The Mammoth in the Room

How Great Leaders and Their Teams Embrace Evolutionary Truths for Outstanding Business Results

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Chapter 2
Build *Your* Team

Earlier in the book, we talked about taking care of yourself and becoming more self-aware—both foundational for strong leadership. Recognizing that you are an individual leading a team of individuals—all with a healthy sense of self-interest—is an important step in embracing evolutionary truths. Wise leaders don't try to deny their own self-interest or those of their team members. That approach never works. Learning how to manage the complex dance of self-interest and group dynamics in a fast-moving environment requires continuous learning. If you're doing the hard work to grow as a leader, then you've probably been tasked with team building. So, in this chapter, we're going to help you start building *your* team, not just *any* team—*yours*!

Bring at Least One Lieutenant

As you step into your first leadership role or advance to a higher one, you are likely taking over someone else's team. Either the former leader is moving to a new department, is leaving the company, or was fired. Once in a great while, you get to build a new team from scratch, but most of the time you are inheriting a team—and this comes with unique challenges and opportunities.

Keep this important fact front and center, especially in the first year: the team you are about to lead is the *other* person's team—not yours. This will change over time if you are a strong leader. In the beginning, though, you're going to have to build trust, fortify relationships, and assess the strengths, weaknesses, and potential development needs of each member of your inherited team. All of this is necessary to shape this group of people into the team you need to do your job well. It's not an easy task, but it's crucial for your success and theirs.

Therefore, my number one rule for leaders inheriting a team is this: find someone you can trust completely—100 percent! You can bring them in from a past project or company or develop this person from within your new team. Either way, find a person who will stick with you no matter what—someone who has your back and will be honest with you. They should share your core values and have a positive attitude. While there are advantages to bringing in someone you already know, like experience working together, this is not a necessity. If you decide to choose someone from within the new team, don't just look at their resume. You need to ensure this person has the necessary skills, yes, but I always prefer a stellar attitude over the right CV. One of my earliest managers taught me a very important leadership lesson. There is only one thing that differentiates a high-performing employee from a low-performing employee: attitude. If a team member is open to learning and growth, they're going to be open to learning and growing with you as their new leader. If they don't have this attitude,

that's going to be a roadblock. Choose someone with a stellar attitude, and then treat this new relationship with the care and respect it deserves. Whomever you choose, this new "lieutenant" will become part of your lifeline until this team you have inherited becomes truly yours, which takes time and nurturing.

Listen to Your Gut

Even if every member of the team you inherit is highly skilled and experienced, these are not the main currencies humans trade in when it comes to relationships. Sometimes you just click with a person and sometimes you don't. First impressions are powerful, and your gut usually gives you a strong read as to whether you're going to like a person. The reasons for these gut reactions are complex and the science around them multifactorial. However, you don't need to study all the science behind gut reactions to know they exist and are mostly accurate. Why? Because you experience the gut's decision-making power every time you meet a new person. Behaviors, olfactory components, looks, past experiences, and reputation are just a few inputs that shape these initial gut reactions. Your gut's advice should play a big role in your hiring and firing decisions. Let me explain.

Throughout my career, I've had the opportunity to be involved in or make the final call on hundreds of hiring decisions. Most of the time, I made the right call and directly hired or helped to hire the right person for the job. I have always judged the success of such hires by these outcomes: the hire did good work, went on to have a successful career within the company (and beyond), and expressed that they were generally happy with the opportunities and professional development they experienced as an employee. In other words, it was a win for me, the company, and for them.

One achievement I'm especially proud of is that in every department and leadership role in my career—across all the years, positions, companies, industries, and countries—at least three-quarters of the people who reported to me moved on to bigger responsibilities and leadership roles during my tenure or afterward. Even more satisfying is that fact that some of the folks who joined my teams came with baggage from former management stating things like they were "not good enough" or had "low potential." I am happy to say that I saw them differently, gave them the opportunities and the environment they needed to develop themselves, and proudly watched them move on to bigger responsibilities in highly respected corporations. This gives me a strong sense of gratification. I like helping people achieve their full professional potential.

