The Ideal Team Player

THE SUMMARY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The Three Virtues of an Ideal Team Player

For organizations seriously committed to making teamwork a cultural reality, I'm convinced that "the right people" are the ones who have these three virtues in common — humility, hunger, and people smarts. I refer to these as virtues because the word *virtue* is a synonym for the nouns *quality* and *asset*, but it also connotes the idea of integrity and morality.

HUMBLE — Great team players lack excessive ego or concerns about status. They are quick to point out the contributions of others and slow to seek attention for their own. They share credit, emphasize team over self, and define success collectively rather than individually. It is no surprise then, that humility is the single greatest and most indispensable attribute of being a team player.

What's so amazing is that so many leaders who value teamwork will tolerate people who aren't humble. They see arrogant behavior in an employee and fail to confront it, often citing that person's individual contributions as an excuse. The problem, of course, is that leaders aren't considering the effect that an arrogant, self-centered person has on the overall performance of the team.

The most obvious kind is the overtly arrogant people who make everything about themselves. They are easy to identify because they tend to boast and soak up attention. This is the classically ego-driven type and it diminishes teamwork by fostering resentment, division, and politics.

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The other kind tends to discount their own talents and contributions, and so others mistakenly see them as humble. But this is not humility. C.S. Lewis: "Humility isn't thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less." A person who has a disproportionately deflated sense of self-worth often hurts teams by not advocating for their own ideas or by failing to call attention to problems that they see.

HUNGRY — Hungry people are always looking for more. More things to do. More to learn. More responsibility to take on. Hungry people almost never have to be pushed by a manager to work harder because they are self-motivated and diligent. They are constantly thinking about the next step and the next opportunity.

It's not difficult to understand why hungry people are great to have on a team, but it's important to realize that some types of hunger are not good for a team and are even unhealthy. In some people, hunger can be directed in a selfish way that is not for the good of the team but for the individual. And in some people, hunger can be taken to an extreme where work becomes too important and dominates their life. I'm referring to a healthy kind of hunger—a manageable and sustainable commitment to doing a job well and going above and beyond when it is truly required.

Unfortunately, undiscerning team leaders too often hire unproductive, dispassionate people because these candidates know how to falsely project a sense of hunger during standard interviews. As a result, those leaders find themselves spending inordinate amounts of time trying to motivate, punish, or dismiss non-hungry team members once they're on board.

SMART — This is not about intellectual capacity. In the context of a team, *smart* simply refers to a person's common sense about people. Smart people are interpersonally appropriate and aware. They tend to know what is happening in a group situation and how to deal with others in the most effective way. They ask good questions, listen to what others are saying, and stay engaged in conversations intently.

Smart people have good judgment and intuition, and understand the impact of their words and actions—so they don't say and do things, or fail to say and do things, without knowing the likely responses of their colleagues.

THE THREE VIRTUES COMBINED — If you're thinking that these three virtues seem somewhat obvious, I would be the first to agree with you. What makes humble, hungry, and smart powerful and unique is not the individual attributes themselves, but rather the requirement of all three. If even one is missing in a team member, teamwork becomes significantly more difficult, and sometimes not possible.

The History of the Model

Back in 1977, a group of colleagues and I started our management consulting firm, The Table Group. Because we had worked together in a department I led in a previous company, we had an easy time agreeing on our core values: humble, hungry, and smart. We committed to hiring only people who embodied these concepts and avoid making any operational or strategic decisions that violated them.

We asked ourselves the question, *Could a person fully practice the five behaviors at the heart of teamwork if he or she didn't buy into the idea of being humble, hungry, and smart?*

The answer was a resounding *no.*

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A person who is not humble will not be able to be vulnerable and build trust, making them unable to engage in honest conflict and hold others accountable. And they'll have a hard time committing to decisions that don't serve their interests.

A colleague who lacks hunger will not be willing to engage in uncomfortable conflict, hold peers accountable for their behaviors, or do whatever it takes to achieve results, choosing instead to take an easier path.

