

How Elite Organizations Transform Good Teams Into Extraordinary Ones

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Most organizations are leaving significant value on the table. Not because they lack talented people or smart strategies, but because they're stuck in outdated leadership models that simply can't deliver in today's complex and volatile environment. After coaching thousands of teams over twenty years, I've discovered a new way of approaching transformation and transforming good teams into extraordinary ones. It's called Teamship.

This isn't just another business buzzword. It's a radical reimagining of how teams operate and collaborate: shifting from traditional hierarchical leadership to a peer-to-peer model where teammates co-lead and co-elevate each other to achieve world-class performance. The load of leadership is shared among the team—a team “hired as individual stars finally acts like a constellation,” as one leader described it. And teamship is producing measurable results that traditional leadership approaches can't match:

- 79% increase in candid communication
- 46% increase in collaborative engagement

- 44% increase in mutual accountability

Yet our research with over 3,000 teams reveals that only 15% have made this critical change in approach, presenting an opportunity to make it your competitive advantage.

First, Commit to Co-Elevation™ & Crossing the Finish Line Together.

Elite teams operate with a fundamental agreement: we win or lose as one. This isn't just about being supportive—it's about a relentless commitment to elevating everyone's performance, what I coined Co-Elevation™.

Beyond the org chart: Team members don't just focus on their own functional responsibilities. They actively engage in improving each other's work, leadership style, and ideas—regardless of hierarchical position or departmental boundaries. All for one, one for all.

Practical application: In practice, team members provide substantive feedback on presentations before they happen, offer resources that might help a colleague succeed, and proactively identify blind spots others might miss. When someone struggles, the entire team feels responsible for getting them back on track.

The measurable difference: At one global technology company, implementing this shift increased cross-functional support by 62% and reduced project delays by 47% in just six months. Team members stopped saying "that's not my problem" and started asking "how can we solve this together?"

This commitment to Co-Elevation™ becomes the social contract that makes all other shifts possible. Without a genuine investment in each other's success, no amount of tools or processes will transform performance.

How Elite Teams Win by Establishing The Three Layers of Teamship

Moving from traditional, hierarchical leadership to peer-to-peer teamship requires establishing and maintaining three high-level focuses that produce Co-Elevation™ and alignment:

- 21st-Century Collaboration
- Peer-to-Peer Feedback
- Relationship Building

"The tangible change has been the ability to escalate and make critical business decisions faster, and ones that stick, because the process is collaborative and therefore the buy-in is higher," explains Eric Starkloff, CEO of National Instruments. "In the past, we thought collaborative decision-making and fast decision-making were at tension... There's no way we would have been able to react with the sort of speed and get the sort of buy-in we see today."

This is not about feeling good. It's about unlocking breakthrough performance and everyone feeling a shared accountability for it.

1. Faster and Bolder Collaboration Through the Adoption of 21st-Century Collaboration

Stop treating traditional meetings as your only form of collaboration—they're actually your least effective option. In a typical meeting of 10 people, only four people feel their views are heard.

Asynchronous Collaboration: Instead of starting with a meeting, start collaborating before the meeting asynchronously so you can then land it in the meeting. If you need to solve a big problem, pose 1-3 challenging questions about it. Send the shared document to anyone that can contribute to a great outcome, i.e. don't be confined to org charts or geography. Give attendees a few days to respond and read each other's inputs before any meeting occurs. Each person adds their perspectives, challenges, and ideas at a time that allows them to be thoughtful. If the topic owner gets all the input they need, that might be it, no meeting necessary. Alternatively, you could then hold a meeting with everyone primed for discussion, but first break into groups of 2-4 to debate ideas before coming together to share all that rich feedback with the team, where the topic owner can then land it with a high degree of alignment.

This approach pulls an entire cycle of collaboration forward, so when you finally meet (if you even need to), you're making decisions, not just starting discussions. One financial services team I coached cut decision time from three months to three weeks while involving twice as many perspectives.

2. Candor, Not Conflict Avoidance Through Peer-to-Peer Feedback

Many organizations reward people who don't rock the boat. Elite teams do the opposite—they establish candor as a non-negotiable requirement. When a teammate sees something concerning, they say something, and it gets fixed. This requires courage that builds into confidence.

