6 Powerful Ideas for Building a First-Class Team on Campus

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Why You Need a Stellar Team

To build a high performing team is a daunting and noble task, and such teams are as rare as blue diamonds. The silo mentality that often exists on our campuses often limits our collective actions, and creates redundancy and replication. Given shrinking resources and the rapid pace of change, the siloed approach to team building and decision making is neither strategic nor feasible. We must work collaboratively to utilize the collective talents of our campus stakeholders. And learning to build high performing teams is one of the most effective ways we can meet the many challenges that confront us.

If a senior leader can build a stellar team, the organizational leverage that can be achieved is powerful and can be a game changer for a campus. In this scenario:

- Stakeholders understand that cross-boundary collaboration is expected and supported by the actions of the senior team, because they model the way.
- Campuses are able to solve complex challenges because people work *together* to manage these challenges.
- People share resources, ideas, attention and effort, recognizing that the team, not just some individuals on it, really matter in serving the mission and vision of their campus.

We have had the opportunity to work with scores of senior teams in higher education. Almost always, these teams were comprised of highly intelligent, dedicated, honest, and mission-driven individuals. But few of them ever became a first class team.

When you witness a high performing senior team being transparent with each other, asking for help, dealing with conflict effectively, and listening carefully to each other, it is something you never forget. We need more of this type of senior team on our campuses if we are to deal effectively with the complex and adaptive challenges facing higher education (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

This informal paper is an attempt to explore *how* a leader can build a great team and is informed by the research on high performing teams and our own experience with great teams on the campuses we worked on over the past twenty-five plus years. We have been interested in how excellent teams actually function and have recently written about them (Sanaghan, 2012; Sanaghan & Gabriel, 2011; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2013; Sanaghan & Lohndorf, 2014; Sanaghan & Lohndorf, 2015; Sanaghan, Mrig & Lohndorf, 2016). There are a lot of prevalent "myths" about teams (see the paper *6 Destructive Myths about Teams in Higher Education* for examples) and we hope to share with you the "realities" about building and creating a stellar team. (If the research and practical strategies we share below are significant to you, consider coming to hear more at the *Leading and Motivating Teams in Higher Education* workshop.)

What We Know: What Did Google Learn about High-Performing Teams?

For years, Google conducted extensive research about building the "perfect team," using a research study called Project Aristotle (Duhigg, 2016). The project studied hundreds of teams, searching for those elements and characteristics that make a team great. They looked at communication styles, gender balance, team leader's behaviors, composition, talent, socialization patterns ... you name it, they looked for it.

Unfortunately, this search for team greatness never discovered any consistent patterns or characteristics that they could learn from and hopefully replicate.

After a while, they began to look at *group norms* instead. These are the traditions, behavioral standards, and "unwritten rules" that strongly influence how we interact with each other. For example: some groups might have a “norm” that heated debate about issues is “normal”, whereas, another group would avoid this approach at all costs.

Project Aristotle looked at over 100 groups and investigated the power of norms and how they influence performance on high functioning and successful teams. What emerged from their extensive and intensive study was this: *How people treated each other had a huge impact on team performance*. Two powerful yet simple behaviors were identified as important levers contributing to powerful team effectiveness:

1. In the best teams, team members' amount of *verbal participation* was roughly equal. In short, they took turns talking, with no individual dominating discussions. As long as everyone on the team had a chance to talk, the team did well.
2. The best teams had *high social sensitivity*. In other words, they shared empathy for others and had emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005). Team members were skilled at sensing how others felt by observing their tone of voice, non-verbal cues and discerning if they were engaged, upset, withdrawn, felt heard or isolated. They were sensitive to other's moods and emotions and therefore were able to create "psychological safety" (Edmondson, 1999) in their group.

There were other team elements identified too - like clear team goals and keeping your word - that contributed to overall team performance, but empathy and balanced conversations were the game changers.

The key takeaway from this deep research is that team leaders need to focus on building a climate of safety and high trust where people feel respected and heard and feel that their participation and membership really matters. This is not easy but focusing on the key elements that make a real difference is the challenge. This research is groundbreaking and should be discussed by teams throughout higher education. Too often, we focus way too much on the "task at hand" and not enough on the *process*, which is *how* we accomplish the task. We have found that a 2/3 focus on the task and 1/3 focus on the process create stellar team performance (Sanaghan, 2012; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2013; Sanaghan, Mrig & Lohndorf, 2016).

