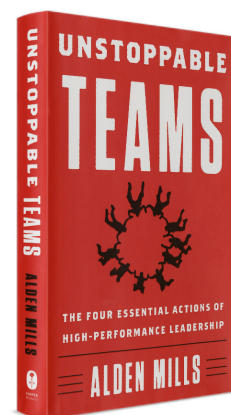


Unstoppable Teams

The Four Essential Actions
of High-Performance Leadership

by **Alden Mills**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

In *Unstoppable Teams*, Alden Mills, three-time Navy SEAL platoon commander and founder of the company Perfect Fitness, reveals how to put together teams that can accomplish any objective—by leveraging unexpected values and priorities.

SEALs and civilians operate in extremely different environments, but what makes both kinds of teams excel comes down to the same thing: service to others, trust, empathy, and a caring environment.

Success almost never depends on individual talent and valor; instead, it depends on creating a strong foundation for yourself and using that foundation to help others go beyond their individual pursuits and talents to create something bigger and better—an unstoppable team.

Unstoppable Teams shows managers at every level, at both large and small organizations, how to inspire, motivate, and lead the people around them. It's the handbook for how to build care-based teams that will push people to achieve more than they ever thought possible.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To use the four key actions of the CARE loop to create an unstoppable team.
- How to lead yourself as your first team.
- To create the 10x advantage, by aligning your team's actions with the goals and actions of external allies.

Introduction

When a small group of people band together to do something extraordinary, the rest of us scratch our heads in wonder. Whether it's an unranked basketball team outplaying an undefeated powerhouse or a little-known startup becoming the overnight market leader, David and Goliath stories capture our attention and inspire us.

We cheer for successful underdogs, and we even dream about being like them—a tightly knit team of ordinary people doing extraordinary things under difficult circumstances. That's an unstoppable team, one that brings diverse gifts to bear on the team's goals through a shared sense of purpose and a deep commitment to each other. You can assemble as many individual superstars as you'd like, but they won't become unstoppable unless they believe in each other and in their collective mission.

When young men and women who want to join the SEALs first hear about Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL school, they become obsessed with the grueling physical exertion that lies ahead. But what gets you through the training is a balance of mental, emotional, and physical strength, combined with your greatest asset as a SEAL: the people around you.

Whether hunting for a war criminal deep in the mountains of Bosnia or conducting classified combat mini-submersible operations at night 30 feet underwater with hand signals (squeezes) as the only means of communication, SEAL Team is bound together by a common purpose and a mentality of "I've got your back." SEALs place the success of the team above individual needs because the team's needs come to represent their individual needs, too.

Unstoppable teams aren't reserved for elite forces in the military. In sports, in business, in communities, in every facet of life, developing the qualities of an unstoppable team is essential if you want to thrive in chaos and break away from the pack. It might sound crazy, maybe even superhuman, but it's within your reach.

The Cornerstone for Team Building

Caring is the cornerstone for building trust and persistence in any group. When people feel cared for and when they care about the tasks and goals at hand, they are willing to step beyond their perceived limits and dare to do something greater than they originally thought possible. If you're willing to commit to caring for and serving others, then you can become a truly unstoppable force for making greatness happen.

There are four actions—connect, achieve, respect, and empower—that, taken together, lie at the heart of every great team. It's called the CARE loop. When these four acts of caring are activated, anything is possible.

It's no coincidence that military strategists consider SEALs (and other military special forces) to be force multipliers 10 times more effective than conventional troops. Moreover, this extreme team dynamic—called the 10x advantage—is not unique to SEAL Teams. It can be harnessed by any well-constructed and highly functioning small team.

If you want to be a great team builder, then you need to learn to become a great relationship builder first. It starts with you. Let's now discuss the foundational component of every great team.

Your Platform

The first team you must build and lead is your own team, the one inside you. This is about creating a conversation between the head and the heart. That's exactly what's needed to lead oneself.

