



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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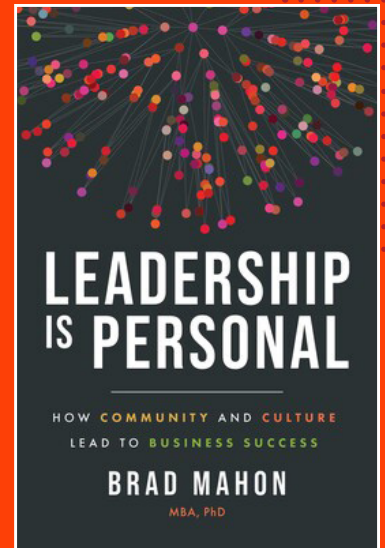
THE SUMMARY OF LEADERSHIP IS PERSONAL

By Brad Mahon
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INTRODUCTION • Why Community Engagement Matters

“Authority is not leadership.” - Mark Carney

It was my first year as president at Grasslands College, and our sold-out fundraiser buzzed. As I circulated, it struck me: our entire community surrounded me—students and alumni, faculty and staff, donors and sponsors, business owners and community leaders, government officials, and many whose only regular interaction with us was this event. When asked to move it to a larger venue, I said absolutely not. Part of the event’s value was having the community on our campus. For that one night, our college was the place to be—the city’s main attraction. I reflected on the power of community engagement.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brad Mahon, MBA, PhD, is a college president with over 25 years of leadership in higher education, including roles as university dean. His experience spans from the classroom to the boardroom, always with an emphasis on engaging the community. He is also a professional guitarist.

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I negotiated my first business deal when I was 13. I'd been grounded for a significant period, and the deal I made with my parents was: full compliance with the punishment in exchange for an electric guitar and amplifier, with lessons and regular practice. And just like that, my life's course was set.

I didn't sell out clubs on the Sunset Strip, but I made noise in local bars, went to music school, collected some paperwork, and settled into a teaching job at the local college. Leadership was never part of the plan; it was an accident. Or was it?

At ten, Mr. Walters named me house leader of Team Sparta. His charge: I want you to be you. Help others, especially the younger kids. Encourage them, teach them, and show them, through your actions. Those

moments taught me an early truth: leadership is service.

I went from guitarist-for-hire and instructor to program coordinator, department head, manager, director, dean, president. I needed a PhD to teach, but no formal training was required to lead.

My core premise: community engagement and corporate culture drive business success. Make engagement the competitive advantage. Outcomes: happier customers, enhanced reputation, greater brand awareness, heightened partnerships, improved employee satisfaction, healthier financial positions.

Shall we begin?

PART 1 • Discovering the Leader Within You

Chapter 1 • Knowing Your Values

Leadership starts on the inside. I never got specific training for leadership which often made me feel like an impostor. The fix wasn't more hustle; it was knowing what I value and letting that steer my decisions. The inner game matters: stop with the harsh, judgmental voice, and trust your preparation and instincts. Act with a clear, nonjudgmental mind.

Emotional intelligence is not a mystery, simply a skill. I keep my EQ radar on: notice when your emotions spike, and then pause, breathe, and get curious instead of reacting. Observe without judgment. Accept the signal, learn from it, use it. That simple shift moved me from reflex to intention.

Self-reflection is very important, and it won't schedule itself. I block quiet time, early, before the noise starts. I ask myself: What kind of a leader am I? What kind do I want to be? How can I serve better? What

did my behavior yesterday reveal about my values? I journal and let recent conversations and experiences surface. Insights often arrive when I'm not forcing them.

Start by naming your non-negotiables. These are your values. For me, community and personal growth came first; access and authenticity followed. Values simplify choices, cut through competing demands, and keep you on high ground when you're challenged. They also travel well: when values are clear, decisions are faster, communication is cleaner, and people know exactly what to expect from you.

Whatever stage of the journey you are in, never stop learning on purpose. Success leaves clues. I read widely, revisit the best ideas, and apply them. Theory and best practices complement intuition and experience; they don't replace them.

Alignment matters. If your organization's strategy doesn't reflect what you believe, sift it. Shake the pan and keep the nuggets you can stand behind. If your essentials are still missing, you're at a crossroads. You can cash the checks and dilute your values, or choose authenticity. I personally chose to leave and work where my values and the institution's actually match.

