

Your Guide to More Effective Teamwork

THE TEAM PLAYER CHALLENGE

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Introduction

Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. — **Ecclesiastes 4:9**

How would you go about finding ten large objects placed at random around the continental United States? Impossible, right? That's over three million square miles to cover!

The answer is that you can't . . . unless you enlist many people to help you.

The Department of Defense has a research division called DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) that promotes developing and applying new technologies.

Once DARPA put on a competition called the Red Balloon Challenge. DARPA offered a prize of \$40,000 to the first group to locate ten eight-foot red balloons that would be placed around the country on a specified date.

Hundreds of teams signed up for the challenge. Each team formulated a strategy for locating and reporting the balloons. They recruited people from across the country to help.

The challenge began on December 5, 2009, when DARPA launched the balloons at 10:00 a.m. Eastern time. Figuring it might take up to a week for a single group to find all ten balloons, DARPA planned to take the balloons down each night and put them back up again each morning.

Teams are everywhere

The Red Balloon Challenge was so immense that anyone wishing to compete needed to ask for help. In fact, that was the point of the exercise: to explore how online social networks could be used to solve unwieldy problems. The core of the challenge was recruiting people scattered across the country and organizing them to search their respective areas.

Teams are such a common part of our lives, we hardly think about them. A team is simply a group of people working together toward a goal. Jesus assembled a team of disciples. Your church is a team. A marriage is a team. A family is a team. You and your coworkers are a team.

The existence of teams is an admission that I need help. I can't do this by myself. The opposite of a team is a lone ranger who either does not want to accept help or cannot find someone to assist and advise him. While lone rangers can be effective, especially in the short-term, most accomplishments in the world come through the strength and collaboration of teamwork.

An entrepreneur can work by himself, but when the business grows beyond his capacity to keep up, he will need to hire people to help him. A team is formed. If the business grows, the size of the team will grow along with it.

The team player challenge

We often see the phrase “Must be a team player” listed in employment ads. The term may be cliché and perhaps even undefined, yet we have a general sense of what qualities employers are looking for. The question becomes: What can I do to become one of these sought-after people?

A reality of our fallen world is that teams are not always effective. Just being part of a group of people working on a project doesn't mean the group functions as a team. Not every team knows how to make teamwork happen. Teamwork is elusive and complicated.

Working together harmoniously is often difficult. Disagreements, dislikes, disappointments, dysfunction, distrust—many obstacles can trip up a team.

However, teamwork doesn't start with the group; it starts with the individual. The team cannot overcome these obstacles to teamwork collectively without its members meeting the challenges individually.

The qualities and attitudes of the individual affect the ability of the team to work together. Responsibility for both the failures and

successes of the team begins with the members. That is the challenge each team player must take up.

Despite its challenges, teamwork is not out of reach. Each of us can become a team player and raise the level of teamwork our team can experience. We can't change other people, but we can change ourselves.

The team player's incentives

As the Red Balloon Challenge began, tens of thousands of people from different teams began looking for the balloons, reporting their finds to their team's headquarters. How long do you think it took the winning team to find all ten balloons?

Eight hours and fifty-two minutes.

A team of students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology won the \$40,000 prize. They attributed their success to their strategy of incentivizing people to join their search. The MIT team promised to pay \$2,000 to the person who found a balloon, \$1,000 to the person who had recruited the finder, \$500 to the person who had recruited that person, and so on back the chain.

Therefore, to get paid, you didn't have to find a balloon, you only needed to be part of the chain of people ending with the person who found it. This payment structure incentivized people to spread the word about the balloon hunt to others.

What incentives do we have for being team players? While team skills may make it easier for us to get a good job with good pay, a team player has deeper incentives. As team players:

- We are more effective at home, at work, and in the church.
- We have greater peace of mind because we are creating less stress for ourselves.
- We bless our coworkers and bosses, making their work go more smoothly and their contributions more effective.
- We find fulfillment in working well with others, knowing our contribution helps the team succeed.

- We please God because we are living the way He intends us to live, at peace with ourselves and others.

None of us wants to be the cause of a dysfunctional team like the one described in James 3:16: “For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.”

Rather, by God’s grace, team players can help bring the experience of James 3:17 to our teams: “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”

These types of team players receive God’s blessing: “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace” (James 3:18).

At work and beyond

The first context for this book is the workplace, and it builds on my earlier book, *Getting Along at Work*. Parts of it appeared first in my monthly “Getting Along at Work” column in *Plain Communities Business Exchange* magazine.

