

A paper by AhaMo:

The five traits of thriving leadership teams

Until now, all teams have been viewed through the same lens. But leadership teams play a different ballgame. Here, we share what makes and breaks these teams.



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The opportunity for leadership teams

In any team, 1+1 rarely equals 2.

In the early 2000s, Florentino Pérez spearheaded a new strategy at Real Madrid Football Club. This strategy – coined Los Galácticos – was a straightforward one.¹ It went like this:

1. Buy the best players across the world.
2. Put these players in the same team.
3. Watch them dominate world football.

With huge financial backing, they signed the world's best players of the time. These included big names like Zinedine Zidane, David Beckham, Ronaldo, and Luis Figo.

Initially, they enjoyed success, winning both domestic and European cups. But as they bought more superstars, the results didn't follow. Their performances were far more ordinary than the extraordinary names in their lineup. And the Galácticos' performance was widely criticised.

The results didn't come because – in the context

of team performance – 1+1 is rarely 2.^{1,2} The truth is, team performance can be more or less than the individual talents of its team members. And this is no less true of leadership teams in organisations.

Millions are invested in developing leadership teams.

Leadership teams set the tone for the organisation. And yet, many are riddled with problems like politics, siloes, and inefficiencies.^{3,4}

Recognising this, team leaders and HR leaders often invest in diagnostic tools, away days, and team development programmes to get the team to the top of its game. But there's a problem that holds back traditional methods for developing leadership teams.

Traditional approaches treat leadership teams like any other team.

Current approaches use the same model or approach, no matter the team. They share a view of what makes up effective teams, drawing on research from elite sport, business, and the military. The assumption here? All teams need the same traits to thrive.

But that's not true. Leadership teams play a different ballgame. They have unique challenges, such as those shown in Figure 1.

This then begs the question, what are the traits that set the best *leadership* teams apart? The ones that help these teams to thrive despite the complex challenges just described.

In 2024, we wanted to find out. So, we spent three months studying high performing leadership teams (HPLTs). We gathered a huge amount of data, combining insight from:

1. **Academic and institutional research** on leadership teams.
2. **20+ years' experience** helping leadership teams.
3. **Input from leaders** in strong leadership teams.

We analysed and distilled all this complexity. In this paper, we share what we learned.



Conflict between function and broader business goals.



Short-term needs vs. long-term business needs.



Complex tensions and politics with no simple answer.



Need to step out of detail and empower others to step up.

Figure 1. Unique challenges of senior leadership teams.

¹ Cattani, G., Ferriani, S., Mariani, M. & Mengoli, S. (2013). Tackling the "Galácticos" effect: Team familiarity and the performance of star-studded projects. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, Volume 22(6), 1629-1662.

² Overbeck, J. R., Correll, J., & Park, B. (2005). Internal status sorting in groups: The problem of too many stars. In *Status and groups* (pp. 169-199). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

³ Morrison-Smith, S., & Ruiz, J. (2020). Challenges and barriers in virtual teams: a literature review. *SN Applied Sciences*, 2(6), 1096.

⁴ Tannenbaum, S., Castillo, G. F., & Salas, E. (2023). How to overcome the nine most common teamwork barriers. *Organizational Dynamics*, 52(4), 101006.



Five traits set the best leadership teams apart.

We distilled all the research into a simple model, shown in Figure 2. This outlines the five traits needed by leadership teams to reach the top of their game. And within these five traits, there are 14 more specific characteristics shown by the best leadership teams. The importance of the five traits differs depending on the exact context of the leadership team.

