ALL
RISE

PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR BUILDING
HIGH-PERFORMANCE LEGAL TEAMS

BENJAMIN SACHS

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Practical Tools for Building High-Performance Legal Teams

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INTRODUCTION

"I had to leave my law firm to learn about great management."

This was a colleague I had known for more than a decade, one who had spent many years at a top global firm before moving on to a series of in-house executive roles in technology companies. He had just started a new general counsel role, and we were discussing the challenge of building great legal teams.

"In other industries, especially tech, they recognize management as a *science*," he explained. "Knowing what I know now, if I went back to Big Law today, I would run my teams completely differently."

I shared his sentiment. After starting my career at a large firm, I took a detour to work at Boston Consulting Group, a strategic management consulting firm, where I set aside my legal skills for two years to learn the language of business. I expected BCG to teach me about strategy, financial structures, corporate transformations, and more, which I thought would ultimately make me a better lawyer. That was all true, but it turned out that the

most valuable lessons BCG taught me had nothing to do with the mechanics of big business.

Even though consulting and law firms have aspects in common—a global footprint, large corporate clients, intense hours, and hierarchies governed by partners—they had entirely different approaches to building teams. At BCG, teaming was considered its own *discipline*. Leaders shared best practices and advice to sharpen their management skills. Junior team members were encouraged to give feedback to team leaders and partners freely, and they routinely did so, not behind the cover of anonymous surveys, but face-to-face.

Fast forward many years to when I was General Counsel and Chief Operating Officer at a technology company, overseeing not just legal work but teams of analysts, engineers, marketers, product managers, designers, and more. Developing management principles that worked across law and business forced me to be more intentional about every aspect of leadership, and I was surrounded by equally committed colleagues ready with ideas and feedback so we could improve together. We were as analytical about how we ran our teams as we were about the products we developed.

By contrast, many law firms and other legal organizations do not adopt a rigorous approach to how they build and support teams. One senior partner at a large firm told me, "Partners here are a bit like feudal lords. We report to someone, of course, just like feudal lords all served the king. But as long as we pay our proper tribute, we are largely left to govern our people as we see fit."

This freedom can be a curse. Without a common approach to building strong teams, each office or each practice group of a large organization can feel like a distinct entity, with its own idiosyncratic rules and styles for how work gets done. Not only

does this result in wildly inconsistent approaches, but it is terribly inefficient, leaving many attorneys to reinvent the wheel. Some will develop into wonderful managers, but they tend to be the exception, rather than the norm.

NOT WHETHER, BUT WHY

These challenges are well-known in our industry. In teaching and consulting for attorneys, I hear complaints about systemic dysfunction and poor management in every sector, including firms, corporations, government agencies, and nonprofits. The question is not *whether* we have work to do, but *why* we have not solved the problem by now. In other industries, there are plenty of success stories. Why have so many legal organizations, especially law firms, been unable to turn the corner?

Some attorneys believe that their leaders do not take "management" seriously. But such short-sighted thinking is not as common as people might think. Nearly every law firm executive, general counsel, and legal director I meet acknowledges the gap. "If I could fix any single problem with a snap of my fingers," one government agency's division director told me, "it would be to transform our management culture."

Sadly, there are no quick fixes for what ails us. In fact, the search for quick fixes is part of the problem. Building strong teams requires attention and commitment from everyone in the organization, from the most junior attorneys to the most senior leaders. The task is so daunting that most do not even know where to start, which leads them to retreat back into legal work.

The work of building strong teams is not a billable activity one can clock in and out of like any other legal matter. No single

management seminar is going to transform an attorney, a legal team, or an organization. Yet even when leaders acknowledge this limitation—when they recognize that more work is needed—they nevertheless continue to struggle with execution. We need a more systematic approach.

EXECUTION FROM TOP TO BOTTOM

If we want results, we have to rethink our execution at every level: the organization, the team, and the individual.

At the organizational level, leaders need a common framework that defines the key traits of high-performance teams. This is more than just a semantic exercise; it is about alignment. Without a common language and clear expectations for what makes a great team, everyone spirals off in a different direction, and senior leaders have no way to measure progress across all of these inconsistent approaches. The framework in this book has been battle-tested across industries for many years and is well-suited to legal organizations. (Note that the term "legal organizations" encompasses not only law firms but also nonprofit legal groups, agencies with legal divisions, and in-house legal teams of corporations.)

Precise execution is also needed at the team level. Every team is different, with its own unique subculture, pain points, and processes. The M&A practice will have different needs than Commercial Litigation, so a generic "management training" is not going to provide the kind of rich, tactical guidance each group needs to be successful. A team-centric approach means putting the entire team—such as all the associates and partners from a single practice group or regional office—in the same room to discuss their challenges and align on action items *together*. They

are not merely discussing ideas; they are committing to a plan of attack. It also ensures that the discussion zeroes in on topics that truly matter. This cannot happen in a management seminar packed solely with fifth-year associates.

