

Acceleration

The secrets of initiative team success

Team performance takes intention.

A team of top performers does not guarantee success for initiatives. Project leaders must create the conditions in which the team can do their best work, as well as continually remove barriers and roadblocks along the way.

When you invest in building a team foundation of genuine relationship, mutual trust, and clear communication, you'll reap the benefits over the lifespan of the project.

The most effective, efficient teams have leaders who:

Secret #1

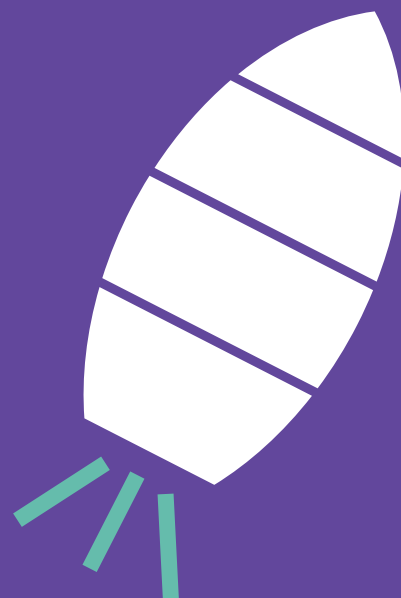
Establish collaborative norms

Secret #2

Cultivate psychological safety

Secret #3

Facilitate high-quality dialogue



Secret #1:

Establish collaborative norms

High-functioning collaborative teams establish shared expectations from the beginning about the specific ways they'll work together, e.g., which communication modalities will be used when, how files will be named and where they'll stored, version control, etc.

Think agile, fast-moving teams shouldn't waste precious time getting into the collaborative weeds? Think again. Norms take personal preference and frequent guesswork out of the equation, ultimately saving more time than they take to create. They also reduce frustration, duplication, silly mistakes – the list goes on and on.

Take this common scenario: You post a draft presentation to your team's shared platform, asking for feedback. One team member emails you a copy of the deck with comments inserted throughout. Two others simultaneously make revisions directly on the platform, resulting in two different versions. And then you get an email from the project sponsor with a list of requested changes. It's...a mess. And guess who gets to sort it out?

Instead, if you take the time to align on a model for how and when you'll use meetings, emails, instant messages, and shared platforms, the team can focus more on the *what* of work, rather than dealing with the aftermath of the *how*.

One more note: operating consistently saves loads of time and frustration, but it takes a bit of practice. Be patient with one another, but also hold one another accountable for adopting these shared norms.

These are a few of the norms we recommend to teams:

Meetings:

- Always include a clear statement of purpose in meeting invitations
- No multi-tasking during meetings
- Keep meetings small by only inviting those who are essential to achieving the meeting's purpose
- Spend the last five minutes of meetings recapping the decisions, actions, and next steps
- Publish a recap to cement meeting outcomes within 24 hours

Email:

- Use standard email subject-line headers to help the recipient prioritize their inbox [e.g., URGENT, ACTION or REQUEST, INFORM, etc.]
- Use BCC when you want someone to be aware that something has been sent, but there is no expectation that they reply or take action
- Don't communicate via email with an expectation of an immediate response; urgent requests should be sent via text or your messaging app

Asynchronous collaboration:

- Use a collaboration platform to request and provide feedback on deliverables
- When requesting feedback / edits, be clear about what you want from each person and the appropriate sequence (i.e., "@Monique, please add the latest budget numbers and then pass the doc to @Jacob to give it a good proof")

Secret #2:**Cultivate psychological safety**

Psychological safety, the “belief that the context is safe for interpersonal risk-taking – that speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes will be welcomed and valued,” is what makes us feel a sense of belonging as a member of a team. For teams that are struggling to work effectively together, psychological safety is often what’s missing.

It’s a deceptively simple truth – when we feel valued and safe at work, we do better. We’re more creative, more innovative, and more willing to share ideas and take risks – all hallmarks of a successful initiative team.

While psychological safety can often be diminished much more quickly than it can be built, it can be steadily improved by small but intentional day-to-day actions. Here’s some to try – and to avoid:

Behaviors that support psychological safety	Behaviors that undermine psychological safety
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Setting aside 1:1 time or office hours to promote connection and get to know the skills and interests of each team member personally ▪ Practicing deep listening, and resisting the urge to immediately offer solutions (or defenses) during conversations with the team ▪ Actively seeking out new ideas and critical feedback, and positively recognizing both when they are received ▪ Demonstrating humility and the fact that you don’t have all the answers ▪ Catching yourself when you make a mistake and publicly acknowledging it in the moment (e.g., “I’m sorry. I think I just cut you off. Would you finish your thought?”) ▪ Providing consistent and direct feedback to members of the team – praise in public and constructive suggestions in private 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reprimanding others for trying and failing or for making a mistake ▪ Taking debate and disagreement personally ▪ Fostering competition – and therefore, winners and losers ▪ Sharing feedback about someone publicly / to others rather than providing it directly to them ▪ Casting judgment when team members share differing perspectives ▪ Dismissing ideas before they have been fully fleshed out ▪ Harkening back to past experiences (e.g., “We’ve tried that and it didn’t work”)

Secret #3:**Facilitate high-quality dialogue**

High-stakes initiatives come with high-stakes discussions and decisions. Learning how to have these conversations productively may be the most critical skill you can help your team develop. As a result, you'll all spend less time spinning your wheels and more time contemplating the questions that really matter for the project's success.

Chris Argyris, a renowned Harvard Business School professor, spent his career teaching "smart people how to learn." His research deconstructed how we come to know what we know. His core framework, "The Ladder of Inference," maps how we quickly jump from data to conclusions while unconsciously filtering out any data that might contradict our pre-existing view.

To learn from one another, however, we must slow down the process and share our views in full, and request that others do the same. Said another way, high-quality dialogue requires a balance of advocacy (stating one's own views) and inquiry (asking questions and understanding the views of others).

Effective advocacy isn't about being the loudest person in the room; it's about helping others see what you see and understand your thinking. It sounds like sharing examples of the data you've selected to inform your position, talking through your reasoning, and then stating your conclusions. While advocating, it's important to remember that your primary goal is not to convince everyone else that you're correct. Instead, adopt the mindset that you're sharing one of many possible perspectives, and your goal is to leverage the differences in perspective across the team to expand the collective thinking.

Inquiry is all about working to understanding others' perspectives in a way that is genuinely curious. Leading questions have no place in effective inquiry. Instead, model asking for others' examples, reasoning, and conclusions with an open mind. It will likely lead to more creative solutions and a firmer commitment across the team to the resulting decision.

Try asking:

- Tell me how you got from here to there – walk me through your reasoning...
- I think I would interpret the challenge this way...but I'm curious about how you're seeing things...
- What other data / options did you consider?

Consider restating what the other person said to confirm your understanding of it. This technique consistently produces a better experience and better decision-making.

On our best days, teamwork does indeed make the dream work. Supporting teams to develop the skills and practices they need to work effectively – and joyfully – together will pay back exponential returns, both for your current initiative and future ones led by members of your team.

Stop Meeting Like This is a professional services firm that believes work can be both joyful and productive. We work side-by-side with optimistic, forward-thinking leaders to unlock the capacity of their organizations through better collaboration. Whether we're developing the skills of individuals, designing new operating models, enhancing the health and effectiveness of teams, or coaching leaders, we help companies catalyze new ways of working that produce better business outcomes and enhance the human experience of work. We are based in Chicago but serve clients all over the globe.