Project Aristotle's findings are not news to us. Over the years we have developed some very simple, powerful tools and techniques for developing these characteristics and building high-performing teams. We want to share with you six of these powerful ideas for how to build such a team:

1. Understand the different "gifts" and strengths of each team member.
2. Clarify the decision rules.
3. Establish team norms.
4. Conduct an After Action Review (AAR).
5. Manage team transitions.
6. Conduct meaningful conversations about important articles that matter to every team member.

1. Understand Each Team Member's Gifts and Strengths

An effective way to begin developing norms of safety, sensitivity, and inclusion is to share personal styles. Everyone has "gifts" that they bring to the team. These could be deep content expertise, creativity, technical skill, rich experience, work ethic, etc. We also have different ways of thinking, behaving, and leading. Understanding these different “ways” of being that people on the team possess, enables the team to tap the rich resources available to them. World-class teams are able to actually use the diverse talents of team members. Most teams cannot do this. Most teams have talented individuals who don't get a chance to bring their full game to the table, or who hide their talents from the team (Tate, 2015).

There are many assessments of leadership styles, personality types, and strengths on the marketplace. We will highlight three that we have found to be most effective when working with teams in higher education:

1. Use the **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator** to assess *personality types*. This is one of the most well-known, popular, and frequently-used assessments of all time. This validated instrument identifies 16 distinct personality types that are framed around Introversion and extroversion. Almost always, this assessment provides helpful information and insight into the different personality types on the team.
2. Use the **Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI)** to assess *thinking styles*. This validated instrument, developed by Ned Hermann, a physicist, in the 1970s, identifies and describes four distinct thinking "preferences" and reveals the sometimes dramatically different ways that people learn and think about things. It is different than a psychological assessment and complements the Myers-Briggs assessment well (Leonard & Straus, 1997).
3. Lastly, use **5 Paths to Leadership** to assess *leadership styles*. We co-authored this leadership styles assessment, which is available at Academic Impressions, and we have used it with thousands of leaders and graduate students in higher education, and in many of the leadership programs Academic Impressions offers.

   The unique contribution the **5 Paths to Leadership** survey makes to the leadership style assessments portfolio is that it reveals your leadership style both under normal circumstances *and* under stress. Often, we see that people lead differently, sometimes dramatically so, under these two different conditions. It is important for us to understand our own style as well as the different styles of others, so that we can utilize the different gifts people bring to the team.

A simple activity to use after having your team complete the 5 Paths survey is to have each individual share their leadership style, their personal strengths, and the challenges of that style in a team setting. They should also share what adjustments they might make to be a more effective team member. This sets the tone nicely for establishing the openness, intimacy, and safety necessary for establishing trust in the team.

The Impact of Trust
It is important to remember that when team trust is high, the differences people bring to the team are considered *assets*, but when team trust is low, these same differences quickly become *liabilities*. This is one of the most important lessons we have learned over the past 25+ years working with teams. Therefore, the team leader needs to know how to build and nurture trust. The team leader needs to model honesty, owning your mistakes quickly, keeping your word, acting with integrity, and treating people with care. Clarifying the decision rules is also key to building trust - which brings us to the next of our six powerful ideas.

2. Clarify the Decision Rules

Everyone on the team needs to clearly understand *who* makes *what* decisions, and *how* decisions will be made on the team. When the decision rules are fuzzy, it can cause conflict and have a negative impact on team performance and team trust (Lencioni, 2002; Sanaghan, 2012; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2013). This might sound simple, but it isn't. Team members often wonder if they can have input on team decisions and, most importantly, whether they can influence team decisions.

The following team decision model has proven to be very effective with many of the senior teams we have worked with. Here the team leader (e.g., president, provost, dean, VP) articulates the following four levels of decision-making, and clarifies which level is appropriate to any given decision. As the findings of Project

Aristotle would indicate, when considering these decision rules it is important to keep in mind that the more involved team members are in decision making, the more ownership and empowerment they will feel.

