INTRODUCTION

SOLVING THE MODERN PROBLEMS OF TEAMWORK
What Today’s Best Managers Are Doing Differently

Chris Hadfield looks like a fireman, or maybe a high-school biology teacher. He’s neither. The trim, mustachioed Canadian is an astronaut and a member of a select group of only two hundred people who have walked in space. Forbes has called him the most famous astronaut since Neil Armstrong. During his five-month stint as commander on the International Space Station, he was certainly the most social-media savvy. Hadfield gave up the first few hours of shut-eye each night so he could float around sending messages via Facebook and Twitter about stuff that most astronauts take for granted but the rest of us find fascinating, like how to make a sandwich in microgravity, how to get your hair cut, or how to wring out a washcloth.

Millions watched Hadfield’s messages, and he did more to generate public interest in space travel than anyone for decades. But his greatest contribution may not be in his tweets and posts, but in the
way he led his diverse team. He told us that before he assumed his role as commander, he knew the mission would be a management challenge. His team was comprised of smart, driven Americans and Russians—the oldest and youngest two and a half decades apart in age. Not only might generational divides develop, but language barriers and cultural misunderstandings could create issues. And here was a young man from Sarnia, Ontario—who looks a lot like an after-school driving instructor—and he was about to tell them what to do twenty-four hours a day.

So, before they even thought about strapping themselves into their rocket, Hadfield got to know his people. He taught himself Russian. He moved to the United States for a time, and then to Russia, where he didn’t live in a hotel but in state housing. Then, he brought his team together to learn how they could respect each other and work best together. The six met each other’s families, heard everyone’s back stories, ate Big Macs, and downed a little vodka. Hadfield even had them role play how they would support each other if one of them lost a loved one while in space, which, remarkably, did happen to one of the astronauts during their mission. Hadfield’s goal: By the time they rocketed out of orbit, he wanted them to not just be coworkers but a codified, unified team.

Their mission was wildly successful from a scientific and public relations perspective; but more remarkably, during their five months in space, Hadfield told us his team members never had a single heated argument. Not one. They worked together beautifully.

We all know how hard it can be to get our stressed out, spread thin modern teams to work together when they can go home after eight or nine hours, let alone when they’re “[S]itting in a tin can far
above the world.” The new kid isn’t pulling his weight. Ruth isn’t responding to my texts. Does Sarah have to send an email about everything? Steve is focused on the wrong stuff! What team leader isn’t hearing such gripes, or others? Hadfield’s multigenerational, global team eschewed such bickering and operated in harmony because he understood how certain soft skills can help build today’s best teams. By using his considerable leadership talents, he came up with resourceful ways of creating bonds of understanding among his team members that went well beyond the standard rule book for running the station.

In space, he explained to us, there are lots of written rules: There are books full of them. They are important because when you don’t follow procedures, things can go wrong and everyone could, well, die. Usually the margin of error is a few seconds. In the opening scene of the movie Gravity, an astronaut, played by actress Sandra Bullock, disobeys mission control and her leader (actor George Clooney) for just a moment. Hadfield told us that would never happen in real life. Astronauts always follow the rules. They are sacrosanct. Yet Hadfield’s team was equally committed to one unwritten rule, which they collectively came up with, that became just as important as the formal ones: Each member of the crew had to do one unsolicited kind thing for every other member of the crew every single day—for five months.

Hadfield said these random acts of kindness were often anonymous. One astronaut might help cook a meal when it wasn’t his turn, another might tidy up a sleeping area for a crewmate who had to rush to duty, another might check a piece of support equipment or clean a filter for a team member who needed to get some rest. These actions focused each person on serving others, versus themselves, and kept
tempers in check and egos in the right place. This one simple practice had a profound effect; Hadfield, in fact, credits it as being the most impactful in bringing his team together.

