The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teams

At Saberr we believe that the greatest achievements of humanity are the product of teamwork, rather than individual brilliance. So, we’re on a mission to help employees build and support highly effective teams.

If you believe the same as we do, then you might agree that collectively we still don’t do enough.

- Learning budgets still focus on leadership development programmes as though leadership is something that can be developed in isolation of the team.
- There’s little training and support for managers that are managing multiple teams at the same time in the modern organization.
- Technology supports individual activities because they are easier to track. Even though work happens in teams.

Supporting teams makes a difference. In a meta analysis (Macy & Izumi, 1993) of talent interventions over 30 years - team development had one of greatest impact on financial performance. There’s a clear ROI to support teams.

So how can we do better?
One of the classics of leadership literature is the book "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey. Timeless principles that develop character in leaders. We asked ourselves: what are the habits and routines that highly effective teams must develop?

It’s true that the context of a team is an important consideration - but there are habits, routines, and rituals that are important for nearly all teams regardless of context. We’ve reviewed 100 years of research and spoken to many of the leading team coaches. What we’ve found out is that if you develop the following routines and you do them well, you will be well on your way to creating a high-performing team.

As a quick side note, when we refer to habits, it’s shorthand for habits, routines and rituals but that wasn’t as catchy a title 😅. Check out our other post on the difference between a routine, a ritual and a habit.

The seven habits of highly effective teams

The first two habits are ones that we can develop as individuals:

- **Feedback**: Giving and receiving feedback on a regular basis
- **One-to-ones**: Having great developmental one-to-ones

The other five habits are ones that we need to develop together:

- **Culture crafting**: Clarity on our purpose and expected behaviors
- **Meeting effectiveness**: Improve meetings continuously
- **Team goals & plans**: Setting and reviewing goals and action plans
- **Reflection**: Reflecting regularly on what is and isn’t working as a team
- **Wellbeing**: Experimenting with new ways to support our wellbeing together

We talk about seven habits of great teams. In fact, it’s a little more complex than that. In each area there are a range of habits, routines, rituals and techniques that can all help a team perform at the top of its game. A tool like Saberr can help in a number of ways:

- Create clarity across the team about what’s required. This shared model for developing the team is too often missing.

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Support “keystone habits” in each area. These are specific activities that our research shows have an outsized impact and where resources and guides can be useful.

As you develop the seven habits and routines together you may unearth challenges. The Saberr library has a broader range of curated information and resources to help with common challenges you’ll face.

Nudges to help you stay on track, as well as tracking to monitor progress.

Mindset: Develop your emotional intelligence and connect personally

1. Give and receive feedback on a regular basis

Feedback isn’t just a ritual of the modern workplace. It’s the means by which organisms, across a variety of life-forms and time periods, have adapted to survive. To Tom Stafford, a cognitive scientist at the University of Sheffield, feedback is the essence of intelligence. “Thanks to feedback we can become more than simple programs with simple reflexes, and develop more complex responses to the environment,” he writes. “Feedback allows animals like us to follow a purpose.”

The ability to give and receive feedback is a great skill. It’s also one that even senior leaders have not mastered. There are different approaches to how feedback is carried out. From the direct “radical” kind of feedback to a more nuanced approach. This will depend on cultural and organizational norms. But whether softer or harder styles are adopted it’s essential to confront what Jim Collins called the "brutal facts".

One of the aims of developing a feedback culture should be encouraging people to ask for feedback (pull approach) rather than imposing a scary review upon hesitant employees (push approach). When people ask for feedback, they feel greater autonomy and certainty because they are in the driver’s seat — they can steer the conversation where it’ll be most useful. Givers, in turn, feel more certainty because they have clearer guidelines for the kind of feedback they should give.

A feedback culture is therefore about mindset as much as process. A mindset where there is psychological safety in the team and so team members feel free to say what they think. And a growth mindset where team members want to, and believe they can, grow and develop.

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There are many areas we might want feedback. We might want to know how we are progressing with a development goal. But we should also encourage teams to give active feedback about whether everyone is living up to the standards that they have set themselves. To that end we encourage making these behavioral standards really clear to get started.

All teams develop "team norms". These are "how we do things round here". It’s helpful if teams are more conscious in identifying these desired behaviors. Establishing a clear set of expected behaviors enables the team to give feedback against standards of behaviors that have been agreed together.

Click here to read more about how Saberr makes regular feedback a reality.

2. Hold regular, high-quality, one-to-one meetings

The one-to-one meeting is the basic building block of teamwork. There are many types of one-to-ones required, including those that allow for information sharing, to test new ideas with peers, and to give support to team mates.