Often, people choose to remain quiet even when they see something that doesn't seem right or up to standard to keep up a company's "nice" culture, but what is nice about letting someone fail? Organizations that master this shift to caring candor see dramatic improvements in decision quality and execution speed because problems are identified and addressed early rather than festering beneath the surface.

Candor Break: Institute a policy that anyone can call out when they feel people aren't being candid, holding their opinions, deferring to authority, etc. You do a candor break, which means you pause, break into pairs or threes where the level of psychological safety is much higher, and answer the question, "what is not being said." Reconvene in 10-15 minutes and each team shares what they came up with. This structured interaction results in candor, and no heroes are required.

Stress Testing: This is the super food of high-performing teams, a practice that should be done regularly in your team's agile sprint. For important initiatives or business lines, the owner presents 1-3 simple slides summarizing what they have achieved, where they are struggling,

and what is planned. The team or stakeholders then go into breakout groups to discuss and respond in a shared document with what challenges they see, their ideas, and offers of help. The team reassembles and reports out on all their feedback in service of the owner, who decides what they will take action on and not.

This might seem simple, but when done correctly and consistently, it has a massive impact: increasing innovation, identifying hidden risk, shortening cycle time and increasing alignment through co-creation. The typical team meeting involves people providing general updates on their work with a lot of passive listening and the same people peppering in questions and directives. With stress testing, you actively engage every single team member and create a culture of challenge, innovation, and curiosity, simply by assigning the practice. No major change management campaigns required, just learn the format and repeat.

Bob Pittman, the media pioneer who co-founded and programmed MTV in 1981, served as CEO of MTV Networks, led AOL Networks during its peak period when 50% of internet traffic flowed through AOL, and eventually became chief operating officer of AOL Time Warner before becoming Chairman and CEO of iHeartMedia, says: "Contrary to what most people think, being open and direct is the ultimate show of respect. It may not be comfortable or easy at first. But it shows that we are all committed to the shared mission and each other. That means we won't let each other fail—and it also means we have to share our data points of concern and challenge."

3. Purposeful Bonding Through Relationship Building

When we coach organizations on teamship transformation, we consistently observe that relationship quality fundamentally determines the effectiveness of collaboration. Traditional approaches rely on chance encounters—the proverbial water cooler conversation—for relationship development, but my research reveals that this approach is increasingly inadequate, particularly in hybrid and distributed environments.

Our data indicates only 41% of team members believe caring and trusting relationships exist with their colleagues, while 58% report greater trust in strangers than workplace associates. This relationship deficit represents a critical vulnerability in organizational performance.

Engineering Trust and Team Resilience

In our work with thousands of teams, we've found that building relationships among team members on a foundation of commitment and empathy is critical to providing an environment of forgiveness and caring enough to challenge each other. Often teams have pockets of broken trust between peers, and left unchecked, this can develop into deep resentments that erode shareholder value.

World-class teams implement structured practices that systematically accelerate trust, development, and collective resilience without the need for in-person offsites including:

Energy Check-in: This practice involves a simple question at the start of each meeting: "Where is your energy today on a scale of 0-5, and why?" This creates transparency around team members' current state and provides a safety net to catch those experiencing challenges. At Cisco, Chief People Officer Fran Katsoudas explains, "Knowing that Tim is normally three out of five creates a space for him to be his authentic self; there's no pretending that he has to be a five." This practice allows teams to track collective energy levels and respond appropriately meaningfully.

Personal Professional Check-in (PPC): This practice creates a dedicated space for authentic sharing about current personal and professional challenges and circumstances. PPC is one of the most powerful practices we've coached teams all over the world to do. Unlike superficial team-building exercises, PPCs establish genuine empathy through targeted vulnerability.

Gratitude Circle: A positive reflective practice at the end of every meeting. Each team member shares what they are most grateful for from the session itself. This practice cultivates appreciation for contributions and reinforces positive collaboration patterns.

