

# 6 Destructive Myths about Teams in Higher Ed

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## TO THRIVE, HIGHER ED NEEDS HIGH-PERFORMING, ADAPTIVE TEAMS

Higher education will face daunting and complex challenges over the next decade, and campuses will need high-performing teams, *especially* a high-performing senior team, in order to face those challenges.

Building and nurturing a great team is a daunting and noble task for any leader. It takes courage and care, perspiration and aspiration, and investment of time and attention—all of which are in short supply on campuses.

The good news is that **the effort is almost always worth it** because an exceptional team can do amazing work. It makes the campus feel alive and energized. People talk about all the possibilities that can be realized. The gift that a stellar senior team gives their campus is that they model the way for others, not with platitudes and pontifications, but with a more powerful teaching model—their actions.

The senior team's behavior has a trickle-down effect: if everyone on the senior team learns how to operate as a real team, they can then teach their direct reports how to be a real team. Those direct reports can, in turn, teach their own direct reports. This cascading learning process creates extraordinary leverage throughout campus. We have examined several campuses that have great teams at the director level—which is where most of the real work lives—and in each of those cases, they learned how to operate this way because their senior team modeled the way.

The challenge for campus leaders is that few of them have ever been taught or trained to actually build and create a team, so most leaders rely heavily on assumptions and on commonly held myths.

We recently conducted extensive interviews with several stellar teams including: award-winning research teams and cutting-edge technology companies, among other organizations, in order to learn what makes them tick. In the process, we uncovered several destructive myths about what makes a team great. In this paper, we will expose these 6 potentially destructive myths.

We hope our advice will prove useful as you prepare your team—and your campus—for the challenges ahead.

# 6 POTENTIALLY DESTRUCTIVE MYTHS

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## #1: THE MYTH ABOUT TALENT

Too many leaders believe that really smart people will automatically “gel” into a high-performing team.<sup>1</sup> This rarely happens. In fact, really smart people can often find it difficult to work on a team. There are several reasons for this:

- Often, high intelligence can be accompanied by an assumption of “rightness”.
- They may think that solutions to complex challenges are “rather obvious,” when they rarely are.
- They can be quite stubborn because they are enamored with their own conclusions and are convinced that they are right. Thus, they don’t give in easily, even when there are better ideas in the room.

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<sup>1</sup> You can learn more about the dangers of this myth in Pat Sanaghan and Kimberley Eberbach’s *How to Build an Exceptional Team* (Amherst: HRD Press). 2014.

- They believe that by just applying “logic” to a problem, the right answers will be found. Unfortunately, most real problems are sticky, complicated, and very human. Logic has limitations that the most intelligent minds tend not to see.
- They rarely ask questions because they assume that they already have the answer. Questions just muddy the waters for them.

It takes more than a high IQ to perform at high levels. A variety of skills, experiences, and perspectives are necessary, along with high levels of trust, open communication, emotional support, and mutual accountability—all of which are very hard to establish and maintain. One differentiator of an exceptional team is a high level of curiosity where questions (not hidden criticisms) are prized.

With the right mix of people and talent, “regular” folk can produce great results.

## #2: THE MYTH ABOUT FOCUS

There is a prevalent myth in higher education (often promoted by leaders who lack the courage and skill to build a real team) that by “gettin’ er done,” somehow, a team emerges. Yet, too often, the focus on simply getting the task done stunts the process of building the “relational capital” that teams need in order to continue accomplishing tasks.

In our observations of exceptional teams, we found something both surprising and revealing: stellar teams allocate their time in an unexpected way. They spend two-thirds of their time on the task at hand (gettin’ er done) and a full one-third on the “process” or relational aspect of the team’s functioning. This process includes making sure everyone feels heard, showing respect and appreciation for others, listening carefully, seeking other perspectives (especially when there is conflict), and clarifying the rules of decision making. This one-third is crucial, because it is in the process, in the relational aspect of team functioning, that most teams fail.

“In over twenty-five years of consulting with senior teams in higher education, I have never been brought into a situation where a cabinet needed help with getting their tasks done because they didn’t have the talent. I have almost always been brought in because the relational aspects of the team had broken down (e.g. members unable to deal with conflict, people being disrespectful to each other, no trust).”

- Pat Sanaghan

### #3: THE MYTH ABOUT CONFLICT

While disrespect is unacceptable, exceptional teams know that some conflict is inevitable. This may seem like a counterintuitive perspective, but in fact, when you have a diverse and highly motivated team with different viewpoints and strong opinions, you will have conflict. Exceptional teams see conflict as a resource, not something to be avoided.

