

The Art of Teamwork

Fostering healthy team dynamics to
drive innovation and business success

The secret behind successful teamwork lies in the ability to intentionally nurture and maintain healthy team dynamics.

Introduction

The challenges facing businesses today are becoming increasingly complicated and unpredictable—from the faster pace of work, to the complexity of producing products and servicing customers, to the dependency on specialists' deep knowledge and experience. Even the daily struggles that pervade our individual lives have grown in complexity, such as the dizzying rate of technological change, disruptive business models, a rapidly changing workforce, and the explosion of data. This increasing complexity emphasizes the need to empower and harness the collective body of talents, perspectives, and experiences present in groups. To tackle the challenges of tomorrow, it won't just be about being the fastest and smartest, but unlocking potential in others and leveraging our differences and personalities to succeed amidst the increased complexity and uncertainty of modern work.

But teamwork can be a challenge in itself, leading to a host of new questions: What is the right team composition? What's the best way to inspire a team to rise to a particularly tricky challenge? What to do when a team encounters interpersonal tensions? What are the conditions that will set a team up for success?

To further understand what makes teams successful, we partnered with IDEO, a global design company known for its human-centered, interdisciplinary approach to teamwork. While we know that diversity of perspective is critical to high-performing teams, we found that its mere presence isn't enough to ensure success. Instead, the best performing teams foster healthy dynamics, which allow them to harness diverse perspectives, create a culture of inclusion, and ultimately drive innovation and business success.

In this paper, we will explore the fundamentals of the art of teamwork, the foundation for our Art of Teamwork toolkit.

“We are facing hard challenges in the world [which] are not going to be solved by one person—however heroic he or she might be—or by one leader... But if we build effective teams, align them around the important purposes that we’re trying to address, and then learn to work effectively as a network, we have a much better chance of understanding each other, and bringing our best selves together to tackle these problems.”

Julie Gerberding
Former Director of the Center of Disease Control
and current Merck Chief Patient Officer



Contents

Understanding—and implementing—the dynamics that fuel healthy teamwork

In this document, you will find:

- A framework for the art of teamwork articulating core elements that influence team dynamics and enhance performance. This framework can help guide teams to leverage their diversity, build trust, and drive innovation.
- Stories from real, diverse teams that informed this work, from chief executives to fishmongers to award-winning journalists to executive producers.
- Tips and tricks, so that you can begin applying the framework with your own team.

Looking for more? Explore the Art of Teamwork guide and download the toolkit at aka.ms/ArtOfTeamwork.



How a team turned their differences into a means to succeed



Outside on the streets, the Iraqi war rages on.

Inside the *Wall Street Journal's* Baghdad bureau, a team of Americans, Shia Iraqi citizens, and Sunni Iraqi citizens gather to discuss the day's news. Each of these groups has very different perspectives on the war—on what the fight is really about and who the villains and heroes are—and the team struggles to abandon the emotional turmoil of the war at the office door. Tensions leave collaboration nearly impossible, threatening the team's mission.

Veteran conflict journalist Farnaz Fassihi is the Baghdad Bureau Chief and leader of this sectarian-diverse team of reporters. It is her job to somehow break the tension and inspire cohesion so that her team can do their work. She decides to do this with a simple morning routine: "I say, 'Let's just start the day by telling each other about what happened in your community. What are your concerns? What are your anxieties?' I feel that confronting the tension is a really good way to overcome it, and to get them to see each other as friends and colleagues rather than rivals and enemies."



Farnaz Fassihi

Award-winning war correspondent and
former *WSJ* Baghdad Bureau Chief

Diversity—from life experience to expertise to temperament—is indeed a powerful ingredient, but it requires tools and their skillful application to transform diversity to a generative force.