Values-based leadership creates real buy-in. When your actions match your words, colleagues and stakeholders engage, communities grant you consent to operate, and culture strengthens. That alignment fuels community engagement and corporate culture—the engine of organizational success at the heart of this book.

My practical cadence is simple: schedule daily reflection; write your values in plain language; test decisions against them; study what works and reuse it; sift institutional agendas for alignment; and if the non-negotiables don't align, act. Quiet the inner noise, let values lead, and model the behavior you want your culture to reflect. That, to me, is authentic leadership.

Chapter 2 • Finding Your Voice

When I took the director's chair at a large Canadian university, let's call it "Protest University" here for reasons I'll make clear, the institute was in a bad place. Budget cuts had slashed programs and jobs; students, faculty, and donors were literally on the front steps with picket signs. Morale and finances were battered.

Despite the reality, on my first day the dean had gripped my hand and said, "Relax, Brad. The heavy lifting is done." My gut feeling disagreed.

I'd faced pushback before, but this mood felt radioactive. Every hallway conversation was a grievance; every email carried an undertone of "fix it or else." When I spoke about new partnerships or fresh cur-

riculum, eyes glazed. Folks weren't ready for ideas; they wanted to unload hurt.

All this pressure pushed me into a voice that wasn't mine. In a meeting with Dan, a long-tenured employee, the months of frustration ignited. I went full top-down commander: blunt, loud, final. Dan resigned that afternoon and the story sprinted across campus. My team looked at me as if I'd morphed into the very leadership style they despised. Driving home, I knew I'd borrowed a voice that wasn't mine, and it felt awful. Something had to change.

So I went back to first principles: values first, voice second. One-on-one, I met every employee, ears wide open. I reminded myself: Listen to hear, not to reply. Minimal notes, steady eye contact, park judgment. Some sessions ended in tears, many in exhaustion, but patterns emerged: people craved honesty, context, participation. When I finally gathered the whole staff, I reflected their words back to them—what hurt, what had to change, what could grow. For the first time, the room was quiet in a good way; nods replaced crossed arms.

Feedback became my currency. Trusted "spies" (Sun Tzu's term, not mine) brought hallway truth: when I acted too slowly, when a message landed flat, when morale ticked upward. Even silent signals mattered: the sole parking stall shoveled after a blizzard, the office space heater switched on before dawn, little gestures from custodians that whispered, "We see you; keep going."

I paired that external intel with an internal gauge—my EQ radar. Feel the heart rate spike? Pause. Breathe. Decide, don't react. Intuition, built on years of gigs, classes, and boardrooms, is pattern recognition; trust it, but verify with data and dialogue.

My authentic voice settled into optimistic realism: say the hard thing plainly, frame it with possibility, and always invite collaboration. Optimism can be

risky, but its upside—energy, resilience, creativity—beats the cost of cynicism.

Slowly the protests dwindled, donors returned, and partnerships reopened. People weren't just hearing me; they heard themselves in what I said. That's the test: when your words line up with your values and theirs, culture heals and momentum follows.

Values defined the "why," voice delivered the "how." Next comes vision—the picture of where we're all heading together.

Chapter 3 • Creating a Vision

When our kids became teenagers, I finally found the freedom to chase bigger roles. I landed an interview for the head of performing arts at a distant university which I will call "Faraway University" here. Asked for my vision, I parroted the job ad: program excellence, elite outcomes, shine restored. The panel cheered, the offer came, and after family sign-off I shouted, *"Bring it on."*

Day one, the disconnect was obvious: the university wouldn't fund elite programming, even basic operations were thin, morale and enrollments were down, partnerships were dormant, and in the city we were nearly invisible. Nights found me staring at the ceiling asking, *"What have I done?"*

My instincts told me: "Work the weeds." I opened my door, fixed timetables, answered every gripe. The access won goodwill but no direction. We needed a North Star.

So I researched. A century ago our music school and concert hall were the city's cultural hub. Stakeholders told stories of packed classrooms and sold-out shows. Finances were grim, but I refused to let numbers shrink the horizon. During dawn reflections I visualized buzzing corridors, a lit marquee, and crowds that

had never set foot on campus. George Lucas was right: you can't build what you can't imagine.