Our suggested “keystone habit” is to use Saberr to support one of the most important but neglected conversations - the development and career conversation. It’s really important to be able to step back, get to know your team better, learn about their aspirations and support them in developing their career. But it’s often hard to know how to frame this conversation. Having a regular conversation to support growth and development ensures individuals learn and feel supported in their career.

Beyond this there are a range of other one to one check-ins you’ll want to consider as well. You can review some of the possible templates here in 10 essential one-to-one meetings (with agenda items).

The research on how important one to ones are is compelling. Sandy Pentland at MIT researches team dynamics. In his research, he found that team communication patterns are an important indicator of team performance. One key communication pattern is “engagement”. This reflects the distribution of energy among team members or the degree to which they share information with each other. "In a simple three-person team, engagement is a function of the average amount of energy between A and B, A and C, and B and C. If all members of a team have relatively equal and reasonably high energy with all other members, engagement is extremely strong.

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Teams that have clusters of members who engage in high-energy communication between themselves at the exclusion of others who do not participate don't perform as well." In other words, the most effective teams had strong and equally distributed dialogue between team members. So developing regular one-to-ones with everyone on the team is a key routine of highly effective teams.

As well as ensuring you are having the right conversations you’ll also want to ensure that the quality of the conversation is high. There are a range of techniques to develop over time. Being a good listener, for example, is always central to having good one to one conversations.

3. Culture crafting

Every team will develop a culture. The question is whether you develop it intentionally or not.

We recommend at least two keystone habits where the team is intentional about the culture it develops. First making sure the team is clear on its purpose. Answering the question: what are we here to do? Second, discussing the behaviors that are required to make this possible. Answering the question: how will we make this happen?

There’s also a question whether each team culture will be more or less aligned with the overall organization. The resources we offer encourages teams to think about their team culture in the context of the wider organization and system. Enough autonomy for the discussion to be meaningful to them. But enough alignment that we avoid teams pulling in different directions.

It's pretty obvious that we need to connect with the purpose of our work to get the most out of it. As Dan Cable wrote in HBR "No one wants to be a nine-to-five robot. People want to feel inspired, find meaning, and see the impact their work has on others. And when they do, they're more engaged, innovative, and productive. That isn't a secret or a revelation. It's common sense."

If we do connect with our work it has an impact, according to a study by Adam Grant the Wharton professor and psychologist. For example, the head of a college fundraising effort to help fund scholarships for underprivileged kids invited a current scholarship recipient to share their personal story. After volunteers had listened to a scholarship recipient, they were inspired and they raised almost 400% more money than average.

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But how do we find purpose together? The first stage is about getting clear on what we are trying to achieve. It’s really easy to assume that we all know our purpose as a team. But in our experience, if you ask six different team members what the purpose of the team is - you often get six different answers. This requires conversations to get aligned with a clear articulation of the purpose. Our Purpose exercise to make it easy to get everyone aligned and motivated behind a compelling purpose statement.

Developing a purposeful team is not a one-off discussion. The purpose needs to come to life in your day to day activities. This might be encouraging employees to go out in the field and experience the clients’ problems first hand. Connecting with the people that you serve can be an enlightening experience. It also might be referencing your purpose in key discussions or meetings.

Developing purpose isn’t a leader delivering speeches about lofty societal goals. Working towards a shared purpose is personal and needs to involve regular connection with the people the team serves. We suggest co-creating a ritual together that connects the team to its purpose and the people it serves on a day to day basis.

Once you are clear on what you are here to do there’s an additional conversation that the best teams initiate. An open conversation regarding the behaviors that are required to make the purpose and goals happen. “How we do things round here”. It’s helpful if teams are more conscious in identifying these desired behaviors.

If a team is intentional in crafting this culture - it’s a great foundation. If it’s clear on its purpose and the behaviors required to succeed. But too often these discussions don’t happen. That’s not surprising, they are hard to facilitate without support. But with Saberr by your side they are much more achievable.

4. Meeting effectiveness

Team meetings can make or break a team. We hear so many complaints of meeting madness. Problems include: dull meetings, badly thought out meeting cycles and bad meeting etiquette.

Workplace Interruptions cause $588 billion dollars a year in wasted productivity. Estimates for how much time we spend in meetings range from 20-30 percent at the lower end, up to 70-80 percent of time. The more senior you are, the more that time costs and you spend in meetings. General satisfaction with meetings is low. According

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to a survey by HBR across diverse industries, only 17% reported that their meetings are generally productive uses of group time.

