

# The Simple Team: Using an Understanding of Human Nature to Lead a Group of Diverse Individuals

Rachael Layne – University of Massachusetts, Boston – CCT 692

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## ***Background***

During my time as an officer in the Air Force, I have had the opportunity to work with and lead groups of diverse individuals; diverse in age, race, religion, gender, nationality, and backgrounds. I have learned more from these situations and these people than I have in all my formal education. But there is a unique challenge in trying to lead a team of diverse individuals to a common goal, especially when those individuals are assigned to you rather than hired with the goal in mind. These challenges reached a peak for me during my time in South Korea where “East meets West” clashes seemed insurmountable at times. The leadership style of the senior Korean officers was often shocking to me as an American, yet many of my Korean counterparts were equally frustrated with the tactics of our American leaders. This led me to ask *what inspires humans intrinsically and culturally to want to be a part of a team and what leadership traits best capitalize on a team of individuals from various backgrounds and cultures?* Though most of my experience and examples lie within the military structure, my search is to find basic human traits that drive effective team performance regardless of structure or context.

Team building is not something that happens passively. There is a lot of hard work and intentional involvement required by both leadership and team members, especially with a diverse team. The rewards for cultivating a successful diverse team are far beyond those of a homogenous team. In a study conducted by Earley and Mosakowski (2000), it was shown that although highly diverse teams often struggle significantly during their development phase, they often surpass groups that more homogenous once they begin performing. An interesting occurrence that was seen in this study was that highly diverse groups always began with a heightened awareness of individual differences which stunted initial cohesion. However, as the team development progressed, the initial distinction of team members as individuals served to allow each member to play a specific role in line with their specific strengths. With such a wide array of strengths present and given value by the team, the diverse groups moved forward in strides of productivity. What this tells me is that, while the challenges will be great, it is worth it to fight for a team of unique individuals. The synergy that is achieved with diversity is not achieved any other way.

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## ***What Drives Us to Community?***

The vast majority of people, regardless of background, want to be included in a community, to have a sense of belonging. This is the foundation of psychological needs in Maslow’s hierarchy. After our physical needs for food, water, shelter, and security, a sense of community is our next most basic need (D. Martin, 2007). How telling is it that, immediately after our physical survival, our first instinct is to establish ourselves in a community? We should not be asking the question whether or not people have a desire to belong to a group of others who value them as an

individual, that is a given in the average human. What we should ask instead is, “What makes one community more appealing than another?” and “How have some leaders and organizations inspired a loyalty in their followers where others like them have failed?” Simon Sinek makes the argument that organizations and leaders are most effective when they *Start with Why* (2013), which is the title of his book. He claims that founding your team on the idea of Why you and your team are doing what they are doing is the only way to inspire long term loyalty and motivation.

Sinek breaks every human action and decision down into what he calls “The Golden Circle.” He chose this naming as a parallel to the concept of the “Golden Ratio.” The Golden Ratio represents a systematic and repeatable pattern within nature, science, and even art. The Golden Circle is similar in that it describes a pattern of human decision-making. He breaks down the decision-making process into three sections: What, How, and Why. “What” simply describes the outcome of the decision that will be made. This is the outside of the Golden Circle and is the most easy to identify. If a person goes to the store to buy a toothbrush, “What” they want to buy is simply a toothbrush. “How” the person will choose which toothbrush to purchase is the next level of complexity of decision-making. He or she might choose the toothbrush based on the price, color, package, or dentist recommendations. The trouble with choosing based on these attributes is that in this age of engineering feats and advanced technology, the specifics of a toothbrush are easily repeatable across brands. Decisions made based on a “How” level of thinking are often random and would be made differently at another point in time. So how does a toothbrush company make a toothbrush that a customer will loyally purchase regardless of color, price, or packaging? They must sell the customer on their reason “Why” they are in the business of making toothbrushes in the first place. A company that first convinces you that your smile is your biggest statement to the world and then offers to help you make your best impression by creating the best toothbrush on the market is much more likely to earn loyalty from their customers. Though buying a toothbrush is a trivial activity, this same pattern is repeatable in decisions from where to go to college to what type of car you will buy.