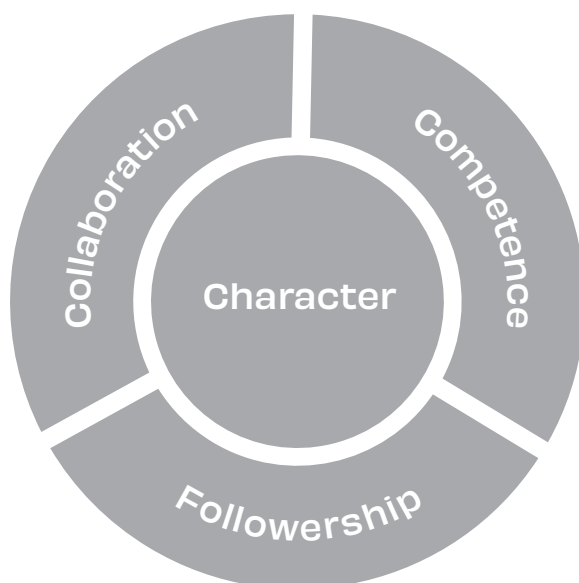
While this book uses the language of business, we know teamwork is not confined to the jobsite or office. Whatever team skills we develop will be useful in any setting where we work with others.

Whatever your situation, I hope and believe this book will bless not just you, but also those around you. You can use what you learn for the rest of your life wherever you go. Thank you for reading.

Introducing the Model

The *Team Player Challenge* is based on the following model.

ELEMENTS OF A TEAM PLAYER



This preview of the book's structure and model sets the stage by briefly explaining how each element is an essential part of being a team player. It also introduces you to each element's challenge.

Character

Why it's important: Who we are inside determines our attitudes about ourselves, our coworkers, and our superiors, and reveals itself in our actions. Our character affects how we relate to our boss and coworkers.

The challenge: Our carnal bent toward self-exaltation and self-protection stands opposed to the virtues of humility, goodwill, openness, and courage.

Followership

Why it's important: Team members must be directed and coordinated to reach the goal. Otherwise, they are not a team, but only a collection of individuals. Team players follow and support the leader.

The challenge: Contemporary culture exalts leadership over followership, and our own human nature resists oversight and inclines us to take our own way.

Collaboration

Why it's important: Collaboration is the mechanism for combining and refining the skills and ideas of individual members into a team effort. Collaboration is the back-and-forth of working together.

The challenge: Contributing our own talents and ideas while also valuing others' input can be hard. We tend to resist the accountability, transparency, listening, and vulnerability that collaboration requires.

Competence

Why it's important: Competence is the ability to do a task well. I draw a distinction between technical and relational competence. Without *technical* competence, a team member is unsuited for the job because he lacks skill. Without *relational* competence, work bogs down in frustrations and offenses between team members. The section on competence focuses on relational competence.

The challenge: People are complex, and getting along with them can be difficult. Just like learning new technical skills, growing our relational and communication skills takes humility, diligence, and intention.

Using the model

The model provides a useful structure for the book, but beyond that, it is also a tool. You can use the model as an assessment for evaluating yourself. Consider in which element you are weakest and in which you are strongest. This not only helps you improve your team skills today but can also prepare you for a job or role you hope to have in the future.

The model can also help diagnose problems. When things are not going well on your team, you can use the framework to evaluate the situation. Is this merely a collaboration problem, or is it really a character problem? Or is it a problem related to followership?

While we will look at the four elements separately, they overlap. For example, our character affects our willingness to follow the leader and our collaboration with others. The level of our competence in communication affects our ability to collaborate.

