WHITEPAPER

The Future of High-Performing Teams

Culture, Collaboration, and the Leadership Habits That Drive Lasting Results

Insights on culture, collaboration, and leadership habits that drive lasting results — a practical guide for people leaders, executives, and HR and talent leaders.

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01 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

The way teams work has changed faster than the way most organizations lead them. Distributed work, AI-augmented workflows, and a relentless pace of change have raised the bar for what effective teamwork requires.

Many of the practices that once held teams together — shared offices, stable job descriptions, annual planning cycles, and informal hallway coordination — no longer do the work on their own. What remains constant is the human foundation underneath performance: people who trust one another, understand where they are going, know how to work together, keep learning, and hold themselves accountable for outcomes.

Research on teams points consistently in this direction. Google's Project Aristotle, a multi-year internal study of team effectiveness, concluded that *how* a team works together mattered more than *who* was on it, and identified psychological safety as the most important of the dynamics it examined. Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson's research has long shown that teams whose members feel safe to speak up, ask questions, and admit mistakes are better positioned to learn and improve.

This whitepaper distills that thinking into a practical framework for leaders:

- **Six pillars** that underpin sustained team performance: psychological safety and trust; clarity of purpose and roles; collaboration rhythms and norms; continuous learning and feedback; accountability and ownership; and inclusion.
- **Leadership habits** organized into a weekly, monthly, and quarterly cadence, because culture is built through repeated behavior rather than one-time initiatives.
- **A perspective on AI** as an amplifier of human collaboration — valuable when it frees teams for judgment, creativity, and connection, and risky when it substitutes for them.
- **Practical tools**: a balanced set of team performance measures and a self-assessment leaders can use with their teams.

THE CORE ARGUMENT

Lasting results come less from heroic effort or new tools than from consistent leadership habits that make it easy for people to do their best work together. Leaders who treat team health as a discipline — observed, discussed, and improved on a regular rhythm — build teams that adapt well under pressure.

02 THE SHIFTING CONTEXT

The shifting context for teams

Four forces are reshaping what it takes for teams to perform. None is temporary, and together they raise the importance of intentional leadership.

01

Hybrid and distributed work

Teams increasingly span locations, time zones, and schedules. Coordination that once happened by proximity must now be designed. Information asymmetry grows, relationships take longer to form, and the risk that quieter or remote colleagues are overlooked rises.

02

AI-augmented work

Generative and analytical AI tools are changing how work gets drafted, analyzed, and decided. Teams must agree on where AI helps, where human judgment is essential, and how to keep quality and accountability clear when machines contribute to the work.

03

Faster, more continuous change

Strategies, markets, and technologies shift faster than traditional planning cycles. Teams need the ability to reprioritize, learn quickly, and recover from setbacks without losing cohesion or morale.

04

Skills over roles

Work is increasingly organized around problems and capabilities rather than fixed job titles. People move across projects, and teams form and re-form. Clarity about who owns what — and a culture of continuous learning — becomes more important, not less.

What this means for leaders

Each of these forces removes some of the “default” structure that teams once relied on. The practical consequence is that leaders must make explicit what used to be implicit: how decisions are made, how information flows, what good collaboration looks like, and how people are expected to grow. The six pillars that follow offer a structure for doing exactly that.

> *“When the default structures of work fall away, culture stops being background. It becomes the operating system.*

03 CORE PILLARS

Six pillars of high-performing teams

High-performing teams are defined not by the absence of tension, but by how reliably they turn effort into shared progress. For each pillar: what it looks like, what erodes it, and the habits that build it.