- **Level 1 =** The team leader communicates that a specific decision is theirs to make. They do not need input, advice, or feedback. They "own" the decision outright. This is an "autocratic" decision, and should be used sparingly.
- **Level II =** The team leader solicits feedback, opinions, ideas and criticisms before *they* make the decision. The key here is to state up front that it is their decision alone to make *after* input from others.
- **Level III =** The team leader says this is "our" decision to make as a team. In this case, the leader operates as a "peer of the realm" and has only one "vote," like everyone else, in making the final team decision.
- **Level IV =** This is a "delegated" decision where a team member(s) takes responsibility for making the decision. This requires clarity up front around outcomes, deadlines, and communication protocols.

Don't be fooled by the simplicity of this model. It is a best practice that can build team trust and enhance performance. An additional helpful protocol for any team leader is to assess decision-making clarity by inviting *anonymous* feedback on a periodic basis (e.g., monthly). Do not assume that everyone understands the decision rules, because things change quickly, move fast, and ambiguity lurks everywhere.

3. Establish Team Norms

Team norms are a set of guidelines that a team establishes to shape the culture and interaction of its members. Norms should be developed early in the team formation process and then used to guide team member behavior as well as assess how well team members are interacting. Having clearly articulated and agreed-on norms promotes a positive work environment and enables members to hold one another accountable for any behavior that is negatively impacting the success of the team. We have found that lacking such a framework often creates potential for misunderstanding, disruptive behavior, and negative conflict.

The research at Google showed that norms - especially ones that support inclusion, psychological safety, and social sensitivity - promote high team performance. When you establish this framework early and periodically assess, debrief, and revise it, the norms gradually shape the desired group culture and become part of the team consciousness. Beyond having a shared common goal, there is probably no higher leverage point for developing a high performing team than the group norms that guide team interactions.

A simple technique we have found useful in identifying these norms is to have the group answer the following questions:

- **What values and behaviors do you want to see reflected in the work of the team?** Often the outcomes of this discussion are things like respect, excellence, open communication, and so on. These are good, but you want to get people talking about the more subtle norms identified in the Google research (such as inclusion, sensitivity, listening, and transparency). To achieve that level of shared commitment, you might want to share the research from Google up front to feed the discussion.
    - **What should be the ground rules or operating principles of the team?** These are more focused on shared expectations for attendance, timeliness, frequency of meetings, communication protocols, etc.

This is a simple discussion that does not have to become too complicated. But if you clarify and periodically review the team norms, this can go a long way toward developing a high performing team culture.

ASSESS YOUR TEAM CULTURE

If you would like a deep diagnostic of your team culture, consider purchasing a license for the High Performing Teams Survey. This unique instrument is based on a research-informed team effectiveness model that Academic Impressions and I have developed specifically for higher education. This model values collaborative decision making, transparency, accountability and mutual support, and team learning. Learn more about the instrument here.

4. Conduct an After Action Review (AAR)

This is a learning tool that the military has popularized over the past twenty years. It is used to debrief important projects, initiatives, and even encounters and engagements with the enemy. It takes considerable practice to conduct an effective AAR and, most importantly, it requires a supportive team culture. It is essential that the debrief of successes or failures is honest and straightforward so that everyone learns from the review experience. This is a serious conversation that takes real maturity and effective team leadership to do well.

Conducting a Team AAR

It is important that the team debrief focus on both the advancement of team goals as well as modeling of team norms – both the task and the process, or the *what* and the *how* of team work. An AAR usually has four focus questions but can be adapted to fit the unique needs of a team. We don't recommend adding many questions to those below, because you want to keep the Team AAR focused tightly on team goals and norms:

1. What did we set out to do?
2. What *actually* happened?
3. Why did it happen?
4. What are we going to do next time?

The following variants of these questions have also been utilized in an AAR on campuses we have worked with:

1. What was our goal?
2. What worked well?
3. What didn't work well?
4. What are some lessons learned from this project/initiative that we can carry forward to future efforts?

The team leader needs to facilitate the discussion and ensure that people don't get involved in blaming or finger pointing, *ever.* This is very important to remember. An AAR is a delicate, sensitive, and important process that can quickly get out of control and wind up being a complaining session. Avoid this at all costs.