Opportunity knocked when a promoter asked to book our long-dark concert hall for singer Jeffrey Rempel. Senior admin called it a distraction, finance balked at free rent, facilities moaned about security. I listened, answered each fear, and staked my promotions budget on the night. The show sold out; students were inspired; city media splashed "Historic Hall Reborn." Six months later a joint public-private grant (eight figures) funded a full restoration. Our North Star broke through the clouds.

With momentum, we partnered with the philharmonic (rehearsal space for class tickets), the folk festival (diversity on stage), school boards (high-school visits), even the pro-football team (students at half-time). Hallways now hummed with pure energy. Enrollment, revenue, and reputation followed.

Crafting a vision is a multistep process:

Look back to leap forward. Heritage stories anchor a future vision everyone recognizes.

Visualize in detail. See the lights, the crowds, the buzz before anyone else does.

Listen, then align objections with values. Collaboration beats coercion.

Paint the picture constantly. Every email, hallway chat, even a restroom encounter reinforces direction.

Balance weeds and altitude. Fix daily problems, but schedule time to steer the ship.

Vision isn't a slogan; it's a living picture you share until others see themselves inside it. When that happens, culture shifts, resources flow, and a forgotten hall—or an entire program—comes roaring back to life.

PART 2 • Fostering Community Connections

Chapter 4 • Be Visible, Make Connections

Visibility is the essential first step toward engagement. Showing up creates opportunities to connect, builds relationships, and puts your organization front of mind. Out of sight, out of mind; our problem in several communities was simply low presence. The fix started with being visible—on campuses and in town.

Visibility prepares the ground for a positive first contact. Event attendance signals an investment in the community and begins to cultivate trust. Trust is the gateway to deeper conversations about collaboration. So I showed up—service clubs, chambers of commerce, forums, breakfasts, luncheons, after-hours mixers. Quantity matters early; the first year is about volume and visibility. Attend anything once, experience it yourself, then use quiet reflection to decide if it's worth repeating. Don't let others' opinions filter what you see. You can do anything, but you can't do everything; test broadly, then focus.

Move from visibility to participation. Roll up your sleeves. March in parades, play (or at least appear) at golf tournaments, volunteer, speak when asked. Participation amplifies presence and accelerates connection. Leaders are never above doing what's needed; being there—physically—matters more than statements or slogans.

Then progress from participation to sponsorship. Back community success: sponsor business excellence awards, tournaments, festivals, and niche events across your footprint. Sponsorship expands brand visibility and, more importantly, gives you the microphone to share your values, mission, and vision in rooms that already care. Over time you stop being “the new president” and become “from the college.” That shift is the signal you're embedded.

Keep multiple channels warm between face-to-face moments—emails, thank-you cards, social posts, calls, voice messages—but remember: nothing beats in-person engagement. Presence is noticed, appreciated, and remembered, especially because everyone knows your time is scarce.

Quantity leads to quality. After each appearance, reflect: What was the return on time? Did we meet new stakeholders, surface partnerships, or strengthen trust? Which events changed the community's narrative about us? Keep the winners; drop the rest; remain broadly visible.

Be consistent and genuine. Use your EQ radar so you communicate with empathy and respect. Share who you are, what you do, and why you're there; then learn the same about others. When people hear themselves in what you say, collaboration follows.

Results follow presence. With active, visible engagement across our communities, enrollment rose—including a campus that hit its best numbers in seven years. The principle is simple: show up, engage, connect. Visibility is a vital investment and the critical first step in community engagement. Showing up is not all of leadership, but it counts for a lot.

Chapter 5 • What Does Your Community Value?

“No more status quo” is a fine mandate only if you first know what your community actually values. My early mistake was assuming I could import “blockbuster” partnerships from a previous post. I hadn't yet learned the place. With multiple campuses, priorities differ town to town. Until you know what matters locally, you can't engage effectively.

Start by being visible and listening. Resist painting every community with the same brush. Spend time on the ground. Learn local history, economic cycles, civic calendars, and who shows up where. Follow organizations online, but don't stop there—walk Main Street, attend council, chamber, and sector meetings, and keep one-on-one conversations flowing.

Map influencers and connectors: mayors, economic development officers, chamber board members, donors, sponsors, elected officials, school leaders, employers. Use warm introductions and, when needed, “cold-call” with humility. Ask simple, direct questions and then be quiet long enough to hear the real answers. Prefer one-on-one over committees and focus groups; busy people don't want another standing meeting, and groups can skew feedback. Pair hard data (plans, surveys, finances) with soft intelligence (what people actually say and signal).