Having this perspective enables high-performing teams to investigate conflict and find out why and where it is happening. They want to deeply understand what is going on and work through the conflict constructively. They believe that conflict can build team cohesion and produce better solutions if it is worked through carefully and respectfully.

Leaders need both the skill and the courage to deal with conflict on their team, as well as the understanding that everyone on the team needs to be involved in its resolution. Several of the exceptional teams we worked

with invested time and effort in building the team’s skills regarding conflict resolution. They used information from two books we would highly recommend: *Crucial Conversations* (2011)<sup>2</sup> and *Crucial Accountability* (2013)<sup>3</sup>. These two resources will help you build your conflict management skills as a team.

### #4: THE MYTH ABOUT OPENNESS

Part of the relational process includes openness. We have heard the phrase “My team members can tell me anything” time and time again from ineffective leaders. These leaders suffer from the belief that they are open to honest feedback and that their people will “tell it like it is,” when this is rarely true. Instead, they are victims of the “*seduction of the leader*” syndrome frequently seen in higher education.<sup>4</sup> This dynamic occurs when a leader does not have access to honest feedback about their ideas or effectiveness because people will not tell them, *even when they ask*.

This occurs for several reasons:

- Due to the “collegial” and polite nature of most campuses, people simply don’t feel comfortable providing honest feedback, especially if it is negative or critical.
- Many people are reluctant to be honest, because it might hurt someone’s feelings.
- People don’t want to “lose their seat at the table” and fear that they risk doing so if they are truly honest.
- People realize that the leader really isn’t open to honest feedback, even as the leader professes to want it.

2 Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Switzler, A., & McMillan, R. (2012). *Crucial conversations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

3 Patterson, K. (2013). *Crucial accountability: Tools for resolving violated expectations, broken commitments, and bad behavior*.

4 Sanaghan, P., & Eberbach, K. (2014). *The seduction of the leader in higher education*. Denver: Academic Impressions.

### REALITY CHECK:

How comfortable would you be providing your team leader with these kinds of feedback?

- “I think that you might need some coaching on how to facilitate our team meetings. Lately, I believe that they have been ineffective with one or two people dominating the discussions.”
- “I feel like you need to show more appreciation for the team members’ efforts and accomplishments. To be honest, we only hear from you if someone has dropped the ball or missed a milestone.”
- “The deep conflict between Larry and Pat is a destructive element in our team meetings. You have to deal directly with this ASAP. It won’t go away by itself. Something needs to be done.”

If you are comfortable giving this kind of feedback to your team leader, you are on a high functioning team. If you can’t provide this kind of feedback, then the culture of your team does not support this kind of honesty, and won’t be a stellar team.

To avoid the seduction dynamic, the team leader needs to be proactive in creating the mechanisms and promoting the culture that supports healthy dialogue.

### #5: THE MYTH ABOUT SAMENESS

It’s often assumed that likeminded people and people with similar backgrounds are easier to work with and will perform better than more diverse teams. However, the exceptional teams we studied explicitly sought out a wide range of diversity—in background, experience, gender, race, age, and thinking styles. **These teams saw diversity as an asset** and avoided sameness.

One of the pervasive team dynamics that every team leader needs to be aware of is “**comfortable cloning.**” This happens when we select people to be on our teams who have similar backgrounds to ours. These individuals are “comfortable” to us and we believe this comfortableness will help create team cohesion. It might—but it rarely creates an exceptional team.

If a team is to achieve strategic thinking, a multiplicity of perspectives is needed and that can only happen if the team is diverse. Actively seeking out people with different backgrounds, learning styles, and personalities can help create the creative tensions needed to achieve stellar problem solving and performance.

One of the high-performing teams we observed was especially diverse. The team included members whose ages ranged from 24 to 59. The team also consisted of nine internal staff members and two external consultants. The team members had a wide range of experience with the implementation of technology, as well as a wide range of management expertise. Yet because they leveraged these differences effectively, this team was able to facilitate and implement a companywide Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system on time and under budget -- for the first time in the company’s history.

Many diverse teams report that they had some real challenges initially with all the “differences” on the team. But they stuck with it because they believed that if they were able to tap all the resources of the diverse team members, they would achieve amazing results. They chose to see their differences as assets and not as liabilities; this is a powerful notion to remember.