Conducting an Individual AAR

An equally important component of an AAR is for each team member to receive feedback on their performance too – on both accomplishing tasks and modeling desired team norms.

A powerful method for leading this level of debrief is for the team leader to start by modeling the way. The team leader can do this by soliciting honest feedback about their own role. For example: "What could I have done differently? What did I do well? How could I have been more effective in supporting the team?" The key here is to listen carefully and not react to the honest feedback received. If the team leader has the maturity to model the way, almost always team members will follow the process carefully and respectfully, and most importantly, *learn* from it, especially when it comes to their turn.

Collective Lessons Learned
After everyone has walked through the four focus questions, some individual reflection and sharing is helpful. Having each team member speak about something they learned from the AAR can be powerful and can reveal important lessons that build the team culture. For example, you might hear:

- I learned that I need to ask for help sooner in the process.
- I realize that I need to speak up earlier and make sure I get heard. I knew the second option was the way to go, but I didn't assert my opinion well.
- I learned that I am an effective communicator and people appreciate that I listen well.
- I really like the fact that we "won" with this project. We brought it under budget and completed it one day before the official deadline.
- I need to pay attention to every team member. There were clues that things weren't going well and I think I ignored some disagreements on the team.
- I really appreciated that people didn't complain about the workload. We knew going in that this was a big and difficult assignment and I didn't hear anyone complain. I am really proud about what we accomplished.

You get the idea. Both success and failure leave clues. The goal of an AAR is to unpack what happened honestly so that team learning is enhanced. Done skillfully and sensitively, this activity promotes the norms found in Google's research on teams. It also integrates personal development with team learning and development, which we have found to be one of the most powerful ways to develop high team performance.

> **Note:** *Never* conduct an AAR if the team is not working well, if there are damaged relationships on the team, or if the team is conflict avoidant. This simple and brave process takes real maturity and a fair amount of team trust.

Now take a quick reality check: As you've read about this process, do you think you could conduct an AAR with your team? Why? Why not? The answers to these questions will offer you a diagnostic of your current team culture - and your ability to learn from each other.

5. Manage Team Transitions

Often during the life of a team, new members are brought on to help accomplish the team goals. When a new team member comes on board, there is often a steep learning curve as they try and understand the team dynamics, culture, norms, and history. It can take quite a while to learn the "lay of the land." Unfortunately, you usually don't have a lot of time to wait until they "get it" (Sanaghan & Gabriel, 2011; Sanaghan & Eberbach, 2013; Kohn & O'Donnel, 2013).

The following protocol will be helpful any time you have a new team member come on board. There is some risk attached to this team transition process, but it enables real learning to take place quickly and sets the tone for communication and team culture going forward. This protocol takes about an hour to do well and is a great investment of time and attention.

Here are the steps:

> **1.** The team leader asks the team to form two groups: one with the veteran team members and one with the new team member(s) and the team leader. The team leader works with the new member(s) throughout this transition meeting.
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> **2.** The team leader asks the veteran team members to come up with 4-5 questions they would like to ask the new team member(s). These need to be the kind of questions that will help them really learn

about the new person *quickly.* Avoid softball questions like "What's your favorite sport?" (or favorite hobby) or "Where would you like to go on vacation?" You can ask those questions any time. For this activity, it's critical to ask the serious questions that are rarely asked when new members come on board because of our desire to be overly polite and "collegial." For example, members of high performing teams often ask new members questions like these:

- What are three gifts or talents you bring to this team? What are the real strengths you have?
- How do you deal with conflict? Please provide an example for us.
- What are two areas of needed development for you? Things you really need to improve upon?
- If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
- Please talk about a time you failed at something. What did you do and what did you learn from it?
- What are things that cause you stress? How do you behave when you are stressed?
- What do you think are the 3 most important qualities of a great team member?
- What is one thing we should know about you that would help us work with you as effectively as possible?
- How would your best friend describe you?

You get the idea. Ask the kind of real questions that usually we would like to ask someone new to the team but rarely get the opportunity to. This protocol sets the stage for an honest conversation, right from the very beginning of the new team member's transition.