Listen for common denominators. A frequent through-line is access to services—education included. Make “What can we do for you?” your default posture. Then fill needs, small to large: open facilities when civic space is scarce; align programs to workforce gaps; add student housing where access blocks enrollment; remove practical barriers (like childcare) by partnering and building capacity. When locals can learn and live where they are, retention rises and communities stabilize.

Expect simultaneous histories. Different stakeholders will tell conflicting versions of “what happened.” Don't adjudicate in the moment. Stay nonjudgmental, verify facts as needed, and keep asking until the picture is clear enough to act. Reframe what you've heard and reflect it back to ensure you've understood.

Anchor everything in shared values. Cooperation that is rooted in values strengthens relationships. Find the one thing everyone can support and build from there. When initiatives align with what the community values and with your institution's values,

momentum compounds: community pride grows, partnerships deepen, brand relevance returns, and results follow.

Be here, now—not there, then. Don't chase headlines or try to win innovation awards by replicating last year's success from somewhere else. Serve this community's priorities, even when the work is quiet and unglamorous. Avoid assumptions. Learn by showing up, observing, asking, and listening.

Chapter 6 • Identify Your Potential Partners

Partnerships are essential to progress and foundational to your network and support system. Disconnection from the community you're meant to serve should be taken as a warning light. You need friends.

Identify the needs of your workforce and respond with education and training. If you lack street cred in a sector, pair your strong regional brand with a partner's subject-matter credibility. One plus one equals three when complementary strengths align. Use that blueprint repeatedly across sectors: research, show up, connect, and launch together.

Work a deliberate progression: show up for visibility, participate by presenting, sponsor events to earn the microphone, then join committees and boards so you can help shape the plan. As results compound, opportunities begin to come to you. Choose collaborations that are most likely to be mutually beneficial.

Think symbiosis. Know what you want from a partnership, how you'll measure success, and which metrics matter. Reputation counts, but missions, definitions of success, and values alignment matter more. Ask who they are, what they stand for, and whether your vision, mission, and values align.

Treat partnership-building as a survival skill. In publicly funded education, partnerships let both sides

maximize resources, build economies of scale, and leverage collective intelligence—the difference between scaling back services and multiplying them. Broaden your playbook by studying partnership models and best practices.

Communicate early and often. Run regular temperature checks: what's working, what needs adjusting, and what problems you can get in front of. Take your partners' success and satisfaction at least as seriously as your own; that's how you become a partner of choice.

To identify partners, explore your community systematically. Map stakeholders. Start with existing friends—elected officials, donors, sponsors—and test the health of those ties. Cultivate economic development officers and chamber boards. Attend municipal and regional meetings to hear priorities firsthand. Prefer one-to-one conversations over councils and focus groups; handshakes and candid dialogue produce unvarnished truth and accelerate trust.

Use your EQ radar. Stay aware and responsive. You're sensing your way forward in the dark—move carefully, avoid stubbing toes, adjust quickly.

Make your brand attractive to collaborators. Demonstrate clear value. Show where passions align and how the collaboration will enhance your partner's brand and standing, and be explicit about the benefits you're seeking as well. Remember: people choose to work with your organization—or not—because of you. You are the face of your organization, and the culture you create heavily influences your appeal to potential partners.

Chapter 7 • Put Out the Welcome Mat

When I arrive at a new institution, I look for one thing: are our spaces alive? Empty rooms are missed

chances for connection, access, and inclusion. Being visible in the community is necessary, but seeing the community in our spaces is equally important. We have to enable access, open our doors, and put out the welcome mat.

Start with intent, not hype. Do a soft launch. Quietly open selected spaces to people already close to you—staff, existing partners, aligned nonprofits—so you can work out the bugs before inviting everyone. Begin small (a boardroom for community boards, a gym for youth leagues) and expand as your processes improve. Prioritize activities that align with your values and complement your programs; that fit makes operations smoother and reinforces your mission.

Move from occasional use to predictable cadence. Aim for recurring events so the public begins to associate times of year and signature activities with your campus. Build a calendar that mixes education-adjacent programming (competitions, festivals, visiting lectures) with inclusive community gatherings (multicultural celebrations, Indigenous events, local awards). Predictability creates habit; habit builds belonging.

