Alumni Unscripted: Being the Ideal Team Player

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The term “team player” is used frequently. And everyone has their own idea of what an ideal team player is, with the common denominator that team players care more about group success than individual recognition.

Our culture works against being a team player by valuing isolation over relationships, self as opposed to others, and pride in abilities versus hungry for opportunities.

I recently attended a conference where I listened to a presentation by speaker and author Patrick Lencioni where he addressed the ideal team player. The characteristics that Pat discussed resonated with me. These traits will be what I strive to achieve and what I will use to assess those around me. He outlines the following characteristics of an ideal team player:

**Humble**: Ideal team players are humble. They lack excessive ego. Humble people are quick to point out the contributions of others and slow to seek individual attention. They share credit, emphasize team over self, and define success collectively rather than individually.
Hungry: Ideal team players are hungry. They are always looking for more—more things to do, more to learn, more responsibility. Hungry people almost never have to be pushed by a manager because they are self-motivated.

(People) Smart: Ideal team players are smart about people. Particularly attuned to group dynamics, these people know how to interact with others to garner the best results.

The ideal team player is strong in all three of these areas.

People who have shortcomings in all three of these traits will have difficulty being valuable team members, no matter the context.

One out of three

If someone is strong in just one area, the journey is likely to be difficult but not impossible. The individual will need to be made aware of shortcomings, acknowledge them and be willing to work on correcting them through feedback and coaching.

Bulldozers

An example of someone who has one out of three areas is the “bulldozer.” Bulldozers have great drive and can push the team forward but tend to run over other people’s feelings. They are also self-focused and want to take advantage of the team for their own purposes.

Two out of three

People who have two of the three key virtues are more difficult to recognize because their strengths can obscure their weaknesses. These people can become strong team players if they address their need to grow in the third area.

If the negative characteristic is too strong to overcome, the individual may never become an ideal team player.

Skillful politicians

An example of a group where overcoming the negative may be difficult is that of “skillful politicians.” Skillful politicians can be the most dangerous people to have on a team because they are good at manipulating people to achieve their own objectives. They are
hard-working but like to bask in the glory of what they have accomplished. Skillful politicians need to be identified, called out and corrected … or moved off the team as quickly as possible.

**Three out of three: firing on all cylinders**

The sweet spot is when you have several team members who have all three traits of ideal team players. These individuals push the team, find fulfillment in the work and results of the team, make smart interpersonal decisions, and have a good rapport with fellow employees. Spotting ideal team members should be easy. They are often some of the most respected people within the organization for how they have managed projects and how they relate to others.

Which of the three characteristics of an ideal team player is your strongest? Which is the one you would like to work on?

*Shane Rodgers graduated from WMU in 2002 with a Master of Science in Accountancy degree. He spent the first eight years of his career at PricewaterhouseCoopers in Detroit and then moved into various corporate finance roles for Zimmer Biomet, one of the global leaders in the orthopaedics industry. Rodgers is currently the CFO for Poly-Wood in Syracuse, Indiana.*