# 7 Traits of SuperTeams

# by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

If you have ever been on a SuperTeam, you know how it felt.  The group accomplished seemingly impossible goals like clockwork. The group stayed pretty much on track, and when it got off the beam, it self-corrected. People on the team shared real interpersonal affection, and the group had a lot of fun. Imagine a world where most teams functioned that way: how refreshing. What would it take to make this dream a reality?

I have been serving on and advising teams for over four decades, and I have come to the conclusion that there are seven traits that enable this kind of environment.  If you are on a team that has an abundance of the following seven characteristics, I guarantee it is one of those super groups that is so rare these days.

## 1. Good leadership

The person in the leadership role must be an excellent leader. Reason: nothing can ruin the ability of a team to rise to greatness more quickly than a leader who cannot maintain the right kind of environment and lead by example. The leadership role can be distributed to more than one member, but there is always one person in charge at any moment, and that person needs to have excellent leadership instincts. Perfection is not required, but a values-based approach to the concept of servant leadership is fundamental, and must be there.

## 2. A common goal

If all members of the team are aligned behind a common goal, that forms a foundation for great teamwork. To have goal alignment, the team needs to embrace the goal or vision emotionally, not just understand it.  Leaders need to foster a sense of ownership of the goal in each team member, and each person must understand his or her contribution to the goal. This alignment is accomplished best by involving all team members in establishing the goal in the first place. With universal ownership of a worthy goal, the team is off to a great start; without it the team could not function.

### 3. Trust and respect

Without the elements of trust and respect, team members will eventually undercut each other and cause discontent. Excellent leaders know that trust begins with them and their behaviors. It is not likely you will find a trusting team if the leader does not know how to foster trust and practice trust building behaviors daily. I believe the most important skill in building trust is to create a safe environment, where team members can voice any concerns and know they will be rewarded rather than punished. Fear is the enemy of trust and will easily destroy it. To drive out fear, leaders need to make people feel good when they voice a concern.  I call it "reinforcing candor," which is an essential ingredient in good team communication.

### 4. Good communication

Team members must be able to express themselves freely without fear and have the skills to listen to each other without being judgmental. Great communication skills do not come naturally, and they are not taught very well in schools. Smart leaders recognize any gaps in communication skills and provide immediate training to enable seamless and easy flow of information. Team members need to dig, not just for understanding, but for intent. The most important communication skills are listening, body language, and Emotional Intelligence. How many of us had courses in these critical skills in school? When these skills are not present, the blockages produced will hobble any efforts toward a cohesive group. Smart leaders invest in training of excellent communication skills for all team members.

### 5. Encouragement and reinforcement

Team members need to feel that someone truly has their back. They need to know someone really cares and will go the extra mile to ensure all members are doing their best. Reinforcement for good work must be sincere and immediate. The best reinforcement on a team is from one member to another and in a loving, spontaneous way. Good reinforcement does not need to be financial. Many times the most effective reinforcement is just a sincere thank you from another team member.

### 6. Discipline

Discipline should not be confused with punishment.  What team members need is an understanding of the rules of engagement and a sense of resolve for upholding their end of the bargain. The most frequent source of team stress is a feeling that one or more members of the team are not pulling their weight. I believe more than 50% of all team problems are caused by this one aspect alone. Teams quickly become fractionated when there is social loafing going on among some members.  The best way to avoid this is to have a team charter with expected behaviors spelled out in advance

and a specific agreed-upon consequence for any member who does not pull his or her share of the load.  If all members agree that a slacker will be expected to "wash the dishes for a week," then a potential slacker is not likely to goof off. If he or she does, then the penalty has already been agreed on, so a fair application is not subject to argument. My observation is that having a solid team charter with visible consequences for social loafing is the most significant ingredient that will prevent team discord.

## 7. Balanced Accountability

Holding people accountable is usually a negative expression. Someone is not measuring up in some way, and is forced by others to face the fact and make corrections.  I advocate a more holistic or balanced approach to accountability where the good things are reinforced in addition to some coaching on things that need to be corrected.

Great teams have a deep sense of accountability, because they have a high level of commitment to each other and the goals. Since most of the team members are making positive contributions daily, they are responsible to the team for their efforts and performance in positive ways most of the time. Acknowledging accountability for positive acts is also called "reinforcement." If an individual does come up short on occasion, he or she receives some shaping that can be anything from some gentle coaching to a more serious discussion depending on the circumstances.

For example, if John has been regularly reinforced for his accurate reporting on the quality report, it is a much easier conversation to have when a single error occurs and his boss does some coaching on how John might prevent a future lapse. Reason: you have the string of good will as a backdrop for the coaching discussion, and you avoid the common frustration of "the only time I ever hear from them is when I do something wrong."

All teams that have these seven elements are going to be highly successful; I guarantee it. Take away any one of them, or somehow thwart their application, and the team will suffer sub-optimal performance. Foster these seven elements in all of your teams and they will glitter like gold and perform like SuperTeams.

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