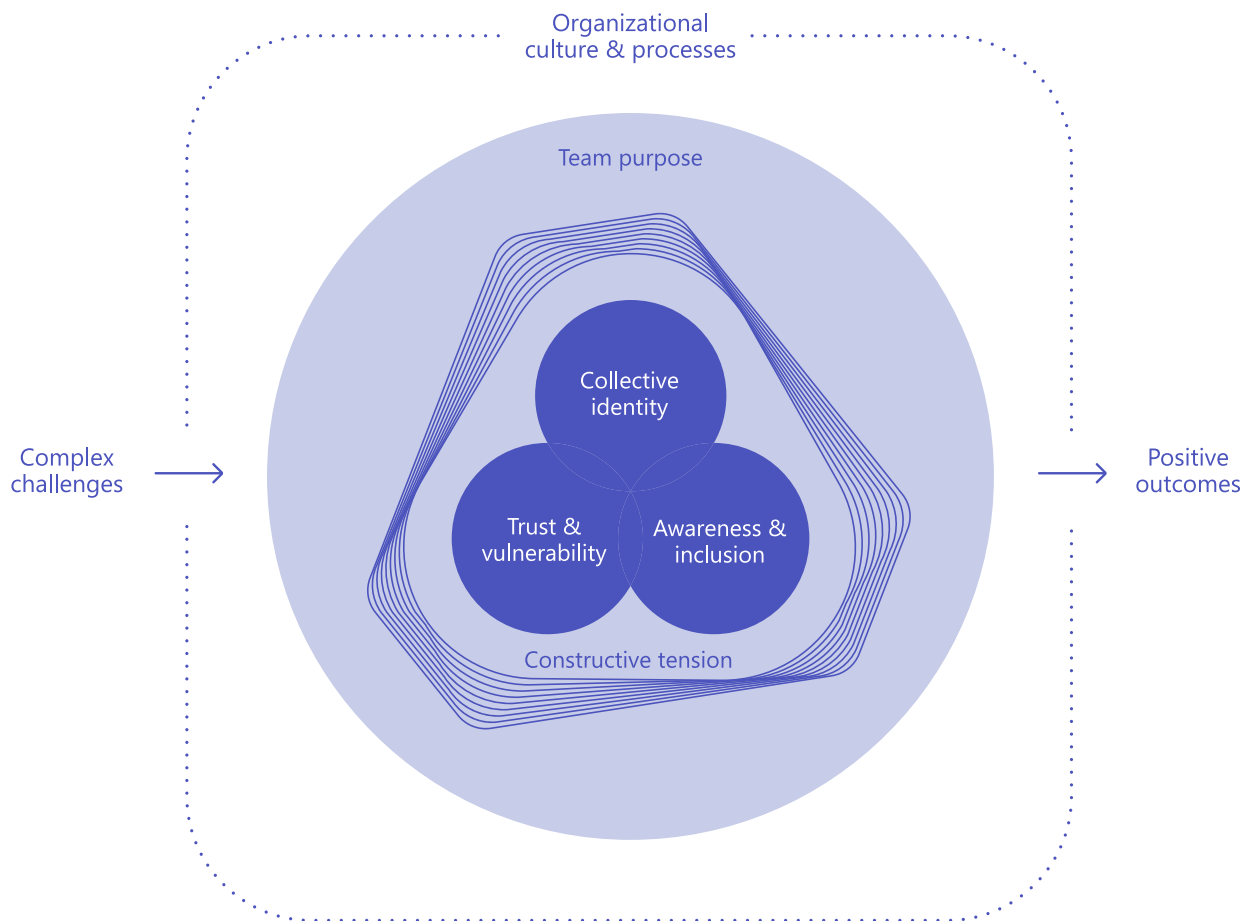
What Farnaz is doing to build her team has many parallels in today's work culture, where harnessing a team's diversity and focusing the inherent tension can lead to enhanced outcomes. A study from the University of Michigan* shows that a group of average problem solvers with diverse backgrounds and perspectives will outperform a homogenous group of the highest performing problem solvers. Shane Snow, the author of *Dream Teams: Working Together without Falling Apart*, says, "The research is clearly telling us that this is not just a good moral thing to do, to include people from all walks of life, but it's actually a very pragmatic thing to do. A [diverse] group of people has a much higher chance of breaking new ground than the group of people who are more similar." Put simply, the convergence of our differences is critical in building teams that drive positive outcomes, and it is necessary for businesses to succeed.

But as we see with Farnaz's team, the simple presence of difference isn't a panacea. In fact, the very differences that enable the team to accomplish what no single individual can is precisely that which threatens to destroy their work. Diversity—from life experience to expertise to temperament—is indeed a powerful ingredient, but it requires tools and skillful application to transform into a generative force.

Challenges today have an increased level of complexity and uncertainty—we can't solve them alone. Armed with tools that help lay the foundation for healthy dynamics and inclusive cultures, teams can address these challenges effectively, making smarter decisions that lead to the best possible outcomes to drive the future of business and an organization's transformation.

* "Groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers" by Lu Hong and Scott E. Page

The Art of Teamwork framework



The highest functioning teams have the same healthy emotional faculties in common.

Teams form to solve a challenge. But mixing personalities, personal objectives, and temperaments can be a challenge in itself.

This framework is the culmination of insights synthesized from in-context observation, expert interviews, secondary research, and prototype activities across a variety of teams—from chief executives to astronauts to chefs to television producers to innovation leaders to nurses to restaurant workers, and beyond.

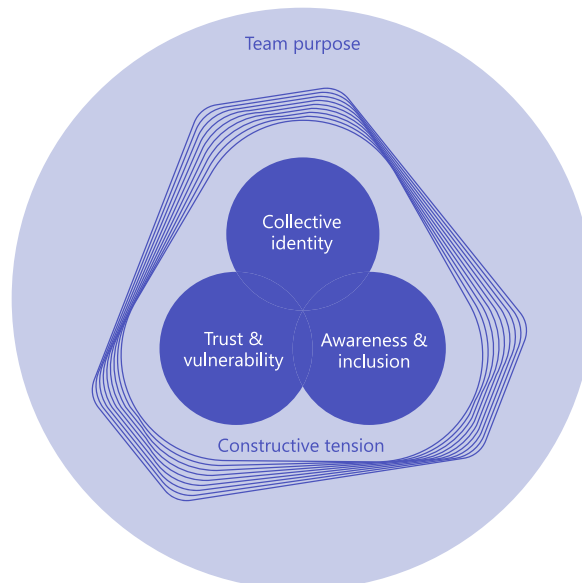
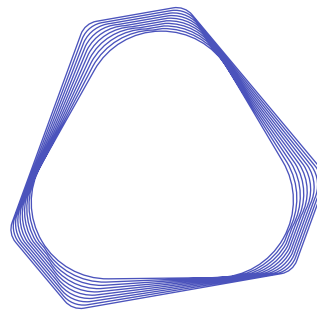
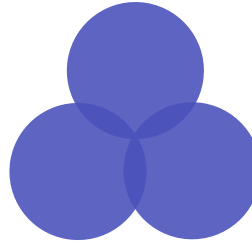
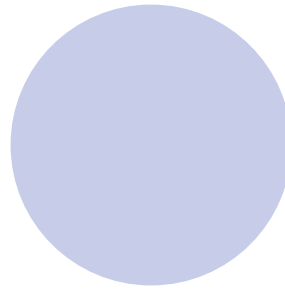


An exciting—yet not surprising—discovery was that the highest functioning teams have the same healthy emotional faculties in common. This framework describes the dynamics that coexist in high-performing teams, and it can be adopted across teams and contexts.