Becoming a Navy SEAL involves exercises such as "drown proofing." That's a game in which your hands are tied behind your back, your feet are tied together, and you're challenged to swim 300 yards. Think about this head-heart conversation for a moment. You are instructed to swim without the benefit of the very things that make it possible for you to swim in the first place—your arms and your legs.

It's only natural to think, "Hey, wait a second. I need my arms to swim. If I don't have them, then I can't swim." That's the start of the conversation. Then the head takes the discussion deeper with, "Wait, the instructor said you could die doing this. Is this worth it to you?" And then there's the obvious, nagging question: "What's the purpose of this test, anyhow?"

If you allow yourself to fixate on these thoughts, you will create a downward spiral of negative thoughts that can easily lead you to feeling defeated even before you try. Those negative feelings might also cause you to act in a manner that is directly opposed to your goals: you might quit before you even get started.

You don't need to go through SEAL training to have this collision of voices directing you to take action away from your desired goal. It's all too easy to obsess about what might go wrong, what you lack, and what bad outcomes

The key to making your mental, emotional, and physical platform work for you is understanding why you care.

could be waiting around the corner. How can you accomplish the task at hand when you're preoccupied with your own thoughts and worries?

The ability to lead yourself—your platform—is the foundation for leading unstoppable teams. Focus on yourself, what you lack, what you desire, and you'll get stuck. But focus on what you need to accomplish and how you can enlist others to reach that goal, and you'll become unstoppable.

The Formula: Focus, Feel, Act

There are only three things you can control: your mental, emotional, and physical capabilities. That's it. We can't control the weather, our competition, the marketplace, or our employees. But we can control what we think, how we feel, and how we act and/or react to what comes our way. Put simply, focus on what you can control, and decide what you want to react to. Period.

The Focus, Feel, Act formula works for individuals, but it's also how unstoppable leaders build 10x teams. What we focus on creates a feeling that drives a behavior that results in an action. The resulting action either reinforces our focus and feeling or shifts them to take a different action. The challenge is trying to make sense of all those internal voices.

Our brains are endlessly focused on energy conservation. Thinking requires a great deal of energy, so seeking the simplest solution is in our best interest. The brain is remarkably adept at creating reasons *not* to do something.

Your brain will always be a bit of a whiner, but you can stem some of its complaining by feeding, resting, and exercising it. You can also keep those whiny complaints in check by learning to manage another critical component of your platform: your emotions.

Out-of-control emotions are like driving a car without ever taking your foot off the gas. You're eventually going to crash or hurt someone else. But if you learn to regulate your emotions, to direct your attention to productive emotions, you will learn to drive like a Formula One champion, expertly banking the curves, learning when to hold back and when to let go as new crises and opportunities appear.

Now that we've covered the first two components of the Focus, Feel, Act formula, let's turn to the third. Our ability to talk back to the brain and listen to our emotions is directly linked to our physical actions. Our entire body supports the functions of our brain. It's responsible for feeding our brain oxygen and the proper nutrients and for carrying out the brain's commands, i.e., taking action. The condition of our body determines how much work we can accomplish.

This three-way conversation between our mental, emotional, and physical "voices" is always going on. Understanding these influencers is paramount to leading your first team: you.

The key to making your mental, emotional, and physical platform work for you is understanding why you care. Knowing what you care about and how it makes you feel will help you focus on taking the actions required to succeed. Becoming an unstoppable leader begins with understanding yourself.

Finding Unstoppables

All great teams are made up of people with complementary skills and strengths. It might sound as though all you need to do is get a group of people with different skills together, and—presto!—you have an unstoppable team. But building unstoppable teams is challenging. Our egos, our pride, and insecurities may prevent us from seeing where our true powers (and our real weaknesses) lie.

Second, it's not always easy to recognize other people's superpowers. Third, it can be a challenge for individually gifted people to see the benefit of working with others to accomplish a common goal. A lot of high-achieving people get that way through a single-minded focus on themselves and their goals.