But no one is perfect, and I am by far no exception. Despite my strong track record, I did not get it right in a few cases. I made the wrong decision. I did not hire the right person for the job. These mistakes still haunt me. Every detail of those missteps is etched into my brain: the person's name, even the time and location where I made the decision to hire them, even though my gut sensed they were

not the right fit. It's painful to get a hiring decision wrong. It weakens your position as a leader. It challenges the cohesiveness and performance of your team. It's not good for the employee either. After a while, once the writing is on the wall, you must move this person within or outside the company. The whole experience stings for everyone involved.

As a leader, you ask yourself, "Why did this happen? Where did I go wrong?" Since hindsight is always twenty-twenty, I can tell you *exactly* why specific hires did not work out. In every single case, I ignored what my gut was telling me. I overrode my instinct because I was impressed by the person's skills, experience, capabilities, interview performance, academic record, or something else. As a result, I forgot my cardinal rule: listen to your gut, Nicolas! I should never have brought any of them on, and my gut knew this even as I was making the hiring decision.

Let me be clear on two things: First, I'm not placing blame for my decisions on the employees that I hired. My point is not to say that these people were not capable of great things. They certainly were, and some of them moved on to very big responsibilities at other companies. Second, I'm not saying, "Just let your gut decide" or "Make unfiltered hiring decisions." What I am saying is that in a particular hiring moment for a particular organization and with my team's unique strengths and weaknesses at that time, my gut raised doubts. It told me that this person was not a fit for this particular circumstance. But instead of listening to this inner voice, I covered my ears and talked myself into each of these hires based on all the inputs swirling around me: their impressive skills, their deep experience, their glowing recommendations, etc. All of this took precedence in my decision to hire, even though my gut kept shouting, "Nicolas, don't do it!"

Over time, I became better at trusting my gut. Now, I share this piece of hard-earned wisdom with every leader I meet because you are allowed to listen to your gut. In fact, you have to once you have your "ideal" candidate on paper. This is exactly the moment when you need to stop and listen hard to what your gut is telling you. Let it be the final decision-maker. Our evolution has wired us to assess other humans, and we're pretty good at it. This, coupled with our professional experience, should be a trustworthy guide. In the end, the chemistry must be there, and that's what our gut is really good at recognizing. My advice couldn't be simpler: if your gut says no, listen!

The same is true when your gut tells you someone on the team you have inherited is not a good fit going forward. This is even tougher, because presumably, this person has been on the team for a while—and possibly has been with the company before you ever came along. But just because the last leader of the team felt this person was a good fit doesn't mean you have to feel the same way. It is highly unlikely you tick exactly the same way your predecessor did, so there could be a multitude of reasons why a person you inherited won't work out well on a team you're running. It's not an easy decision, but when you inherit a team, the job is to make it *yours*. That's why you must assess and

make tough decisions about which team members will move forward with you. It's an important decision, so take your time, and remember to trust your gut.

After about six months of learning and analyzing the team you have been charged with leading, you'll likely begin to feel more confident and can assess if some positions need to change. Here are some of the reasons why you might want to move someone off your team:

1. You just don't connect with them. Maybe you have very different ways of looking at the business or life in general.
2. They think you took the job they deserved, and now they are resentful of the fact that they must report to you.
3. You discover your predecessor kept an underperforming member on the team because they were moving soon, and they didn't want to deal with the hassle of a complicated exit scenario.
4. You like someone but their talents don't fit your team's needs, and they are not performing well. As a result, you're spending too much time helping them. Is this even possible? Too much help? Yes, this is a problem because it breaks an important management-performance ground rule: spend most of your time with your highest performing people. If you spend too much time with low-performing team members—even if your intentions are honorable—it takes time and attention away from your highest performers. These high performers might feel slighted, which has the potential to decrease their performance or even cause them to leave your team. You don't want that to happen.
5. Their behavior is destructive. Maybe they're screamers, fighters, unethical, rude, etc. You start to wonder, *Who is protecting this person?* However, most of the time, they are still in their position because someone was simply too cowardly to deal with them. Do not make the same mistake and hope the situation will improve. It won't. You might give one warning, but then they're gone. Call the HR team for instructions and then escort them out.