And a person who is not smart about people will most likely create unnecessary problems in the entire teambuilding process, especially when it comes to tactfully engaging in productive conflict and holding people accountable for behaviors.

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The intersection of three overlapping circles represents the ideal team player. That is not to imply that a person in the middle section—combining humble, hungry and smart—will be consistently perfect in all of these virtues, or in any one of them, for that matter. No one is perfect. These are not permanent characteristics embedded in a person's DNA; rather, they are developed and maintained through life experiences and personal choices at home and at work.

When team members are adequately strong in each of these areas, they enable teamwork and overcome the five dysfunctions of a team. That means they'll be more likely to be vulnerable and build trust, engage in productive but uncomfortable conflict with team members, commit to group decisions even if they initially disagree, hold their peers accountable when they see performance gaps that can be addressed, and put the results of the team ahead of their own needs.

When people are 0 for 3:

Only humble, hungry, and smart people can do those things without a great deal of coaching. Those who don't have any of the three virtues are going to require significantly more time, attention, and patience from their managers.

When people are 1 for 3:

Those who lack all three qualities, who are markedly deficient in humility, hunger and people smarts, have little chance of being valuable team members.

People who are only humble but not at all hungry or smart are "pawns" on a team. They often get left out of conversations and activities, and have little impact on the performance of a team.

People who are hungry but not at all humble or smart are "bulldozers" who are determined to get things done, but with a focus on their own interests and no understanding or concern how their actions impact others.

People who are smart but sorely lacking in humility and hunger are "charmers" with little interest in the long-term well-being of the team or their colleagues.

When people are 2 for 3:

People who are humble and hungry but decidedly not smart are the "accidental mess-makers." They inadvertently create interpersonal problems on teams because they don't understand how others receive their words and actions.

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People who are humble and smart but not adequately hungry are the "lovable slackers." They tend to do only as much as they are asked, rarely seek to take on more work, and have limited passion for the work the team is doing.

People who are hungry and smart but lack humility are the "skillful politicians." They are cleverly ambitious and willing to work extremely hard, but only in as much as it will benefit them personally. They may portray themselves as being humble, but create a trail of destruction among their more humble colleagues who have been manipulated, discouraged and scarred.

WARNING — Wrongly labeling a team member can be damaging, and so be careful about labeling team members who are truly ideal team players simply because they are *relatively* stronger in one of the three areas. Reserve these classifications only for people who are significantly lacking in one or more of the three traits. Remember the real purpose of identifying these types is not to pigeonhole people but to understand them, so we can recognize or develop them on our teams.

When people are 3 for 3:

Ideal team players possess adequate measures of humility, hunger and people smarts. They have little ego when it comes to needing attention or credit for their contributions and are comfortable sharing accolades. They work with a sense of energy, passion, and personal responsibility. They say and do the right things to help teammates feel appreciated, understood, and included.

Application #1: HIRING

The most reliable way to ensure that teamwork takes hold in an organization would be to hire only ideal team players. This may be neither possible nor practical, since most leaders don't have the luxury of creating their teams from scratch. But all leaders can certainly do their best to recruit, select, and hire people who are humble, hungry, and smart when an opportunity arises.

There is no perfectly reliable diagnostic tool for accurately identifying and selecting people who are humble, hungry and smart, but by doing thorough interviewing and selective reference checking, a manager can hire people with a high degree of confidence they'll be ideal team players.

The most important part of interviewing for team players is simply knowing which answers and behaviors are the best indicators of humility, hunger and people smarts and then making the interviews as revealing as possible.

Don't be so generic in your interviews that they provide little or no insight into the specific attributes. Being specific about targeted behaviors is critical.

When a handful of people are conducting their own interviews, don't wait to talk about what you've learned until after the entire round of interviews is complete. Debrief quickly after each interview. For instance, if the first two interviewers agree that the candidate is hungry and smart, the third can take more time to focus directly on humility.

Consider interviewing as a group, which allows for more effective debriefing. That also gives you a sense of how the candidate deals with multiple people at once, which is a critical skill on a team.

