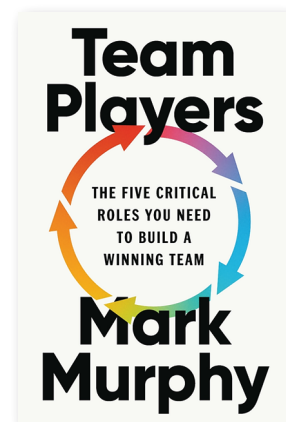


Team Players

The Five Critical Roles You Need to Build a Winning Team

by **Mark Murphy**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Conventional wisdom about teamwork tends to repeat the same themes: focus on trust, create psychological safety, avoid hierarchy, and aim for consensus. While these principles sound valuable, they leave out an essential truth. The strongest teams don't succeed because members think and act alike. They succeed because each individual plays a distinct part that, when combined with others, creates balance, momentum, and resilience.

In *Team Players: The Five Critical Roles You Need to Build a Winning Team*, Mike Murphy challenges the idea that team building is about uniformity. Instead, he argues that the real secret lies in intentionally assembling people with different strengths and allowing them to step fully into those strengths. Too often, organizations rush into team-building activities before ensuring they even have the right mix of talent at the table.

Drawing on decades of research and hands-on experience, Murphy reveals five roles that consistently appear in high-performing teams. Each role contributes something unique and indispensable—and when even one is missing, the group risks stalling out, fracturing, or failing to achieve its goals. By identifying and leveraging these roles, leaders can transform teams from simply functional to truly exceptional, capable of tackling challenges with clarity, creativity, and lasting impact.

IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn the five roles vital to team success and performance.
- Curate a team intentionally through analysis and selection of key team member talents.
- Discover why “hierarchy” is not a bad word and has a place on teams.
- Apply roles to team decision-making for better outcomes and team harmony.

Introduction

On the best teams, “team players” aren’t cookie-cutter replicas, molded to fit arbitrary standards of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Greatness in groups comes from leveraging everyone’s unique talents so that each member adds something important and valuable. Hard-nosed decision-makers, tireless doers, meticulous planners, diplomatic peacekeepers, and bold visionaries don’t always fit the cliché definition of “team player,” but make no mistake, their diverse talents and personalities are vital for team success.

The Five Team Roles

Over the past few decades, thousands of teams were studied, from executive teams and boards to task forces and project teams. And in any high-functioning group, five roles nearly always emerge:

The Director assumes a leadership role within the team, guiding its direction and making important, difficult, and even unpopular decisions.

The Achiever immerses themselves in the details of accomplishing tasks and getting things done, with a keen eye for delivering error-free work.

The Stabilizer keeps the team on track with meticulous planning, processes and procedures, clear timelines, and organization.

The Harmonizer brings collaboration and camaraderie, builds relationships, and resolves conflict.

The Trailblazer brings innovation, creativity, and out-of-the-box thinking, along with the courage to challenge conventional wisdom.

Team success requires a specific mix of roles; it’s a balanced ecosystem that brings together differing talents and perspectives. When critical roles are absent, however, the results can be disastrous: innovation is stifled, conflicts simmer unaddressed, and priorities can swing wildly without a steadying hand. Teams lacking this balance often fail, not because of individual incompetence, but because key perspectives are missing or drowned out.

The Director

Whenever you walk into a team meeting room, whether it’s an executive team, board of directors, project team, or what

have you, the Director is typically easy to spot. Maybe it’s the tap-tap-tap of their pen impatiently hitting the conference table; it could be the tension in their shoulders as they lean forward primed for action; or if they’re leaning back, it might be the hint of a furrow in their brow that says, “If we could get this done ten minutes ago, that would be great.”

Directors are decisive; they’re not looking for hours, let alone weeks, of deliberation. They want decisions made, and they want them made yesterday. In simplest terms, Directors make decisions, especially the kinds of decisions that stymie or vex others.

Psychologically, the Director role typically attracts individuals with strong, assertive personalities—people who naturally gravitate toward leadership positions. They thrive on making decisions, taking charge, and steering the course for others.

They have a higher-than-average drive for power and influence, and they enjoy having the ability to affect outcomes and guide others. Directors are typically quick and decisive in their decision-making, relying more on facts and logic than emotions. They’re often goal-oriented and focused, with a talent for seeing the big picture and developing strategies to achieve objectives.