When applied thoughtfully and intentionally, teams can develop an enhanced capability to nurture healthy dynamics, increasing positive outcomes and productivity. This is the art of teamwork.

We will touch on the primary components of this teamwork framework, beginning with a trip to Seattle to understand the power of team purpose with the fishmongers at Pike Place Fish Market.

Core elements



Team purpose

The shared meaning that keeps teams focused, fulfilled, and aligned toward achieving their objectives

Collective identity

A shared sense of belonging that builds cohesion and helps team members work together as one

Awareness and inclusion

An understanding of self and others that enables teams to navigate interpersonal dynamics and foster inclusion

Trust and vulnerability

The components of emotional safety that enable interpersonal risk-taking in teams

Constructive tension

The generative force that results when teams harness their differences

Team purpose

The shared meaning that keeps teams focused, fulfilled, and aligned toward achieving their objectives



“Heyyyyyyoooo!” deep voices sing in unison.

A glimmering king salmon soars over the heads of the jaw-dropped crowd, landing gracefully in the wide sturdy arms of a barrel-chested fishmonger behind the counter. He holds the fish up one last time for applause before wrapping it in a plastic sheath.

Taho Kakutani, the man who threw the slimy catch, smiles for a photo next to a grinning tourist, rubber-gloved thumbs pointed to the sky. He has been a fishmonger at the Pike Place Fish Market for the past 15 years, a tourist attraction famous not just for the fish, but the smiling staff and entertaining show. While Taho’s team’s official job is selling fish, something else gets them out of bed in the morning: “When you’re contributing to something bigger than yourself—like making people happy—it’s motivating because you’re doing it for a larger purpose,” Taho says.



Team purpose is the collective heartbeat, the guiding light that orients discussions and aligns decisions.

This is crucial when a challenge is especially complex. When a team's purpose is clear, it gives individuals autonomy in their work because they can trust they're all moving together in a shared direction. A clear purpose also helps shape shared goals, as well as focus effort toward them.

A team's purpose may be as simple as the tactical goal they are striving to achieve, like selling fish. But in order to infuse every day with the kind of personal meaning that fuels Taho's team, their purpose should be tied to the impact the team aspires to have on those touched by their work. In fact, purpose really works its magic when a team has the agency to self-identify the impact they hope to have in the world. Just ask Taho; while he'll tell you that selling fish is his job, making people happy is his purpose—and therein lies all the difference. It is so clear, and so strongly held that customers feel it the moment they walk under the red Pike Place sign and duck to avoid a fish flying toward their faces.



Team purpose in practice



“When I think about teams, I think about family and friends and loved ones—any group that’s aligned and grounded in this shared passion and purpose, and that is driving toward the same goals together.”

Katie Kirsch
Product Designer at IDEO



“Teamwork is about coming together... for one positive impact, one really strong purpose, and really fighting to death for that purpose.”

Tayyiba Haneef-Park
Three-time Olympic indoor volleyball player

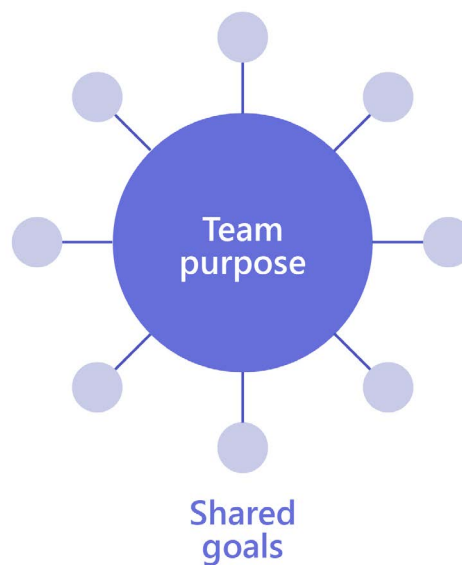




Key components of team purpose

When a team's purpose is clear, agreed upon by all, and deeply felt, each teammate will have a sense of autonomy and agency to make decisions and act on their own, knowing that the team as a whole will be aligned. This helps a team remain focused, higher performing, and happier.

Shared goals are the discrete, achievable milestones a team strives toward, that ladder up to the team's purpose. A sales team, for instance, might have a shared goal of striking deals with 500 new retailers in order to achieve growth objectives.





An easy way to get started

Looking for a simple, accessible way to begin to articulate your team's purpose? Try this:

A proud moment

Sometimes it's easy to get lost in the minutiae of work and lose sight of the big picture we are trying to collectively achieve.

"Get together with your teammates and jot down a few instances when you were most proud of your team's work. Then share back with each other. For each instance, ask, 'Who are we serving?' and 'What was the impact we had?' From your answers, construct a simple purpose statement—or perhaps several!

For the purpose statement, have each teammate fill this out:

We exist to (create this impact)
for (intended audience)"

Joe Brown
Senior Portfolio Director at IDEO

Want to dig in deeper? Explore the Art of Teamwork guide and download the toolkit at aka.ms/ArtOfTeamworkGuide.



Collective identity

A shared sense of belonging that builds cohesion and helps teams work as one



Before Kellie Gerardi's international team of astronauts is dropped deep in the red rock formations of the San Rafael Swell—a remote portion of the Utah desert that closely mirrors the surface of Mars—she and her teammates spend hours on video calls discussing some important agreements. What are each of their areas of research and the roles they will assume? Who is going to cook, and who is going to clean—on which days? What time will they have breakfast, lunch, and dinner? How will they celebrate birthdays and milestones to bring some levity to the work? What is the best way for each person to give and receive feedback?

