

The IDEAL TEAM PLAYER

HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND CULTIVATE
THE THREE ESSENTIAL VIRTUES



A LEADERSHIP FABLE

PATRICK LENCIONI

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *THE FIVE DYSFUNCTIONS OF A TEAM*

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*This is dedicated to Tracy Noble, who guided me
through the process of writing this book, and who lives
humble, hungry, and smart every day.*

INTRODUCTION

If someone were to ask me to make a list of the most valuable qualities a person should develop in order to thrive in the world of work—and for that matter, life—I would put being a team player at the top. The ability to work effectively with others, to add value within the dynamics of a group endeavor, is more critical in today's fluid world than it has ever been. Few people succeed at work, in the family, or in any social context without it.

I'm sure that most people would agree with this, which is why it's a little surprising that great team players are somewhat rare. I think the problem is that we've failed to define what being a team player requires, which leaves the concept somewhat vague, even soft.

It's not unlike teamwork itself, which still gets more lip service than practical attention. In my book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, I explained that real teamwork requires tangible, specific behaviors: vulnerability-based trust, healthy conflict, active commitment, peer-to-peer accountability, and a focus on results. Thankfully, with enough coaching, patience, and time, most people can learn to embrace those concepts.

However, I must admit that some people are better at being team players, at embracing those five behaviors, than others. They're not born that way, but either through life experiences, work history, or a real commitment to personal development, they come to possess the three underlying virtues that enable them to be ideal team players: they are humble, hungry, and smart. As simple as those words may appear, none of them is exactly what they seem. Understanding the nuances of these virtues is critical for applying them effectively.

During the past twenty years of working with leaders and their teams, I've seen time and again that when a team member lacks one or more of these three virtues, the process of building a cohesive team is much more difficult than it should be, and in some cases, impossible. We've been using this approach for hiring and management at The Table Group since our founding in 1997, and it has proven to be a remarkable predictor of success, as well as a reliable explanation of failure. As a result, we've come to the conclusion that these three seemingly obvious qualities are to teamwork what speed, strength, and coordination are to athletics—they make everything else easier.

The ramifications of all this are undeniable. Leaders who can identify, hire, and cultivate employees who are humble, hungry, and smart will have a serious advantage over those who cannot. They'll be able to build stronger teams much more quickly and with much less difficulty, and they'll significantly reduce the painful and tangible costs associated with politics, turnover, and morale problems. And employees who

can embody these virtues will make themselves more valuable and marketable to any organization that values teamwork.

The purpose of this little book is to help you understand how the elusive combination of these three simple attributes can accelerate the process of making teamwork a reality in your organization or in your life so you can more effectively achieve the extraordinary benefits that it brings.

I hope it serves you well.

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The Fable

PART ONE



The Situation

ENOUGH

fter twenty years, Jeff Shanley had experienced more than his fair share of the Silicon Valley. The hours. The traffic. The pretentiousness. It was time to make a change.

To be fair, it wasn't really the work that Jeff had grown tired of. In fact, he had enjoyed an interesting and successful career. After a few jobs in high-tech marketing, at age thirty-five he cofounded a technology start-up. Two years later, he was fortunate enough to get demoted when the board of directors hired what they called a grown-up CEO. During the next four years, that CEO, Kathryn Petersen, taught Jeff more about leadership, teamwork, and business than he could have learned in a decade of business school.

When Kathryn retired, Jeff left the company and spent the next few years working at a small consulting firm in Half Moon Bay, over the hills from the Silicon Valley. Jeff thrived there, and was on the verge of becoming a partner. But during that time, he and his wife began to grow tired of trying to keep up with the Joneses, which happened to be the name of the family that lived in the over-priced bungalow next door.

Jeff was definitely ready for a change. Where he would go and what he would do next was a mystery to him. He certainly didn't expect the answer to come via a phone call from his uncle Bob.

BOB

Robert Shanley had been the most prominent and diversified building contractor in the Napa Valley for three decades. Whether it was a winery, a school, or a shopping center, if it was being built in Napa, there was a decent chance that Valley Builders was involved in some significant way.

Unfortunately for Bob, none of his kids was interested in taking over the family business, instead choosing to be restaurateurs, stockbrokers, and high school teachers. And that's why Bob called his nephew to see if he knew anyone who might be interested in running the company in a couple of years when Bob retired.

It wasn't the first time that Bob had turned to his nephew for advice. Jeff had helped him on a few occasions in the past, and actually consulted to the executive team a year earlier on a substantial project around teamwork, which was one of the firm's values. Jeff had focused his efforts on building more effective teams at the highest levels of the company.

Bob loved the work Jeff did, and often bragged about his nephew during family reunions, usually saying something to the effect of "this boy is my best advisor." His cousins teased Jeff, pretending to resent their father's favoritism.

Bob thought so much of Jeff that he had absolutely no expectation that his ambitious nephew in the exciting world of high tech would ever be interested in working in construction. Which is why he was so stunned when Jeff asked, "Would you consider hiring someone without industry experience? Someone like me?"

TRANSITION

Within the month, Jeff and Maurine Shanley had sold their tiny home in San Mateo and moved their two children and one dog to the northern end of Napa—the town, not the valley. Jeff's commute to the Valley Builders office was about four miles, and even if he drove the speed limit, it took just seven minutes.

It was during those minutes that Jeff experienced an initial wave of remorse. Though everything on the domestic side of his decision had been going well, learning the nuances of the construction industry proved to be more of a challenge than he expected. Or, more precisely, it was the lack of nuance that was the problem.

Everything in construction seemed to come down to physical, material issues. Gone were the days of theoretical debates and pie-in-the-sky planning. Jeff now found himself learning about concrete matters having to do with everything from air conditioning to lumber to, well, concrete.

But soon enough, Jeff not only got used to this new way of working, he actually came to prefer it. Straightforward conversations about tangible things may have been less sophisticated than high tech, but they were also more gratifying.