If you’ve ever felt agitated, frustrated, or even enraged by a group’s inability to decide, you understand one of the biggest benefits of having a Director on your team. They make decisions swiftly and with confidence, and in doing so, they keep the group moving forward and avoid stagnation.

One final thought about Directors. Too often people think that what distinguishes a Director is making the speediest decisions. But there are cases where the difficult decision is the slow one, not the fast one.

The Stabilizer

Stabilizers are the people on your team who bring order, planning, and predictability. Firmly convinced that careful planning leads to better outcomes, they’ll be the ones to ensure your group makes and adheres to both short-term and long-term plans. If you’ve ever been on a team that failed to hit its deadlines (like half of all teams, by the way), it’s probably because there wasn’t someone creating and ensuring adherence to schedules, processes, details, and “dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s.”

Psychologically, Stabilizers tend to have high levels of conscientiousness, attention to detail, and a strong need for

Stabilizers are the motivational force behind strategy tools like scenario planning.

order and structure. Their innate drive for consistency and reliability manifests in their meticulous approach to tasks and adherence to established processes. Sometimes that adherence to precedent can show up as risk aversion.

Not only do they derive satisfaction from maintaining stability and predictability, but they've often got a heightened sense of responsibility to ensure nothing goes wrong. The tech startup ethos of "move fast and break things" that sometimes gets bandied about is about as far from the Stabilizer personality as you can get. Of course, that's precisely why smart teams make sure there's a Stabilizer present.

Cognitively, Stabilizers excel in systematic thinking and have a strong capacity for long-term planning. They possess a natural inclination toward analytical problem-solving and are adept at identifying potential issues before they arise. Put more simply, Stabilizers are the motivational force behind strategy tools like scenario planning.

This is a crucial aspect of the Stabilizer role that often goes unrecognized: the emotional burden of being the team's anchor. On the one hand, anchors keep ships from drifting out to sea and provide stability. On the other hand, an anchor can be a weight that holds us back and limits progress. Stabilizers often need to find a balance between providing structure and allowing for flexibility.

By recognizing their own stress levels and when the emotional labor feels overwhelming, they can better modulate their approach. And, it's important for Stabilizers to communicate the reasoning behind their cautious approach; helping team members understand that their goal isn't to stifle progress but to ensure sustainable success.

The Trailblazer

With a natural flair for creativity and a penchant for thinking outside the box, Trailblazers often spearhead new ideas and unconventional solutions to problems. Not bound by traditional approaches, the Trailblazer is willing to take risks and experiment with different strategies. They have a visionary quality and are able to anticipate trends and see possibilities

that others might overlook. Trailblazers aren't afraid to challenge the status quo; they're instrumental in driving change and transformation. But as wonderful as that sounds, if a team doesn't intentionally seek and enable Trailblazers, it's not uncommon for them to experience resistance.

When a team needs innovation, adaptability, and creative problem solving, Trailblazers shine. Their ability to think differently makes them excellent when a team requires developing new solutions to complex problems. In the most severe scenarios, the Trailblazer can knock a team off-kilter and focus its energies on one wild goose chase after another. But the epitome of the Trailblazer unlocks opportunities that would remain hidden to groups without such an innovative thinker.

Psychologically, Trailblazers typically have high levels of openness to experience, creativity, and a higher tolerance for risk. That also correlates with their generally strong need for novelty and stimulation, seeking out new challenges and unconventional ways to solve them. Their thinking style is divergent and nonlinear, which helps drive their ability to make unexpected connections and generate innovative ideas. Trailblazers typically score high on measures of curiosity and have a natural inclination toward exploration and experimentation.

While Trailblazers have a high tolerance for risk and a willingness to challenge the status quo, it's their ability and willingness to push forward despite widespread doubt that really sets them apart. Their ability to swim against the current and take frequent stands in the face of strong opposition is often coupled with a deep intellectual curiosity and a genuine excitement for innovation.

It's often this combination of traits that allows them to not only generate groundbreaking ideas but also to advocate for them persistently, even when faced with years of rejection. And for teams in general, bear this in mind: Trailblazers are just as essential as all the other roles. To put it bluntly: Trailblazers are necessary to ensure the success of every organization.

The Harmonizer

The Harmonizer plays a crucial role in team dynamics, serving as the social glue that binds members together. They're adept at fostering collaboration, building relationships, and maintaining a positive team atmosphere. Harmonizers excel in creating an environment where team members feel comfortable, valued, and understood.