3. At the same time, the team leader works with the new team member(s) and helps create a set of 4-5 questions for *them* to ask. The team leader is there to encourage asking "real" questions and to do some quality control at the same time. For example, the new team member might ask the veteran members:

- What are two or three successes you have experienced on this team that you are especially proud about?
- What are 3 words that describe the culture of this team?
- How do you deal with failure on this team? What actually takes place?
- How do you celebrate successes?
- What is a team norm that I need to be aware of?
- What is one piece of advice that will help me contribute to this team's effectiveness quickly?
- What do you like most about being on this team? What do you like least?

4. After the two groups have created their questions (allow a maximum of 15 minutes for this), the team leader lets the new team member ask their *first* question. The intact team members take turns answering the question and the new team member(s) listens carefully to the answers.

5. Then the veteran team members ask their *first* question, and they listen and observe how the new team member handles themselves.

6. This process continues with the new team member asking one of their questions, followed by the veteran team members asking one of their questions. It is important to take turns asking and answering because this creates a level playing field and a two-way conversation.

The team leader needs to pay attention to the Q&A and make sure it doesn't take too long or wander all over the place. The team leader should also check to make sure team members understand the answers and should strive to clarify where appropriate.

As you can imagine, this simple yet powerful protocol creates a very different dialogue, from the very beginning, and sets the tone for future communication. In a very short period of time, participants really learn about each other and, almost always, establish a foundation of trust and transparent communication.

> **Example**
> We recently utilized this process with a new provost and a senior team that had worked together for quite a while. The very first question the provost asked their new team members was: "How do you celebrate success as a team?" The provost was met with blank stares and confused looks. The senior team realized that they rarely, if ever, celebrated their many successes. It was a "learning moment" for them because they realized they might also not be celebrating the successes of the many people who reported to them, and there were some real implications connected to this lack of celebration, such as lack of engagement. The provost in turn learned a great deal about the senior team's culture and expectations with just that one small, meaningful question.
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> We continued with the process, to ensure that all the questions were asked and answered. The provost's other most telling question was: "Please tell me a story that best represents the unique values and guiding principles of this team." That question was a game changer, because it prompted members of the senior team to share powerful examples of the *lived* values of the team, not just platitudes and "philosophy" about teams. It was revelatory.
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> All the participants really appreciate the candor and were committed to continue this kind of conversation going forward.

Remember, this protocol is not without risk - but is usually well worth it.

6. Conduct Meaningful Conversations

One of the best ways to build and nurture a stellar team is to have relevant and significant conversations that matter and that can make the team smarter about their values, guiding principles, team behaviors, tolerance for failure, and best practices. Rather than have an "informal" and often wandering conversation about these topics, it is important to ground them in some real content. The following protocol has been used with several teams in higher education - without ever referring to "team building."

The team leader asks each team member to select an article (not a book - something brief) about a subject that really matters to them, and then facilitate a conversation about the article. The selected reading has to have something to do with effective teams, organizational culture, leadership, values, organizational communication, change management, etc. It has to somehow connect with and inform the work that they do as a team. It is essential that each team member choose an article that has real personal meaning for them, because it has to be worth the time invested in reading and discussing it. When people identify articles that mean something to them personally, that builds quality control into the process, because team members will be highly selective and careful with their suggestions.

We suggest that the team leader (e.g. President, Provost, Dean, V.P) hold a "chew and chat," blocking out a specific time monthly (at a minimum) to have a conversation about a suggested article and discuss its implications for the team's functioning and effectiveness. We like to have food at these "chews and chats," and we suggest a working lunch meeting, which is also a nice way to build a gentle sense of community.

To get you started, we will suggest some articles for consideration below, along with a sentence or two describing the heart of each article. These are suggestions only, but these have proven to be effective discussion starters with many teams we have worked with. The articles your team members choose should have some "heft" to them, so that members need to really think about the implications of the ideas shared. If the quality of the articles chosen is good, you will have a great conversation as each member reacts to the content, reflects on its meaning, and reveals what is important to them personally.

