

The American Team

7 Steps to Genuine Teamwork in the
White House and Beyond

by Marian and Glenn Head



*Never doubt that a small group
of thoughtful, committed citizens
can change the world.*

Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

—Margaret Mead

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Original Version Published In
"Blueprint for Presidential Transition"
October 1992

Revision - November 2008

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INTRODUCTION

The power of genuine team, a team whose members think and act as team players, is awe-inspiring. We see the results of such united team members in sports, in space, and in the greatest of organizations.

Synergy is the result. It is something that no single person, no matter how talented, can do by him or herself. Synergy, that which is greater than the sum of its parts, is what creates **breakthroughs**. Breakthroughs are needed **now** to move America forward, to find the solutions to seeming paradoxes such as fostering economic prosperity *and* environmental responsibility, promoting world economic growth *and* American economic growth. Genuine teams empower each individual to express his or her full potential while recognizing teamwork as *the* strategy for exceptional accomplishments.

Most of us are not raised as team players. We are not taught to be team players in school (except on the playing field) or in our professional lives where grading and performance ratings are often based on doing better or worse than someone else. Given this background, genuine team building does not occur simply as a result of a series of exercises or retreats. Genuine team building takes time, patience, perseverance and systems to foster a deep understanding of teamwork as the natural state for achieving personal and collective goals.

Following are the best of all processes and systems we've experienced for creating and maintaining genuine teams. From budding small businesses to booming multi-billion dollar corporations, from America to the Soviet Union, we have experienced the power of these steps to genuine teamwork and breakthrough results.

All teams can benefit by following these simple steps. Who are these teams in the White House? Any group of people with a common purpose—from the President and his closest advisors, to the Cabinet, to a group of computer programmers who support the work of the Executive Branch.

1: VISION

*A shared vision is not an idea.
It is, rather, a force in people's hearts,
a force of impressive power.*
Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*, Doubleday

A vision provides inspiration and direction for all members of the team. The act of articulating your vision together is the first step toward creating a genuine team.

Two types of visions are essential: (1) a universal, overarching vision that guides actions for hundreds of years; and (2) a more personal vision of the team's ideal work situation and quality of work life.

An example of an overarching vision for our country is: *A society in which every person honors diversity and naturally desires one another's well being.*

An example of a team's vision for its ideal work situation would include descriptions of its physical environment, interactions with co-workers, relationships with those it serves, and the personal contributions and recognition of its team members.

Co-creating these visions offers a unique opportunity to transform individuals into a united front for accomplishing their dreams.

2: MISSION

A goal is a dream with a deadline.

"Mission Control" conjures up images of one of our country's greatest teams: those whose job it is to explore outer space. Indeed, one of the greatest missions in the twentieth century was a *dream with a deadline*: President Kennedy's realized dream of seeing an American on the moon within a decade.

Missions, and their subordinate objectives, are the WHAT's to the WHY's of vision.

Beginning with the President and his or her cabinet, each team creates its own mission statement, supporting the overarching vision while honoring the unique contribution of the team. Any group of two or more may be a team and create their own mission statement, thereby creating alignment, building trust, and empowering themselves to take action.

A mission-driven team member knows instinctively the right action required in a tight situation... and does it without asking.

3: ALIGNMENT

Empowering individuals or units in an unaligned organization often exacerbates conflict, increases stress and undermines organizational performance. By contrast, empowering people in an aligned organization can contribute directly to spectacular increases in performance.

Bryan Smith, "Vision: A Time To Take Stock," *Business Quarterly*

The most powerful alignment process we've experienced during times of transition and seemingly impossible deadlines is **daily alignment meetings of 20 minutes or less**. Following these three simple steps produces high-spirited productivity and a sense of team (even when one's work is solo) for the rest of the day:

(1) **Inspiration.** From Native American Councils to Quaker meetings to football huddles, gathering in a circle is a powerful symbol and builder of unity. Sit or stand in a circle, connect by clasping hands or linking elbows, and remove visual distractions for a moment by closing your eyes. Visualize each of your team members and yourself achieving the greatest good this day. Focus on the power within you and its connection to the greater power that unites and guides you. The team leader, coach, or rotating facilitator offers an inspiring opening statement and then asks if there are others who wish to speak any words of inspiration for the team and the work ahead. The opening statement could simply be reciting your vision or mission statements.

