Book Nice Teams Finish Last

The Secret to Unleashing Your Team's Maximum Potential

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Recommendation

How would you best describe your team's work dynamic? Sugar and spice and everything "Nice"? "Fierce" as a fever? Or "Bold" as brass? This book's main premise is that teams are often too nice or too fierce, when instead they should be bold to succeed and get their work done. Management and training consultant Brian Cole Miller, a bestselling author, explains how to create a bold team. He organizes his ideas by identifying the roles participants play and by discussing the myths and truths about how best to manage teams. His suggestions for giving feedback, making requests and handling conflicts are especially helpful. Miller's examples are basic and instructive, and he writes in a straightforward style. *BooksInShort* recommends his book to anyone charged with leading or managing a group of people for the first time, and to seasoned leaders and managers who seek a skills review to bring their teams to new levels of performance.

Take-Aways

- When group harmony is a team's number one goal, members can lose sight of its business purpose.
- Teams must pass through their "forming" and "storming" development phases before they can proceed to "norming" and, ultimately, "performing."
- To manage a team, you need to balance your focus between its needs and its performance outcomes.
- Teams are often "Nice" or "Fierce" when they should be "Bold."
- People adopt roles and practices that reflect their team's nice, fierce or bold natures.
- When nice teams are afraid to hash things out, their work can suffer.
- When fierce teams focus too heavily on tasks, their collegial relationships also can suffer.
- Bold teams strike a balance, using conflict as a chance to exchange views and move on.
- Give team members feedback by sharing your ideas, listening and setting future steps.
- As a team manager, offer balanced reactions, praise, healthy debate, planning and flexibility. Respect the team's experience, priorities and contributions.

Summary

"Nice" Teams Prize Peace over Performance

Modern society values being nice and getting along – especially at work and especially when you are a member of a team. But being nice all the time actually can hold back a team's development. Teams typically take on one of three personality dynamics:

1. "Nice."

2. "Fierce."
3. "Bold."

> "The principle is not majority rules. It's hearing and respecting everyone's viewpoint, and then coming to a consensus that every bold team member cannot just live with, but actually support wholeheartedly."

Teams also go through four stages:

1. "Forming."
2. "Storming."
3. "Norming."
4. "Performing."

When your team is too focused on being nice, its members risk staying in the forming stage and never going through storming. Participants may be unwilling to air disagreements that would enable the group to move forward to norming and, ultimately, performing. This can threaten relationships and make the squad lose sight of its mission. To maintain a nice team, managers and unit leaders often resort to behaviors designed to avoid confrontation or to appear positive. Unfortunately, this means that managers sacrifice planning, performance improvement, accountability and problem solving to keep the peace.

> "Speak your truth. Tell it like it is without embellishment, and then share its impact as accurately and as fairly as you can."

Managers often guide nice teams under the influence of myths about how "nice" people should work. In fact, these misguided approaches thwart good teamwork. It is ineffective to offer meaningless praise instead of pointing out areas where the team needs to improve. Instead of yielding unquestioningly to clients' directions and top bosses' orders, team managers should pay attention to the team's knowledge. Instead of ignoring conflicts and hiding problems, managers should remain flexible and discuss issues with their troops. Team members who excessively prioritize nice values may lose their momentum and spend too much energy keeping the peace. Members of all kinds of teams tend to assume the following roles, but individual behavior varies, depending on the type of team. First, these are the norms:

- The "peacemaker" generally wants everyone to get along and will mediate.
- The "champion" is a strong, outspoken leader.
- The "perfectionist" wants work done flawlessly.
- The "energizer" is creative and wants work to be interesting and fun.
- The "guardian" is loyal and looks out for others.
- The "observer" strives to understand what is going on and to remain objective.
- The "individualist" longs for self-expression.
- The "achiever" is action-oriented and flexible.
- The "helper" is well-liked and works hard to aid others.

> "Time and again I've seen eager, ambitious teams play too nicely together and not reach their potential."

Basically, on a nice team, each personality settles for something less than his or her normal standards to avoid confrontation and maintain harmony:

- The peacemaker settles for artificial group harmony to avoid conflict.
- The champion accepts matters as they are to "avoid losing standing."
- The perfectionist settles for "good enough."
- The energizer accepts the status quo to avoid confrontation.
- The guardian struggles to maintain a "fragile sense of security."
- The observer shirks challenges to avoid feeling burdened.
- The individualist suppresses his or her opinions and tries to help others one-to-one.
- The achiever focuses on success and ignores interpersonal problems.
- The helper cannot form deep relationships with any real feeling.

Fierce Teams Focus on Tasks Too Ferociously

Fierce teams put too much emphasis on getting the job done. They neglect interpersonal relationships and focus only on efficiency. These teams avoid being overly nice, sometimes to a fault. They can become stuck in the storming phase of their development, which is not the right point of view for fostering performance.

> "It takes guts to look someone in the eye and say something that he or she will disagree with or that you know they don't want to hear. The courage you need comes from caring about your teammates and your relationships with them."

To maintain a team's fierceness, managers and team leaders often resort to behaviors designed to keep people intent on their jobs. Unfortunately, this may sacrifice interpersonal relationships and reinforce the group's least positive behaviors and values. Fierce managers mistakenly focus on what their people do wrong without balancing their feedback with praise. They discuss their teams' duties, but not their other concerns. Team members who cling to fierce concepts undermine their personal potential and spend their energy focused only on tasks. Here's how various personalities tend to act on fierce teams:

- The peacemaker does not know how to handle open conflict effectively.
- The champion is so concerned with swaying opinions to avoid delays that he or she could provoke arguments.
- The perfectionist is upset when the team sacrifices quality to get the work done.
- The energizer takes fewer chances because the environment is hostile.
- The guardian prefers to stay safe rather than take risks, and so he or she won't question any actions.