All these scenarios are different, but one thing should remain the same: if your gut tells you not to hire or keep a team member, listen carefully. You have been chosen to lead this team or department because people believe in your ability to deliver on their expectations. Don't let them, your team, and yourself down. To deliver on the promise others see in you, you need a high-performing team that you can trust and that trusts you. Do your homework, gather all the facts, and in that final decision-making moment, trust your gut!

Trust You Must!

You've probably heard the saying, "Trust must be earned." Guess what? It's wrong. Scientific experiments around the world have shown that humans are naturally inclined to trust others, but they don't always.[1] Trust is given, at least a certain initial level, and then either strengthened or lost. This is how evolution made us. First, biologically, it has been proven that it is better to trust than not to trust. Over hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, humans have learned to read people, situations, and circumstances quickly. It is highly complicated, time-consuming, and inefficient to do extensive research before engaging in a business relationship. As an evolutionary shortcut, we have become highly skilled at reading body language for trust signals. For instance, when someone greets us with a slightly elevated hand showing their open palm, it tells us they have nothing in their hand and thus do not intend to harm us. We also look people in the eyes, check their posture, and assess their facial expressions, among other things. We only get suspicious if something is not "normal," as measured against a lifetime of daily experiences reading people.

Our default is to trust others and collaborate with them because it is in our best interest as individuals. Remember, evolution has taught us that together, we are stronger and more successful as a species. This doesn't mean we don't make mistakes when assessing other humans. But this is the exception, not the rule. When was the last time you asked the taxi driver for their driver's license before entering the car? Do you ask your dentist for his dentistry school certificates before you open your mouth? When you hired your last employee, did you call the university to see if the candidate really finished their courses with honors as stated on their resume? Probably not. But if someone behaves repeatedly in an unethical or destructive fashion, then trust is broken.

Trust is not earned; distrust is.

Successful leaders trust their people enough to give them the opportunity to make mistakes. Stumbling, learning together as a team, and improving after missteps are powerful trust-building experiences. I have always told my people that it's okay to make mistakes. I don't want them to be afraid to try new things or take risks. As a leader, it's my job to create a safe environment in which people can try things, stumble, learn from their mistakes, and grow. This is how great teams are built.

Trusting your employees and giving them the necessary freedom to try new things and make mistakes is a hallmark of successful leadership. Those who master this skill can lift their teams to ever-higher performance. Why? Because growth requires innovation, and innovation implicitly involves risk. Inevitably, in this creative cycle, there must be room for failure. Teams led by leaders who understand this and create a safe environment for inevitable failures allow innovation to thrive. In today's competitive marketplace, creating this type of an environment isn't just a luxury; it's a necessity. When a mistake happens, a good leader knows how to turn it into a learning moment. The

team gets stronger and smarter because there is a process in place to assess mistakes, learn from them, and be better prepared for the next innovation.

Sometimes leaders struggle with the topic of trust and letting their people make mistakes. That stems from being part of too many corporate cultures that are highly risk and mistake averse. Most companies are ruled by all kinds of monitoring tools, dashboards, metrics, and key performance indicators. In fact, there are so many of these tools that people in big companies build entire careers around monitoring dashboards that force employees into transactional relationships with their leaders. "Give me a green dashboard and you get your incentive!" What ridiculous BS. I'm not saying to nix all dashboards or downplay the necessary role of key performance indicators. Data matter. I'm talking about managers who think these tools are the only gauge of success. Remember the Indemnify fiasco? That's an example of the limitations of dashboards because humans enter the data. Typically, "leaders" who are heavily dependent on dashboards do not trust their people and don't trust themselves to deal with mistakes. They only trust dashboards. Truth is, when these highly coveted management tools become leadership tools, they constantly fail.