**EVIDENCE OF PAYOFFS**

Now, more than ever, businesses need great team leaders like Chris Hadfield, those with strong team leadership skills. The current era of unprecedented change in business has been described with another acronym to add to our lexicon: VUCA (pronounced voo-ka), which stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. And one of the ways in which organizations are seeking to meet the challenges of a VUCA world is by making more work team-based. In fact, if you haven’t noticed, we are smack-dab amid a massive shift toward more collaboration. Already, in the average company, up to 80 percent of employees’ days are spent working in teams and, in a Deloitte survey of 7,000 senior executives in 130 countries, almost half said their companies were either in the middle of restructuring, or about to embark on it, to put more emphasis on teamwork.

The vogue for teams is driven by evidence for potential payoffs in higher-quality and faster problem-solving, which includes a fascinating study from professors at the University of Central Florida and a research psychologist with the U.S. Army that found the most effective teams have a collective intelligence that allows them to get more work done and spot problems quicker. We’ve also found that when people feel they are part of a collaborative, communicating work group they are overall happier on the job, which tends to make people more productive and efficient. All good stuff. Stanford and University of Michigan professors also have shown those in positive
team environments have fewer accidents and health care costs 50 percent lower than those of their peers who are not in great teams.

Another payoff: The diversity of knowledge and experience that good teams bring to assignments allows them to be more responsive to customers—especially those of different ages and cultures for instance. And it’s well documented that team collaboration spurs greater creativity and therefore more rapid innovation for customers, which is vital in today’s ultra-competitive and rapidly evolving business environment. The need to develop more smart products, for example, which capitalize on the potential of new technologies, is requiring increased collaboration across departments—work that is best achieved by cross-functional teams. One last payoff: Organizations are relying increasingly on teams because they allow for decentralized decision-making and speedier action, due to fewer layers of bureaucracy. So that means we are increasingly evolving from the outmoded command-and-control hierarchy to a network-of-teams approach, which, as General Stanley McChrystal wrote in Team of Teams, enables organizational flexibility, such as moving talent more seamlessly between work groups.

These benefits all sound pretty good, right? The problem is that most of the teams we find are nowhere near as effective as they could be, and worse, are often riven by massive tensions if not outright disension. You might have been part of a dysfunctional team. Heck, every team can have stretches where things don’t click. Such dysfunction drains employee energy, enthusiasm, and creativity rather than fueling them. A recent workplace survey by Salesforce.com shows a whopping 96 percent of executives cite poor collaboration and communication as the main sources of workplace failures, and only 14 percent of leaders
(according to a Deloitte/Facebook study) are completely satisfied with their ability to collaborate and make decisions as teams. Ouch.

It might be the most pressing question businesses must address: How can managers better lead their teams to improved performance given all the distractions and challenges we face? Here is where our findings come in. Considerable research into the factors driving the success of today’s high-performance work teams shows that a set of disciplines makes the biggest difference. This research includes a number of recent high-profile reports as well as our own substantial study of team leadership.

**THE SOFT STUFF IS THE HARD STUFF**

A few years ago, Google conducted a prominent recent study on teams called Project Aristotle. The company assembled some of its best statisticians and organizational psychologists to investigate why some of its work groups were more innovative and productive than others. It’s a great question and, after half a decade of analysis, having evaluated more than 250 attributes of 180 teams at the company, the researchers concluded that the key factors in the superior performance of the best teams were not that they had more talented people or better technology or a better mix of skills; nor did they find that the best teams were more incentivized or led by more experienced managers. No, the five factors the researchers identified were goose-down soft. Team members in the best teams: Felt *psychologically safe* with one another, which meant they felt comfortable being vulnerable in the group and taking risks such as sharing an idea that might be perceived as wacky elsewhere; Felt that their fellow team members were *dependable*, in other words they trusted one another; Were clear about team *structure*...
and had clarity of plans and goals; Felt their work had personal meaning; and Believed their work would have a positive impact in the world.