- The observer would rather watch without taking sides.
- The individualist wishes to be different, but refuses to oppose the team.
- The achiever strives to win, but may take on too much work.
- The helper wants to assist other members, but places blame when things go wrong.

Bold Teams Are Balanced and Effective

Bold teams exhibit the best traits of nice and fierce teams. They value interpersonal relationships and they do their work well. If you want your team to become a bold team, use these tactics:

- Give positive feedback, and help team members grow, change and do better at their tasks as a result of what they learn from you.
- Focus on accomplishing the team's tasks, as well as on how its members get along.
- Saying yes to customers may not be in everyone's best interests. Plan, allocate resources fairly and look at the big picture before deciding how to handle competing priorities and client demands.
- "Respect the diversity of experience...on the team." Value everyone's input.
- Welcome debate and discussion before acting.
- Plan ahead but remain "flexible" to react to events as they happen.
- Be "efficient in both the short and the long term." Keep your eye on results.

    "Healthy disagreements occur when team members highlight differences in a way that allows everyone to reflect on and consider new alternatives or ones that aren't getting full consideration."

To have an authentic bold discussion, refer to your team members by name and make the conversation personal. Use eye contact, so you can avoid distraction and pay close attention to what each person is saying. Keep a steady, even tone of voice, and don't let tense situations put you on the defensive. Control your body language and gestures, so you don't say or do anything that a colleague could misconstrue. Be direct and genuinely empathetic. Don't place blame. Just be patient and let people react to your conversation without judging how they seem to feel.

    "The goal of confronting someone is resolution, not winning, gaining power or belittling people."

A bold team has the same cast of role-players as other teams, but each individual is likely to act more effectively in the context of the team's personality. You know how these players operate on nice and fierce teams. Now, help them transform into members of a bold team so they take on their ideal roles and duties while being true to their individual identities:

- The peacemaker finds that getting along can mean working through conflicts.
- The champion works with others to get things done.
- The perfectionist accepts different ways to achieve great outcomes.
- The energizer finds fun at work by keeping focused and getting the job done.
- The guardian stops worrying and feels safe enough to take risks.
- The observer takes a stand and focuses on the right way to accomplish tasks.
- The individualist expresses opinions and waits for feedback.
- The achiever feels free to do good work.
- The helper feels safer taking responsibility for his or her role in working out issues.

Four Bold Team Management Principles

When you are leading a team, you want to help its members grow, change and perform. As you assemble your bold team, prepare for success by blending the best of nice-team and fierce-team practices. Bold teams balance their priorities between getting the work mission accomplished – like a fierce team – and making sure everybody gets along – as they do on a nice team. Value your team members' input and listen to them. Pay attention to outcomes, both short-term and long-term. To build a bold team, teach members to "care, believe and trust." Use the four bold principles as guidelines for your management practices in a variety of contexts:

1. **"Assume innocence"** – Avoid prejudging or accusing. Keep your intentions pure.
2. **"Build a bridge"** – Find common ground and understanding with team members.
3. **"Speak your truth"** – Stay objective and avoid generalizations. Use specific examples.
4. **"Invite dialogue"** – Ask questions and encourage others to join the conversation.

Using Bold Principles to Offer Feedback, Make Requests and Handle Conflict

Give feedback often to help team members achieve their goals. Avoid telling them what they did wrong, how their actions are bad or how to fix their problems. Instead, be mindful of what you say and how you say it. Use requests to inform the team about what you want and need without directly telling them what to do. Think of a disagreement as a way to share alternative information instead of letting opposing views always lead to arguments. Align your feedback, requests and conflict management with the four bold principles:

Assume Innocence

Tell your team members why you are offering feedback. Avoid blaming anyone, and, instead, share information about how you perceive the situation objectively. Talk to team members as soon after an incident as possible. To make requests, in lieu of giving orders, be respectful but state your case in a timely way. Determine why the conflict exists and try to use it productively. In all cases, find a safe place for your conversations so that people do not feel intimidated and be sure you've identified a

good time to talk.

Build a Bridge

Before you can give feedback, make a request or heal a conflict, be sure the person you are talking to is comfortable hearing what you have to say and content to listen, as well as to express his or her point of view. To address a conflict, try to figure out specifically what the disagreement is and to determine how you can heal the gap.

Speak Your Truth

Make sure your feedback is objective and give as many concrete examples as you can. Always connect your feedback and requests to the organization's priorities. To set the agenda, be specific about what you want and why your team should cooperate. Don't keep people guessing or speak in general terms. To settle a disagreement, explain exactly where people agree and disagree. Clearly state your relevant points dispassionately.

Invite Dialogue

When you give feedback, elicit responses from your team members. Ask for their solutions. Work with them to outline the next steps the team needs to take, but be ready with Plan B. To make an agenda-setting request, first ask for their comments and solutions. Try to anticipate their objections (that's another reason to have Plan B prepared). To address a conflict, first seek understanding, then ask the people involved to react to possible solutions and seek their concurrence.

About the Author

Brian Cole Miller is the author of *Quick Team-Building Activities for Busy Managers* and *Keeping Employees Accountable for Results.*