### #6: THE MYTH ABOUT MOTIVATIONAL METAPHORS

How a team deals with differences and manages conflict stems from how team members relate to each other and to the team leader. Often, ineffective leaders don’t speak plainly to their teams, but mask direction and motivation in overused sports analogies. However, many people have never been on a sports team, and find it difficult to relate to these strange analogies. As a result, many of these analogies have become cliché and have lost any actual meaning. This contributes to team members not knowing how to talk with their leaders when real issues arise.

There is another reason that sports analogies don’t contribute to (and may detract from) a team’s dialogue around crucial decisions. It’s because the original analogy is usually a false one. Sports teams are *artificial* creations

that work within specific (and short) time frames. These teams understand strongly reinforced rules of play with concrete punishments for breaking the rules, and they have a way to keep score, minute by minute. Most non-sports teams don't operate under these conditions.

Also, if you watch a sports team perform, you will notice that they have lots of coaches—sometimes more than the number of players. These coaches provide ongoing feedback and advice, shout instructions, cajole, and praise the players constantly. Does that sound like your workplace? Can you call a timeout when a meeting is going downhill and you feel overwhelmed?

Team leaders need to talk to their teams in a way that relates to that *specific* group of people, instead of just projecting a single experience onto the group. Involving the members themselves is crucial to creating a shared environment. One of the best ways to build a real team is to have each team member share their own metaphor for how they would like the team to operate. Maybe a member imagines the team working like a jazz ensemble, where people create in the moment and where everyone contributes.

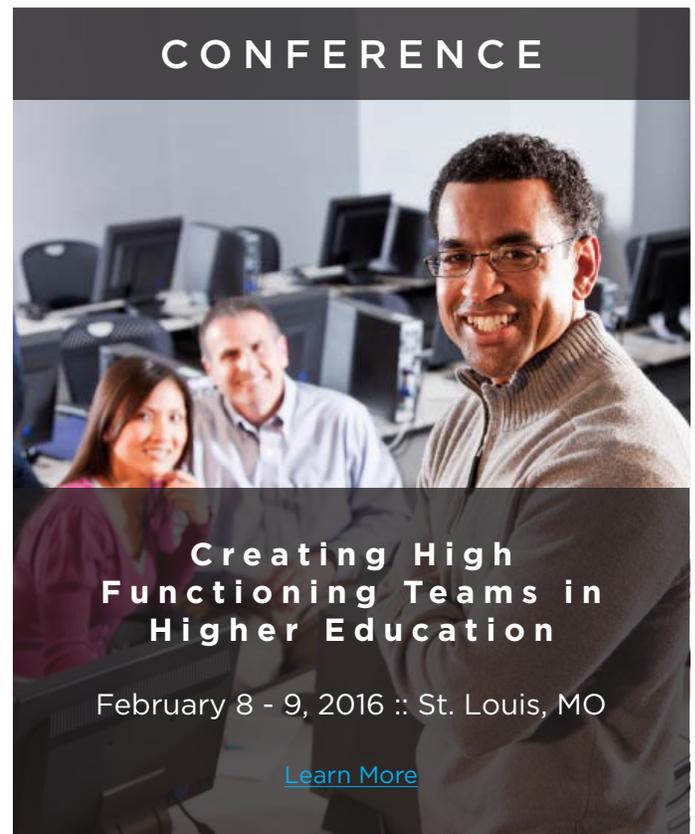
Inviting this input from the team itself will generate powerful and evocative pictures of people's expectations and hopes for the team—and will help you establish more of a shared language.

After everyone has shared their metaphors, the team should distill some lessons or themes that can be applied to their existing team. For example, you might find that many of the metaphors talk about everyone having a meaningful role to play or a "gift" to contribute. Or perhaps the common theme is one of creating a safe environment where risk taking and possible failure are supported. These are real aspirations that can inform how people want the team to function and can help you create some "ground rules" for moving forward.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

It takes more than intuition and singular experience to build a great team. Most campus leaders have strong technical skills, impressive backgrounds, and possess content expertise in their respective fields. However, these took time to accomplish. In much the same way, if leaders invest in paying attention to the relational side of building a high-performing team, they will accomplish important things for their campuses.

Campus leaders need to do more than just practice building teams but learn about high-performing teams through reading and talking about them. They should work at listening to others, relating to their teams, and receiving criticism. With a focus on these skills, they will be able to develop the kind of teams that are ready to face the challenges of the future.



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