

# **Building Effective Teams Isn't Rocket Science, But It's Just as Hard**

by Douglas R. Conant

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Over my 35 years of experience in the corporate and non-profit worlds, I've been part of hundreds, if not thousands, of teams of all shapes and sizes: large, small, formal, informal, "real", "virtual" — and the list goes on. I've also led some of these teams as a Fortune 300 CEO, and I've been at the bottom of the ladder as a marketing assistant at the start of my career. Consistently building high performance teams is a challenging and complex undertaking — not unlike my layman's understanding of rocket science. That having been said, in my experience, there are four key guiding thoughts that can materially improve your odds of success:

**1. Hire Highly Effective Team Members.** The time to think about building a highly-effective team is when you recruit people into the organization in the first place. I look for the 4 C's: competence, character, courage, and collaboration. The best contributors that I have recruited over the years know what they are doing (have competence), do what they say they are going to do (display character), meet challenges head-on (have the courage of their convictions) and delight in working with others for the good of the enterprise (are spirited collaborators). In my opinion, all of these attributes can and should be vetted during the interview process — way before a team assignment is even contemplated. When team members consistently display these four traits, my experience is that you have begun to lay the foundation for creating a high-performance environment.

**2. Focus on Inspiring Trust.** Once you've recruited a talented team of people, I believe that the single most important challenge is to create a high-trust environment. As Stephen M.R. Covey says in his book, *The Speed of Trust*, it is the one thing that changes everything. If you promote a high-trust environment where you have capable people who do what they say they are going to do, in my experience, anything is possible. If there is not a high-trust environment in place, virtually everything, including the most mundane activities, can feel like an ordeal for the group and impede progress. Over time, I have found that trust, based on competence and character, trumps all other attributes.

**3. Encourage Candor.** Once you have talented people operating in a high-trust environment, a spirit of candor is essential to advancing the agenda. It is important that the team acknowledges mistakes and celebrates progress in a timely way. The path forward for every team is always forged around a series of course corrections based on what is working and what is not working. Candid and timely conversation is essential to shaping that path forward.

**4. Be Clear About Expectations.** I have found that the greater the clarity of the mission, the greater the odds of success. Individual team members and the teams themselves simply must know what is expected of them, in as granular a way as is practical, in order to meet or exceed those expectations.

Bottom line, I believe if you fully leverage these four guiding thoughts, you may not build the next-generation space shuttle, but you will most assuredly see your teams soar to new heights.

*This post is part of the HBR Insight Center on The Secrets of Great Teams.*

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