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Make interviews nontraditional—moving away from the same stilted, rehearsed, and predictable conversations they were forty years ago. I believe that interviews should incorporate interaction with diverse groups of people in everyday situations and that they should be longer than forty-five minutes. I like to get out of the office with a candidate and see him deal with people in an unstructured environment.

Asking an interviewee a question once often yields a generically acceptable answer. Asking the question again in a different way might get you a different answer. If you're not sold on the response, ask a third time in a more specific way, and you will often get a more honest answer.

Instead of asking a candidate to self-assess a given behavior or characteristic, ask them what *others* would say about them. For example, instead of asking someone if he is humble, ask, "If I were to ask your colleagues to assess your level of humility, what would they say? There is just something about having to answer on behalf of another person that makes a candidate more honest.

In some situations, you may be able to give candidates a simulated work project to see how they perform in real-world situations.

If you have a doubt about a person's humility, hunger, or smarts, don't ignore your hunch. Erring on the side of assuming that a person has all three virtues of a team player is a bad idea. While it's never possible to have *complete* confidence in a hire, don't ignore red flags.

One of my favorite ways to ensure that I'm hiring people who are humble, hungry, and smart is to come right out and tell them that these are requirements for the job. Let him know you are absolutely, fanatically committed to these principles and if he does not share that commitment, he will be miserable working there. Many people will try to get a job even knowing that they don't fit the company's stated values, but very few will do so if they know they're going to be held accountable day in and day out for behavior that violates the values to the extent that they'd eventually dread coming to work.

Interview Questions: Humble

- "Tell me about the most important accomplishments of your career."

- "What was the most embarrassing moment in your career? Or the biggest failure?"

- "How did you handle that embarrassment or failure?"

- "What is your greatest weakness?"

- "How do you handle apologies, either giving or accepting them?"

- "Tell me about someone who is better than you in an area that really matters to you."

- *Interview Questions: Hungry*

- "What is the hardest you've ever worked on something in your life?"

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- "What do you like to do when you're not working?"

- "Did you work hard when you were a teenager?

- "What kinds of hours do you generally work?"

Interview Questions: Smart

Smart is difficult to discern by asking a specific question. What is most important is observing her general behavior during an interview process and the way she answers questions. Some people can mask social awkwardness during a rehearsed interview.

- "How would you describe your personality?"

- "What do you do that others in your personal life might find annoying?"

- "What kind of people annoy you the most, and how do you deal with them?"

- "Would your former colleagues describe you as an empathetic person?" or "Can you give me an example of how you've demonstrated empathy to a teammate?"

Perhaps the most important question that interviewers can ask to ascertain whether a candidate is smart is one that they should ask themselves: Would I want to work with this person every day? Smart candidates generally seem to be the kind of people you'd enjoy spending time with on a regular basis.

Candidate References

Beyond the actual interview, one of the other ways to get information as to whether a person will be an ideal team player—as tired and limited as it may seem—is to do reference checks on candidates.

It is critical that a reference does not feel he is holding the future of the candidate in his hands. Ask the reference to serve as a consultant, one whose job it is to ensure that there is a fit that will benefit everyone.

Ask for three or four adjectives that best describe the candidate, and ask about specific behaviors and how the candidate compared to other people the reference has managed or worked with.

Explore areas that you are unclear about relating to the candidate. If you're really clear on humility and smarts, probe specifically for hunger.

Pay attention when reference givers do not respond to your requests for a reference. It's possible they aren't enthusiastic about the candidate.

Ask the reference what others would say about the candidate. That allows them to feel like they aren't bad-mouthing the candidate, but at the same time makes it easier to share important information.

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Application #2: Assessing Current Employees

Another extremely important application of the ideal team player model is the assessment or evaluation of current employees. There are three outcomes—confirm the employee is ideal, help the employee improve, or decide to move the employee out.

Thankfully, humility, hunger, and smarts are not inherent traits, but rather they can be adopted by people with the desire to embrace them.

