


# The Surprising Secrets To Building A Great Team

 By Prof Dato' Dr Noor Azizi Ismail on 1 May 2023

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One day, a junior colleague came to meet me in my office. He was recently appointed as a director of a university centre. He has some ideas to uplift the academic quality of the university and sought my advice on how to turn those ideas into reality.

To do that, he needs cooperation from faculty deans. Commanding trust and respect from the deans is a big challenge as he is seen as a junior colleague with a lack of experience. Without the deans' cooperation, there is not much he can do. I shared with him my experience leading from the top, bottom, and side.

## My Little Experience

I always believe people are the most important asset of an organisation. A great team with the right culture, values, and attitude can do wonders. I was blessed to work with a great team when I was dean of Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business (OYAGSB), Universiti Utara Malaysia. I was the youngest dean then, but I was highly motivated to do things differently. But getting cooperation from other senior deans was a big challenge. That requires a special skill to lead from the side.

To gain their trust and confidence, we have to deliver quick wins while at the same time working on several big agendas. Similarly, delivering results at the faculty level requires the skill to lead from the top while at the same time leading from the bottom to convince the university's top management. It was never easy and required perseverance and persistence. Eventually, we were able to work as a family to produce the desired results, which we can all be proud of.

Again, when I was at the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), I had the opportunity to work with another great team led by the Honourable Minister Dato Seri Idris Jusoh and supported by the Secretary-General Tan Sri Dr Noorul Ainur and the Director General Datuk Siti Hamisah. I was Deputy Director General then. We were known as the "soaring upwards" team. My job was to ensure the policies made by the ministry were implemented at the institutional level. That requires cooperation from the vice-chancellors and top-down leadership skills.

Both OYAGSB and MoHE strived to do "big" things and constantly challenged the status quo. We changed "impossible" to "*I'm Possible*". A great team is not a perfect team, but its members complement each other to make the team great. They work for the institution beyond their personal agenda.

Then God tested me with a different challenge, the kind of impossible mission. I was given a big task by the minister to transform a bottom-ranked public university, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK). The university was established in 2006 but already had four vice-chancellors (VC). Except for the founding VC, all did not last long. So I guess it must be a "special" institution. I, coming from a different institution, will be leading it as her fifth VC.

But as a leader, you have to work hard to build a great team. Some may welcome you as the bringer of change, the kind of knight riding to the rescue; others may see you as an invader and, depending on their power and position, will find every possible way to make your life difficult.

Both ways give you great lessons. It has been almost 2 years since I vacated the hot seat. Being a knowledge wanderer now, I have never felt happier. I share the lessons learned in my latest book, *I'MPOSSIBLE: LEADING CHANGE*.

## What Makes A Team Great

There are several factors that contribute to making a great team. **First is having clear goals and expectations.** A great team has a shared vision and understanding of their goals. They know what they are working towards and how each individual's contributions will help them achieve their objectives.

**The second factor is diversity and inclusion.** A great team comprises individuals with different backgrounds, characters, experiences, and perspectives. This diversity brings a range of ideas and approaches to problem-solving and can help drive innovation. Importantly, they create an inclusive environment where everyone feels heard and valued.

Open and honest communication is critical for any team to succeed. Hence, **the third success factor to build a great team is effective communication.** A great team communicates openly and honestly with each other. This means that team members feel comfortable expressing their opinions, asking for help, and providing feedback to others in a constructive and respectful manner.

**Fourth, a great team is built on trust.** Trust is essential for building strong relationships within a team. A great team not only trusts but also respects each other's opinions, perspectives, and expertise. They trust each other to do their jobs well, to follow through on commitments, and to have each other's backs when needed.

**The fifth success factor is collaboration.** A great team works together collaboratively. This means that team members are willing to share resources, brainstorm ideas, and support each other in achieving their goals. **The next factor is accountability.** A great team holds each other accountable for their actions and commitment. They take responsibility for their mistakes and work collaboratively to find solutions. The team members take ownership of their work and hold themselves and each other responsible for achieving the team's goals.