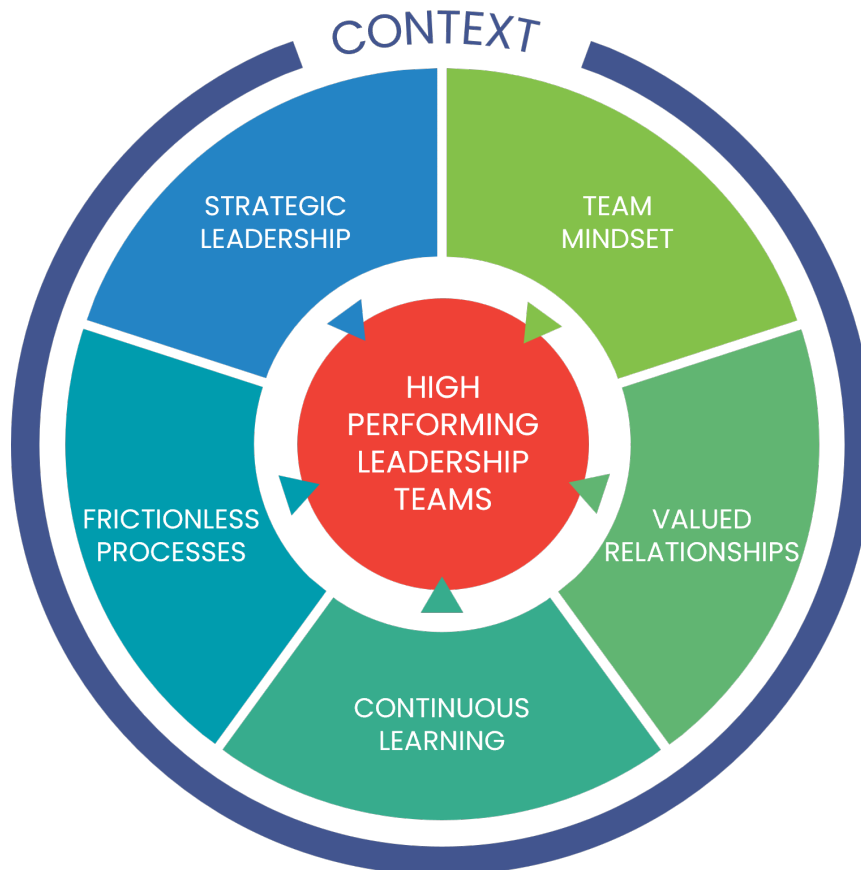


Figure 2. AhaMo's High Performing Leadership Teams (HPLT) model.

High-level Summary

Team Mindset

How much team members have a shared direction and consistently pull in that same direction.

Valued Relationships

How much team members share mutual respect, show genuine care, and feel safe to be themselves.

Continuous Learning

How well the team uses feedback, conflict, reflection, and risks to keep improving every day.

Frictionless Process

How well the team uses processes and structures that help them be efficient and make great decisions.

Strategic Leadership

How well the team operate strategically and have far-reaching positive impact across the organisation.

Let's explore each in turn.



Trait 1

Team mindset

Team members have a shared direction and consistently pull in the same direction.

Imagine a rowing boat with 12 crew members beautifully gliding through the water. You'll see all members pulling powerfully in a synchronised fashion. With each pull, the boat reaches an even more impressive speed.

Now imagine each crew member pulling at different times and in various directions. Despite huge effort invested, the boat will aimlessly flail in the water.

Unfortunately, our research showed us that many leadership teams resemble the second boat. They don't resemble a team at all. They lack a unifying purpose and team members think about their functional area first, and the business second. They have a closer connection to their functional teams, rather than their leadership team. Perhaps they're even financially incentivised to prioritise their own function's results.

Multiple huge academic reviews on team performance have underscored how this lack of shared direction negatively impacts team performance.^{5, 6} And similarly, our own research consistently showed us that high-performing leadership teams:

- 1. Know where the team is headed.**
They share clear, compelling goals and use metrics to track progress against them.
- 2. Pull in the same direction.**
They prioritise collective goals over personal ones, sharing accountability for team performance and focusing on outcomes more than politics.

⁵ Mathieu, J. E., Gallagher, P. T., Domingo, M. A., & Klock, E. A. (2019). Embracing complexity: Reviewing the past decade of team effectiveness research. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 6, 17–46.

⁶ Salas, E., Reyes, D. L., & McDaniel, S. H. (2018). The science of teamwork: Progress, reflections, and the road ahead. *American Psychologist*, 73(4), 593–600.



Trait 2

Valued relationships

Team members share mutual respect, show genuine care, and feel safe to be themselves.

When Google wanted to understand what set their best teams apart, they commissioned the now famous Project Aristotle. In this huge research project, they studied over 180 teams.⁷

They found the biggest differentiator of successful teams was psychological safety. In these teams, people felt safe to express their views and take risks without fear of judgment. Without this safety, team members became more interested in saving face than doing what was right for the team.