Treat event hosting as a progression: visibility, participation, collaboration, sponsorship. At first, simply welcome and support. As comfort grows, partner more deliberately and co-own outcomes. Hosting chambers, school competitions, arts presenters, and civic forums gives you a platform to share your value proposition with business, students, and families—your current and future customers.

Measure returns differently. Busy spaces aren't always about immediate rental revenue. Think alternate capital: brand recognition, reputation enhancement, goodwill, and a growing network of community stewards. Track it. Before and after you open up, monitor awareness, applications, enrollments, donor touches, social mentions, partner inquiries, and repeat bookings. Use data to tell the story.

Onboard your own people. Explain the why. Some will worry about traffic or mission drift. Be transparent: we exist to serve our communities; opening facilities advances access and strengthens our brand. The last thing you want is for visitors to be met with a cold shoulder. A welcoming culture is part of the welcome mat.

Remember that customers have choices. Students are customers too. Openness and access keep you in the running. Host, co-sponsor, collaborate, and lend resources freely. Busy halls, full parking lots, and a community that sees your campus as its gathering place are leading indicators of brand strength. Put out the welcome mat, keep it out, and let a living campus do what empty rooms never will: make you a trusted community asset.

PART 3 • Cultivating Internal Culture

Chapter 8 • Company Culture Matters

In the interim dean role at Protest University, it became clear fast: I had inherited an employee engagement issue. Stress leaves, grievances, high-profile departures, closed doors, uneasy hallways. We had a culture problem, and culture eats strategy for breakfast.

Declining enrollments and a 40 percent staff reduction left people dejected, uncertain, and distrustful. Those who remained walked past empty offices and wondered if they'd be next. When employees feel disconnected from mission, vision, and values, or feel like they don't matter, your brand is at risk. Staff can be your biggest champions, your brand ambassadors, or not. Employees come first. If you take care of employees, they will take care of the clients.

So I started by listening and removing signals of hierarchy. I turned on the EQ radar, opened my door and then made sure I was actually in it. I redesigned the office to be psychologically safe: the power desk went, a round table arrived, matching chairs, natural light, softer art, tissues in the middle. I set weekly office hours, no appointment required. Nothing was too small: temperature, trash pickup, marketing ideas, changing learner profiles. I listened, reframed, and followed up. Doors across the unit began to

open. Conversations replaced whispers. Trust started to build.

We invested in culture. A social committee organized potlucks, milestones, health challenges, office pools, and low-key after-hours gatherings. I showed up briefly to signal support, then got out of the way so people could connect. We added professional development and wellness back into the budget. We gave the gift of time at the holidays—an afternoon people could use however they wished. Actions matched words.

Culture matters because it compounds. Internal community strengthens external community. When employees see their organization investing in its people and its place, belonging and pride grow. Recruitment and retention improve. Engagement rises. Social harmony supports effective teamwork; effective teamwork drives results. Values plus behavior equals culture, and behavior must be modeled by the leader. Employees are always watching.

The outcomes followed. Grievances subsided. Hallway energy shifted. Managers mirrored the approach. We moved from partner of choice to employer of choice; candidates said they applied because of our culture and community engagement. Financials followed suit, from deficits to surpluses.

Company culture matters, there's no denying this. So make values, empathy, and humanity central. Build psychologically safe spaces. Formalize connection. Reward and recognize. Invest in learning and wellness. Explain the why, over and over. And model the behavior you expect. A healthy, caring culture radiates outward—and it drives performance.

Chapter 9 • Lead By Example

People watch how you show up. A friendly walk to a meeting room from our information desk said more about our culture than any slogan. That's the point: model the behavior you want to see. Social harmony beats raw IQ when it comes to team success, and leaders set the tone. I greeted guests at the door, walked them to rooms, and showed, rather than told, how we represent the college.

I haven't always gotten it right. Early in the pandemic, some business functions needed staff on-site. We ordered essential workers back without clearly explaining why. Fear spiked, resentment grew, and my "just get it done" default only made things worse. I called a meeting, slowed the pace, listened without defensiveness, and let people say exactly how they felt. Then I owned it. I apologized, explained the rationale I should've shared from day one, and laid out concrete steps: weekly check-ins just for essential staff, clearer communication, and hybrid options where possible. Lesson learned: don't hide the "why," and don't ask people to do what you wouldn't. If you can't stand beside them, find other ways to show up—consistently.