Harmonizers are often driven by a high degree of emotional intelligence and empathy. They possess an innate ability to perceive and understand the emotions of others, allowing them to navigate complex interpersonal situations with skill and sensitivity. This emotional acuity enables Harmonizers to anticipate potential conflicts, mediate disagreements, and promote understanding among team members, even those with drastically diverse perspectives and personalities.

Psychologically, Harmonizers are driven by a strong need for social connection and group cohesion. They enjoy fostering positive relationships and maintaining a harmonious team atmosphere. This motivation often manifests as a willingness to prioritize others' needs over their own, sometimes to their detriment. More than a few Harmonizers have struggled with setting personal boundaries; taken too far, this can cause varying degrees of emotional exhaustion. Harmonizers typically score high on personality measures of agreeableness. They're generally skilled communicators, particularly when it comes to active listening and interpreting nonverbal cues.

At its best, you'll see the Harmonizer's impact in the strengthened relationships between other team members and the positive atmosphere that permeates the group. Their influence manifests in increased camaraderie, mutual support, and even communicative effectiveness (a fancy way of saying that everyone else becomes a more tactful and empathic communicator).

The Achiever

Characterized by a hands-on mentality and an unwavering commitment to excellence, Achievers thrive on immersing themselves in the details of tasks, focusing intently on producing high-quality, error-free results. They're not looking to run the team or wield significant power; they're generally driven by the satisfaction derived from a job well done.

This intrinsic motivation stems from a deep-seated need for personal achievement and a relentless pursuit of excellence. Achievers tend to set high standards for themselves and

derive satisfaction from surpassing expectations, often going above and beyond what is asked of them.

Driven by a strong preference for autonomy, Achievers are most comfortable when they can concentrate on their tasks without the distractions or responsibilities of managing others. They prefer to work independently, honing their expertise and digging deep into the nitty-gritty.

There are fantastic minds on teams with zero desire to be in charge; instead, they want to burrow into the details of a project. Achievers' thorough analysis and precision make them particularly effective in projects requiring creative problem-solving and meticulous execution. Fighting for control of a team? That's not them. But doing the detailed work that makes the project possible? That's where they shine. Achievers are the people who ensure that the team's goals are not just conceptualized but actually realized with a high degree of excellence and precision.

Data from more than a million professionals shows team members are nearly three times more likely to be Achievers than Directors. Achievers are the most populous role on teams, and unlike some of the other roles, when teams are overloaded with Achievers, the group is less likely to suffer negative consequences. It can be hard for people in other roles to understand, but it's not uncommon for Achievers to resist taking on leadership roles, even when their expertise would seem to make them ideal candidates.

Curating Your Team

The first task in unlocking your team's potential is creating an appreciation for the diversity of roles and talents that drive a group's success; your team needs to grasp the importance of Directors, Stabilizers, Achievers, Trailblazers, and Harmonizers. Ideally, your team should think like quarterbacks who value their offensive line, not like the star stock analysts who believed too strongly in their own self-sufficiency. Explain the concept of the five roles to your group. Once they've got a handle on the five roles, conduct the following exercise:

ROLE APPRECIATION

Ask everyone on your team to answer these three prompts:

1. Describe a time when you worked with someone amazing in each of the five roles (think of the best Harmonizer you ever worked with, a great Stabilizer, etc.).

The first task in unlocking your team's potential is creating an appreciation for the diversity of roles and talents that drive a group's success.

2. For each of those roles, describe how that person helped you or the group achieve success.
3. Describe what the team would've been missing without someone fulfilling that role.

The goal here is simply getting everyone on your team to start appreciating the importance and value of Directors, Stabilizers, Achievers, Trailblazers, and Harmonizers.

Once your group starts appreciating the value of the different roles, you're ready to assess the roles currently represented on your team. Before we start, there are two critical points to bear in mind.

First, you could be part of wildly different teams, and you need to figure out the role you (and others) play in each of those potentially disparate groups. You'll want to conduct this exercise for each team; for instance, you might be on a team where you're the one making all the tough decisions while simultaneously participating on a team where you're the designated peacemaker.

Second, people often struggle to objectively assess themselves, but they evidence good insight into how others view them. For instance, one study asked employees to rate their own job performance and then predict how their supervisor would rate them. The researchers then compared both types of employee ratings to the supervisor's actual ratings.