Why is it that people respond so strongly to being presented with “Why” an organization is taking the actions that they are? It is because each person has an internal “Why” they do what they do. When these two “Whys” are in alignment, there is an emotional connection between the person and the product that drives behavior. Sinek also breaks the brain down into two parts: the Neocortex and the Limbic Brain. The Neocortex tends to deal with the logical “What” and “How” part of an action or decision, while the Limbic Brain is what encourages a person to determine “Why” a product, organization, or team functions the way it does. The challenge here is that the Limbic Brain is not capable of language; it is heavily rooted in emotional response. Understanding this helps us to understand why it can often be so challenging to articulate what makes a person a good leader or why the explanation “it just felt right” can hold so much sway over a decision.

What will make one community more desirable than another will be its ability to engage a person’s Limbic Brain by presenting “Why” they are a community in a way that resonates with the individual’s “Why.”

But what happens when a person is assigned to a team with which they do not feel their “Why” aligns properly? How does the individual become successful? Many would argue that the success or failure of a team is a reflection of its leadership. While the person may not naturally be inclined to work effectively towards organizational goals on which they place no emotional value, it is not impossible for their leadership to engage them in a way that will inspire them to set their value upon being an effective teammate.

### ***What is Considered Effective Leadership around the World?***

If leaders are responsible for facilitating the effectiveness of their team, it becomes the burden of the leadership to engage their followers in a way that will usher a response of loyalty from their Limbic Brain. In an increasingly globalized world, the way that a leader will most effectively elicit loyalty is becoming more convoluted. Regions, communities, and teams are becoming more diverse than ever and each person brings their own “Whys” to the table along with their own biases of how a “good” leader is supposed to behave. The GLOBE Organization conducted a study of 62 societies around the world on a wide range of topics, to include leadership. The findings are summarized in the book *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (House, 2014). As one might expect, every culture has different expectations for a leader and different attributes that define a person as a “good” leader. However, traits that are essentially universal to leaders across cultures can be summarized as:

- Honest
- Has Vision and Foresight
- Dynamic and Encouraging
- Good Team Communication Skills

Furthermore, traits that are universally accepted as “bad” leadership qualities are below.

- Loner
- Asocial
- Noncooperative
- Irritable
- Nonexplicit
- Egocentric
- Ruthless
- Dictorial

While these lists of traits still suffer the complication of individual interpretation, considering them in a global context as well as in the context of each other will give an idea of what a successful “global leader” looks like. Regardless of the goals of an organization, leadership who embodies these traits will be able to inspire loyalty in their followers on a relational basis.

It is worth noting that the discussion on all the positive leadership traits by House et al. surrounded the idea of integrity. Many people think of integrity as being synonymous with honesty, but that is a narrow view of the concept. In regards to leadership, the most effective way of discussing integrity is in regards to construction. If a building has integrity, it means that every fiber of that building is working towards the common goal of keeping the building standing and steady. Sinik also mentions the importance of authenticity within organizations and in leaders. Without integrity or authenticity, a leader fails to have their own “Why” defined in a way that their followers will trust.

However, leadership in a vacuum isn't true leadership and the vertical relationship between leaders and their followers is not the only important relationship within a team. The horizontal relationships between peers are also crucial to the development of a productive and successful team.

### ***How Can a Leader Facilitate Team Member Integration?***

A leader can use his or her influence to develop a positive working environment between peers. The avenues to team cohesion are numerous and best developed with a particular team in mind. Different teams have different interests and will respond to different methods in a variety of ways.

The following examples are simple and generic explanations of tasks that should be accomplished to ensure team member integration, however specific execution of the themes can and should be determined at the team or organizational level. They can be as fun, creative, or as challenging as the team is up for.