During a management assessment long ago, I was accused by a "leadership consultant" of being too trusting of my people. Another assessment by one of the big shots of major consulting companies advised that my outcomes were so phenomenal, I must have pressured or incentivized my managers to achieve these high results. They reported this to my management team. Really? You cannot be serious!

As leaders, first and foremost, we must trust and empower our people. We must create a safe environment for them to innovate, fail, learn, and thrive. Key performance indicators and dashboards have their place. They can help us see certain problems, trends, and opportunities. But they don't provide the whole picture. They are management tools that should never be used as leadership tools. As leaders, trust is our most important tool. Never feel bad about trusting your people! Trust should lead, and leaders should trust.

Do Not Invest in Your Competition

Albert Einstein once famously said, "A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new." As we've already discussed, your team must have the opportunity to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from them. It's your responsibility as a leader to build a safe environment in which employees don't fear repercussions every time there's a misstep. People can't innovate if they live in fear. "All men make mistakes," Winston Churchill famously said, "but only wise men learn from their mistakes." And that's the key, if everyone is learning, growing, and improving after their mistakes, you know you're doing something right.

Of course, big miscalculations can have ripple effects. They can damage your team's reputation, your reputation, and even your company's reputation. You're undoubtedly going to take heat for larger missteps. Deep down, you might even want to fire the person who put you and your team in this situation. Don't do it. That's a bigger mistake. Let me clarify: think twice—or even better, three times—before firing somebody who made a mistake and learned from it. Only consider firing this person if he or she did not admit to the mistake, tried to blame others for it, or clearly learned nothing from the situation. Only then should you consider letting this person go. If someone repeats the same mistakes over and over, then you should consider whether they are right for the role. Otherwise, the culprit should stay. Why? Layoffs are costly—in terms of time, money, and knowledge lost. You need to invest in your people over the long term. Coached correctly, it's unlikely the culprit will make the same mistake twice. That's a big plus. And if you lay them off, you don't know which of your fierce competitors they'll join. Now *that* company has all of this former employee's hard-earned wisdom, and you're starting over with a new person. Additionally, no one on your team will remember anything from the big mistake now that this person is gone. Business will go on as usual and maybe a few changes will take place. But a year or two down the road, with potentially you yourself having moved on to another responsibility, your organization will probably make the same mistake again because nobody is there to remind everyone about the high cost that was paid the first time the mistake was made. As Winston Churchill famously said, when he was working to form the United Nations after World War II, "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

So, if you're thinking of firing someone for a mistake, even an expensive one, think again. You're setting yourself and your team up for a triple whammy: First, you already paid for the mistake. Second, you invested in your competition, which learned from your company's mistake because they hired the culprit. Third, your company will probably make the same mistake again. Congratulations, you've magnified the problem threefold. That's why, if at all possible, keep people who tried and failed! They learned something invaluable for the company!

Appoint a Court Jester

Throughout history, court jesters have been known not only for their sharp tongues and quick wit but for their ability to use that wit to subtly call out bad behavior by the rich and powerful. They were granted comic dispensation because their criticisms were disguised as jokes, thus allowing the victims of their critiques to save face. The rich and powerful who employed court jesters also valued the honest, no-holds-barred feedback they received from them. Certainly, back when the royals were still shouting, "Off with their heads!" no one would dare tell the truth. Thus, court jesters became the best

way for the rich and powerful to receive honest assessments about their decisions, character, actions, and reputation among the people.

As a leader, you're not running around shouting, "Off with their heads!" At least, let's hope not! However, you do hold significantly more power than those who report to you. In some ways, their fate is in your hands, and this makes people hesitant. They are unlikely to be completely honest with you when they think you've screwed up. That's human nature when the balance of power is unequal. But if you're surrounded by people who censor their responses, which is often the case in corporate environments, you're at risk of being out of touch with reality, which is never good.

