

What Is “The Ideal Team Player”

Capacity: Leadership

Baton Exchange



In *The Ideal Team Player*, Patrick Lencioni uses a fable and then proposes that behind every truly effective team lies not just talent or skills, but character — specifically, three core virtues that define the ideal team player. The central message: teams built around humility, hunger, and people-smarts outperform those relying solely on skill or technical talent.

THE THREE ESSENTIAL VIRTUES

Lencioni defines three interlinked virtues that together make a person an “ideal team player.”

1. Humble

- Humility is not self-deprecation but putting the team above the self. The humble team player shares credit, recognizes others’ contributions, and defines success collectively rather than individually.
- They lack excessive ego or status-seeking, and they’re willing to admit mistakes or ask for help when needed.
- According to Lencioni, humility is “the single greatest and most indispensable attribute to being a team player.”

2. Hungry

- Hunger refers to drive — a strong work ethic, initiative, self-motivation, and a desire to do more. Hungry team players look for the next opportunity, volunteer for responsibilities, and rarely need external push.
- They care about results, contribute consistently, and avoid complacency. Their internal ambition drives both personal and team success.

3. Smart (People-Smart)

- “Smart” in this context doesn’t refer to IQ or technical intelligence — it refers to emotional intelligence and common sense about people. It means being aware of how one’s words and actions affect others, understanding interpersonal dynamics, and responding appropriately.
- People-smart individuals read the room well, ask good questions, listen actively, and navigate group dynamics with sensitivity and empathy.

WHY ALL THREE MUST WORK TOGETHER

A key insight of the book is that possessing only one or two of the virtues is not enough — and may even be harmful. Lencioni maps out combinations of missing virtues and the problematic team-member archetypes they create.

For example:

- **Humble + Hungry, but not Smart** → *The Accidental Mess-Maker*: well-intentioned workers willing to go above and beyond, but who create interpersonal conflict due to lack of people-smarts.

- **Humble + Smart, but not Hungry** → *The Lovable Slacker*: nice relationally, emotionally intelligent, but lacking drive; does just the minimum required.
- **Hungry + Smart, but not Humble** → *The Skillful Politician*: ambitious, results-driven, often charming — but self-centered and potentially destructive to team trust and cohesion.
- Single-virtue types, such as “Humble only” or “Hungry only” or “Smart only,” typically lack impact or are harmful to team health.

The book’s core claim: only a person with a healthy blend of humble + hungry + smart can consistently be an ideal team player.

APPLYING THE MODEL: HIRING, ASSESSING, CULTIVATING

One of the most valuable parts of *The Ideal Team Player* is its practical guidance — how to evaluate prospective or current team members, and how to embed these virtues into culture.

Hiring & Selection

- Use interview questions that probe humility, hunger, and people-smarts, not just technical competence. Observe not only what candidates say, but *how* they say it, how they treat others, how self-aware they are.
- Incorporate multiple perspectives: peers, subordinates, even non-work interactions (receptionist, admin staff) — sometimes the best test of humility and people-smarts lies in such everyday moments.

Assessing Current Team Members

- Periodically evaluate teammates (and yourself) against the three virtues. Are there red flags? Which virtues are strong, which are weak?
- Provide feedback and development opportunities for individuals who are “almost ideal” — people who may be missing one virtue but could grow.

Cultivating Team Culture

- Leaders must model humble, hungry, and people-smart behavior — culture is “caught, not taught.”
- Reinforce virtues with recognition, feedback, accountability, and consistent communication. Culture grows through repeated behavior over time, not just policy.
- Use the model in performance reviews, promotions, team-building, interviewing — make these virtues part of how you evaluate success.

WHY THE BOOK MATTERS — THE BENEFITS OF EMBRACING THE IDEAL TEAM PLAYER

1. Stronger, Healthier Teams

When team members are humble, hungry, and people-smart, teamwork improves — trust grows, conflict becomes productive, and collaboration thrives. Teams become greater than the sum of individual talents.