(2) **Communication.** Take a few minutes to share any news or communicate any logistics that are appropriate for **every person in the room** to hear. (Do not waste one person's time with something irrelevant to her or him. This is one of the reasons meetings get such a bad rap.) Communicating good news can be uplifting. Communicating logistics can be essential for saving time and increasing productivity.

(3) **Rally.** Like the end of the half-time locker room talk, close your brief meeting with your team's chosen word or cheer. It can be as simple as saying the words "Yes We Can!" together with a "high five."

4: AGREEMENT

Create agreements among the members of your team that make explicit the way you choose to work together. Read them aloud at your regular communication meetings.

Following are agreements we've used over the years with our own team and with client teams. They have been a powerful force in changing organizations' cultures from destructive, internal competitiveness to a deep spirit of constructive cooperation. Feel free to use them as is, modify them, or create your own:

Team Agreements*

1. *Commit to the Mission:*

I agree to support the mission of my organization and to use it as a guide to my actions.

2. *Communicate with Integrity:*

I agree to be honest, thorough, and responsible in my communications.

3. *Listen Openly:*

I agree to listen respectfully to the communications of others and to be receptive to the meaning behind the words.

4. *Honor One Another:*

I agree to acknowledge that everyone, including myself, is making the best possible choice or decision we are capable of at that moment of choice or decision.

5. *Appreciate Our Own Contributions:*

I agree to take responsibility for acknowledging myself and receiving acknowledgment from others.

6. *Express Appreciation for Others' Contributions:*

I agree to acknowledge others.

7. *Honor Differences:*

I agree to operate from a sense of cooperation and caring in my interactions with others, understanding that goals are often the same even though methods for achieving them may differ.

8. *Use Grievances as Opportunities for Growth:*

I agree to look for unresolved issues within me that create disproportionate reactions to others' behavior.

9. *Resolve Problems Constructively:*

I agree to offer at least one solution any time I present a problem. I agree to take problems, complaints, and upsets to the person(s) with whom I can resolve them, at the earliest opportunity. I agree not to criticize or complain to someone who cannot do something about my complaint, and I will redirect others to do the same.

10. *Go For Excellence!*

I agree to support others and to be supported in participating at the highest levels of excellence.

11. *Learn From Experience:*

I agree to look for opportunities to learn from my experiences, to continue doing what works and discontinue doing what does not work.

12. *Be a Leader:*

I agree to foster an environment of genuine collaboration in which all people, including myself, feel empowered to express our individual and collective potential.

13. *Re-evaluate Our Commitment:*

I agree to choose and re-choose to participate in this organization. It's my choice!

14. *Lighten Up!*

I agree to create joy in my relationships, my work, and my life.

*Team Agreements are a developmental version of Revolutionary Agreements. See *Revolutionary Agreements: Twelve Ways to Transform Stress and Struggle Into Freedom and Joy*, by Marian Head, (Marlin Press:2005).

5: COACHING

It's what you learn after you know it all that counts.

John Wooden

Every great sports team has a great coach and a great coaching staff. It's time we built more coaching and less traditional management into our government organizations. A high performance team gets that way and stays that way because the coach is always on the side of the team players and tells the truth from a context of loving his or her team. Imagine if every person on your team felt empowered to coach and ask for coaching from every other person on that team.

A good coach holds a mental image of the other person at their highest potential. The leader models this by assisting team members to evaluate their own actions through asking reflective questions such as: "When you [behave in a specific way] what results do you get? Are these the results you want?"

Coaching requires agreements between those coaching one another. You may set up coaching systems with different people for different purposes: to help clarify thoughts, to learn to communicate more precisely, to continually improve your skills. For example, one coach could remind you when you use limiting words such as "but" (which often negates everything you said before it), "try" (which questions your willingness to go for it 100%), and "should" (which may flag a potential action which is out of integrity for you).