Google’s findings are backed up by more research. Another study, conducted by researchers at MIT and Union College, analyzed 192 teams and found that those with the highest collective intelligence and competence—measured by how the teams performed on a number of widely ranging tasks—had greater social sensitivity. In particular, the PhDs found, members were more empathetic about what others on the team were thinking and feeling.

The effective use of soft disciplines, “makes people feel valued and rewarded, gives them a clearer sense of high standards, and helps them feel more motivated,” said Rick Lash, Hay Group’s director for leadership and talent. The management consultancy found managers who incorporate the soft side into their leadership approach can increase their team’s performance by as much as 30 percent. The value of these skills was also highlighted by a large study of the U.S. labor market by Harvard economist David Deming, who found that wage growth—as measured across all sectors—has been considerably stronger in occupations where workers can develop strong soft skills to complement their analytical abilities. That means employers have placed a premium on those who can bring the soft with the hard.

We back this up with a bit of research of our own. A 300,000 person study by Willis Towers Watson for our book All In found high-performing managers excel at a group of key soft skills including inculcating a clear mission, developing more agility in their team members, sharing information transparently, and recognizing individual and team accomplishments. The use of these soft skills was correlated with workgroups that have stronger levels of employee engagement, as well as significantly higher customer satisfaction scores and team profitability. Not too shabby.
We could go on with the proof. We won’t. In short, the case for the decisive role of soft skills in driving today’s best teams has been won. The problem is that for most managers, the soft stuff is the hard stuff. We work with leaders of teams of all sizes—from those in small businesses to large multinationals—and most tell us that the people management side of their work is by far the most difficult aspect of their jobs. It is hard to lead a team and, despite all the advances we are making with digital tools and leadership science, it’s getting harder still. Almost every week, we speak to busy managers who are facing increasingly pressing trials that the most popular books on teamwork simply don’t address. Just about every leader we meet has described some variation on these modern challenges of team leadership:

THE RISE OF THE MILLENNIALS. Younger employees, as a group, want to work and be managed in different ways from older team members, and from the ways most team leaders learned to manage. In this book, we are going to introduce you to findings from our 50,000 person motivation research database, which shows a clear preponderance of younger employees prefer to work collaboratively, which is good news as our traditional workplaces evolve into team structures. The challenges we find, however, are that they want much more coaching and feedback, and have a considerably stronger desire for appreciation of their work from their supervisors than older workers. They are also hopping from job-to-job much faster. Boomers’ average tenure in their jobs is seven years, Gen Xers average five years per job, while Millennials are staying only one-and-a-half to two years on average. (Most of us have underwear we’ve hung on to longer than that.) Younger workers, therefore, not only are demanding a different style of management,
they are creating more instability in teams. This requires leaders to ensure that their groups produce a smooth flow of work despite an almost constant ebb and flow of talent.

**INCREASING SPEED OF CHANGE.** Businesses of all kinds are evolving more rapidly due to fast-paced technological changes and the pressure to bring innovations to market faster. This means teams must be more agile and their make-up more fluid, with staff moved around as market- or customer-needs morph. As Cisco CEO John Chambers said, “Today we compete against market transitions not competitors. Product transitions used to take five or seven years; now they take one or two.” Thus, getting people up to speed faster is a necessity, not a nice-to-have. And this means that today’s team leaders are faced with the uphill task of training people quicker and helping them understand their roles in a fraction of the time allowed in the past.

**MORE TEAMS WITH GLOBAL, VIRTUAL, AND FREELANCE WORKERS.** With so much business now conducted globally—and with so many more remote and gig employees—many teams are often comprised of individuals spread out across the planet who rarely meet in person. Consider that 37 percent of employees now work virtually—whether from a remote location or their homes—and 93 percent of companies say they are regularly teaming freelancers up with full-time employees to work on projects. Today’s work environments can also comprise workers from different cultures, with diverse working styles, and sometimes dissimilar perspectives about the right approach for getting the job done. Of course, these workers may also prefer different styles of management. The ability to manage without borders is becoming
increasing critical for team leaders, yet it’s never been more difficult to create a sense of common team culture, make every worker feel connected and integral to the group, and facilitate clear, inclusive, and frequent communication among members.

