

3 Essential Virtues of the Ideal Team Player

By [John Scorza](#)

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Jeff Shanley, the co-founder of a Silicon Valley startup wanted to make a career change. So when the opportunity arose to take over Valley Builders, his family's California-based construction company, Shanley jumped at the chance. With two of the company's biggest projects in its history looming, his challenge was to build a culture of teamwork within the firm.

That's the premise of *The Ideal Team Player: How to Recognize and Cultivate the Three Essential Virtues* (Jossey-Bass, 2016), "a leadership fable" by [Patrick Lencioni](#), president of the Lafayette, Calif.-based Table Group, a management consulting firm. His first best-selling book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2002), hit on similar themes.

His newest work follows Shanley and his team, including Clare Massic, the construction company's HR director, as they set out to define the qualities of a good team player and to design a way to identify these traits in people, particularly during the hiring process. After all, to gear up for the company's new construction projects, Shanley's team had to hire 80 new workers—and expected a high turnover rate of more than 30 percent due to the company's failure in the past to build an effective team culture.

To start the process, the company identified three virtues of an ideal team player: humility, hunger and smarts. These are not inherent traits. Team players aren't born that way, but they come

to embrace the essential qualities through life experiences, work history or personal development. As Shanley and Massic learn, it's much more difficult to build an effective team when a team member lacks just one of these essential virtues.

Humility. Humility is the most important virtue of the three. Great team players, Lencioni writes, don't have big egos or concerns about status. They are quick to point out the contributions of others and generally don't seek attention for their own. They define success collectively and not individually. People who are not humble are unable to be vulnerable or build trust and are incapable of engaging in honest conflict.

Hunger. Hungry people are always looking for more, according to Lencioni. More to do. More to learn. More responsibility. They rarely have to be pushed to work harder because they're self-motivated and diligent. They're always thinking about the next step and the next opportunity. People who lack the virtue of hunger won't achieve results.

Smarts. In the context of teamwork, Lencioni writes, being smart is not about one's intellectual capacity. Instead, smart team players have good common sense about people. They tend to know what is happening in the group and how to deal effectively with others. They ask good questions, listen to what others are saying and stay engaged in conversations. People who aren't smart in this regard will create unnecessary problems, especially when involved in productive conflict and holding people accountable for their actions.

All three of these attributes are necessary for the ideal team player. If even one is missing in a co-worker, teamwork becomes much more difficult and sometimes even impossible, Lencioni writes.

By conducting thorough interviews and selective background checks, Lencioni says, managers can have a high degree of confidence that the people they hire are team players. For best results, stick to a few interviewing concepts, which may seem obvious but are too often overlooked.

Here are a few:

- Don't be generic. Be specific in your questions about targeted behaviors and attributes.
- Debrief each interview as a team. Avoid a siloed approach; after each interview, talk to other interviewers about their observations.
- Consider group interviews. Talk to candidates in a room with multiple team members.
- Ask candidates to do some real work. See how people perform in real-world situations.
- Don't ignore hunches. Pay attention to nagging doubts about a person's humility, hunger or people smarts, and probe further to understand them better.

Of course, most leaders don't have the luxury to create their teams from scratch. That's why Lencioni also addresses how to assess current employees, how to develop employees lacking in one of the three virtues and how to embed the model in an organization's culture.

In the end, he says, the best way to create a culture of humility, hunger and smarts is to constantly keep an eye out for people who exhibit those virtues and publicly hold them up as examples.

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