Finally, each individual has a role to play in helping build stronger teams. This book is not just for managers. I remember a partner at BCG sitting me down on my first day with a new case team and saying, "I expect you to make the entire team better. Just doing your work well isn't going to be good enough." I had just started my *second year*; I had never conceived of my role as anything beyond my specific silo of assignments. He took an ax to that narrow-minded attitude and forced me—and everyone on the team—to take on a shared responsibility for the team as a whole.

He was right, and the lessons apply to any profession, including law. As this book will explain, even the most junior team members can learn how to spot and diagnose problems on their team and do their part to correct them. Your leadership and influence can extend far beyond your title.

Thoughtful execution at each of these three levels—the organization, the team, and the individual—generates a powerful combined effect. But having three levels of execution also increases the risk of misalignment. That is why it is so important to adopt a unified framework for the principles that will guide us throughout this journey.

THE FRAMEWORK

Simply stated, our mission is to *build high-performance legal teams*. To do that, we have to start by defining what makes these teams special.

Regardless of the industry, high-performance teams have four key traits in common:

1. Trust: They are comfortable being honest and vulnerable
2. Ownership: They put the team's goals above personal goals
3. Productive Conflict: They challenge each other's ideas
4. Accountability: They hold each other to high standards

Trust is first for a reason. When teams falter, many team leaders focus on the failures they see in accountability, conflict avoidance, or lack of ownership. But smart leaders know that trust is often the key to turning everything around.

FRAMEWORK FOR BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

1 TRUST

2 OWNERSHIP

3 PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT

4 ACCOUNTABILITY

When team members lack trust, they focus only on self-preservation. Once teams establish trust, they begin to look beyond their personal interests and focus instead on what's best for the

team—the first step toward true ownership. When they feel genuine ownership over the goals of the team or organization, they readily challenge and sharpen each other's ideas, harnessing the power of productive conflict. And finally, once teams are willing to engage in conflict, they can hold each other accountable, not through a culture of fear or micromanagement, but through a common set of standards that empower *everyone* to lead.

Without these traits, a manager must pull all the strings and coach each team member through every task. But if and when teams climb this ladder to the top, everything changes. Instead of a single manager pulling team members over the finish line, team members push *each other*. They support and coach each other. They expect great things from each other, and they don't want to let their colleagues down. In this environment, the improvement is not linear; it is *exponential*. If you have ever served on such a team, you know what that difference feels like. It is a team you never want to leave.

This book will unpack the four traits of high-performance teams one by one, starting with trust. Each section will include relevant psychological and behavioral models of organizational behavior, but we are focused on turning academic into actionable. No trust falls or vague buzzwords—just sound tools that attorneys need to drive change on their teams.

TAILORED FOR ATTORNEYS

These four key traits of high-performance teams are not specific to legal teams. In fact, one of the very first books that I read on managing teams, Patrick Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, continues to inspire my teaching today, despite it not being written for the legal profession, and countless other books provide

general frameworks and tools that could be useful to attorneys.[1]

But despite the existence of these concepts in other industries, leadership advice often falls flat with lawyers because it fails to take into account the unique experiences and obstacles we face. This is particularly true at law firms, where cookie-cutter management tactics simply do not translate well to intense litigation and deal teams.

Some law firm partners also make the mistake of believing that investing in a stronger team culture will blunt their competitive edge. When they hear the word "culture," they bristle, thinking not of the famous quote by Peter Drucker ("Culture eats strategy for breakfast") but rather of frivolities like ping-pong tables and free snacks. But a strong culture does not require taking one's foot off the gas. I have worked with practice groups hellbent on becoming the dominant player in their markets, with leaders at the helm who understand the extraordinary work and sacrifice it will take to win. The recommendations in this book are fully compatible with those goals. In fact, they are more than compatible; they are *vital*, because ensuring peak performance is the only way such leaders will be able to reach their goals without destroying their teams (and the value they have created) in the process.

For these reasons, despite the fact that this book will offer guidance to attorneys everywhere, most of the examples will focus on attorneys in high-pressure environments where the problems are most severe. I have spent many years teaching law students and lawyers at every level of their careers, watching as many of them join large firms with a sense of eagerness, only to leave jaded. This dissatisfaction should not be their destiny.

My hope is that if we can do it in law firms, we can do it anywhere attorneys work, be it at a government agency, a legal nonprofit, or

an in-house legal team. Every environment will present its own challenges; for example, agencies and nonprofits have unique constraints and stakeholder considerations that require special attention. But the tools of high-performance teams will still apply.