This is not Kellie's first time simulating life on another planet, but living in tight quarters with the same few people for a month, enveloped in a heavy space suit, is not going to be easy. "The agreements that we set are instrumental in helping things run smoothly during the simulation," she says. "They also help prevent and soothe the inevitable interpersonal friction that we know will arise in such an intense environment: living



with each other in a small space, without much outside contact, for an entire month.” In moments of tension or misalignment, the team points to the agreements they collectively agreed upon to help quickly reach a resolution.

“What made you happy today? What was frustrating for you? What would you like to change? What would you like to repeat?” Each evening at dinner, the team goes around the table answering this same set of questions.

“This ritual is an important time for our team to sit together outside of the work day, to discuss our emotions honestly, celebrating the moments that were awesome, and talking through things that could have been better,” Kellie notes. While celebrating a birthday may not seem like a mission-critical task, taking time each night to discuss feelings and share “small” personal moments help form the bond that carries the team through the most challenging moments to come.

If purpose is about where the team is headed, values are the playbook of how to get there.

Agreements are critical because they are the tangible, agreed-upon manifestations of a team’s values.

One of the astronauts’ core agreements is to give—and be open to receiving—honest, constructive feedback. Other important agreements may be around working hours, or team members’ unique roles and responsibilities to ensure work does not overlap. Taking the time to explicitly craft and codify these agreements gives clarity to the team around ownership and accountability, which in turn ensures that the agreements stay alive and relevant.

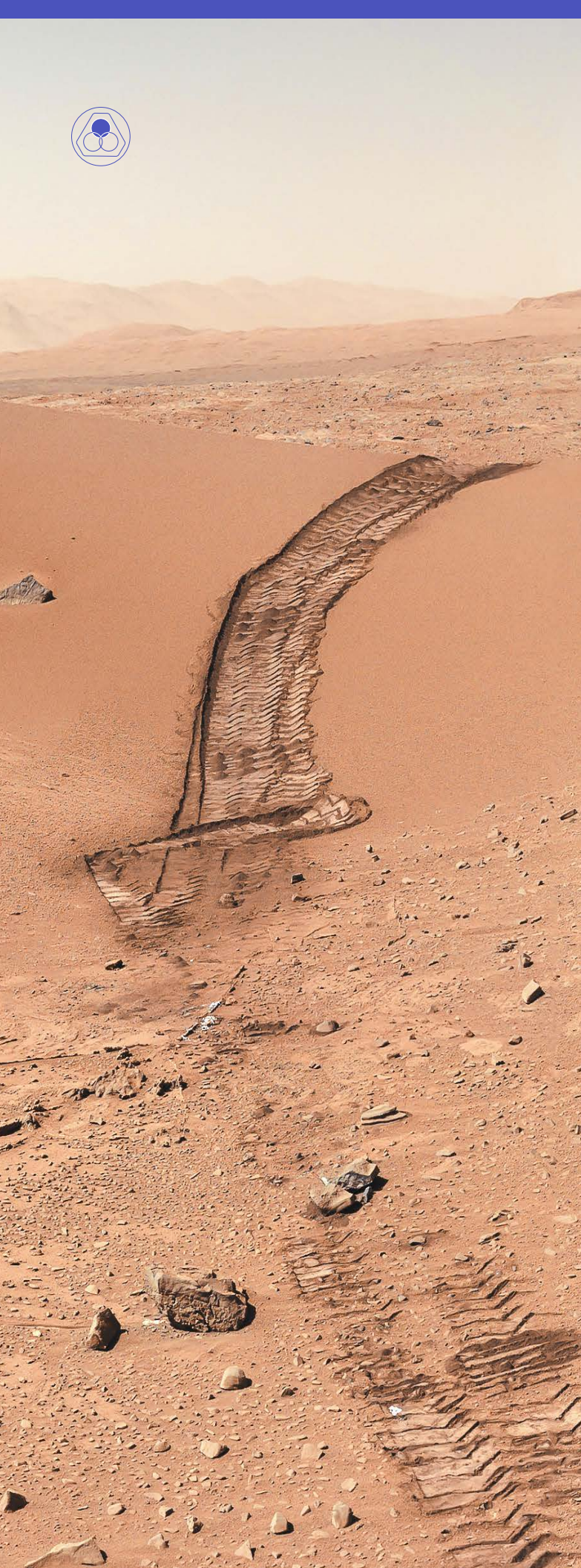
Teams build connection and bonding through shared experiences.

Rituals reinforce both formal agreements (nightly questions around the dinner table) and informal bonding (celebrating Kellie’s birthday).



Used correctly—and followed religiously—agreements are instrumental in fortifying a team’s identity, laying a strong foundation upon which the team can forge into more challenging territory.

The agreements help solidify the astronaut team’s collective identity—their identifying as a single entity aligned toward their team purpose. But for their collective identity to remain intact throughout the Mars simulation, it is nurtured continually over time, helping the team strengthen communication and foster trust.





Collective identity in practice



“I made sure that I visited [Iraqi team members’] homes and had meals with their families, and I brought them gifts and remembered children’s birthdays... I made sure that they understood that we really look at them as equal team members, and in a sense that we were all a family.”

Farnaz Fassihi

Award-winning war correspondent and former *WSJ* Baghdad Bureau Chief



“We created team values—what were the things that were really important, that no matter what work we did, we were going to agree to abide by?...we wrote the path, not just the goal, and it allowed us to really consider our values as we worked toward it.”