The keystone habit that we suggest to keep your meetings on track is to review and improve them regularly. This creates a culture of continuous improvement. Meetings are often best viewed not in isolation, but as a system. Good team meetings need to follow a cadence. How these meetings work together, including the meeting sequence and other timing considerations is critical. It’s also important to have agreed guidelines for running each of the meetings. Our Meeting Optimization exercise to reduce the time and increase the impact of your team meetings.

There are examples of good practice to review and we also provide access to information and support to pick what’s right for you. As the world has become more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous most organizations and teams are running meetings in shorter and highly focussed cycles. Teams often work on longer term quarterly cycles against organization goals. They then break work into iterations or cycles of 1-2 weeks. These are time boxed periods of work. They start by planning and then review activities every one to two weeks. These are sometimes called “sprints”. Sub teams break into project groups to meet needs that arise. Much of this meeting cadence is borrowed from agile ways of working. Meetings or "ceremonies" are an important part of agile practice. We have a range of guides and templates to utilize.

5. Team goals and plans

A clear purpose is great but even better is when you translate your overarching purpose into clear goals and actions. It’s well evidenced by the CIPD that "goal setting is one of the most powerful and evidence-based interventions for enhancing performance”.

There's something about the act of defining specific ways to measure success that galvanizes the team. Whether you develop SMART objectives, a Balanced Scorecard or OKRs will depend on the organization and context.

Our keystone habit is that teams set collective goals. Goals need to be set for the team - not just individuals. If outcomes are delivered by a team - then that is where you should focus on the goal setting. Again it’s one of the conversations that’s quite hard to facilitate. So we've worked with goals coaching experts to make it a lot easier.

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Defining goals must not be a "set and forget" approach. A very large part of the success of setting goals involves checking in regularly on progress and whether the goal is still appropriate, including a full review at the end of the period. It's also essential to develop clear action plans to achieve the goals.

At Saberr we set and review goals using the OKR framework. Check out our guide to creating OKR's here.

6. Reflect regularly on what is and isn’t working as a team (The Retrospective)

Reflection and learning is essential for the long term development and health of any team. Organizations as diverse as the Navy Seals, Pixar and the NHS declare this space for team reflection as one of the most important habits a team can develop.

We recommend two keystone habits to improve reflection. First is setting aside some time to look back and reflect on how the team is working. A common term for this type of meeting is the “retrospective”. The second is to take a “team health check” to initiate a deeper and data supported review on how the team is working together.

Organisations that work according to agile principles take time for "retrospectives". A retrospective (from Latin retrospectare, "look back"), generally, is a look back at events that took place, or works that were produced, in the past. The term is also used in agile development, where a retrospective is a meeting held by a project team at the end of each iteration of a project cycle to discuss what was successful about the project or time period covered by that retrospective, what could be improved, and how to incorporate the successes and improvements in future iterations or projects.

Retrospectives play a very important role in iterative and incremental development by cementing learning. As you “normalise” this routine, you’ll find many benefits. You’ll catch problems earlier and become more comfortable sharing fears and aspirations for how you work together.

From time to time we need to step back and reset. A good way to do this is using a “team health check”. This is a survey based instrument that gives a reading across a range of team health indicators. This kind of deeper dive reflection is particularly true in some situations:

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● Teams together for a long time, that are becoming a bit stagnant
● Teams that are going through a major change of direction
● Teams that have new members or significant changes in team composition
● Teams that have unhealthy conflict but not clear why

It’s important to recognise these moments and take a longer dedicated period of time (e.g. 1 to 2 days as opposed to 1-2 hours) to evaluate what’s working and what needs to be reevaluated. This used to be the preserve of the office off-site. But we shouldn’t wait for these to be scheduled. We should have the confidence to highlight the need for a team reset. In any case, developing a team is not done by walking across tightropes. It’s best done by working through real challenges together. As the team faces and addresses challenges openly it builds trust and strength.

Taking an extended time out to discuss team issues can be really helpful. Budget enough time - perhaps a full day, for these meetings. This is a time for review. It can be helpful to gather data via a survey or other team health check to raise issues that wouldn’t normally be discussed.

7. Wellbeing

Routines, habits and rituals are also important for a team’s well being and resilience and to prevent burnout. It’s extremely important for us all to invest in our own well being. The statistics regarding burnout are increasingly alarming. This is bad for us, our team and the organization.

There are a number of warning signs of burnout: physical (headaches, sickness, insomnia) psychological (panic, hopelessness, anxiety) and behavioral (reduced performance and absenteeism). It’s obvious the negative effect that these can have for a team and an organization.