**The seventh factor is continuous learning.** Like the Kaizen principle, a great team is always looking for ways to improve and grow. The team members are open to new ideas, feedback, and constructive criticism and they are committed to developing their skills and knowledge. Last but not least is a positive attitude and energy. A great team has a positive attitude and energy, even in the face of challenges. They support and encourage each other, celebrating their successes and pushing through setbacks together.

## Challenges

People said it was easier said than done. Building a great team is not always easy and can come with several challenges. **The first challenge is communication.** Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings, conflicts, and ineffective teamwork. Overcoming communication barriers can be challenging. Therefore, a team leader should encourage open and honest communication among team members by establishing regular check-ins, providing feedback, and creating opportunities for team-building activities. Leaders must address any communication barriers head-on and work to overcome them together.

**The second challenge is resistance to change.** Change is always hard. Some team members may be resistant to new ideas, processes, or ways of working. Overcoming resistance to change requires effective leadership and communication. Therefore, the team leader must communicate the benefits of change, involve team members in decision-making, and provide resources and support to facilitate the transition. They encourage a growth mindset and a willingness to learn from mistakes.

**The third challenge is a lack of trust and respect.** Building trust and respect takes time and effort. It can be difficult to establish a sense of trust and respect among team members, especially if there is a lack of diversity or team members have competing goals or interests. Therefore, a team leader must develop a culture of trust and respect by modelling these behaviours as a leader, acknowledging and valuing diverse perspectives, and providing opportunities for team members to collaborate and build relationships.

**The fourth challenge is a lack of accountability,** which can lead to missed deadlines, incomplete work, and a lack of commitment to team goals. It can be challenging to hold team members accountable for their actions without creating a negative work environment. Hence, the team leader needs to set clear expectations, establish measurable goals, and provide regular feedback to hold team members accountable for their actions. A good leader celebrates successes and addresses areas for improvement in a constructive and supportive manner.

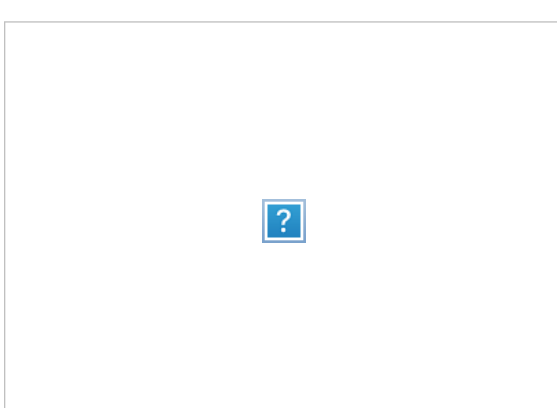
**The fifth challenge is inadequate resources.** A lack of resources, including funding, technology, and staffing, can hinder a team's ability to achieve its goals. It can be challenging to navigate these obstacles while still maintaining team morale and productivity. Therefore, leaders need to advocate for the necessary resources to support the team's goals. Be transparent about resource constraints and work collaboratively to identify creative solutions.

**Last but not least is burnout and turnover.** Overworked team members or those who do not feel valued or supported may experience burnout or choose to leave the team. Retaining team members and ensuring their well-being is crucial to building and maintaining a great team. The team leader must encourage a healthy work-life balance, provide opportunities for professional development, and recognise team members' contributions and achievements. A good leader knows how to identify and address the underlying causes, and provides support and resources as needed.

## Conclusion

A great team is a group of individuals who work collaboratively towards a common goal, leveraging each other's strengths and supporting each other's weaknesses. They share a sense of purpose and have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the team. A great team also has open communication and fosters a culture of trust where team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas, opinions, and feedback. They are also adaptable and able to respond effectively to changes and challenges, continuously improving and learning from their experiences. Ultimately, a great team is one where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, achieving outcomes that exceed individual efforts.

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