**CROSS-FUNCTIONAL FRICTION.** We have yet to meet a leader who doesn’t want to build bridges within his or her organization and break down silos. It is certainly in fashion to bring together crossfunctional teams to develop more creative and inclusive product development and service delivery. The downside is that many of these teams end up being hugely ineffective. Stanford University researchers found that three-quarters of cross-functional teams can be classified as dysfunctional. Despite the many ways companies have tried to facilitate collaboration across departmental lines, a 2016 study from the Hay Group revealed close to half of employees say their teams are still not adequately supported by other areas of the business. It’s as if the Hatfields and McCoys are at work, with team members from different functional areas engaging in turf wars, unreceptive to input about how to do their work from those elsewhere, lacking appreciation for the challenges of others, and failing to understand the important mission of tasks completed in other teams.

**LEADING TEAMS IN AN ERA OF UNPRECEDENTED CHANGE**

Organizations have tried to solve these modern problems of teamwork in various ways. They’ve provided managers with better connectivity and collaboration technologies. Many teams now use virtual project management tools, shared calendars, internal chat systems, brainstorming and collaboration tools, employee engagement analytics platforms, and
learning management systems. While this book is not about these tools, they certainly can increase efficiency. But a core finding is this: Tools alone cannot improve the quality of team-management.

Another common practice aimed at enhancing teamwork has been the systematic and widespread tearing down of physical walls dividing employees to build cooperative working environments. About 70 percent of offices are now open space, in theory, to get people talking, meeting more, and sharing ideas. Again, there’s nothing wrong with this concept. But alone it does not stimulate genuine teamwork.

More extreme efforts to fundamentally restructure organizations have also been tried. Online shoe retailer Zappos has experimented with a flatter organization and self-management, through a structure CEO Tony Hsieh refers to as holacracy, in which traditional top-down reporting lines have been replaced by work circles that do not have traditional managers. In place, they appointed lead links, nominal managers with little formal authority. As might be expected, the system has presented some challenges, and interestingly, Zappos dropped off the Fortune Best Places to Work list for the first time in eight years after implementing the approach.

The bottom line is that no matter what experiments an organization conducts with operating structure, sophisticated collaboration tools, or physical environment, there is no skirting the fact that a manager’s soft skills are vital in driving high performance and real teamwork.

Our task in this book is to help leaders understand how to effectively manage teams of people in this era of unprecedented change. We set out to find the answers, drawing on a wealth of studies, both our own and those of others, looking for the most scientifically grounded answers we could find. The research we tapped includes several of our
own surveys of more than 850,000 people, data that helped us identify the traits of managers of the most successful teams and isolate disciplines of management that employees indicate are most motivating.

In addition, as of the end of 2017, more than 50,000 working adults, of all ages and from all around the world, had completed our Motivators Assessment. This is a 100 question scientific test to determine the features of work—including what style of management—most strongly motivates the person taking the assessment. The people who completed the test work in small businesses with fewer than ten people, all the way up to huge organizations with hundreds of thousands of employees. They work in all sectors, from information technology, to medicine, hospitality, nonprofits, K-12 and higher education, pharmaceuticals, energy, manufacturing, mining, media, banking, dining, consumer lending, advisory services, construction, telecommunications, government/public sector, and more. We found some striking patterns in their answers that provide strong support for the importance of the particular leadership methods we’ll outline.