Likewise, most of us think we are better at more things than we really are. It is hard to come to grips with our own weaknesses. And sometimes our own superpowers aren't obvious to us. That's why relying on others to help you identify your strengths and weaknesses can be helpful. This is called triangulating, after the technique of land naviga-

tion used during SEAL training. Here are the steps.

Step one. Find at least three people from three different environments of your life to give you honest feedback. Select people who will give it to you straight without fear of hurting your feelings. When you select these people, find one or two people each from your professional life, your personal life, and your community.

Step two. Ask them this question: “If you were counting on me to save your life but I could save it only by using the one thing I am best at, how would I save you?” They should answer by giving you a verb, not a noun. What action are you best at—inspiring people, analyzing data, drawing pictures, coordinating a project, inventing a new idea, or . . . ?

Step three. Triangulate the feedback and look for similarities, commonalities, and patterns in it. Test the feedback against your own answers to these questions. Is there something in the feedback that rings true in your gut, not just your head? Does some portion of the feedback sound familiar to you? This exercise helps you identify your own talents and also the skill gaps you’ll need to fill with contributions from teammates.

The Seven Unstoppable Traits

There are seven traits that characterize unstoppable teammates. These are the must-haves for powerful team dynamics—regardless of the team’s circumstances and challenges.

1. **Competence**—a curiosity to learn new skills and develop mastery of new subjects;
2. **Perspective**—thoughtfulness about the way past experiences and challenges have shaped attitudes, beliefs, and behavior;
3. **Communication**—the ability and willingness to express ideas and emotions;
4. **Drive**—a can-do spirit, a strong work ethic, a hunger to succeed;
5. **Humility**—inclusiveness, self-awareness, and respect for others;
6. **Flexibility**—an openness to new perspectives and the adaptability to let go of one idea or belief to embrace another;
7. **Selflessness**—a willingness to serve others and to place the truth and others’ interests above self-interest.

Your job as team builder and leader is to develop a team that embodies these seven traits, to direct the team’s focus, and to set an example of the behaviors that will drive the actions required to succeed. Then, as you scale from a team of one (leading your action platform) to a team of many, your greatest challenge is to connect with them, the first step in activating the CARE framework.

Connect

No matter what industry you work in or what position you hold, your success depends on your ability to build human relationships. At the center of relationship building is empathy—the ability to place yourself in your colleagues’ shoes, to understand their point of view, or more important, their feelings. Building connections with others requires empathy, and empathizing requires that you show vulnerability and act with transparency.

If that sounds a lot like the role that parents play in a child’s life, that’s not a mistake. It’s this level of care that makes some teams unstoppable and others just mediocre.

As a leader, you don’t have an automatic, innate connection. You must build it through the three Cs: communication—physical, mental, emotional; credibility—integrity, accountability, humility; commitment—reliability, consistency, focus.

Communication. The first way you connect with others is through communication. You might think that’s obvious, but do you know that 55 percent of face-to-face communication occurs without even uttering a word? That’s right: Studies have proven that most of our communication comes through body language and tone. Thirty-eight percent is how we say it, and only 7 percent is what we say.

Learn to use all the elements of body posture, facial expression, and eye contact in synergy and with intent, and you’ll find that your ability to connect and to build trust increases.

Now layer in the mental components of communicating. Are you preoccupied by your own thoughts and your own needs? When you speak, do you use “I” and “me” a lot? Do you say that people work “for” you or “with” you? People want to be seen for who they are; they want to be recognized for their superpowers; they want to contribute; they want to be led, liked, and, yes, even loved. We need to feel connection, not just to other people but to the purpose of our work, too.

The third component of effective communication is using

feelings as a powerful tool for connecting with others. At the heart of connecting emotionally with others is curiosity. The hunger to learn from others comes from being curious—curious about others' backgrounds and points of view and curious about different approaches to solving a challenge.