That's why you need a court jester—someone who can speak the truth, uncensored, and keep you in check. In looking for your court jester, you must seek someone whom you trust implicitly, and they must feel the same way about you. This person must be very mature and skilled in his or her own right, both from a leadership and a communication perspective. More importantly, this person must know how to stand firm even when your most narcissistic traits are on display. The court jester's job is to force you to look at yourself in the mirror every day, even when it's unpleasant—actually, *especially* when it's unpleasant. We all know that honest feedback decreases inversely to increases in responsibility, department size, and power. That's why a court jester becomes even more important as you rise in a company and get used to more and more positive feedback. When you walk on a stage to present in front of hundreds of people, there is often applause or a standing ovation. When you roll out the newest strategy backed up by all the numbers and analysis, everyone congratulates you and pats you on the back. You're on fire and walking on cloud nine. Then you get back to your office and your court jester walks in. "Don't kid yourself, that was BS!" They proceed to outline everything you did wrong and suggest ways you might improve. How does that taste? Well, not very good. Believe me, I've been there. But because there is trust between you and your court jester, and great respect, you listen, you assess, and you learn. It's in these conversations—not in the applause or the congratulatory messages—that you'll find opportunities to improve and grow as a leader.

Just a reminder: even as your court jester points out all your flaws and all the traps you fell into *again*, you must listen carefully *and* thank them for their constructive feedback. It's not always easy, but it's important. Sometimes, the truth will strain your relationship. That is why it is so important to choose the right person for the court jester job and be crystal clear with each other from the start about how this relationship is supposed to work. When the going gets tough, the strength of the relationship must pull you both through—the respect and mutual trust must be preserved. If this can be achieved, you are on to something invaluable that will shape you into a much stronger and wiser leader—your opportunities for growth become boundless.

I speak from personal experience. While it was not possible to establish this kind of relationship in every role I've had throughout my career, it was amazing when it did happen. You cannot imagine the lessons I learned through these relationships. I may have learned more from my court jesters than from my bosses. My court jesters kept me from running in the wrong direction and allowed me to harvest opportunities I was not able to see myself. They kept me from my self-fulfilling prophecies and opened doors for me to connect with important people I would have never known otherwise. My court jesters helped me grow and become a better leader. Though these relationships can sometimes be unpleasant and challenging, I encourage you to be brave and find a court jester for every team you lead. They will make you better!

One last note to make sure there's no confusion: a court jester and a lieutenant are not the same. A lieutenant is likely to share a lot of intangibles with you. There might be a natural chemistry, common interests, or a similar view of life. They might even be a friend. The court jester, on the other hand, should be your opposite, with different opinions on how to run the business. It's probably best not to bring a friend on as your court jester. Look for someone who respects you, is not threatened by you, and is willing to be brutally honest.

Just like in ages past when wise kings and queens had court jesters to keep them in check, so should today's wise leaders seek out a court jester. As entrepreneur, bestselling author, and speaker Seth Godin once said, "As our society gets more complex and our people get more complacent, the role of the jester is more vital than ever before. Please stop sitting around. We need you to make a ruckus."

Hire for Your Blind Spot

When we make hiring decisions, we're looking for a certain profile—specific skills, knowledge, capabilities, and experiences. We let human resources filter the applications and give us a short list. We then let others narrow this list further through the interview process. Now it's our turn, and we're ready to sit down with the best candidates for that all-important one-on-one interview. What are we looking for? Fit—that combination of hard and soft skills that makes a person ready to hit the ground running, grow, and be successful on our team.

We're also assessing how this person will fit *in* with our team. Will their personality and behaviors mesh with others? In the early days of my career, this was a big focus for me. If I had a team of quick implementors, I hired people who could implement quickly. I was quick. The team was quick. The new hire had to be quick too. If I had a team of successful, scientifically focused sales reps, I looked for folks who would blend in and add grease to this already well-oiled machine. I was scientifically wired. My team was scientifically wired. Logically, we needed someone who was

scientifically wired. Over time, however, experience taught me this was *not* the best way to hire. I completely changed my approach. I went from telling myself, "I need to hire someone who fits my team today" to "I need to hire someone who fits my team tomorrow, and this person needs to be able to help shape that tomorrow." I stopped trying to hire mirror images of myself and my team and started hiring for our blind spot.

