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The Ideal Team Player:
How to Recognize and Cultivate The Three Essential Virtues

Humble

In the context of teamwork, humility is largely what it seems to be. 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 great surprise, then, that humility is the single greatest and most indispensable attribute of being a team player.

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What's amazing is that so many leaders who value teamwork will tolerate people who aren't humble. They reluctantly hire self-centered people and then justify it simply because those people have desired skills. Or, 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. This happens in sports, business, and every other kind of team venture. There are two basic types of people who lack humility, and it's important, even critical, to understand them, because they look quite different from one another and impact a team differently. The most obvious kind is the overtly arrogant people who make everything about them. 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. Most of us have seen plenty of this behavior in our careers. The next type is much less dangerous, but still worth understanding. These are the people who lack self-confidence but are generous and positive with others. They tend to discount their own talents and contributions, and so others mistakenly see them as humble. But this is not humility. While they are certainly not arrogant, their lack of understanding of their own worth is also a violation of humility. Truly humble people do not see themselves as greater than they are, but neither do they discount their talents and contributions. C.S. Lewis addressed this misunderstanding about humility when he said:

“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. Though this kind of lack of humility is less obtrusive and obvious than the other, more negative types, it detracts from optimal team performance nonetheless. What both of these types have in common is insecurity. Insecurity makes some people project overconfidence, and others discount their own talents. And while these types are not equal when it comes to creating problems on a team, they each diminish performance.

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. And they loathe the idea that they might be perceived as slackers.

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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, consuming the identity of an employee and dominating their life. When I refer to hunger here, I'm thinking about the healthy kind—a manageable and sustainable commitment to doing a job well and going above and beyond when it is truly required. Okay, few team leaders will knowingly ignore a lack of hunger in their people, most likely because unproductive, dispassionate people tend to stand out and create obvious problems on a team. Unfortunately, undiscerning leaders too often hire these people because most 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.

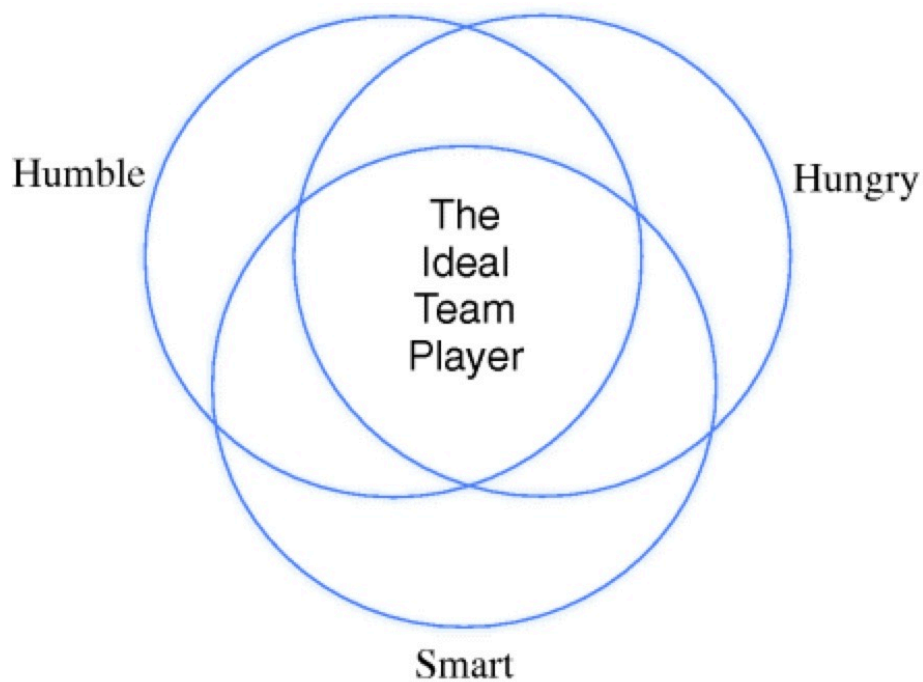
Smart

Of the three virtues, this one needs the most clarification because it is not what it might seem; it is not about intellectual capacity. In the context of a team,

smart simply refers to a person's common sense about people.

It has everything to do with the ability to be interpersonally appropriate and aware. Smart people 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. Some might refer to this as emotional intelligence, which wouldn't be a bad comparison, but smart is probably a little simpler than that. Smart people just have good judgment and intuition around the subtleties of group dynamics and the impact of their words and actions. As a result, they don't say and do things—or fail to say and do things—without knowing the likely responses of their colleagues. Smart simply refers to a person's common sense about people. Keep in mind that being smart doesn't necessarily imply good intentions. Smart people can use their talents for good or ill purposes. In fact, some of the most dangerous people in history have been noted for being interpersonally smart.

“What makes humble, hungry, and smart powerful and unique is not the individual attributes themselves, but rather the required combination of all three.”



0 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**. It would take great effort over a long period of time for them to develop the capacity for all three, let alone two or even one. Fortunately for managers, these people are very easy to identify and rarely slip through interviews and make it onto teams. Unfortunately, life can be very hard for them.