Academic reviews suggest a similar pattern. For example, one huge meta-analysis of 112 studies summarised that trust in other team members was a decent predictor of team performance.⁸

In our own research, we found that this was no less true in leadership teams. These teams prioritise relationships between team members and proactively build psychological safety in several ways. Namely, they:

- 1. Embrace diverse thinking.**
They seek and celebrate different perspectives, share concerns without fear, and handle mistakes constructively.
- 2. Show genuine care for one another.**
They actively look out for, support, praise and help each other to grow.
- 3. Share mutual respect.**
They show respect by trusting, listening, and adapting to one another.

⁷ Rozovsky, J. (2015). *The five keys to a successful Google team*. re:Work. Retrieved from: <https://rework.withgoogle.com/en/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness>

⁸ De Jong, B. A., Dirks, K. T., & Gillespie, N. (2016). Trust and team performance: A meta-analysis of main effects, moderators, and covariates. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 101(8), 1134–1150.



Trait 3

Continuous learning

The team uses feedback, conflict, reflection, and risks to keep improving every day.

The Navy SEALs – the USA's elite Special Operations forces – are one of the most respected commando forces in the world. Their missions involve unpredictable, high-stakes environments. And things often go wrong.

After these moments, SEALs conduct After-Action Reviews – or AARs for short.⁹ These AARs are brutally honest debriefs where every team member shares their view, no matter their rank. These AARs are set up to avoid blame and expedite learning as a group.

Academics call this Team Reflexivity.¹⁰ Multiple studies reinforce how this continuous process of reflection and learning are critical for performance across many teams.^{11, 12}

We found the best leadership teams were equally diligent in their learning, even when it feels uncomfortable. They create the conditions that mean they never stop growing. In particular, they:

- 1. Learn from successes and failures.**

They continually review performance, proactively seek and act on feedback, and celebrate wins as they go. They spend as much time reviewing what's led to their wins, instead of only conducting reviews when something goes wrong.

- 2. Use conflict constructively.**

They use open conversations and honest feedback to push the team to find better solutions to problems. Simply put, they dare to care.

⁹ Tannenbaum, S. I., & Cerasoli, C. P. (2013). Do team and individual debriefs enhance performance? A meta-analysis. *Human Factors*, 55(1), 231–245.

¹⁰ Schippers, M. C., Edmondson, A. C., & West, M. A. (2014). Team reflexivity and innovation: The moderating role of team context. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(6), 910–924.

¹¹ Decuyper, S., Dochy, F., & Van den Bossche, P. (2021). Team learning behaviors and performance: A meta-analysis of team learning behavior research. *Group & Organization Management*, 46(1), 1–40.

¹² Van der Haar, S., Koeslag-Kreunen, M., Euwe, E., & Segers, M. (2017). Team learning behaviors in response teams: A literature review. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 29(7/8), 488–507.



Trait 4

Frictionless processes

The team uses processes and structures that help them be efficient and make great decisions.

Back in the 1970s, pit stops in Formula 1 took 20–30 seconds. Today, they can take less than 2 seconds.¹³

This dramatic improvement comes from the advanced choreography of pit crews. They're crystal clear on their roles and work seamlessly together to maximise efficiency.

The research tells us structured coordination isn't just critical for F1. In one review of over 50 years of research, academics summarised that structured routines, decision processes, and planning tools are critical in almost every team.¹⁴

And unfortunately, we found many leadership teams struggle with this. They face endless unproductive meetings, duplication of work, and a lack of clear responsibilities. We found the best leadership teams recognise that time is a precious resource and streamline as much as they can. They:

- 1. Share effective ways of working.**
They share clear ways of working that help them coordinate across the team. When things don't go smoothly, they identify and overcome the obstacles in the way.
- 2. Make smart decisions.**
They use diverse strengths, sources of expertise, and structured decision-making processes to make great decisions.
- 3. Know and play personal roles.**
They know who's responsible for what and deliver on their personal roles.
- 4. Manage time efficiently.**
They have productive, well-run meetings and spend the right amount of time on the right things.

¹³ The Times. (2024, April 5). *Mechanics reveal secrets behind the perfect Formula 1 pitstop*. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/mechanics-reveal-secrets-behind-the-perfect-formula-1-pitstop-vctbjjp5d>

¹⁴ Kozlowski, S. W. J., & Ilgen, D. R. (2015). *Enhancing the effectiveness of work groups and teams*. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 7(3), 77–124.



Trait 5

Strategic leadership

The team operate strategically to create far-reaching positive impact across the organisation.