Caryl Stern

President and CEO of UNICEF USA



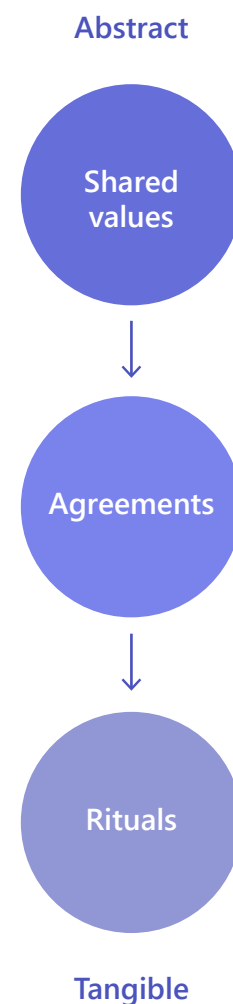
Key components of collective identity

A team forms a collective identity by aligning around shared values, creating agreements that are continually revisited, bonding through shared experiences, and practicing rituals that are uniquely theirs. A team with a strong sense of collective identity has a shared sense of belonging that builds cohesion and helps them work as one.

Shared values are the beliefs and attitudes that a team defines as necessary for its success. An example of a team's shared values could be *embrace ambiguity*, or *make others successful*. When a team articulates shared values, they are brought to life through everyday behaviors.

Agreements are the tangible, agreed-upon manifestations of a team's values. Agreements might show up in your team as daily start and end times, or the agreed-upon methods for giving feedback.

Rituals are the repeated behaviors and activities that reinforce both formal and informal agreements. A ritual can be as simple as going out to eat as a team on Mondays, having a team chant, or doing a creative exercise together every morning.





An easy way to get started

Looking for a way to strengthen your team's collective identity? Try this:

Famous team quotes

An easy way to build a team's collective identity is through a "Famous Team Quotes" board.

"The board is a space to collect the essence of the team's humor and experiences. It continues to grow throughout the course of the project capturing the funny moments, ironic statements, or banter exchanged across the team. These quotes can be written on sticky notes during the course of the day. A built-in ritual to tell these stories associated with the sticky note could happen each day (after the morning meeting, for example), provoking laughter in the team."

Jayne Jeffries, PhD
Senior Design Researcher at IDEO

Want to dig in deeper? Explore the Art of Teamwork guide and download the toolkit at aka.ms/ArtOfTeamworkGuide.



Awareness and inclusion

An understanding of self and others that enables teams to navigate interpersonal dynamics and foster inclusion



Six search-and-rescue volunteers have set up camp in the woods near Truckee, California, for what they call Small Alpine Training, a three-day backpacking trip where the volunteers learn important rescue techniques while getting to know each other intimately. The team discusses everything from sleep patterns to their eating habits to how they communicate when they feel under the weather.

This is interpersonal awareness training in action, which helps create an inclusive culture.

On one particular day, the team was busy setting up a technical course of ropes, learning the best ways to rescue people when they are stuck high on a cliff or ledge. This is dangerous work, so the volunteers constantly check in with their teammates, asking how they are doing and answering as honestly as possible when asked—as if their lives depended on it.



Alex Grishaver has been a search and rescue team lead for five years, spending his weekends in trainings or going on missions in the Northern California mountains. On this day, he was in charge of leading the technical rope exercise, but he felt off. “I didn’t sleep at all the night before. We have a rating system for risk, 1 being low and 10 being high. That day, I said ‘I am at level 5,’ which is not good,” Alex says.

He was moving slowly, giving inaccurate directions and slipping up. His teammate Fred noticed that Alex was struggling. “He pulled me aside and wanted to know how I felt. I said ‘not good.’ So he asked if I’d like him to take over so I could rest up,” Alex says. “At first, I was agitated and felt a little demoralized. But after taking a moment to process, I knew that was the best thing to do for everyone.”

By practicing interpersonal awareness, Alex and Fred mitigated a potentially dangerous situation. “I have seen things go very wrong when people try to be tough. This group is made up of folks who have cultivated a deep level of self-reliance. It can be hard for them to admit anything that might be perceived as weakness,” Alex explains. “But when volunteers aren’t honest about how they feel out here, people can get hurt—or worse.”

We’ve all seen a communication breakdown between teammates, when things fall apart because an offhand comment is taken personally. Often, team dysfunction is bred through a lack of understanding—of each other, but also of ourselves.

Properly mastered, emotional awareness is a powerful skill that enables teammates to take a step back from disagreements, objectively analyze the situation, and calmly respond to one another to push the team forward without personality flare-ups getting in the way.



At the first level, this skill starts with **self-awareness**, the ability to recognize why one is feeling frustration, anger, disappointment, happiness, and a range of other feelings. Alex practiced self-awareness by acknowledging, first to himself and then to his search and rescue team, that he was feeling too tired to lead the rope course.

This tiny act of self-awareness had an outsized effect on the group; not only was it a good test for Alex, it strengthened trust in the group, enhanced safety for everyone, and modeled a form of vulnerability that is difficult to master.

Another way that self-awareness shows up in teams is when team members adopt a growth mindset. In a growth mindset, people believe that intellect and talent are just a starting point, and that their abilities can be developed primarily through perseverance and hard work. This perspective creates a passion for learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishments. Adopting a growth mindset requires both humility and courage.

Co-awareness is the second level of interpersonal awareness. It is the ability to recognize the impact one's actions have on others. It is founded on empathy, or the practice of trying to share in the feelings of another. Empathy helps team members actively listen to other perspectives and defer judgement.