We also hit the road. We conducted site visits and interviews with a host of team leaders and employees in high-engagement, high-performance organizations around the world. We think those visits and interviews provide rich insights into how specific managers, like astronaut Chris Hadfield, implement a key set of practices we have found to be the most impactful on performance. The stories we will tell allow us to bring those practices to life through accounts of modern team leaders in action—from CEOs of major corporations to entrepreneurs with a handful of employees (meaning that you don’t have to be big to benefit from these ideas). As one example, we’ll explain how sales team leaders for the basketball team with the worst record in the NBA more
than quadrupled season-ticket sales and set numerous league records by focusing on hustle instead of sales. We’ll tell you how managers at one science and technology company found a way to get new team members up to speed faster by keeping them from doing their work for a full three months. And we’ll show how one leader at an eighty-year-old helicopter manufacturer has created some of the most innovative creations in the sky by teaming up Hollywood sci-fi artists with his aerospace engineers.

Though we are sticklers about basing our recommendations on hard data, we are also strong believers in using the stories of real managers in action. Their examples populate the chapters to come, and we hope you enjoy meeting them.

We are also sensitive about how busy you are. As such, we will attempt to offer concise solutions, not complex or time-consuming advice. We have boiled down our findings about what works for high-performance team leaders into five practices that every manager can implement, starting tomorrow.

THE FIVE DISCIPLINES OF TEAM LEADERS

From the research and our hands-on work with teams around the world, we have identified this set of distinguishing characteristics of the management styles of the best leaders in modern teams:

**Discipline 1: Understand Generations—**

**Help Millennials, Gen Xers, and Boomers Get Along**

It’s time to accept that we are different, after all. The best managers have learned to adapt to meet the special demands of Millennial employees, and have developed ways to cater better to their needs while
creating stronger bonds between all generations. Our research has found a handful of stark differences in what motivates many Millennials in comparison to their older colleagues—some of which bucks conventional leadership wisdom. Perhaps most striking is the finding that while autonomy is one of the stronger motivators for Boomers and Gen X workers, it ranks near the bottom for Millennials. Another striking data point with Millennials is that recognition from their bosses and co-workers matters much more than it does to older workers. While these differences can cause considerable friction between young employees and their managers and older colleagues, we will show that they, in fact, can provide a basis for creating stronger bonds between the generations and to their organization.

**Discipline 2: Manage to the One—Give the Man His Guitar**

Lack of career development has become the number one reason why employees leave organizations—a change from just a few years ago when pay topped the list. The good news: Focusing on career development is a relatively low-cost way to keep people and keep them engaged, and is something well within the control of a manager. We will introduce our findings showing the considerable payoffs in increased commitment, creativity, and ultimately productivity, when leaders take even a small amount of time to personalize responsibilities based on team members’ individual drivers. In most high-engagement teams, we discovered variations on a practice we call job sculpting, in which managers give each employee some work to do that is especially motivating to him/her, while altering or transferring other work that might be demotivating (if at all possible).
Discipline 3: Speed Productivity—
Help New People and Teams Work Faster and Smarter
The fluid composition of teams today and the rapid movement of people between jobs requires managers get new team members up to full productivity in a fraction of the time than even a few years ago. We introduce specific methods we’ve seen in action for the rapid integration of new people and entire teams, and outline the three-step process managers can use to build security, context, and affiliation.

Discipline 4: Challenge Everything—
Inspire Innovation Through Healthy Discord
Feeling comfortable to express one’s views, take smart risks, and being given roughly equal time to speak up are the hallmarks of psychological safety. Research shows that fostering these characteristics is vital for effective problem-solving and innovative thinking within a fast-moving team. We’ll also introduce you to what we call the radical effect—the remarkable payoff of having at least one team member who regularly challenges assumptions and approach. But keeping debate from escalating into dissension and backstabbing, while assuring that all team members get a roughly equal hearing, is a tricky challenge; thus, we’ll introduce the methods used by great team leaders to promote healthy discord.

Discipline 5: Now, Don’t Forget Your Customers—
Create Alignment Around Serving Them
In the most global, diverse, technologically driven workplace in history, any manager who doesn’t find time to understand how to work more collaboratively with other functional areas is going to be left behind.
But we find the focus of all team efforts must be kept rigorously on customers, whatever they look like. With that as a foundation, turf consciousness begins to diminish and purpose is much more clear.