2. Sustainable Performance

Hunger brings initiative and diligence; humility keeps ambition healthy and focused on collective success; people-smarts ensure relational coherence and emotional intelligence. Combined, these traits support long-term success rather than short-term flashes.

3. Easier Hiring and Retention

Focusing on character and virtues in hiring helps avoid the costly mistake of recruiting “talented but toxic” individuals. Teams built around character tend to retain people, maintain morale, and navigate stress better.

4. Positive Organizational Culture

When leadership models humility, hunger, and empathy, it sets a tone of respect, service, and shared purpose. That culture attracts like-minded people, reinforcing a virtuous cycle.

5. Greater Team Resilience

Teams comprised of ideal players better handle change, setbacks, interpersonal conflict — because they have trust, motivation, emotional awareness, and collective ownership.

6. Leadership Made Accessible

Not everyone has a lofty title. But this model gives a path for anyone — regardless of position — to contribute to team health and success. Influence comes from character, not hierarchy.

ASK YOUR MENTOR

1. How do you evaluate humility, hunger, and people-smarts when hiring or promoting team members?
2. What strategies help cultivate these virtues in individuals who are lacking in one area?
3. How do you lead the team culture so that humble, hungry, and empathetic behavior is modeled consistently at all levels?
4. What are warning signs that someone may have two of the virtues but lacks the third, and how have you addressed that?
5. How do you balance performance standards with character standards when they seem to conflict?
6. In a high-pressure environment, how do you guard against hunger turning into selfish ambition or burnout?
7. How can I personally grow in humility, hunger, and people-smarts, even if I’m working alone or don’t yet lead a team?

Creative Connection and/or Role Play

Think of a song, character or person from a book, movie or history, or an everyday item that personifies the main idea of this lesson and share it. Or, if applicable to this lesson, role play a practice from this article with your mentor.

Self-Evaluation

Rate yourself 1–5 (1 = rarely true, 5 = consistently true):

Do I demonstrate humility by valuing team success more than personal credit?	
Am I self-motivated and diligent (hungry), or do I wait to be pushed?	
How well do I understand and respond to people’s emotions and needs (people-smarts)?	
When conflict arises, do I maintain humility and empathy, or do I default to ego and defensiveness?	
Have I helped cultivate these virtues in others on my team or peers?	
When faced with setbacks or success, do I stay grounded, or does pride or discouragement emerge?	
Do I contribute to a team culture of trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility — or do I inadvertently fuel division or competition?	

Reflect and Journal

“Lord, which virtues — humble, hungry, smart — are evident in me and in my team, and which seem lacking? How do these strengths or gaps show up in team dynamics, communication, or performance? What one virtue can I commit to growing this week, and what practical steps will I take?”

Write down observations, patterns, and a concrete commitment to growth. Revisit weekly to assess progress.

Action Step

Choose one team or working group you are part of (or lead).

1. Rate each team member — including yourself — on humility, hunger, and people-smarts (e.g., high / medium / low).
 2. Identify one person (could be you) with “potential but lacking one virtue.”
 3. Develop a simple plan for coaching or mentoring that person on that virtue (e.g., encourage empathy; set stretch goals; invite feedback).
 4. Communicate with the person (or your team) about building a culture around these virtues — share the reasoning and invite buy-in.
 5. Observe how behavior and cohesion change over 30–60 days.
 6. Reflect on lessons learned, refine the approach, and continue embedding the virtues in team practices (hiring, feedback, collaboration).
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Sources & Resources

- Lencioni, Patrick M. *The Ideal Team Player: How to Recognize and Cultivate the Three Essential Virtues*. 2016.
- Summary.com — “The Ideal Team Player: Book Summary – Key Ideas and Takeaways”
- The Leader’s Edge — “The Ideal Team Player” [summary article](#)
- “Top 10 Lessons on Building a Winning Team Culture”, Alliedify (discussion of applying the model)
- *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* — develops the “smart / people-smart” dimension, helping individuals better understand and manage emotions in professional settings.
- “How to Recognize and Develop Ideal Team Players”