Credibility. Leaders live or die by their reputations. Your reputation or personal brand is nothing less than a promise, which is supported by people and a process. A person's brand promise is dependent not only on how they communicate but, equally important, on whether they are reliable, act with integrity, and hold themselves accountable for their actions.

How you handle the truth or difficult situations, how you take ownership for your team's actions, and whether you follow through on your commitments determine your credibility.

Commitment. The more consistent you are in your actions, the more you are trusted, because people know what to expect. If you're erratic in your actions, people don't know who you are. Inconsistent actions throw people off balance, and when they're wondering "what's next," they're spending more time guessing what the leader is going to do than focusing on what they should be doing to help the team. Consistency in your actions and your behavior cements trust with your teammates.

That's how unstoppable teams work. They swarm a problem from multiple angles before they single out one approach.

Achieve

Teams exist for one reason: to achieve results. Unstoppable teams exist in all environments of crisis, creativity, and productivity, and they all strive to achieve goals where the outcome is uncertain—over-the-horizon (OTH) goals that lie beyond our visibility and push us out of our comfort zone.

The goals that most unstoppable teams aspire to reach exist beyond the line of sight of any one individual. The team leader's role is to help team members see well beyond

the visible horizon and find ways to surpass real and/or imagined limitations. The team leader's actions involve the five As of Achievement: **Aspire**, **Assume**, **Assess**, **Assure**, and **Appreciate**. Taken together, these five actions form the second part of the CARE loop.

- **Aspire.** Bring the goal to life by helping team members personally connect to it. Give them hope and a reason to believe that their collective efforts can achieve the task.
- **Assume.** Give your team the space, resources, and confidence to do their jobs.
- **Assess.** Initiate performance assessments frequently and transparently to avoid surprises and unify the team.
- **Assure.** Encourage and reassure your team of their purpose, progress, and perspective; help team members overcome their fears and doubts.
- **Appreciate.** Show enthusiasm and gratitude for both individual efforts and team progress.

A little over 60 years ago, the Russians put Sputnik 1 into orbit. Mankind's first satellite launched two nations on a race to explore space. Three years later, John Kennedy narrowly defeated Richard Nixon to become the youngest president in US history. The nation was divided after decades of bloodshed, from World War I to the Korean War.

President Kennedy recognized that a common goal could rally the country; he sought an OTH goal that the country could aspire to achieve. While delivering a speech to Congress on May 25, 1961, four months after taking office, he challenged the nation to "put a man on the moon by the end of the decade."

At a time when America was still trying to understand how to launch a satellite, the idea of putting a man on the moon in less than ten years was the definition of an OTH goal. There was no clearly identifiable way to accomplish it. As NASA leaders quickly realized, their OTH goal would depend on best guesses, trial-and-error efforts, and numerous course corrections over the next decade. As they dug in, NASA teams often would learn something new or develop a new technology that would change their minds and hence their course of action on how to accomplish the goal.

That's how unstoppable teams work. They swarm a problem from multiple angles before they single out one approach. They realize that when you're venturing into unknown waters, it's all hands on deck. This process of

swarming for solutions, as opposed to sending off individuals to work in silos, is the essence of what unstoppable teams do. They don't rely on one person for the solution; everyone pitches in without regard for individual glory. But this selfless attitude does not happen magically; that's why the CARE loop is so important.

Respect

If you want your team to care about their customers, show them how to care for each other. This sets the example that carries forward in all interactions. As a team leader, you reap what you sow. Your team will act the way you do.

Respect as a verb is not a passive trait; it's all the actions you take within your team and outside the team to shine a light on the team's skills and capabilities and to show how the team can contribute to others' success. Your job as a team builder is to take the lead highlighting other people's skills and articulating how those capabilities can help the team.