Are there payoffs to all this discipline?

The results from better team leadership are profound. Consider that researchers at Gallup have found manager behaviors explain 70 percent of the variance in employees’ daily work engagement, and academics from Stanford University and the University of Utah have discovered that nine-person teams led by engaging bosses are as productive as ten-person teams led by average or poor bosses. Our 300,000 person research study for All In found profitability was as much as three times higher in work groups where managers drove higher levels of worker engagement, enablement, and energy.

The vital role of the team leader became clear to us when we were having a conversation not long ago with Gerard Johan “G.J.” Hart, CEO of California Pizza Kitchen. CPK is one of the top three companies in U.S. casual dining for comps—same-stores sales in comparison to previous year’s—and achieves this with no major media advertising. Hart told us his company’s success has come by building great team cultures—one at a time. “So goes the leader, so goes the rest,” he said. “When I speak with my team leaders, I talk about the responsibility of developing and caring for the people they lead. We foster a culture in our industry of promoting operators from within; while they are great at the skills of running a restaurant, they might not have significant experience in developing and leading people. It doesn’t matter if you graduated from Harvard or kindergarten, people follow you if you care for them and you are genuine.”
To that end, Hart asks his team leaders to think of themselves as 911 operators. “When you call 911, you get someone who cares,” he said. “You know they will resolve your issue and get you the help you need. That’s what our managers have do for their people—be responsive and care.”

At Tesco, the United Kingdom’s largest grocery store chain, with 425,000 employees, Mark Chapman is the customer fulfillment director. Chapman made us smile with the following true account of a young store manager in his organization: “He was good with numbers and was brilliant about giving the perception of being a great leader, but I just had this nagging feeling he wasn’t all he said he was. I asked him one day, ‘Who’s the most important person in your store?’ With no pause, he said it was him. I asked, ‘Why not the customer or your employees?’ He said, ‘Because I’m responsible for sales, the shrink, the wages.’ ”

So, Chapman gave the store manager an assignment. The next day he was to take all the store’s cleaners—the people who mopped floors, polished registers, and emptied the dust bins—and put them on a minibus and take them to another store. The manager was to work with them all day as they cleaned.

The store manager laughed, but Chapman said he was serious. No joke. Moreover, he said, at the end of the day he wanted the bus to take each cleaner to his or her home and the store manager was to thank them personally as they got off.

The young man did as requested. Chapman said, “The next week I asked that manager, ‘Who is the most important person in your store?’ He said, ‘The cleaners!’ ”

Now, Chapman’s goal wasn’t to convince this store leader that cleaners are more important than a general manager, but that everyone
on his team must feel valued and appreciated—from the people pushing brooms to those ringing up customer orders, from the folks stocking shelves to those balancing the accounts.

Just think of the difference you feel when you are part of a vibrant team with a caring, attentive leader, someone who makes you feel included, trusted, and valued. And, on the flip side, who hasn’t seen the corrosive effects of mediocre bosses? (Not to mention the influence of truly terrible bosses.)

If you are still not convinced, we hope you will be by the end of this book. Many of today’s best organizations have come to understand how important changing their team leadership styles is in achieving great results. Consider what happened at Caterpillar, the $47 billion heavy equipment manufacturer and one of the world’s most respected brands. After enhancing managers’ soft disciplines in just one location, they found performance in that team had jumped by an astounding 70 percent; customer satisfaction by 34 percent; and absenteeism, turnover, and overtime dropped too—yielding an $8.8 million annual savings. No dummies, Caterpillar leaders then made this a management priority across its entire tough-as-nails organization. Wouldn’t you?

Today, the company has found that its best team leaders run business units that meet or exceed performance goals 40 percent more often than other units.

As you’ll see, it is possible to lead your team to major improvements as well, no matter what you are seeking to achieve.

All it takes is a little discipline.