PILLAR 01

Psychological safety and trust

A shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking — that people will not be embarrassed or punished for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. Edmondson's research and Project Aristotle both place this at the center of team effectiveness.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT ERODES IT	HABITS THAT BUILD IT
• People raise concerns early, including to senior colleagues • Mistakes are surfaced and discussed openly • Disagreement is about ideas, not people • Questions are welcomed, not judged	• Blame-focused responses to failure • Leaders who dominate discussion or dismiss input • Inconsistent follow-through on promises • Sarcasm, interruptions, or visible favoritism	• Ask for input before sharing your view • Respond to bad news with curiosity and thanks • Admit your own mistakes and uncertainties • Run blameless reviews of setbacks

PILLAR 02

Clarity of purpose and roles

Everyone understands why the team exists, what success looks like, how their work connects to it, and who owns which decisions. Project Aristotle highlighted structure and clarity, meaning, and impact among the dynamics that distinguished effective teams.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT ERODES IT	HABITS THAT BUILD IT
• A purpose people can explain in their own words • A small number of clear, visible priorities • Explicit ownership for key outcomes and decisions • Shared understanding of trade-offs	• Shifting priorities without explanation • Overlapping or unstated ownership • Too many "top priorities" at once • Goals disconnected from customer or business impact	• Restate the "why" whenever priorities change • Clarify decision rights before work begins • Limit work in progress; name what you will *not* do • Connect individual work to outcomes in every review

PILLAR 03

Collaboration rhythms and norms

The team has agreed, explicit ways of working: how and when it meets, which channels are used for what, how decisions are recorded, and how members across locations stay included.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT ERODES IT	HABITS THAT BUILD IT
• A predictable meeting cadence with clear purposes • Documented team agreements, revisited regularly • Thoughtful balance of real-time and asynchronous work • Decisions captured and shared, not lost in chat	• Meeting overload and unclear agendas • Always-on expectations that drain focus time • Side conversations that exclude remote members • Norms that are assumed but never discussed	• Co-create a team working agreement • Protect focus time as deliberately as meetings • Default to written context for key decisions • Audit recurring meetings each quarter

PILLAR 04

Continuous learning and feedback

The team treats its own work as something to learn from. Feedback flows in every direction, reflection is built into the rhythm of work, and growth is expected for everyone.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT ERODES IT	HABITS THAT BUILD IT
• Regular retrospectives that lead to real changes • Timely, specific feedback — peer to peer, not only top-down • Experiments framed as learning, not pass/fail tests • Visible investment in skill development	• Feedback saved for annual reviews • Retrospectives with no follow-through • Punishing intelligent failure • No time allocated for learning	• Hold short retrospectives after key milestones • Ask “What is one thing I could do differently?” • Make development goals part of one-on-ones • Share what you are learning, including from failures

PILLAR 05

Accountability and ownership

People reliably do what they commit to and take ownership of outcomes, not just tasks. Accountability is mutual — peers hold one another to high standards, not only the leader. Project Aristotle described this as dependability.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT ERODES IT	HABITS THAT BUILD IT
• Clear commitments with owners and dates	• Accountability used as a synonym for blame	• Close every meeting with owners and next steps
• Problems flagged early, without waiting to be asked	• Leaders rescuing work instead of coaching	• Review commitments openly and without drama
• Peers comfortable raising missed commitments	• Vague goals with no definition of done	• Coach ownership: “What do you recommend?”
• High standards paired with high support	• Tolerating persistent underperformance	• Address performance issues promptly and fairly

PILLAR 06

Inclusion

Every member can contribute fully, and the team actively draws on the range of perspectives, experiences, and working styles it contains. Inclusion is what turns diversity into better decisions.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHAT ERODES IT	HABITS THAT BUILD IT
• Airtime is shared; quieter voices are invited in	• Decisions made by an informal inner circle	• Rotate facilitation and high-visibility assignments
• Different working styles and locations are accommodated	• Meetings designed only for those in the room	• Use structured rounds so everyone contributes
• Opportunities and visible work are distributed fairly	• Assumptions about who is “ready” for stretch work	• Ask “Whose perspective are we missing?”
• Dissenting perspectives are sought out	• Treating sameness as alignment	• Review who gets growth opportunities, and why

> *“Inclusion is not a program that runs alongside the work. It is a property of how the work gets done.*

04 LEADERSHIP HABITS

Leadership habits: a practical cadence

Culture is the sum of what leaders repeatedly do, tolerate, and reward. The habits below are organized by rhythm, so they can be built into the calendar rather than left to good intentions.