*Create a Team Culture.* When dealing with a team that represents a wide range of cultures or backgrounds, it is important to give the team a clear definition of the values and standards held within the team. This will give the members a context where they can apply their past experiences. This allows them to bring their strengths to the table, while leaving traits that don't necessarily support the team culture behind. For example, there are many ways that South Korea is behind the United States in advancements towards gender equality. It has been my experience that Korean women are rarely taken as seriously as their male counterparts and are often awarded leadership roles for show more than anything else. However, as we came together as a professional team, our Korean counterparts knew that discrimination based on gender was not part of our team culture and (usually) chose to set that piece of their culture aside to better align with the team (Earley, 2000).

*Create Shared Experiences.* One of the biggest challenges that a leader of a diverse group of individuals will face is the lack of shared experiences and interests. This damages the team's ability to continue the emotional buy-in of the members and the stimulation of the Limbic Brain. Many times, facilitated activities that are unrelated to work can encourage a sense of shared experiences and comradery. Research conducted by Catherine Eckel and Philip Grossman and summarized in their research article *Managing Diversity by Creating Team Identity* (2005) showed that an activity as simple as a puzzle had significant impacts on a team's willingness to work together later in a professional environment. Other often used examples include sports, sharing a meal, and problem-based learning sets.

*Ensure Fair Mediation.* Going back to the concept of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is crucial that each member believes that their team respects them as individuals – that they have a place to belong. When many different backgrounds and values are present in a team, conflicts will arise. As these conflicts arise, effective leadership will mediate between the individuals involved and give guidance that is in line with the team's guiding principles and shows that the team values all members.

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## ***Application and Moving Forward***

The last 4-Star General that I worked for in Korea was General Vincent Brooks, the Combined Forces Command Commander and he was tasked with leading over half a million people. Most of his team was made up of South Koreans and Americans, with a small percentage coming from a handful of other United Nations partners. From his biography, I saw that he had a distinguished career from the start. He was the first African-American Cadet Brigade Commander at West Point and excelled through the officer ranks all the way to the 4-Star level. I knew from what I had read that he embodied all the traits of a “global leader.” He understood that his team needed a cause to fight for and had a level of integrity that his troops would rally behind and follow.

Just as I was leaving Korea, I saw General Brooks expand the relationship that he had with his troops to a team-wide culture of horizontal respect. He was able to create a team culture, provide a shared experience, and ensure fair mediation and equality in one simple action. He required that all of his senior staff learn how to introduce themselves and their counterpart in both English and Korean. Up until this point, everything was run through a translator and most US members learned very little Korean during their one-year tour. Though the idea wasn't well received at first, through this one action General Brooks created a team culture of inclusion, reemphasized that both Koreans and Americans were important parts of the team, and created an opportunity for his staff to work with their counterparts one-on-one to accomplish a shared task together. A week or so after this requirement went out, there was a visible change in how the senior leaders interacted with each other. They had been given the opportunity to break down the walls of apprehension towards diversity and began to recognize the value of each and every member of the team.

Prior to conducting this research and organizing this report, I had not thought much about General Brooks' requirement for his senior staff and I did not realize the significance of the action. Now, I am amazed at how beautifully simple the requirement was. He knew that each member of his team contributed to the mission and he needed for his entire staff to understand the value that their peers had. Though he could have simply ordered all of them to become friends and work together closely, he made the wise decision to instead provide them with the opportunity to discover the insight he had for themselves.

As a leader, I often find myself feeling that I do not have the power or tools to build an effective team. In many ways, I am often the minority in the team that I am leading. I am frequently the youngest, only officer, and only female in my unit. What integrates me with my team and drives me to demand the best version of my team that I can have is that I know each of the individuals bring something unique to the table, just as I do. What I always have to remember is that even the simplest actions can have significant impacts on the effectiveness of my team.

While the challenges of diversity that faced General Brooks and those that I face every day seem overwhelming and like impossible challenges, putting in the effort to build a team of diverse individuals pays out huge rewards in the end. At the end of the day, we are all humans

guided by human nature. Understanding how to speak to your team at their most basic levels will pave the way to leading a highly successful team.

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