Employees were generally inaccurate when rating their own performance, especially for things like teamwork and going above and beyond their core job duties. However, when asked to predict how their supervisor would rate them, employees were literally twice as accurate.

Armed with those two insights, you can now take stock of your team.

CHARTING YOUR TEAM'S ROLE COMPOSITION

This "Team Role Map" will help you identify your team's strengths and potential gaps. Here's how to make the map:

1. Gather the role assessments from each team member.
2. Draw six columns on a large piece of paper or

whiteboard. Label the rows with team members' names and the columns with the five roles.

3. For each team member, place a checkmark in the column corresponding to their primary perceived role. This is the role they believe others see them fulfilling most often.
4. Use smaller dots to indicate any secondary roles that team members would like to fulfill or develop.
5. Finally, step back and look at your completed map. Are all roles represented? Are some roles overrepresented while others are lacking? This visual representation can quickly highlight your team's composition and potential imbalances.

Learning To Think Like All Five Roles

In an imperfect world, however, you might find that it takes an extra step to curate the ideal team. There's another approach that helps teams thrive, even when they can't achieve the perfect role balance: teaching everyone on the team to think like each of the five roles.

ROLE-THINKING EXERCISE

1. Start by choosing a decision or challenge the group is facing.
2. Introduce the concept of the five roles: Director, Stabilizer, Achiever, Trailblazer, and Harmonizer. Start with one role—for example, the Director. Provide a brief overview of the Director's typical mindset and priorities (or better yet, take a few minutes and have everyone read the Director chapter).
3. Ask the entire team to adopt the Director perspective and discuss the issue from that viewpoint. Depending on the issue and the stakes involved, this could take five minutes or twenty. Challenge everyone to fully embrace and embody that role's thinking style, regardless of their natural predilections.
4. After the discussion, take a few minutes to summarize key points and insights from the Director perspective.

5. Next, move on to the Stabilizer role and repeat the exercise. Then the Harmonizer, and so on.
6. After all five roles have been explored, you'll want to lead a final discussion where your team members can speak from any perspective they choose. This allows them to apply the insights gained from each role to develop a comprehensive solution or decision.

What you're after here is getting every team member to think from each role perspective. And as you progress through the five roles, you'll notice team members becoming more adept at switching perspectives and seeing issues from different angles. This exercise leads to increased empathy, more creative problem-solving, and a deeper understanding of how the different roles contribute to the team's success. It will also identify potential blind spots in the team's approach and lead to far more balanced thinking about the issue at hand.

Hierarchy Is Not a Bad Word

Hierarchies feel outdated, maybe even primal or primitive; they're millions, if not hundreds of millions, years old. You've probably never seen someone jump up in a modern-day office and exclaim, "We need more hierarchy!" Hierarchy is one of the least appealing words in the English language. Humans have evolved beyond the need for pecking orders, right? Not quite.

Humans are wired for hierarchies. Toddlers can spot hierarchies with incredible accuracy. Boards of directors and NBA teams perform better with hierarchies. But, humans perform at their best with a hierarchy that's much more evolved than a barnyard pecking order.

That's where adaptive hierarchies come in. Adaptive hierarchies deliver the clarity and order of traditional hierarchies while moving faster, producing better results, and harnessing the unique talents of everyone on your team.

Adaptive hierarchy has a clear structure, but it's not static. Simply put, the hierarchy adapts so that the right person takes the lead.

Making Better Decisions on Your Team

In theory, teams make decision-making easier and more effective; they bring together diverse perspectives, expertise, and experiences. In practice, however, decision-making in teams can be both challenging and fraught.

That's why it's pretty typical to see some cynicism about group decision-making.

The first step in unlocking your team's potential decision-making prowess is recognizing that not every decision should be made by a group. Sometimes group decision-making gets a bad rap simply because we're asking a team to make a decision that should have been made by a single person. We need to save group decision-making for situations where the benefits of the group's insights outweigh the time and effort required.

Some choices have far-reaching consequences that affect multiple departments or even the entire company. Some decisions deal with complex, high-stakes situations where there isn't a clear path forward. There are plenty of situations where you need innovative and novel solutions, insights outside your area of expertise, or buy-in from multiple stakeholders. In any of those scenarios, you will absolutely want to involve your team in the decision-making process.

On the other hand, there are plenty of decisions that are far more routine and familiar. These are decisions that get made every day regarding recurring issues that don't have an especially wide impact, aren't particularly high risk, where the inputs and outputs are well understood, and that aren't all that politically sensitive. In those cases, it's usually more efficient to delegate the decision-making to a particular individual.