The third and final tier of this skill is **situational awareness**, taking into account not just yourself and your teammates but also the context you're in. Fred practiced situational awareness by immediately pulling Alex aside to chat, rather than confronting him in front of the team, which could have resulted in panic and put additional pressure on Alex to react quickly as opposed to taking the time to respond with the group's perspective in mind.

For Alex's team, interpersonal awareness training encourages team members to ask for help when they need it.



It helps both in the small moments—when a team leader knows a team member’s curtness might be because they’re sleep deprived or hungry—and in the big ones—how to cope when a search mission ends tragically. Emotional awareness fortifies the team when they are out in the wilderness, allowing them to navigate complex and potentially perilous situations together while forming an inclusive culture where people feel seen, heard, and supported.

Emotional awareness fortifies the team when they are out in the wilderness, allowing them to navigate complex and potentially perilous situations together while forming an inclusive culture where people feel seen, heard, and supported.



Awareness and inclusion in practice



“I think the collections improve when you are able to listen to criticism from everybody and know that it’s coming from a place of wanting to push the product to its best spot.”

Fernando Garcia

Co-Creative Director of Oscar de la Renta and Monse



“Why is someone shut down and not really comfortable contributing in a group? Often the group dynamics don’t really foster the sense of complete inclusion, so we don’t take advantage of the talent that we have.”

Julie Gerberding

Former Director of the Center of Disease Control and current Merck Chief Patient Officer



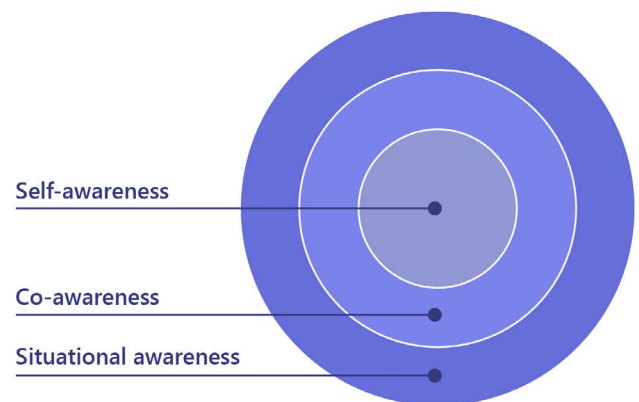
Key components of awareness and inclusion

There are three levels of awareness in a team. The first is self-awareness, or the ability to understand yourself and your emotions; the second is co-awareness, which is established through practicing empathy; and the third is situational awareness, or being aware of the context in which a team acts. When the team has a heightened sense of awareness, it fosters an inclusive culture where team members can more easily navigate interpersonal dynamics.

Self-awareness is the ability to both recognize one's emotions, as well as understand why one might be feeling them. The more aware we are of the source of our feelings, the more we can react in a productive fashion and ask for what we need.

Co-awareness is the ability to sense others' emotions and recognize the impact one's actions have on others. For example, if you know that a team member isn't able to focus when loud music is playing, practice co-awareness by keeping your headphones on.

Situational awareness is taking into account not just yourself and your teammates, but also the context you're in. For example, if it's necessary to have a conversation with a teammate about performance issues, it's likely best done in private as to not derail the rest of the team.





An easy way to get started

Looking for ways to increase emotional awareness in your team? Try this:

The power of getting real

Everyone has different working styles and preferences, but that doesn't mean everyone communicates those needs in the same way. Sometimes, all it takes is a quick check-in to get to know new members on your team.

"Every time you start a new project or welcome a new member to the team, sit down as a group and ask everyone to share when they're at their best and when they're at their worst. Answering these questions can help get everyone on the same page around the conditions needed to support one another and make each other successful."

Dav Rauch
Portfolio Director at IDEO

Want to dig in deeper? Explore the Art of Teamwork guide and download the toolkit at aka.ms/ArtOfTeamworkGuide.



Trust and vulnerability

The components of emotional safety that enable interpersonal risk-taking in teams



"Doctor, can someone help?!"

A team of doctors bursts into the room to find a woman convulsing on the floor. Her husband is trembling above her, holding their newborn baby. "I don't know what happened, she was fine a minute ago. Please help her!" he cries.

In a calm, steady voice, the lead physician snaps to action. "She's having a seizure. Clear the area. Residents, stabilize her." Two residents clear her airway and turn her on her side as the team lead asks the bedside nurse about the woman's history. The nurse runs through her mental chart. "Female, 29 years old. Came in last night with labor contractions, and gave birth at 2:06 PM. No complications during labor."

"Ok, pause!"—a woman's voice cuts through the chaos. The doctors turn and face Maybelle Kou, the residents' program director.



Suddenly, the woman's quaking body stills, and her eyes open with piercing lucidity. The new father turns on his heels, and the hospital blanket falls away from the baby's face, revealing it to be a silicone dummy. The postpartum patient and her husband are actors in the simulation, and while the residents know this, their commitment to handling the crisis scenario has still left the air so tense, it could be pierced with a scalpel. "Let's talk about what just happened," Maybelle continues.

This is the INOVA medical simulation center, where resident doctors are trained in handling life-or-death crisis situations. During each simulation, the team debriefs often, presenting residents with opportunities to analyze and learn. "We create an environment where doctors can make mistakes without fear of repercussions. That's an oxymoron in medicine where you're expected to be perfect, but humans make mistakes." Maybelle says. It's a ritual of vulnerability she wants her residents to practice and learn well, as they'll be expected to debrief in exactly the same way after real-life crisis situations in her hospital.

Psychological safety is a crucial cornerstone to healthy teams. It is the brave state of mind where an individual feels comfortable sharing opinions and ideas without fear of recrimination, judgement, or animosity.