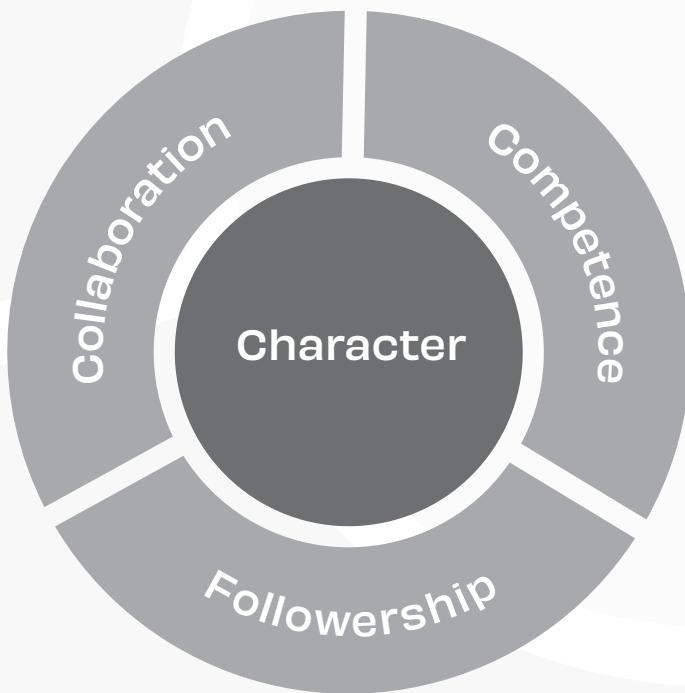
The diagram on page ix reflects this integration. The related elements interlock to form a unified whole. Because it relates to our heart condition, character is at the center of the diagram. Followership can be seen as a foundation of sorts, and collaboration and competence round out the rest of the team player.

Character may be the most important element of a team player, but it is insufficient on its own. Our employers also want us to be able to collaborate well, follow well, and perform well.

Ready for the challenge? Let's get started and learn to become high-functioning team players. We'll start with the heart—character. In the first section, we'll see how character affects our relationships with others. We'll observe the connections between character, ego, fear, and how we handle criticism and mistakes.

Part I

The Challenge of Character



ELEMENTS OF A TEAM PLAYER



1 Teamwork Takes Character

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? — **James 4:1**

Nations go to war against other nations.

Politicians disparage opponents.

Churches split over disagreements.

Couples divorce. Siblings bicker.

Coworkers collide.

That's the world we live in.

Let's imagine a world where two parties would agree to settle a disagreement through some peaceful means, let's say, a chess match. Chess is a quiet game, no sweating or shouting. The winner of the

game wins; the loser loses. Everyone accepts the outcome and goes home in peace.

Think about how much pain and stress could be avoided by using a simple chess game to solve our disagreements. No more war! Simple, efficient, easy, cheap—what could go wrong?

The game stretches for over an hour as the two contestants (we'll call them A and B) play carefully, methodically. The game is a toss-up. Tensions mount. The pressure is intense. Onlookers grow uneasy. Finally, "Checkmate!" player A shouts. He has won! He is right! He gets his way! B was wrong all along!

But player B angrily leaps to his feet, his chair tumbling over backward, and punches A in the stomach. A full-fledged fistfight ensues. Chairs topple, tables overturn, and chess pieces scatter. Player B is stronger, heavier, and gaining the advantage. Surely this will resolve the disagreement, show who is right, and punish the side that is wrong.

In trouble, A calls for his friends to help him. They pile on, but B's allies are not going to let him fight alone. They join the free-for-all. Someone arrives armed with a stick and begins whacking heads right and left. Soon all the fighters have sticks.

Innovative minds contrive new ways to inflict even greater injury upon their foes to force them to give up the fight. Guns show up. Dynamite. Tanks. Then even more sophisticated weapons—fighter jets, submarines, aircraft carriers, guided missiles, nuclear bombs. The quiet chess match between A and B has escalated to full-blown warfare.

While this is only a thought experiment, you get the point.

Elusive peace

Hopes have always run high that peace and unity for humanity are just around the corner. For example, the inventor of dynamite thought his explosive product would bring world peace. In 1891, Alfred Nobel wrote to a pacifist friend:

Perhaps my factories will put an end to war sooner than your congresses: on the day that two army corps can

mutually annihilate each other in a second, all civilized nations will surely recoil with horror and disband their troops.¹

But a man who spent much of his life involved with military matters had a clearer perspective. As President of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower warned,

When you resort to force as the arbiter of human difficulty, you don't know where you are going; but, generally speaking, if you get deeper and deeper, there is just no limit except what is imposed by limitations of the force itself.²

Eisenhower got it right. There are no limits to what humans will do to each other. But why is peace so hard to achieve? If all the ungodly people and troublemakers were suddenly removed from the earth, leaving only the godly, would we get along?

Back in Noah's day, when everyone but eight God-fearing people died in the Flood, God did just that. But even that didn't solve the problem of human conflict. This makes clear that the source of our problems lies within us.

The hostile human nature

The chess game thought experiment for settling arguments illustrates how selfishness and the need to be right are engrained in human nature. Just as the threads of hostility run far into human history—all the way back to the Garden of Eden—even the relatively tame conflicts we face in the office or on the jobsite have their roots deep in human nature.

