

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective IT Teams

By [Peter Kowalke](#)

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Great things are usually not created by one person alone.

For all the brilliance and vision of a Steve Jobs or an Elon Musk, neither man would be a household name today were it not for the help of their teams. Big things, great things, require a team to keep things running, refine ideas, have the right skills, and build things larger than one person could do alone.

Getting several people together does not make a team, though. A team is a collection of people who act in concert and amount to more than the sum of their parts. They work together, and there's deep trust between the members.

Not all teams have this juju. While there are many ways to create and run a good team, there are some habits that commonly surface among the most effective teams. Here are seven of those habits.

Habit #1: Create Psychological Safety

Freely sharing information is critical for working together as a team. That starts with feeling safe enough to share.

“When someone has an idea, you don't immediately shoot it down, you don't shame them, you don't embarrass them. You just take it as an idea, openly,” says [teams consultant](#) and Silicon Valley project manager Rebecca Zhuo. “You want to create an environment where if something goes wrong, they can bring it up. If they have an idea, they can bring it up.”

That only happens if there's psychological safety, if sharing won't lead to demotion, blame or a public shaming.

Habit #2: Encourage Direct Communication

Good teams might distribute work, but they don't work in silos. Instead, they stress an overall team dynamic and communicate directly with each other throughout the course of the day both in meetings and on an as-needed basis.

“Processes and performance metrics are important. But the most effective IT teams focus first on their culture and how they work together both within and across teams,” says Paul Buffington, the principal solutions engineer for [Atlassian](#), maker of the widely used IT project management solution JIRA. “Daily standup meetings are a great way to track progress and priorities, and to reinforce the team dynamic.”

The communication or lack thereof often is reflected in the cohesiveness of the final product, adds Zhuo.

“What's interesting about teams is that if your team works in silos and handoffs, your software feels like it's in silos and handoffs. It reflects the team exactly. And if your team is collaborative, your software also feels collaborative,” she says. “Your software feels like one cohesive, coherent whole that works together if your team works together and talks to each other.”

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Habit #3: Collaborate Frequently

Highly effective teams are resilient and collaborative, further breaking down silos by not only talking together, but also working together frequently.

“An effective team helps each other out,” says Zhuo. “Through helping each other out, covering for each other, and genuinely taking an interest in what the other team members are doing, great teams develop a deep understanding of each other’s roles.”

If someone’s falling behind on a sprint deliverable, for instance, a great team will assign someone else on the team who knows a little bit just to help. This builds the teams and creates resiliency by expanding the number of people who are familiar with that part of the project.

Habit #4: Empower Each Person on the Team

People do their best work when they are empowered to try things, make decisions and take responsibility instead of relying on approval and direction from those higher up on the chain. That’s why micromanaging usually doesn’t work.

Highly effective teams understand this, and empower team members to do what needs to be done with a minimum of red tape and approval-seeking, even if there’s a hierarchy.

“Take change processes, for instance,” says Buffington. “Rather than creating approval monsters where each type of change follows a dramatically different set of complex rules, the best teams today are switching to devops style peer reviews instead. In this model, all proposed changes must pass a peer review before going straight to testing and production. It’s a faster and far more reliable way to vet changes and eliminate complexity at the same time.”

Habit #5: Focus on Agility

Effective IT teams flow like water and make agility a core competency so the team can change, evolve and meet any challenge. Agility is more than a tack-on, it is baked into the core organization of the team.

“IT teams that display exceptional levels of organizational agility will be the most successful,” suggests Steven ZoBell, chief product and technology officer for online work management software [Workfront](#).

“Rather than simply make existing work easier or more fluid,” he notes, “they actually take on a more dynamic approach, working across departmental seams, changing more often, empowering new leaders, and redeploying themselves at the individual, team or even organizational level.”

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Habit #6: Automate Everything Possible

Creating deliverables is the ultimate goal for highly effective teams, not clocking time or looking important. So highly effective teams lean heavily on the unnamed team member: automation. If a task can be automated, it is automated.

Team members work together on finding and sharing ways to let automation handle as much work as possible, comfortable that a reduced workload is a badge of success, not a sign they are working too little.

“The very best teams make it their mission to find new ways to use automation to make their own roles obsolete,” says Buffington. “As a reward, they’re moved to bigger and more exciting roles — each time with the same goal of automation.”

Habit #7: Track Meaningful Metrics Only

Effective teams resist the urge to measure everything, and look instead for ways to set meaningful measurements that support company and organization-wide goals.

“The best teams don’t obsess over every small number; they create a balanced scorecard to track their overall performance against the metrics that matter most to the org,” says Buffington.

Good metrics help an effective team get the data needed for adjustment, but they understand that these metrics are only a means to an end, not the end itself.

Silicon Valley was built on the back of visionaries, but none of these visionaries would have gotten very far without their team. IT can feel like an individual effort, but look closely and it really is a team sport.

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