In states of psychological danger, individuals are less likely to share divergent views, leaving some ideas unsaid and voices unheard.

Innovation comes from the embrace of divergent and novel points of view, which are precisely the ideas that die first in a psychologically unsafe environment.



At times, Maybelle invites veteran doctors to share difficult personal stories with the younger residents. “It’s powerful when senior doctors are vulnerable and say ‘I’ve made mistakes too.’ If residents are in a state where they are defensive, feel ashamed, or afraid, it is impossible for them to learn and grow,” she explains. Vulnerability is entering into places that involve risk and emotional exposure. Regularly practicing vulnerability invites other teammates to also let down their guards, creating space for the best ideas to be shared.

Trust is knowing you can be vulnerable with someone and won’t be hurt.

Trust and vulnerability work in a cycle; you only show vulnerability when you trust someone, and the more you learn to trust someone, the more they show vulnerability.

It is this virtuous cycle that enables teams to enter into spaces of psychological safety, which allow them to take bigger risks and accomplish loftier goals.



Trust and vulnerability in practice



“In teamwork, trust is everything because it leaves you to be able to put forward your different perspectives and ideas without holding back. If you don’t trust the people you’re working with enough to put yourself out on a limb, then your whole team can’t go out on that limb and see further.”

Shane Snow

Author of *Dream Teams* and Journalist



“We have a no-fault, no-guilt rule if you can’t accomplish your mission... we want to create a space that is safe for people to tap out so that other people can tap in.”

Amanda Nguyen

Activist and CEO of Rise





Key components of trust and vulnerability

The virtuous cycle of trust and vulnerability establishes psychological safety in a team. Team members who feel psychologically safe are able to take greater interpersonal risks, allowing them to bring their full selves to their work, which sets the stage for innovative ideas to flourish.

Trust is knowing you can be vulnerable with someone without being put down or hurt. For example, when a team shows unwavering support for a team member who is struggling with a personal trauma, that team member's trust in the team deepens.

Vulnerability is entering into situations that involve risk and emotional exposure. For example, a team member may show vulnerability by confiding in their team about a personal trauma they are struggling with.

Psychological safety is the brave space where an individual feels comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas without fear of recrimination, judgement, or animosity. Psychological safety is created through the virtuous cycle of trust and vulnerability. For example, when the team member struggling with a personal trauma feels psychologically safe, they won't feel the need to hide their struggle, which allows them to show up fully.





An easy way to get started

Looking for a way to reinforce trust and vulnerability in your team? Try this:

Guilty pleasures ice breaker

Everyone has music they hate to love because everyone else loves to hate it.

“A fun way to practice vulnerability in your team is to share a tune that makes you happiest and embarrasses you most, whether it’s 70s yacht rock, 80s hair metal, or a 90s boy band. By sharing your guilty pleasure with your team, you will learn what it feels like to let your guard down by sharing something personal, even if its starting with a small thing—like a good bad song.”

Peter Hyer,
Portfolio Director at IDEO

Want to dig in deeper? Explore the Art of Teamwork guide and download the toolkit at aka.ms/ArtOfTeamworkGuide.



Constructive tension

The generative force that results when teams harness their differences



"United has clear regulations that make the crew responsible for the safety of all passengers, and because Mr. Dao was a clear danger, his extraction from the was totally warranted," says Dan Hall, a former Apache helicopter pilot in the US army, as he taps a pencil on his desk.

The professor slowly scans the 93 intent faces peering down at him from the rows of desks in the auditorium, looking for signs of dissent.

"Jenny—do you agree with Dan?"

Jenny, a civil rights activist from Taiwan, looks as though she is about to burst. "Absolutely not," she gasps. "This was a racist and unnecessarily brutal reaction on the part of the airline. The crew members were the ones who made Mr. Dao unsafe, and the lawsuit proves as much."

The students are sitting female-male-female-male in assigned seats. Dan is next to Sheila, a private equity



associate from Mumbai, and Lynne, a former HR lead from a Silicon Valley tech company. This is their first year at Harvard Business School, and these 93 students will make up their “section,” for the duration of the year.

These sections are intentionally curated by Harvard to be as diverse as possible, down to the assigned seating chart. But the goal here is not diversity for its own sake. Rather, the intention is to produce as much tension as possible. “They take all of our different backgrounds, from work experience, nationality, age, race, gender orientation, and basically jumble us all up into the most diverse sections possible,” Dan explains. “And that’s really important with the pedagogy that Harvard Business School uses for their instructional method; everything here is taught by the case method.”

Each class focuses on a Harvard Business Review case, an example of a business decision—like David Dao and United Airlines—that the students read and prepare for beforehand.

“We each bring unique professional and personal life experiences, and contribute our thoughts to what’s going on in the case. There’s such a diversity of opinions, especially when it comes to ethics cases, but after hashing it out—even fighting sometimes—we usually reach consensus on what the key takeaways are,” Dan says.

The educational value at HBS is rooted in just how deep, how insightful those discussions become, which is entirely based on divergent contributions.

Teams and organizations that value diversity tend to perform better. The reasoning is simple—more diverse ways of thinking means more ideas.

While diversity includes demographics such as gender, ethnicity, or upbringing, the idea of diversity is broadened to encapsulate so much more. At a minimum, all teams need cognitive diversity, or a wide variety of ways of thinking and perceiving—which naturally breeds tension.



Tension is often seen as negative, and people go to great lengths to avoid it. However, tension is a formidable tool that can be leveraged to accelerate innovation.

Varied viewpoints pull conversations and ideas in different directions; the more teams can lean into that tension, the further they can stretch their ideas, uncovering fertile new ground to explore and innovate.