1 for 3

For those who lack two of the three in a big way, it's also going to be an uphill battle—not impossible, but not easy. Let's look at these three categories, the ones involving a team member who is only humble, hungry, or smart.

Humble Only:

The Pawn People who are only humble but not at all hungry or smart are the “pawns” on a team. They are pleasant, kind-hearted, unassuming people who just don't feel a great need to get things done and don't have the ability to build effective relationships with colleagues. They often get left out of conversations and activities, and have little impact on the performance of a team. **Pawns don't make waves, so they can survive for quite a long time on teams that value harmony and don't demand performance.**

Hungry Only:

The Bulldozer People who are hungry but not at all humble or smart can be thought of as “bulldozers.” These people will be determined to get things done, but with a focus on their own interests and with **no understanding or concern for how their actions impact others**. Bulldozers are quick destroyers of teams. Fortunately, unlike pawns, they stand out and can be easily identified and removed by leaders who truly value teamwork. However, in organizations that place a premium on production alone, bulldozers can thrive and go uncorrected for long periods of time.

Smart Only:

The Charmer People who are smart but sorely lacking in humility and hunger are “charmings.” They can be entertaining and even likeable for a while, **but have little interest in the long-term well-being of the team or their colleagues**. Their social skills can sometimes help them survive longer than bulldozers or pawns, but because their contributions to the team are negligible, they often wear out their welcome quickly.

2 for 3

The next three categories that we'll explore represent people who are more difficult to identify because the strengths associated with them often camouflage their weaknesses. Team members who fit into these categories lack only one of the three traits and thus have a little higher likelihood of overcoming their challenges and becoming ideal team players. Still, lacking even one in a serious way can impede the teambuilding process.

Humble and Hungry, but Not Smart:

The Accidental Mess-Maker People who are humble and hungry but decidedly not smart are the “accidental mess-makers.” They genuinely want to serve the team and are not interested in getting a disproportionate amount of attention and credit. **However, their lack of understanding of how their words and actions are received by others will lead them to inadvertently create interpersonal problems on the team**. While colleagues will respect their work ethic and sincere desire to be helpful, those colleagues can get tired of having to clean up the emotional and interpersonal problems that accidental mess-makers so often leave behind. Though the accidental mess-maker can definitely be a problem, of the three types that lack just one of the characteristics of an ideal team player, this is the least dangerous to a team, as accidental mess-makers have no bad intentions and can usually take corrective feedback in good humor.

Humble and Smart, but Not Hungry:

The Lovable Slacker People who are humble and smart but not adequately hungry are the “lovable slackers.” They aren't looking for undeserved attention, and they are adept at working with and caring about colleagues. **Unfortunately, they tend to do only as much as they are asked, and rarely seek to take on more work or volunteer for extra assignments.** Moreover, they have limited passion for the work the team is doing. Because they are generally charming and positive, it's easy for leaders to shy away from confronting or removing lovable slackers. After all, they're lovable. Lovable slackers need significant motivation and oversight, making them a drag on the team's performance, more so than the accidental mess-makers. But they don't represent the most dangerous of the three types who lack one of the virtues; that would be the skillful politician.

Hungry and Smart, but Not Humble:

The Skillful Politician People who are hungry and smart but lack humility are the “skillful politicians.” These people are cleverly ambitious and willing to work extremely hard, but only in as much as it will benefit them personally. Unfortunately, because they are so smart, skillful politicians are very adept at portraying themselves as being humble, making it hard for leaders to identify them and address their destructive behaviors. By the time the leader sees what's going on, the politician may have already created a trail of destruction among their more humble colleagues who have been manipulated, discouraged, and scarred. **Most of us have worked with plenty of skillful politicians, as they tend to rise in the ranks of companies where leaders reward individual performance over teamwork.**

WARNING :

Now is probably a good time for a few important warnings. First, keep in mind that accurately identifying people as bulldozers, charmers, pawns, accidental mess-makers, lovable slackers, or skillful politicians is not always easy, and shouldn't be done flippantly. Wrongly labeling a team member, even in private or jest, can be damaging. Second, don't assign these labels to colleagues who are truly ideal team players simply because they are relatively stronger in one of the three areas. For instance, don't refer to an ideal team player who is slightly less hungry than she is humble and smart as a lovable slacker. These classifications are reserved only for people who are significantly lacking in one or more of the three traits. Managers will need to be “smart” about how to use the terms with their employees. And remember, the real purpose of identifying these types is not to pigeonhole people, but to better understand what constitutes ideal team players so we can recognize or develop them on our teams.

3 for 3

Humble, Hungry, Smart:

The Ideal Team Player 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 they are comfortable sharing their accolades or even occasionally missing out on them. Ideal team players work with a sense of energy, passion, and personal responsibility, taking on whatever they possibly can for the good of the team. Finally, they say and do the right things to help teammates feel appreciated, understood, and included, even when difficult situations arise that require tough love.

Most of us can recall having managed or worked with ideal team players in our careers, as they are quite appealing and memorable.

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