Everyone and every team has a blind spot. I know mine, and hopefully you know yours. Today, I hire for my blind spot. If you and your team are quick decision-makers, hire someone who encourages you to think more fully and longer about your decisions, if needed, while not necessarily slowing you down. I bring on people with different perspectives and skills. This can come with its challenges, especially early on, but the payoff can be huge.

The bottom line is this: if you and your team are runners, do not hire a runner; instead, hire a climber who can show you and your team where to place the hooks in the wall. Initially, this might slow your team's pace, but you'll be ready to tackle mountains, not just straightaways, in the future. Don't hire a copy of yourself or your team. Hire for the future and where you want to go. Hire for your blind spot. It will reduce bias, increase emotional and intellectual bandwidth, and make you and your team better.

Do Not Huddle Too Much

Have you ever been part of a great team that continuously outperformed all the other teams at your company? This team regularly exceeded targets, surpassed expectations, achieved the best possible outcomes, and redefined what is possible. If you have been part of a team like this, as I have been, you know it's an amazing experience. There are compliments, promotions, high fives, bonuses, and elevated professional status. Everyone tells you how much they admire you and your team. They want to know how you've continued to achieve so much for so long. Be honest, who doesn't love all of *that*? People start to think that if you and your team can't do it, well, no one can! It's a great feeling.

You have all worked very hard to earn these accolades, and your accomplishments are certainly worthy of celebration. However, there are risks when this happens. You start thinking about success as a destination—and you guys have *definitely* arrived. Your team members start becoming a little complacent and stop challenging themselves. You all start believing your own victory story.

"Of course we'll close that deal. We *always* close those deals. We're amazing!"

"Of course we'll exceed our targets; we *always* exceed our targets. We rock!"

Yes, it's important to enjoy your success, but it's poison to start expecting it.

When your team starts to rest on your laurels, you're in trouble. That mindset will undermine all future success. It's like a slow-release poison, because when you think you are great, you stop trying to get better. That's the death knell for a high-performance team.

Luckily, there are some warning signs when your team becomes complacent. Everyone is getting cozy with one another. They always have one another's backs. Compliments are flying. And everyone starts to agree . . . all the time.

I call this huddling too much—and it's a symptom of a bigger problem.

On the surface, it seems great. Everyone is getting along. The atmosphere is upbeat and positive. But then one day, you are all together at a team meeting to work through a big challenge, and someone says, "We've tried everything," and the whole room nods in agreement. Or, when the first suggestion presented to solve a complex business case gets unanimously approved as is. Remember this moment, because it is *exactly* the one when your team turned south. If you don't turn this around, it's also the beginning of the end of your long winning streak.

Sound dramatic? It's not, because here's the secret sauce of success: friction—and your team has lost it. Questioning ideas and arguing through different scenarios and solutions is part of what made your team great in the first place, and now it's gone. Hello mediocrity—unless you nip this in the bud right away. If 20 percent of my team isn't in disagreement on any given topic, I know something is wrong, and I move into antihuddle mode. Unfortunately, once too much huddling is the norm, it is not easy to fix the problem.

What to do? One tactic I use when I see too much huddling is to drop some "bombs." I shake things up. I stop being so agreeable and start stating more objections. Instead of saying yes, I start to say no more often. I become intentionally combative on certain topics where there is total agreement among my team. I create a little conflict to make sure no one becomes too comfortable with the status quo. It wakes people up and shakes them out of their self-satisfaction huddle.

The best business solutions are only developed under relentless scrutiny. If that is not happening on your team anymore, you run the risk of sliding backward toward average. As Zig Ziglar famously said, "Success is not a destination, it's a journey." Stop the huddling and get your team back on track with some friction, arguments, and conflicts.