What happens when a manager can't decide if an employee has the will or ability to improve? My preference, and my recommendation, is to err on the side of caution and keep working with the employee. Why? Because I believe it is a tragedy to lose an employee for the wrong reasons. Not only does it create an unnecessarily painful situation for that person, but it also robs the team of a potentially valuable contributor. But do not misread my advice as permission to tolerate people who don't fit. Too often, leaders fail to act because they lack courage.

Manager Assessment: Humble

- Does he genuinely compliment or praise teammates without hesitation?
- Does she easily admit when she makes a mistake?
- Is he willing to take on lower-level work for the good of the team?
- Does she gladly share credit for team accomplishments?
- Does he readily acknowledge his weaknesses?
- Does she offer and receive apologies graciously?

Manager Assessment: Hungry

- Does he do more than what is required in his own job?
- Does she have passion for the "mission" of the team?
- Does he feel a sense of personal responsibility for the overall success of the team?
- Is she willing to contribute to and think about work outside of office hours?
- Is he willing and eager to take on tedious and challenging tasks whenever necessary?
- Does she look for opportunities to contribute outside of her area of responsibility?

Manager Assessment: Smart

- Does he seem to know what teammates are feeling during meetings and interactions?
- Does she show empathy to others on the team?
- Does he demonstrate an interest in the lives of teammates?

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- Is she an active listener?

- Is he aware of how his words and actions impact others on the team?

- Is she good at adjusting her behavior and style to fit the nature of a conversation or relationship?

An ideal team player will merit a "yes" answer to almost every one of these questions. Remember, we're looking for ideal team players, not adequate ones. A good team player must not only have the right attitude, but must demonstrate the right behaviors in a way that others see and understand.

I believe that the most effective way to assess employees is often to ask them to evaluate themselves. This isn't always the case, but the vast majority of employees really are willing to own up to their limitations, as long as the process is aimed at improvement instead of punishment. This self-assessment approach is preferable because it allows employees to take ownership for their areas of development, and it minimizes the possibility of defensiveness and denial.

Direct questions are good but can seem a little overwhelming given the politics or sensitivity on a team. A gentler approach to assessment is to ask team members to simply rank the three virtues for themselves, starting with the one they feel they demonstrate most clearly, followed by the second, and then the third. This allows everyone to call out their relative weakness without having to admit the extent of that weakness, and it provides a place to begin development.

I'm not a big proponent of formal peer evaluations in general. The process is fraught with potential for misunderstanding, politics, and unnecessary pain. My opposition is even stronger when it comes to assessing peers on the basis of humility, hunger, or people smarts. Having said that, I believe that the most powerful activity that occurs around any assessment is peer discussion. Sitting down as a group and having teammates reveal and discuss their own relative weaknesses related to humble, hungry, and smart is a powerful way to ensure that all of this will lead to change and that teammates will be one another's best coaches.

Application #3: Developing Employees Who Are Lacking in One or More of the Virtues.

The most important part of the development process, and the part that is so often missing, is the leader's commitment to constantly "reminding" an employee if she is not yet doing what is needed. Without this, improvement will not occur.

Why don't most managers do it? Because it's uncomfortable. No one likes telling a person for the fifth week in a row that she still isn't working hard enough or isn't dealing with colleagues in a socially appropriate way. It's unpleasant and it's awkward, and yet, it's what a manager must do.

When a manager steps up to this challenge, week after week after painful week, one of two things will almost always happen. The employee will break through, and be in her manager's debt forever. Or she will finally decide that being humble or hungry or smart is not her thing, and she'll decide on her own to leave. But this requires that the manager not shirk her responsibility to constantly, repeatedly, kindly, constantly (yes, I said it twice) let the employee know that he's got to get better.

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Even people who aren't terribly deficient can benefit from improving one or more of the virtues in their lives. And because they're hungry, they're probably going to be looking for ways to improve anyway.

Once everyone understands that it is merely a developmental opportunity, the best approach is to often use other ideal team members as a stable of coaches. Get the members who are stronger in humility to coach those who would like to improve in this area.

