand results.

9. SOLUTIONS, NOT PROBLEMS
It seems simple, but if everyone gets into the habit of coming to each other with solutions rather than problems, it creates a much more positive, involving, can-do attitude to the whole team. It challenges everyone to think around an issue rather than panic and look for someone to blame.

On top of that, if you've got good people and you've given them all they need to do a good job and they feel involved and supported, then the solutions they come up with are often spot on, which makes everyone's life easier, including your own.

10. SMILE
We spend more waking time with our colleagues than we do with our friends or families, and if you can’t find a smile to share then you’re probably in the wrong job. We’ve all met the infamous ‘mood hoover’ who can suck all the fun and energy out of an office, and I can’t imagine they enjoy their working day too much. No one likes a grump except another grump.

Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield (the people behind Ben & Jerry’s Ice Cream) have a corporate ideal – a brand essence if you will - which underpins everything they do: “If it’s not fun, why do it?” I imagine this is more straightforward when you’re making interesting new ice cream flavours than when you are days away from launching a pharmaceutical brand and the signatories are all playing havoc with your deadlines – but the principle still applies.

It may sound a little trite, but if you can approach every unassailable catastrophe with a wry smile and a shrug of your shoulders before getting on and sorting it out; if you can take time to laugh with your team mates; if you can get on with everything with a smile on your face (or at least in your head) then you’re winning.

So that’s it; not rocket science, and I’m sure we all follow most of these principles most of the time. Don’t we?

The last thing to bear in mind (am I cheating by slipping in number 11?) is that we’re all human and mistakes do happen and that’s fine too: no one can be expected to be perfect. Trust your instincts, believe in and express yourself, if you don’t know, then don’t be afraid to say: “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you.”

And before you dig your heels in and decide who should get the blame (by the way, it’s you, remember?), just consider that if you can keep your head while all those around you are losing theirs, then maybe, just maybe, you have misjudged the situation.

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Trust your instincts, believe in yourself and if you don’t know, don’t be afraid to say: “I don’t know but I’ll find out and get back to you”
WHO'S THE DADDY?

There were times when you didn't know whether to laugh or cry. But you kept your composure. Learning to step back when you weren't needed, and diving in when you were.

Now, months on, everyone is cooking and doing, putting you on the back. The consummate professional. You make it all look so easy. They wish they were a natural at it, just like you.

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