Mutual respect is a powerful adhesive when the team comes under pressure. People who feel respected are more confident to express their ideas. They aren't wasting energy thinking of how not to look stupid; instead they focus on using their abilities to help the team solve the problem. Put simply, respect fuels greater levels of contribution. When you create an environment of mutual respect, you also eliminate the fear of being ignored, humiliated, or victimized.

What Comes Around Goes Around

Three elements of respect are the three Rs: Realize, Recognize, and Require. These actions establish an environment of respect that, when interwoven with the trust you have built and the direction you have set forth, will create a platform for developing empowered teammates.

Realize. Respect comes from two places: from your authority and from your actions; the respect garnered from the latter is more valuable and more sustainable than the former.

Recognize. Respect derives from results. As a team builder, it's your job to bring forth and acknowledge the superpowers of each of your teammates.

Require. Respect isn't a nice-to-have; it's a requirement, and it needs to be shared and reciprocated.

When Doug Conant became CEO of Campbell Soup in 2001, he viewed respect as a cornerstone of his turnaround strategy. The company had lost over half its mar-

ket value, conducted a large round of layoffs, and faced declining revenues. A Gallup researcher reported that the company's engagement statistics "were the worst for any Fortune 500 firm ever polled."

Conant spent the next nine years never missing the opportunity to show respect for the contributions of the 20 thousand people of Campbell Soup. Conant and his leadership team developed the Campbell Promise: "Campbell valuing people. People valuing Campbell." He intentionally led with the importance of Campbell valuing people; he wanted people to know they are valued and respected.

He reinforced the promise with a 10-point pledge as to how he intended to lead, and his first point was, "We will treat you with respect and dignity." He personally sent more than 30 thousand thank-you notes to show his respect for employees' efforts. His actions set the tone for his 350 senior leaders to emulate, and they did. By 2010 the company was setting all-time performance records while outpacing the S&P 500 five-fold.

Empower

When the training tool the Perfect Pushup (made by Perfect Fitness) became a breakout success, company leader Alden Mills was called a one-hit-wonder entrepreneur. If the Perfect Pushup had been an album, it would have received multiple platinum awards within its first year. What it got instead was a whole host of comments from industry veterans saying, in essence, "Enjoy it while you can. You got lucky, kid."

Yet over the next eight years, five more of the company's products—Perfect Pullup, Perfect Multi-Gym, Perfect Ab Carver, Perfect Cooling Towel, and Perfect Smartphone Armband—earned the equivalent of platinum status, and several others sold at gold level. No longer could someone say, "You got lucky, kid." That's because Perfect Fitness had created a system for developing products that sold in the millions.

What was the secret of the team behind these series of successes? Empowerment. The products didn't come from one inventive genius; they came from the entire team. Every single person on the team owned the product-idea process.

When people are owners, they think cooperatively. They share ideas, test new concepts, and focus on finding the best idea no matter who comes up with it. They act selflessly. Put simply, empowerment, which closes the CARE loop,

When a team authentically proves how much they care about other people, they experience an exponential return on their efforts.

depends on three actions: educate, enable, and engage.

Nothing shows people you care more than dedicating time to helping them learn new skills. Be careful, however: telling people what you know (and what they don't know) isn't the same as teaching them. Empowerment isn't a task you can check off your list or test on paper; it develops over time and depends on creating an environment where every person on the team shares lessons learned and feels a responsibility to coach and support other team members' growth.

The Geometry of Education

Think of education as a triangle. Each side of the triangle expresses one of the three ways to educate someone, and ideally you want to be creating an equilateral triangle in which all three sides are equal. Here's how to define each one:

Leapfrogging: This is in-house and often informal training delivered via lessons learned, best practices, debriefings, or email updates shared among teammates.

Externality: This tends to be more formal training provided by outside professionals, often representing unusual or diverse fields of expertise.

On-the-job training: On-the-job training gives people the chance to put their knowledge to work. This learning-by-doing approach may include mentoring and coaching as well.