Suggested Reading for "Chew and Chats":

1. **The Work of Leadership** (1996), Ronald Heifetz & Donald L. Laurie, HBR. Both authors are well-known academics from Harvard, who write frequently about the concept of "adaptive change," which describes the type of emerging and complex change where there are no clear answers or path forward. Adaptive change can't be solved by current expertise, experience, or knowledge; nor can we just throw money and technology at the problem. Leaders will need to take risks, experiment, be creative, and discover answers along with their people as they move toward an uncertain future. This powerful article provides effective strategies for managing and leading change and complexity in organizations. (Almost anything Heifetz writes is excellent and will provide ideas and insights that will generate a great conversation.)
2. **The Failure-Tolerant Leader** (2002), Richard Farson & Ralph Keyes, HBR. The authors have written a provocative and counterintuitive article about the benefits of "failure." They researched some of the most successful companies in the world and found that their leaders believe that failure is an essential part of the learning process. Resilient leaders see failure as a *resource* that they can learn from. The key to failure-tolerant leaders is the ability to uncover what happened without blame or recrimination, and distill the "lessons learned." Rather than hiding our mistakes, we need to discover the clues embedded in them, which will make us smarter in the future.
3. **Embracing Confusion** (2005), Barry Jentz and Jerome Murphy, Phi Delta Kappan. This monograph explores the "lost leader syndrome," which occurs when leaders face uncertain situations that simply don’t make sense. Unable to discern a clear direction forward or next steps, they often become confused, disorientated and even "lost." This confusion has nothing to do with the leader's intelligence or ability. Rather, it is an inevitable condition when the world is filled with change, complexity, and adaptive challenges. When most leaders are confused, they see this as a *liability*, yet Jentz and Murphy see it as a *resource*. They have a created a 5-step process which they call "Reflective Inquiry and Action," where the leader walks through a disciplined process that enables them to travel from confusion to clarity. It is a provocative and powerful concept.
4. **Primal Leadership: The Hidden Driver of Great Performance** (2001), Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis & Annie McKee, HBR. This is one of Goleman's seminal papers on "emotional intelligence" and has helped create a whole field of leadership study. Goleman & his colleagues were some of the first researchers to show that a leader's self- awareness, empathy, and ability to build authentic relationships are crucial elements of organizational culture, effectiveness, and the bottom line. Anything Goleman writes (and he is prolific) is well worth reading and discussing; he is one of the most influential psychologists of the last 50 years.
5. **Beware the Busy Manager** (2002), Heike Bruch & Sumantra Ghoshal, HBR. This article can be a humbling one to read because it looks squarely at the "busyness" most of us get caught up doing. The pace and complexity of campus life isn't going to slow down anytime soon, and unless we become more self-aware, focused, and disciplined, we will fall prey to the "buckets of sweat" dynamic, where we feel overwhelmed, overworked, and stressed out most of the time. The authors did extensive research on how people *actually* spend their time productively and found that most of us (90%) are "busy" but unproductive. They offer some strategies for review that will possibly free us from this ineffective dynamic, empowering us to achieve the most important priorities we have identified for our people and ourselves.

If you can pay attention to this simple learning process over time, the "chews and chats" will enhance your team's effectiveness in dramatic ways. These sessions provide rare opportunities to talk about what really matters to people and can deepen the level of authenticity and engagement on the team. And when people share an article or paper that means something important to them personally, their real values are revealed, which helps to establish a foundation of trust and open communication.

Summary

In summary, our collective experience with teams has taught us several powerful lessons:

1. Deeply understanding the "gifts" people bring to the table allows you to tap the talent of all your team members. Remember that when team trust is high, all the differing talents people bring are seen as positive assets. When trust is low, they are seen as liabilities, and then differences can cause great conflict on the team.
2. Clarifying the team's "decision rules" is essential for high performance. When people are uncertain about their level of input and influence regarding team decisions, they hesitate, wait to be told what to do, question themselves, and often overstep their authority - all things a team leader wants to avoid.
3. The "process" - or *how* the team functions (communicates, participates, listens, empathizes) - is the *most* important element of a first class team. Please pay attention to this.
4. Evaluating meeting effectiveness, reflecting on team norms, and reviewing both successes and failures is critical to a first class team's overall success.
5. A new team member's transition can be a fragile journey, but when you manage that transition thoughtfully and well, you can level the learning curve dramatically and allow them to contribute almost immediately.
6. Building in learning throughout the life of a team is an important duty for any team leader. Learning doesn't just "happen"; you need to design it into the way the team operates.

We hope our suggestions are helpful in your team's journey towards excellence!

Further Reading

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