Peer Celebration: A monthly round-robin practice where team members take turns sharing specific appreciation for colleagues. This helps reinforce positive behaviors from the team's social contract. Our research shows that 79% of people leaving organizations cite lack of recognition as the primary reason, making peer celebration a critical retention strategy.

Accelerated Team Integration

These practices prove particularly valuable during organizational transitions—new team formations, reorganizations, or mergers—when relationship dynamics are most fragile. In these contexts, we've observed a critical distinction: team members often respect each other's professional competence but lack genuine trust in their intentions and priorities. This respect-trust gap emerges primarily because colleagues don't truly know each other or understand the experiences that shape their perspectives and behaviors.

The key insight is that all significant collaboration requires vulnerability, but vulnerability requires psychological safety. These structured practices create a virtuous cycle that builds upon itself, replacing the traditional "wait-and-see" approach to team relationships with purposeful engineering. Our research demonstrates a compelling progression: purposeful relationship development creates psychological safety, which enables candid communication, which facilitates effective peer accountability—three foundational elements of high-performing teams that cannot be established through structural reorganization or strategic directives alone.

Teams that implement these approaches systematically report:

- Reduced time to establish effective working relationships (from months to weeks)
- Decreased interpersonal conflict and improved conflict resolution
- Enhanced psychological safety leading to greater innovation
- Improved retention of high-performing talent
- Greater collective resilience during organizational challenges

Practices, Not Platitudes

Here's what differentiates organizations that struggle to improve team performance and those that make the change and do so quickly. They don't rely on mission statements or values posters; they implement specific, repeatable practices that transform abstract aspirations into concrete daily behaviors. My favorite saying perfectly captures this reality: "We don't think our way into new ways of acting; we act our way into new ways of thinking."

Real-World Transformation

Leading organizations are already implementing these shifts with remarkable results:

Comcast Xfinity: Under President Bill Connors' leadership, the company transformed its operational culture through "Things That Matter Outlier Team Meetings" – a practice focused on candid discussion of performance challenges. These sessions encourage cross-functional problem-solving where marketing executives help solve operations issues and finance leaders contribute to customer experience improvements. The result? Historically challenged geographies became market share growth engines and the largest individual EBITDA contributors in the Comcast family.

e.l.f. Beauty: CEO Tarang Amin has disrupted the cosmetics industry dominated by legacy giants like L'Oréal and Estée Lauder. The company can bring high-quality products from concept to online launch in as little as thirteen weeks, while competitors typically require 2-3 years. This extraordinary speed comes from their commitment to Teamship practices, where every employee shapes product strategy through continuous feedback loops. The financial impact? Net sales increased 48% to \$578.8 million in fiscal year 2023, representing an 84-fold increase in shareholder value over a decade to \$11 billion. The company's staff turnover rate remains at just 4% compared to the industry average of 20-25%.

Procter & Gamble: The Fabric & Home Care division, P&G's largest business sector, achieved what had never been done before: forty consecutive quarters of growth. CEO Sundar Raman attributes this to the team's deep emotional commitment to a shared vision and their practice of high-conflict, high-respect collaboration. They created a personal accountability grid displaying people's faces against quarterly commitments, making progress transparent to everyone. What was initially feared became a powerful performance driver, with team members actively seeking accountability and feedback. This demonstrates how teamship can drive sustained results even in mature markets.

Your Next Move

The question isn't whether to embrace Teamship, but how quickly you can implement the necessary shifts. Organizations that successfully navigate this transformation position themselves not for incremental improvement but for breakthrough performance. Now, let's imagine if educational institutions, community organizations, healthcare systems—even families—adopted these Co-Elevation™ principles.

My friend Peter Diamandis, CEO of XPRIZE Foundation, describes this transformative potential: "Our work with Teamship radically accelerated our growth, which enabled our strongly independent executive team to address key tenets of our strategy, shape our team and our future." This experience represents a microcosm of what's possible when organizations systematically implement teamship principles.

No one can lead alone—nor should they try in today's environment. The future belongs to organizations that recognize the power of Teamship to transform good teams into extraordinary ones. Are you ready to make the shift?