Developing Humility

Humility is the most sensitive of the three virtues, which is why the process of improving in this area is often the most psychologically nuanced. That's because the source of a lack of humility is always related in some way to insecurity, which often goes back to childhood and family issues. Without getting too deep in psychological analysis or therapy, it is often extremely helpful for a person to identify where her struggle with humility comes from, and can greatly improve her ability to be coached.

Beyond identifying and admitting the cause of their challenge, people who lack humility can make progress simply by acting like they are humble. By intentionally forcing themselves to compliment others, admit their mistakes and weaknesses, and take an interest in colleagues, employees can begin to experience the liberation of humility. This happens because they suddenly realize that focusing on others does not detract from their own happiness, but rather adds to it. After all, humility is the most attractive and central of all virtues.

The best way is to have teammates coach the employee. There is nothing like having a teammate say, "Hey, I really appreciate that you've been so encouraging lately. And your concern for me personally has made a real difference." I would challenge anyone who hears that from a colleague to claim that it doesn't make him want to continue that behavior.

Another important aspect of development for an employee is knowing that his manager values humility and does her best to demonstrate it. Even if the manager struggles, her willingness to admit it and continue working on it will go a long way toward encouraging the employee to do the same.

Developing Hunger

Hunger is the least sensitive and nuanced of the three virtues. The bad news is, based on my experience, it's the hardest to change.

While it is tempting for an employee to downplay his lack of hunger, it's difficult for him to deny it over time because of the behaviorally observable, and often measurable, nature of the virtue. From work rate and output to goal achievement and hours worked, it's not hard to demonstrate to an employee that he seems less hungry than his colleagues. Getting him to actually become hungry is difficult. Remember, it's not merely a matter of increasing his output. It's about actually transforming the employee so that he can ultimately come to embody the idea of going above and beyond and no longer needing extra prodding and reminding.

For some people, being less hungry than others has its benefits. More free time. Less responsibility. More emphasis on other, more preferred activities. That isn't to say that someone who prefers these things is a bad person. But quite often, he is a bad team member.

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The key is to find out which people who lack hunger really like being that way and which don't, and then to support the ones who want to change, and to lovingly help the others find a job that doesn't require hunger.

The first and most important part of helping that person become hungry is to find a way to connect her to the importance of the work being done. All too often, employees struggle to become hungry because they don't understand the connection between what they do and the impact it has on others, be they customers, vendors, or other employees.

Asking someone to be a more engaged and invested team member won't do much if that employee doesn't think the work she does matters to someone. And no, wanting to keep her job isn't the kind of motivation that turns a lethargic employee into a lively one.

The most effective way to do this is as a team. When a slightly non-hungry employee hears his colleagues describe their motivation and connection to the mission, he may get "infected" by his teammates passion, or at least realize that he plays an important role in helping them fulfill their passion.

Another indispensable part of developing hunger in an employee is to set clear behavioral expectations for them and then hold them accountable for those expectations. For example, it's one thing to specify how much production you expect from someone in order for her to keep her job. It's another thing entirely to tell her that you expect her to help her colleagues make their numbers by doing whatever they need, including taking on some additional responsibilities, working more hours, or doing additional research into problems until they are solved.

An employee who prefers not to be hungry will recoil at this, and perhaps should be lovingly helped to find a job somewhere that doesn't require her to be hungry. An employee who deep down inside wants to be hungry will respond to clearer expectations with resolve.

Tough love is the answer. Managers and teammates will need to overcome their reticence to call out non-hungry teammates when they see behaviors that they need to change. Waiting until a performance review is not only irresponsible, but cruel.

Finally, when a non-hungry employee starts to exhibit signs of hunger, praise her publicly and have teammates do the same. Will it seem like you're rewarding her for behavior that is merely expected of everyone else? Yes, but she needs it more than anyone else, and they know it. Might she be slightly embarrassed? Who cares!

Developing Smarts

Anyone who lacks in this area most likely wants to improve. The key to helping someone become smarter is to make it clear, to everyone involved, that a deficiency in this area is not about intention.