WEEKLY

Connect and unblock

- Hold one-on-ones focused on the person, not only the status update
- Open team meetings with priorities and the "why" behind them
- Ask at least one genuine question before offering an answer
- Recognize specific contributions, especially less visible ones
- Close meetings with owners, next steps, and dates

MONTHLY

Reflect and recalibrate

- Run a short retrospective: what is working, what is not, what we will change
- Review commitments and progress against priorities openly
- Have a development conversation with each direct report
- Check meeting load and focus time across the team
- Share one thing you have learned or would do differently

QUARTERLY

Realign and renew

- Revisit purpose, priorities, and the explicit "not doing" list
- Refresh the team working agreement together
- Run the team health self-assessment and discuss the results
- Review how stretch assignments and visibility are distributed
- Reset decision rights as roles and projects shift

Making habits stick

Habits are easier to sustain when they are small, scheduled, and visible. Rather than adopting every practice at once, choose two or three that address your team's most pressing gap, tell the team what you are trying, and ask them to hold you to it. Inviting that accountability is itself a signal of psychological safety.

> *"Teams take their cues from what leaders do consistently, not from what they announce occasionally.*

05 PERSPECTIVE

Where AI fits: augmenting, not replacing, collaboration

AI can make teams faster and better informed. It cannot, on its own, make them trusting, aligned, or accountable. The opportunity is to use AI to give people more time and better inputs for the work only humans can do together.

WHERE AI CAN HELP

- Summarizing meetings, threads, and documents so distributed members share context
- Drafting first versions, freeing time for review and refinement
- Surfacing patterns in data to inform — not make — decisions
- Reducing coordination overhead such as scheduling and status tracking
- Supporting personalized learning and skill development

WHERE HUMANS MUST LEAD

- Setting purpose, priorities, and the trade-offs between them
- Building trust, resolving conflict, and repairing relationships
- Making judgment calls with ethical, customer, or people impact
- Giving and receiving meaningful feedback
- Owning outcomes — accountability cannot be delegated to a tool

Principles for AI-augmented teams

- **Agree on norms together.** Make explicit where AI tools are encouraged, where they require review, and where they are not appropriate.
- **Keep accountability human.** Every AI-assisted output should have a named person who is responsible for its quality and consequences.
- **Be transparent.** Encourage people to share how they use AI so the team can learn from what works — and catch what does not.
- **Protect connection.** Use time saved by automation to deepen collaboration, coaching, and customer understanding, not simply to add more work.
- **Invest in skills.** Treat AI fluency as a team capability to build, with room to experiment safely.

06 MEASUREMENT

Measuring team performance

What gets discussed gets improved. Effective measurement balances outcomes with the health indicators that predict whether those outcomes are sustainable. No single metric captures team performance; use a small, balanced set and review it as a team.

DIMENSION	WHAT TO LOOK AT	HOW TO GATHER IT
Outcomes	Progress against agreed goals; quality of deliverables; customer or stakeholder impact	Goal reviews, stakeholder feedback, quality reviews
Delivery and execution	Reliability of commitments; time from decision to action; rework	Commitment tracking, project retrospectives
Team health	Perceived psychological safety, clarity, and inclusion; trends over time	Pulse surveys, the self-assessment in Section 07
Learning and growth	Skills developed; changes made as a result of retrospectives; internal mobility	Development plans, retrospective action logs
Sustainability	Workload balance; focus time; retention and engagement signals	Calendar audits, one-on-ones, engagement surveys
Collaboration	Quality of cross-team handoffs; participation across locations and roles	Partner feedback, meeting and decision reviews

Guidelines for meaningful measurement

- **Measure to learn, not to judge.** Health indicators lose their value if people fear how the results will be used.
- **Look at trends, not snapshots.** Direction of travel over several quarters is more informative than any single reading.
- **Pair numbers with conversation.** Discuss results with the team and ask what is behind them before acting.
- **Keep it light.** A handful of well-chosen indicators reviewed regularly beats an exhaustive dashboard reviewed rarely.