The Science of Great Meetings

STATEMENT OF ACHIEVEMENT

Recent survey shows the startling fact that 90+ percent of meetings fail to produce an identifiable achievement.

The reason why so many folks are sitting in meetings with no idea why they're there is because they lack a clear objective. That's what a Statement of Achievement is. It's one sentence that says, "As a result of this meeting, we will have achieved _____."

The blank can be anything; it's your meeting. But before you can proceed with that meeting, you have to be able to fill in that blank. Once you've got your Statement of Achievement, share it with the people who will be in the meeting. You can do it in an email prior to the meeting or include it in the meeting agenda so people have a chance to prepare. Alternatively, you can stand up before the meeting

Writing a Statement of Achievement will tighten up your meeting.

starts and say, “Hey folks, as a result of this meeting, we will have achieved _____. And once we achieve that, this meeting is over.”

RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE ROOM

Writing a Statement of Achievement will tighten up your meeting. It will also force you to answer an all-important question: “Given what I need to accomplish in this meeting, which people and roles need to be in attendance?”

CHOOSING THE RIGHT NUMBER OF PEOPLE

When you’re picking people for your meeting, this is your balancing act. You’re always trying to find the sweet spot between having enough people to bring diverse perspectives and skills to the table and keeping the group small enough to maintain efficiency and engagement. This sweet spot isn’t a fixed number—it can vary depending on the nature of the task, the complexity of the problem at hand, and the specific individuals involved.

AGENDAS

Agendas and start times are two of the least sexy topics when it comes to meetings, yet the problems that plague them remain so pervasive that each warrants a mention. There are innumerable agenda formats, but as long as yours is crystal clear about what participants should have completed as prework or must bring to the meeting, you’ll be in good shape.

END-OF-MEETING RECAPS

If you find that the to-dos coming out of your meetings aren’t getting accomplished, or they disappear into some kind of accountability black hole, you ought to try an end-of-meeting recap.

Before your meeting ends, ask each person in attendance to answer this question: “What are you personally going to achieve and by when?” Document the responses and distribute them to all meeting attendees. Don’t bury those accountabilities in a lengthy minutes document; make it a standalone list with each item clearly outlined.

Selecting New People To Join Your Team

There will inevitably come a time when you’ll need to bring a new member onto your team. In an ideal world, that new member will fit perfectly and give your group exactly what it needs.

When you’re bringing a new member onto your team, it’s tempting to focus solely on their resume and technical qualifications. However, attitude should be at the forefront of your selection process. The right attitude can make the difference between a hire that merely fills a position and one that transforms your team.

In the event you need to bring someone new onto your team, remember that it’s not just about technical skills; it’s about finding individuals whose natural inclinations align with the Director’s decisiveness, the Trailblazer’s innovative spirit, the Harmonizer’s diplomatic skills, the Achiever’s attention to detail, or the Stabilizer’s organizing prowess. Pay attention to the language people use, their past experiences, and their approach to challenges. When you find the right attributes, you’ll get a team where each member complements the others and elevates the group as a whole.

Conclusion

When Directors, Stabilizers, Achievers, Trailblazers, and Harmonizers work together and balance each other, there’s no limit to what you can accomplish. Each role brings unique strengths and perspectives that, when properly leveraged, create a whole that is truly greater than the sum of its parts.

As you embark on this journey, be patient with yourself and your team. Change takes time, and there may be bumps along the way. Celebrate small victories and learn from setbacks. Keep the lines of communication open, and always be willing to adjust your approach based on what you learn. Remember also that, as a leader, you set the tone for your team.

Model the behaviors you want to see. Be willing to adapt your own role as needed, appreciate the contributions of all team members, and foster an environment where diverse perspectives are not just tolerated but actively sought out and valued.

The strategies and actions outlined in this book are not just theoretical concepts—they are practical, actionable steps that have been proven effective out in the real world. By consistently applying these principles, you can transform your team into a high-performing unit capable of tackling any challenge.



Mark Murphy is the author of the New York Times bestseller *Hundred Percenters*, founder of the research and training firm Leadership IQ, and a senior contributor to Forbes. His work on leadership and workplace culture has been featured in The New York Times, Harvard Business Review, Time, and The Wall Street Journal. He is also the author of *Hiring for Attitude*.

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