Employees who lack people smarts have no desire to create interpersonal problems with their teammates. They just don't understand the nuances of interpersonal situations, and they don't seem to realize how their words and actions impact others.

A person who has trouble being smart with people can be likened to a pet. Like a puppy being trained, he needs to be quickly and lovingly rapped on the nose with a newspaper whenever he does something non-smart.

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I mean it when I say quickly and lovingly: "Hey, Bob, this is the part in the meeting where you should thank her for what she did." Or, "Bob, the next time you have an issue with my team, you might not want to send an e-mail, and if you do, run it by someone who can help you put a nice greeting and closing at the beginning and end. They were really annoyed last night, but I explained that you didn't mean it that way."

If this sounds rudimentary or even juvenile, that's okay. And if he is sincerely interested in getting better, he'll thank you for it. It fact, it will become a source of humor and bonding for him and the team.

Application #4: Embedding the Model into an Organization's Culture

I believe that teamwork is not a virtue, but rather a choice. It's a strategic decision and an intentional one, which means that it's not for everyone.

Having said that, I must admit that it's hard for me to imagine a company not wanting to experience the benefits of teamwork. But it takes considerable time and effort to make teamwork more than just a break room poster.

I wouldn't want a leader to do what I am going to recommend here if he or she isn't really committed to a culture of teamwork—the kind that attracts ideal team players. So, for those organizations that are sincere about humility, hunger, and smarts, here are a few simple ideas for embedding those virtues into your culture.

Be Explicit and Bold

Leaders who believe teamwork is important and expect their people to be humble, hungry, and smart should come right out and say so. They should tell everyone. Employees. Vendors. Partners. Customers. Prospective customers. Prospective employees. Everyone.

You know what kind of organizations are explicit about building a strong culture? The successful ones.

Catch and Revere

Leaders who want to create a culture of humility, hunger, and people smarts in their organization should be constantly on the lookout for any displays of those virtues. And when they see those displays they should hold them up as examples for everyone to see.

The point of praise is not only to reinforce the behavior in that employee, but also to reinforce it in everyone else. I've found that, in most cases, managers greatly underestimate the impact that a comment or quick gesture of approval has on employees. No balloons, pastries, or plastic tchotchkes are necessary, just genuine, in the moment appreciation.

Detect and Address

The last simple step in embedding humility, hunger, and smarts into your organization is something that any parent or coach would tell you is critical. Whenever you see a behavior that violates one of the values, take the time to let the violator know that his behavior is out of line.

And don't just do it in egregious situations. Often, the smaller offenses are the one that are harder for employees to see and the ones they learn from the most. Of course, doing this well requires tact and good judgment. Great cultures tend to be appropriately intolerant of certain behaviors, and great teams should be quick and tactful in addressing any lack of humility, hunger, and people smarts.

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Connecting the Ideal Team Player Model with the Five Dysfunctions of a Team

Some who have read *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* might be wondering how that book and model fit with this one. I am glad to say that the two models complement one another. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* focuses on how individual team members become a cohesive team.

(A team dysfunctions when there is an absence of trust, a fear of honest conflict, a lack of clarity, an avoidance of mutual accountability, and an emphasis on individual credit over collective success.)

This book focuses on the how the virtues of an individual team member make him more likely to overcome the dysfunctions that derail teams. For example, a person who grows in humility is going to be much better at demonstrating vulnerability than a person who is arrogant, insecure, and egotistical. Similarly, a person who improves in people smarts will have an easier time engaging in productive conflict, knowing how to read and understand teammates, and adjusting words and behaviors appropriately.

When team members improve their abilities to be humble, hungry, or smart, they'll be able to make more progress in overcoming the five dysfunctions on a regular basis.

A Final Thought—Beyond Work Teams

Over the past twenty years, it has become clear to me that humility, hunger, and people smarts have relevance outside of the workplace. A humble, hungry, and smart spouse, parent, friend, or neighbor is going to be a more effective, inspiring, and attractive person—one that draws others to them and serves others better.