Warfare between nations is categorically different from friction between coworkers, yet both types of conflict are rooted in human nature. Though not on the same scale, they are on the same spectrum.

In His startling Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that hating someone is like murdering them. Hating a coworker is like dropping a bomb on their office.

Human nature makes teamwork hard. Human nature makes people look down on those who are different from themselves. Human

nature prefers to associate with those who are like themselves and to avoid those perceived as inferior or superior to themselves. Human nature covets. Human nature drives people to show they are better than others. Unrestrained, human nature can become self-protective to the point of deceiving or even harming others for its own advantage.

We all must contend to some degree with this carnal nature that causes so much conflict. Have you ever . . .

- Become upset when someone else got the job promotion you wanted?
- Been jealous of someone else's talents or abilities?
- Avoided a coworker because you didn't like being around them?
- Disdained someone who was different from you or who you believed was competing with you?

Such feelings spring from the fallenness of our hearts. But born-again believers strive to overcome such feelings. As Christians, we have “put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,” and have “put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:22, 24). We have a new character!

This internal transformation is a work of God's grace that affects our relationships, of course, but it's not the end of all relational difficulties.

My carnal nature will never in my lifetime be completely eradicated. Neither will yours. So, any time you and I work together, there will always be potential for selfish conflict or unkind disagreement. However, the more our character is like God's character, the more our responses to others will be like His responses.

What's inside affects what happens outside

Shortly after midnight on April 26, 1986, a reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine overheated and exploded, ironically during a safety test.

The plant, once the pride of the Soviet Union, became a death zone. Tons of glowing nuclear fuel, normally contained behind heavy layers of steel and concrete, rained down on the area, igniting fires. Firefighters and workers suffered severe exposure to radiation while clouds of radioactive particles floated away into the night sky, spreading contamination for hundreds of miles.

Two miles away, tens of thousands of residents evacuated the town of Pripjat. Today, the town remains uninhabited: rusting and rotting, overgrown by trees, overrun by wildlife, and slowly crumbling. A restricted area covers one thousand square miles around the plant.

In the months following the accident, work began on a concrete and steel structure to cover the ruined reactor and contain its radiation. The cabs of the cranes working onsite were lined with lead to protect the operators, who received instructions from spotters who were themselves viewing the scene through a camera feed. Today, a second newer colossal structure shelters the still-radioactive reactor.

This damaged nuclear reactor is a picture of our hearts. The heart is not self-contained, but like the radiation from a damaged nuclear reactor, heart problems spread to other areas of our lives and affect those around us.

Think back to the Garden of Eden, back to when the first humans fell. Adam and Eve's sin corrupted their natures, affecting their relationships with God and with each other.

We catch the first glimpse of this fracture as we watch Adam and Eve respond to God's questioning. Adam seemed to suggest that God might have been partly at fault by creating Eve in the first place. And he pointed an accusing finger at Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit.

Adam said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." Eve responded by blaming the serpent: "The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat" (Genesis 3:12, 13).

We don't know what this first couple's relationship was like for the hundreds of years they lived together, but we do know that if their marriage was harmonious, they had to work for it just like any couple does today. We also know that their oldest son—the first baby ever born—grew up to become a murderer.

These heart issues, and not the people we work with, are the real opposition to our becoming good team players.

We can give many reasons for the relationship problems we encounter with coworkers. We might say things like:

- “He is so disrespectful to me.”
- “She rubs me the wrong way.”
- “He thinks he’s better than the rest of us.”
- “I can’t stand her attitude.”
- “He doesn’t understand me at all.”
- “She never listens to my point of view.”

Though the details will vary, many relationship struggles can be traced back to what’s inside—to what is in the heart.

On the one side (outgoing), our carnal nature is selfish and uncaring. On the other side (incoming), our carnal nature makes us susceptible to being unforgiving and reactive. In both the giving and receiving aspects of relationship, human nature contributes to the problems we face.

Growing in character

Heart-level problems require heart-level solutions, and thankfully, God knows our hearts. He knows how to give each of us the kind of character it takes to be a team player striving to “follow peace with all men” (Hebrews 12:14).

If you find yourself mired in conflict with a coworker or even catch a whiff of brewing tension, try a few of the following suggestions and see if anything improves in the relationship (especially in how you think about it):

1. Ask God to help you be a peacemaker.
2. Ask God to bless the other person.
3. Treat the other person the way you would want to be treated.
4. Identify something positive about the other person and express appreciation to him for it.