How, then, do teams harness the creative energy of tension without letting it rip them apart? Much like a muscle, tension must be properly exercised and developed over time in order to harness its full potential. This requires the appropriate emotional preconditions previously outlined in the teamwork framework.

Creating space for tension is not about being right, but about getting to new places that no mere individual could reach alone.

“At HBS, we do something called ‘My Takes,’ where we stand up and share a personal story with our section. For example, I talked about coming out as gay, grappling with my religion, and my family’s expectations,” Dan says. “Being vulnerable with each other allows us to build trust, feel empathy, and bond. Ultimately, when case discussions become heated in the classroom, we have a deeper understanding of where each person is coming from, so we lean into the tension rather than shut down.”

When a team encourages the sharing of unfettered individual perspectives leading to a heated debate, and then everyone walks out of the room still feeling like friends—they’ve learned how to harness tension and turn it into a constructive, generative force. This is less about debate for debate’s sake, but strengthening the muscles that both create and resolve tension, pushing thinking further while simultaneously protecting the emotional vulnerability of those involved.





Constructive tension in practice



“Something that’s really important is diversity of thought, and having people that are die-hard, live-in-a-bubble liberals, or super-staunch conservatives... I think that’s how you get to the best version of the show at the end of the day.”

Jen Flanz

Twenty-year Executive Producer of *The Daily Show*



“The key ingredients of a great team are having people who think differently, coming together and fully engaging...mashing our different ways of thinking together, and then being humble enough and eager enough to change.”

Shane Snow

Author of *Dream Teams* and Journalist



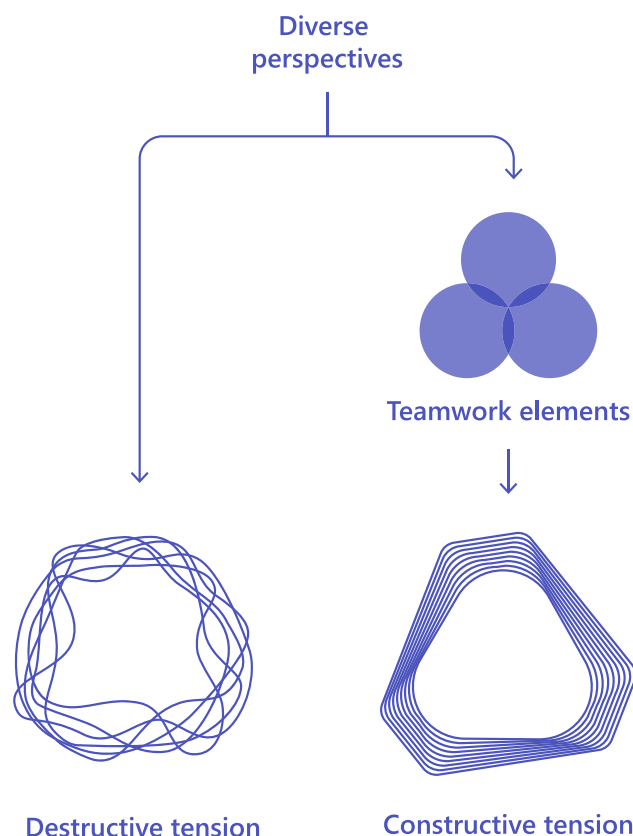
Key components of constructive tension

When differing perspectives collide, tension arises. This tension becomes a force that if unharnessed, can be destructive to a team. But when tension is harnessed by fostering healthy team dynamics, it becomes a constructive force that produces innovative ideas.

Diverse perspectives, when harnessed properly, are key for innovation to happen. These perspectives can derive from diversity of thought, background, ethnicity, temperament, role, gender, sexual orientation, and beyond.

Constructive tension is the productive force that emerges when diverse perspectives are allowed to flourish in healthy conditions.

Destructive tension is the negative force that emerges when diversity collides in unhealthy conditions.





An easy way to get started

Looking for a way for your team to embrace constructive tension? Try this:

Supervillains, superheroes

Sometimes, just calling out a tension can defuse it. Other times, you need a superhero to defeat it.

"Gather your team and ask each member to write down a tension that is affecting your ability to collaborate. Now, ask each person to give the tension a supervillain name, like The Talk-Over Lord, or The Red Tape-inator. Then share back. Taking a playful approach can often defuse the discomfort we have when talking about tensions, opening up a productive conversation. Next, ask, 'Which superhero is best suited to defeat this supervillain?'"

Michelle Lee
Director at IDEO Play Lab

Want to dig in deeper? Explore the Art of Teamwork guide and download the toolkit at aka.ms/ArtOfTeamworkGuide.



Harnessing the power of teamwork to achieve more

The heart of any company's competitive advantage comes down to its ability to harness the strengths of dynamic teams. The progressively complicated and unpredictable challenges we face require fresh approaches, including innovative strategies for unlocking creative potential in groups.

The secret behind successful teamwork lies in the ability to intentionally nurture and maintain healthy team dynamics.

When teams actively nurture this healthy state, they are able to catalyze tension, leveraging a primary critical advantage: diversity of perspectives and personalities. When these differences are fully harnessed, they become the dynamic, creative, and generative force that's required to tackle today's unpredictable and fast-paced challenge.

If you're interested in learning more about how to help your team foster healthy dynamics, explore our online guide and download the Art of Teamwork toolkit aka.ms/ArtOfTeamwork.

(c)[2019] Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved. Individual views expressed in this document may change without notice and do not necessarily reflect those of Microsoft or other companies. You may copy and use this document for your internal reference purposes.