David Marquet was the U.S. Navy captain for the USS Santa Fe. This nuclear-powered submarine was well-known for being one of the worst-performing submarines in the fleet. In just 2 years, this submarine was winning awards for operational excellence. In his book, *Turn the Ship Around*, Marquet shared the remarkable story behind how this was achieved.¹⁵

The key shift was a simple one: turning leader-follower relationships into leader-leader relationships.

Marquet and his team decentralised decision-making. They set a compelling vision, developed skills, and then empowered their people to take responsibility for their work. Since then, this case study has become emblematic of the coaching culture that many organisations strive to create.

The research suggests this lesson isn't limited to this single case study. Multiple studies have reinforced that when leadership is shared across the team, team members are happier and the team performs better.^{16, 17}

In our own research, we found that leadership teams get stuck in the detail and fail to relinquish control. They get pulled into day-to-day firefighting that distracts them from the work that only they can do. The impact? An organisation reliant on its senior leaders to make all the decisions. One that lacks any clear or long-term focus.

The best leadership teams escape this rut. They:

- 1. Operate strategically.**
They empower their teams, think big picture, and balance business tensions. They only step down into the detail when it becomes necessary.
- 2. Collaborate well with others.**
They build strong relationships with external stakeholders and other teams.
- 3. Communicate well with the organisation.**
They share a compelling strategy, role model the right behaviours, and communicate effectively with the wider business.

¹⁵ Marquet, L. D. (2013). *Turn the ship around! A true story of turning followers into leaders*. Portfolio.

¹⁶ Nicolaidis, V. C., LaPort, K. A., Chen, T. R., Tomassetti, A. J., Weis, E. J., Zaccaro, S. J., & Cortina, J. M. (2014). A meta-analysis of shared leadership and team effectiveness. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 25(5), 923–942.

¹⁷ Serban, A., & Roberts, A. J. (2016). Exploring antecedents and outcomes of shared leadership in a creative context: A mixed-methods approach. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 27(2), 181–199.

Developing the 5 traits in practice

Team development that's more nimble, credible, and effective.

We develop these five traits in leadership teams across diverse sectors. By focusing specifically on the traits of leadership teams, we can:

Give clarity to get teams moving much further, faster.

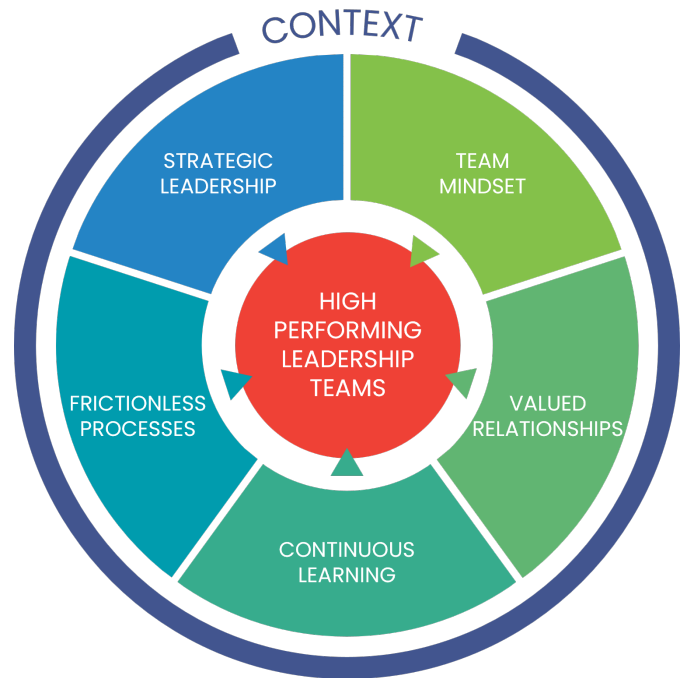
We use our HPLT diagnostic to assess the five traits. This helps us diagnose problems quicker than traditional methods.

Build credibility by speaking the same language.

We assess the challenges faced by leadership teams. By showing we understand your team's world, we build trust more quickly.

Create greater impact on team and business results.

We make a greater difference to team and business performance by focusing on the traits needed by leadership teams.



Need to take your leadership team's performance to another level?

We deliver world-class team programmes that give teams the Aha Moments™ they need. These programmes consist of our:

HPLT Diagnostic

A simple tool to help team identify which of the five traits need focus.

Immersive Sessions

Interactive workshops and events led by our diverse and experienced team performance facilitators.

1:1 Coaching

We support leaders to be as effective as they can possibly be.

Get in touch

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