When you create a system for educating your teammates with all three sides of the triangle, they will develop the “know what,” the “know why,” and the “know how” to achieve goals and develop new confidence and capabilities for future roles.

Creating a culture of empowerment can be challenging, because it requires the leader to let go, to relinquish control so that others can step up, make decisions, and take control as well. However, here's the irony: the more you empower others, the more the power returns to you. It comes back to you in a different, even more potent form: gratitude.

As a leader, your role is to grow your people to achieve their highest potential. Each phase of the CARE loop builds

upon the others, and this final phase completes a group's transformation from selfishness to selflessness, from a group of individuals to an unstoppable team.

Activating the 10x Advantage

It's time to broaden the team-building discussion to include other constituents and stakeholders who have a hand in your team's success or might be affected by your team's performance. When a team authentically proves how much they care about other people, they experience an exponential return on their efforts. This is called the 10x advantage. The 10x advantage is activated by aligning the actions of the internal team with the goals and actions of external allies.

Many teams become one-dimensional and imbalanced when the relationship with one constituency, usually the customer, is emphasized over others. Then team-building goals and resources are devoted to whomever and whatever can help hit the bull's-eye, and everyone and everything else becomes nonessential.

The problem with this “customer is everything” approach is that it disregards 67 percent of your other key teammates, who can help you get more customers. The three constituents outside your organization—customers, contributors, and community—can become a force multiplier for your team's efforts. And when you bring them into the CARE loop, you'll see what it's like to be part of something bigger and better than any one team can achieve on its own.

The transformation from a group of individuals to an unstoppable team is marked by five phases.

Phase 1: Connected group. In this phase, connections are still weak, and communication is impersonal; the leader does most of the talking and speaks mostly in terms of “I” and “me.” Leaders tend to micromanage their direct reports, and direct reports focus mostly on “managing up.” As you might guess, empowerment is nonexistent.

Phase 2: Direct group. Directed groups are connected

through an authoritarian figure who spends most of his time telling others what to do and how to do it. The direction is known, measurable, and achievable. Fear of failure is high, and people tend to focus only on the specific tasks they've been assigned. Information is disseminated on a need-to-know basis. Accountability is low, and the group's focus is on pleasing the leader and not being singled out for mistakes.

Phase 3: Respected team. In this phase of team development, individuals have begun to feel emotionally connected to each other and to identify with the emerging team. They have started to feel intellectually invested in the group's progress toward achieving their goals. The leader listens more and talks less, giving the group more time to share insights and learnings with others.

Phase 4: Empowered team. The fourth phase of team building begins to harness the collective focus and efforts of the entire team. The team leader transfers decision making and authority to the team. Selfless action is commonplace, and the team begins to build similar links to external stakeholders, based on the same values of connection, achievement, respect, and empowerment.

Phase 5: The 10x advantage (aka the unstoppable team). This is the peak of team building. The CARE loop has become a well-oiled machine within the team as members seek to activate the CARE loop with external constituents as well. The team reaches levels of performance that have not been seen before and enjoys spending time together at work or for fun, and word-of-mouth about the team's commitment to each other and to their goals spreads far and wide.

The leader is humble; humor and warmth abound. The

team's actions are magnified and improved by the support and participation of their contributors, customers, and community. People express enthusiasm, even love, for each other, and look for new opportunities to collaborate and pursue even bigger goals.

Team building and teamwork are personal. They're about a group of human beings, all with their own quirks of personality, their own superpowers and weaknesses, coming together to do something amazing.

Put the CARE loop to work and practice connecting, achieving, respecting, and empowering. Have some faith that you've done the work, or that you're prepared to do the work, of opening yourself and your heart to building relationships that are deep, sturdy as hell, and immensely satisfying to your heart and your head.

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Alden Mills is a three-time Navy SEAL platoon commander and was the CEO of Perfect Fitness, one of the fastest-growing companies in America. He is a long-time entrepreneur, with more than 40 patents and more than 25 years of experience working with high-performing teams.

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