A key skill set to master to avoid burnout is resilience. This is the skill set to navigate stress and thrive amidst challenges that you face together. Resilient teams can adapt and anticipate challenges. They are aware of each other's capacity levels and respond accordingly. They know when to ask for help. The debrief regularly.

Burnout is best not seen as purely an individual problem but a systemic problem. Organizations need to address this problem holistically. How teams work together can be a significant factor in developing well being and resilience and reducing burnout.

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Our keystone habit is simply to experiment with new approaches to develop resilience and well being. We have resources and techniques that you might find useful. Of course you might come across an idea that supports well being elsewhere. That’s great. There are techniques that you can try individually but also together. These are techniques that can help develop wellbeing in body, mind and spirit. We just ask that you write a note of the experiment and make any observations about the impact.

Taking care of our body with sleep, exercise and nutrition and supporting each other in doing so. Taking care of our mind through taking breaks and time for introspection or even meditation. Lifting our spirits through acts of kindness and joy together. There’s a lot of evidence that laughter is good for teams. So sharing a good joke with your team will not do any harm!

Of course well being should be embedded in all other discussions.

- Are you clear and aligned on your purpose, behaviors and goals that increase clarity as this can reduce stress and anxiety from confusion?
- Are your team meetings effectively run to share information, generate ideas and make decisions?
- Are in your one to one discussions supportive and developmental?
- Do you reflect honestly and regularly on how you work together?
- Do you provide honest and open feedback with good intentions and you celebrate small and large successes together?

If we focus on the seven habits and make space to test new ideas that’s a great foundation for well being.

**Mastering the 7 habits of highly effective teams**

Mastering anything means stepping outside of your comfort zone and being willing to try something new. The energy and mindset that you bring to team development will play a great part in whether you make a difference.

Teams that grow and develop are open to experiment. They have a growth mindset and are willing to try out new ways of working and behaving together.

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It’s important for teams to cultivate a culture of psychological safety. This means team members are free to speak up and discuss how they feel.

Underpinning all of these habits and routines is an interest to connect with your teammates on a personal level. If we each develop our self awareness and understanding of others - that will help us navigate many situations.

This doesn’t mean that you have to be best friends. Or that you have to over-share and initiate embarrassing conversations. But teams that are curious, are willing to show a little vulnerability and develop emotional intelligence create relationships that underpin performance. Appropriate personal disclosure about things that matter can really help develop team bonds.

For example, if you said “I feel lacking in energy because of this situation at home”, it might help a colleague understand why you are more retiring in the team meetings than normal. Or sharing “I’m a little fearful of this engagement because of a previous experience“ might enable a teammate to support you better. Taking a genuine interest in your team mates strengths and weaknesses, motives, and ambitions will ensure all the conversations above have more meaning and have depth.

There’s no magic bullet to greater performance. But it’s also not rocket science. These are well researched habits and routines. If you develop these routines it will make your team stronger and more likely to succeed. In the same way that losing weight or getting fit have pretty clear pathways. It’s the execution that’s really hard.

It requires bravery to initiate new types of conversations and it requires discipline to follow them through. In the Saberr platform we’ve specified “keystone habits” that we’d recommend to get started. You can build these up one at a time.

As you develop these habits you will identify new challenges, opportunities and problems. There’s much more support on hand for a large range of common challenges that teams face. Meeting templates, exercises and techniques that help individuals and teams develop.

Embracing a culture of “learning by doing” means gathering feedback and then trying out new approaches to improve the ways we work together. We learn through small experiments and make marginal gains. This sounds easy but isn't. It’s much easier to stay in our comfort zone and continue to do things the way we have done before.

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If you’d like to find out more, contact us here.

A note on our coaching offer

Teams need to learn to develop these routines and habits on the job together. The aim is that they can do this on their own and without support.

However, we recognise that for many managers and teams this is a significant skill to develop. We are able to offer both leader and team coaching to support in the mastery of these routines and habits. Some organizations and teams introduce coaching to start alongside the use of the platform.

Having a coach present can help you understand how to “create the space” for the right kind of conversation. Initiating a conversation with your team about purpose for example can feel a little daunting the first time. But once you have done it once it becomes much easier and it is a skill that you can use whenever you manage a team.

Our coaching partners are fully accredited to leverage the templates, exercises and techniques available in the platform. They create the space for these skills to be mastered with a view to stepping aside and enabling teams to self coach. In this way we get the true benefit of both human coaching and digital enablement.

We find human coaching is especially useful for teams that are new to certain activities and need support. Tools are then available to immediately practice the routines - with the team. Meaning ideas can be translated into action and embedded.

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