The type of coaching we find in the best of sports teams and among our astronaut corps is what is needed to lead America now. Accomplishments thought impossible would become everyday business. Accomplishments never dreamed of would be initiated and completed.

Great coaching results in championship teams.

6: COMMUNICATION

*The more perfect the understanding between men,
the less need of words.*

Emerson

Much could be said about the significance of excellent communication in successful organizations. Although important, it is beyond the scope of this paper to delineate all of the many proven communication systems for effective teamwork. For the purpose of this writing, we've selected one of the simplest, most effective team communication tools.

On a regular basis (daily, weekly, or monthly), the entire team meets for an update for no longer than one hour. The meeting has two parts: (1) What's Working and (2) Action Items.

What's Working is a time for people to acknowledge one another and themselves for outstanding results since the last meeting and to update one another on progress toward action items. From Cabinet meetings to lower-level staff meetings, it is important to highlight strategies and tactics that led to success and to celebrate those successes.

Action Items focuses the team's energy on achieving desired outcomes, rather than focusing on problems. Create a list from responses to these three questions: "*What would you like to see improved? Who can work on achieving the desired change or outcome? By when would you like to have this improvement in place?*" Encourage team members to select those issues for which they have the most passion and are best equipped to handle outside of this meeting time. Substantial progress towards the desired outcome can be reported during the "What's Working" portion of future meetings.

7: MODEL

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.
Mahatma Gandhi

There is no better way to influence the behavior of others than to act in a manner that demonstrates the desired behavior. We are all aware of the influence of powerful models in our lives. During the 2008 Presidential campaign, Barack Obama's leadership trainings for neighborhood organizers included teaching the meaning and application of his *Organizing Principles*: Respect, Empower, and Include. Leaders-in-training learned that Obama was running his campaign by these principles, he intended to run his government by them, and he expected his volunteers to run their neighborhood teams in the very same way.

When you and your team set an example by acting in integrity with what you want to create, seemingly impossible results become achievable.

A Personal Story

One of our most significant *aha* moments came when we were retained to help the team who was planning the historic Soviet-American Citizens' Summit at the end of the cold war.

Although those working on the project were extraordinary, talented individuals, they were rapidly reaching burn-out under extreme time and resource pressures.

Their mission was to create a special environment in which high level Soviet citizens — cosmonauts, award winning film makers, leading educators, prominent physicians, etc.— would develop joint projects with American counterparts in twenty different fields of common interest. The overarching vision was that by working together, the Soviets and Americans would overcome stereotypes and build meaningful, lifelong relationships.

When we engaged with the planning team, we found them mired in a divisive, combative working environment, hardly a model of the relationship-building mission that had brought them together.

After pointing this out, one of the team members asked, "*How can we practice what we preach? How can we create an environment in which we emulate what we want to create for the Soviet and American teams?*"

We took the planning team offsite for a day and used the Agreements to guide us through a process to listen, learn from, connect with, and ultimately appreciate each other. We started the day as individuals and left as a team, with systems in place to keep us that way. Among other things, we initiated ten-minute alignment meetings each morning. The genuine teamwork that resulted produced truly extraordinary results at the Summit and for many years hence as joint Soviet-American projects continued to serve both nations and the world.

The power of being and acting as the results you want cannot be overstated. Imagine if every member of your team acted the way you would like all Americans to act toward one another. How might exemplifying *Respect, Inclusion* and *Empowerment* affect your team, our nation and the world?

Peter Senge says: *If any one idea about leadership has inspired organizations for thousands of years, it's the capacity to hold a shared picture of the future we seek to create.*

We would add: *To achieve our vision of the future, be it... **now.***

IN SUMMARY

This Presidency has been given a mandate to change, to re-unite our citizenry in a common vision. We have the processes and technologies to involve millions of us in co-creating our future. What is needed now is a fully functioning team at the helm modeling the new possibility in its every action.

This Presidency has the opportunity to **be the new**, to act in new ways, break through old patterns ingrained in our bureaucracies, and institute a new form of leadership: **The American Team.**