First impressions matter. When I arrived at a new department and found my office packed with boxes, I could've barked. Instead I laughed, thanked the team, and focused on solving it together. That small choice signaled who I was and what I expected: calm, gratitude, and action.

Presence matters in crisis, too. When a burst sprinkler flooded our performing arts center on a brutally cold morning, I went to the lot before sunrise and personally briefed each arriving student and colleague at their car window. Others joined in. Your actions call others to action.

Make leading by example a daily habit. Greet people. Say thank you—a lot. When you make a mistake, own it fast, explain what you'll do differently, and follow through.

Walk your talk, model what you expect, and your team will follow.

Chapter 10 • Values-Based Hiring

Think like a scouting department: always be looking. Great teams don't wait for a vacancy; they track talent constantly, weighing skill and leadership, not just stats. Every vacancy is an opportunity—but only if you hire for alignment, not just a résumé. I learned the hard way that hiring solely for competencies builds disjointed teams. One "on-paper" hire quickly fueled an us-versus-them mindset and set back our one-college vision. Undoing the damage took years. Without shared values, alignment is impossible.

So we started hiring for values fit and cultural add. Our job ads went beyond duties to the kind of person we were seeking—their essential character. I made myself available for one-on-one calls with anyone considering applying. Casual conversations revealed voice, motives, and fit—and saved time by screening in and out early. I also shoulder-tapped promising people with a clear commitment to a fair, transparent process.

We diversified hiring committees: not just the supervisor and HR, but peers, cross-functional partners, and at least one person below the role. The perspectives were richer, and the conversation kept circling

back to our values, voice, and vision. With finalists, we added an unhurried meal. Over food, values surface.

Onboarding became the final, critical step. Day one was about people and place: walking the campus, quick hallway introductions, coffee at the busy café, stops at services they'd rely on, and drop-ins with senior leaders. I used those moments to model expectations and reinforce one message: "The greatest investment you can make is in yourself." I'll support development—even if it eventually points you elsewhere. Train people well enough so they can leave; treat them well enough so they don't want to.

Keep the honeymoon mindset. After the offer, keep showing up with coaching, resources, and real inclusion so the spark doesn't fade.

Hire for heart and skill. Seek shared values. Nurture diversity and inclusion. Invest in growth. The process is a two-way street: candidates choose you as much as you choose them. Get the right people on your bus.

Chapter 11 • Communication and Celebration

We never won community by accident; we talked our way into it—and then we celebrated it. Just like in real estate, where it's location, location, location, in leadership it's communication, communication, communication. People need to feel a part of, not apart. Armed with information, they invest mentally and emotionally.

I kept a communication utility belt: quick all-employee emails for transparency and small wins; short, agenda-less Monday huddles where each person shared last week, this week, and asks; monthly "state of the union" updates—*Coffee with Brad*—opening with mingling, then a concise briefing, shout-outs, and Q-and-A. Early on, few asked questions, so I planted one to break the ice. Soon the Q-and-A matched the briefing in length. When budgets cut

hospitality, we rebranded to *Tap Water with Brad* and addressed the real fear, layoffs, openly. During the pandemic, we shifted to weekly *Social Distancing with Brad*, same goals: communication, celebration, connection, community. With six campus regions spread over a vast area, I added photos from the road and virtual *Brews with Brad* to keep everyone seeing the same picture.

The point was always the same: don't let silence write the story. "If you don't communicate," a mentor reminded me, "your employees will fill the gaps with their own stories." So we filled the gaps often and simply, with consistent, human voices.

Communication opened the door; celebration kept people walking through it. We recognized progress in real time—names named, gratitude expressed. Birthdays on the main stage. Acknowledgments in emails. Applause in meetings for colleagues who stepped up that week. Over time, the tone shifted from "I need help" to "Thanks to X for jumping in," and then to "We've already coordinated Y."

As trust rose, communication got easier. We invited adjacent teams into each other's meetings, shared perspectives, and normalized seeing folks talking across the lobby, the hallways, even each other's offices. Eventually, that cross-talk turned into results—program growth, stronger attendance, and, yes, an Effective Team Award. The trophy mattered less than what it represented: a "we" mindset.

Communication and celebration are not add-ons; they are the work. Share news persistently. Discuss transparently. Make time for dialogue. Recognize accomplishments. Foster fun and camaraderie. Keep the drumbeat steady and the spotlight warm. Do that, and people stop guarding turf and start owning outcomes—together.