07 SELF-ASSESSMENT

Team health self-assessment

Rate each statement from **1** (strongly disagree) to **5** (strongly agree). For the richest insight, have each team member complete it independently, then compare results together. Focus the discussion on the lowest-rated and most widely varying items.

PILLAR	STATEMENT	1	2	3	4	5
Psychological safety & trust	People on this team can raise problems and tough issues without fear.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	When someone makes a mistake, we focus on learning rather than blame.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Clarity of purpose & roles	I can clearly explain our team's purpose and top priorities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	It is clear who owns each key decision and outcome.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Collaboration rhythms & norms	Our meetings and channels have clear purposes and work well for everyone.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	We have explicit working agreements that we revisit regularly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Continuous learning & feedback	I receive useful, timely feedback that helps me improve.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	We regularly reflect on our work and make real changes as a result.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Accountability & ownership	Team members reliably follow through on their commitments.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	We hold one another to high standards in a supportive way.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Inclusion	Everyone has a genuine opportunity to contribute, regardless of location or role.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Growth opportunities and visible work are distributed fairly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Interpreting your pillar averages (average the two statements for each pillar):

4.0 – 5.0	3.0 – 3.9	BELOW 3.0
A strength. Protect it and share what works with other teams.	**Mixed signals.** Explore the variation and pick one habit to reinforce.	**A priority.** Discuss openly and agree on a focused improvement.

These bands are a suggested starting point for discussion, not a validated benchmark. The conversation the results prompt is more valuable than the scores themselves.

08 CONCLUSION

Conclusion and recommended next steps

The future of high-performing teams will be shaped less by any single technology or work model than by the quality of the human system underneath. Trust, clarity, healthy rhythms, learning, ownership, and inclusion are not soft extras; they are the conditions that let talent and tools translate into results.

The encouraging news is that these conditions are buildable. They respond to consistent, observable leadership behavior — the kind of small, repeated habits described in this whitepaper. Leaders who invest in them create teams that adapt, recover, and keep delivering as the context continues to change.

Recommended next steps

01
Start the conversation. Share this framework with your team and invite their perspective on which pillars feel strongest and weakest.

02
Run the self-assessment. Complete it individually, compare results together, and agree on one or two focus areas.

03
Choose your habits. Commit to two or three leadership habits from the weekly, monthly, and quarterly cadence, and tell your team what you are trying.

04
Make norms explicit. Co-create or refresh a team working agreement, including how you will use AI tools.

05
Measure and revisit. Select a small, balanced set of measures and review progress as a team each quarter.

06
Scale what works. HR and talent leaders can embed these practices into leader development, onboarding, and team-formation playbooks.

> *"Lasting results are not built in a single offsite. They are built in the ordinary weeks, one consistent habit at a time.*

RESOURCES

Further reading

The following works offer deeper perspectives on the research and practice behind this whitepaper.

Edmondson, A. C. (1999). "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2).

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Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (1993). *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*. Harvard Business School Press.

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Woolley, A. W., Chabris, C. F., Pentland, A., Hashmi, N., & Malone, T. W. (2010). "Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups." *Science*, 330(6004).

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Part of the **Resource Library — Tools to Accelerate Your Growth**: curated guides, whitepapers, and templates designed to help you lead, hire, and grow with confidence. Pair this whitepaper with the team health self-assessment in Section 07 to turn its ideas into a focused conversation with your team.