

# Why Teams Work

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Stop and think about what makes you marvel.

My guess is—not much. It takes a lot to “wow” us today. However, I bet I know something that moves you every time you see it. Outstanding teamwork. After informally polling hundreds of people during my travels around the world, I discovered the most inspiring act is the sight of a group of people who, over time, become a team and pull off something they could’ve never achieved as a set of individuals. Consider the man-made wonders of the world. They inspire us because we know they required teamwork. None of them could have been built alone:

- The Pyramids in Egypt.
- The Great Wall of China.
- The Eiffel Tower in France.

While we all love stories of rugged individual accomplishment, we celebrate even more the achievement of teams. Case in point. LeBron James already enjoyed personal achievement with the Cleveland Cavaliers, winning the MVP trophy twice. He moved to Miami because he wanted a championship more than a trophy. It’s been said so much its cliché, but it’s still true: everyone wants to be part of something bigger than they are.

I believe authentic teamwork is stunning to us because while we understand the psychology of it—we experience it less than in the past. Our lives often don’t reflect that we even need each other. Why is genuine teamwork rare?

1. Few great NCAA athletes remain in college a full four years. It’s difficult to experience rich teamwork in a short amount of time.
2. Professional sports foster a “free agent mindset” which prevents players from mentally settling into one team or franchise. Few lay down roots.
3. Great athletes have agents that lobby for individual benefits and rewards, not for team or shared rewards. It’s all about the individual not the whole.
4. Parents push for their own kid to get the limelight or the big break; few see the big picture and teach the honor of playing any part of something bigger.

## What Separates Teams From Groups?

So what makes for great teamwork? What happens when a group of athletes or musicians or employees transform themselves into a team, that experiences synergy and achieves far more than the sum total of all their parts? My friend, Winkie

Pratney, shared an idea with me years ago that I want to build upon and use to answer this question: what makes for great teams?

### **1. A Sense of Destiny.**

Great teams experience, either immediately or over time, the inward sense that they are destined for greatness. This spirit is difficult to measure and impossible to conjure up artificially, but it moves teammates to greater performance than they're capable of without it. In 2004, the Detroit Pistons shocked the world by beating the more talented Los Angeles Lakers for the NBA championship. They appeared far more hungry than the champion Lakers. This team of athletes spoke of a "sense of destiny" that pushed them to do the impossible. While teams must possess talent, great team performance is more about *perception* than *potential*. They believe it's possible to upset the better opponents.

### **2. A Sense of Family.**

Great teams always create a family atmosphere among the members. Love for each other goes beyond the playing field or the office. They serve each other and protect one another beyond their working hours. This is what drove Pee Wee Reese to look out for Jackie Robinson in 1946. Those Dodgers became a blended family. In 2002, the Cinderella team of baseball, the Anaheim Angels, won the World Series. They finished 46 games out of first place the year before. What happened? This team of free agents, not superstars, gelled in April as manager Mike Soccia began rewarding and fining players based on whether they sacrificed for each other. This built incredible trust among them. They soon learned that great teams are more about *trust* than *talent*. It paid off.

### **3. A Militant Spirit.**

Finally, great teams cultivate a "do whatever it takes" attitude. It's a radical passion to find a way to win; to extend themselves and push for more than they felt they could produce. It usually stems from a hunger to win a *championship* not a *trophy*. I mentioned LeBron James earlier. One may presume that a team with James, Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh would trample any other NBA team. Not necessarily. Winning has become more difficult than they assumed. Why? Three superstars used to scoring most of the points for their previous teams have to adjust to playing second fiddle. It's the hardest instrument to play—but stars who learn to do so, also win.

Probably the most powerful picture of these elements occurred in a rock band named U2. Most bands are never considered a team. They play for a few years and break up because members don't like to sacrifice their personal stardom. Not true with U2. Lead singer Bono, lead guitarist "Edge," bass player Adam Clayton and drummer Larry Mullen Jr. have played together for over 30 years. That's unheard of for most teams. They see themselves as partners in an enterprise that is far bigger than any one of them.

While Bono is clearly the voice of the band, they possess a clear vision and set of values. U2's mission is to improve the world through its music and influence. Bono calls it the spark that sets U2 apart from other bands. He describes U2 as a "tight

knit family.” They split all income evenly, between the four band members and their agent. They value excellent performance and continuous improvement but they stand for something bigger than that: social justice and human rights. Further, each member knows his strengths and weakness. Bono says he can hear melodies in his head but is unable to transfer them into written music. He relies on fellow band members for that. They’ve each experienced struggles and often argue over new songs—but they only move forward when each member agrees to do so. If one of them is in need, the others rally around him to support him and put that need above the performance of the band.

One incredible illustration of this happened during the 1980s when U2 campaigned to observe the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. as a national holiday. That year they performed the song, “In the Name of Love” written about Dr. King. Before one concert, Bono received a death threat, warning him not to sing that song or he’d be shot. The band debated if they should strike the song from that night’s concert—but Bono insisted they do it. In an interview, Bono said as he sang the song, he closed his eyes. At the end of a verse, he opened them to find Adam Clayton standing in front of him to shield him from harm. Evidently, each member took turns protecting him during the song.

I don’t know about you—but I long to play on a team like that. Few get to do it. When groups of people are willing to set aside their own agenda, however, it can happen. And when it does, it makes people marvel.

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