A note on terminology. Although most of this book will offer advice that applies to attorneys at all levels, there will be times when I want to specifically tailor the guidance to certain audiences. When I refer to "senior" attorneys or "managers," for example, that is intended to include attorneys who oversee the work of others. By contrast, I will generally refer to the people they oversee as "junior" team members. These terms have less to do with age or tenure and more to do with *context*. For example, a second-year associate can be a manager over a workstream but still feel like the junior player in a strategy meeting with partners. And even partners can feel like junior team members when they collaborate with more senior leaders.

Finally, all attorneys should keep in mind that legal teams encompass more than just lawyers. Success requires close collaboration with paralegals, assistants, IT professionals, investigators, HR experts, professional development managers, and countless others. Because writing out this list is cumbersome, I may refer to "team members" and "attorneys" interchangeably, but do not misinterpret this shorthand to suggest that the only team members that matter are those with law degrees.

THE PAYOFF

Although the challenge ahead may seem daunting, it also presents a tremendous opportunity, both for individual attorneys and for organizations as a whole. For attorneys to stand out, they

need to know not just how to spin a precedent or weave together complex deal terms. They have to know how to build and leverage incredible teams. That skill, even more than brilliant legal thinking, is what catapults careers.

It is also the key to winning the talent wars.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the legal talent wars reached a new height. Even before the pandemic, law firms were concerned about retaining top talent. But by the end of 2021, roughly 23%—nearly *one quarter*—of associates at law firms had left their firms.[2]

At first, many thought this was just attorneys' version of the so-called Great Resignation, the pandemic-era phenomenon where many employees reexamined their career choices and chose a different path. "I had imagined associates resigning en masse to do some kind of 'Eat-Pray-Love' thing," wrote Vivia Chen, a columnist for Bloomberg Law.[3] But that was not the case. In fact, many attorneys were not leaving Big Law altogether; they were just shuffling between firms. Big Law as a whole held onto 18% *more* attorneys in 2021 than it did in 2019.[4]

At Georgetown Law, the Center on Ethics and the Legal Profession teamed up with the Thomson Reuters Institute to analyze the differences between the winners (firms with low turnover rates) and losers (firms with high turnover rates) in this great contest. You might think that firms with lower turnover paid their associates more or perhaps demanded fewer hours from them. *Neither was true*. Associates at low turnover firms worked 51 *more* hours per year and earned 16% *smaller* raises over the same period than associates at high-turnover firms.[5] Yet those firms enjoyed *half* as much turnover.

Loyalty comes from "less tangible factors," wrote the study's authors. Or, to put it more plainly: people don't quit their jobs,

they quit their bosses. When attorneys feel every firm is largely the same, even a small bump in compensation (or other perks) might be enough motivation to break them away. On the other hand, when firms distinguish themselves through *how* they work—their culture, management style, professional development, and values—attorneys connect more deeply, more genuinely to the firm and to each other. These "intangibles" generate connections that are much harder to break.

But retention is just the tip of the iceberg. Stronger teams are not just happier; they *perform* better. They are more efficient and productive. They handle setbacks more smoothly. They sharpen each other's ideas through honest feedback. And they are more self-sufficient, overcoming obstacles on their own rather than seeking help from "the boss" at every turn.

Who wouldn't want these qualities on their team, whether at a legal nonprofit, a government agency, or a firm? No legal team has infinite budget, and certainly not infinite time. For senior leaders, the math is obvious. Teams that perform better and stick around longer will in turn generate better work (and more revenue), all while reducing the time and money wasted recruiting and training replacements for those who leave for greener pastures. From a P&L standpoint, it's a no-brainer.

But for individual attorneys, including the most junior associates, this is much more than a financial exercise. This is about your career—your life. So much of your life is spent at work, after all. Long nights and weekends will not evaporate completely, but strong teams have more control over their time because they are more disciplined and organized in how they approach complex assignments. They communicate better, collaborate better, and produce better work because the entire team is engaged. When

you work on a team operating at this higher level, it is not an experience you ever forget.

LOOKING FORWARD

Admittedly, these were not the skills we learned in law school. This is an entirely new curriculum to most attorneys, but the chapters that follow provide a step-by-step playbook for creating high-performance legal teams. It's not magic; it's a methodical way of thinking about what drives better retention, higher leverage, and better job satisfaction using practices that have been refined in other industries yet remain elusive in the legal profession. You will gain new insights for managing "up" and "down." You will learn how to support and enhance the power of diverse teams. And you'll build more self-awareness so that you can continuously improve throughout your career.

By the end, you will see your team—its people, its strengths, and its weaknesses—in a whole new light. This is not just the path for personal growth as an attorney; it is the means for elevating your entire team. As you rise, all rise.

TRUST

4

ACCOUNTABILITY

3

PRODUCTIVE
CONFLICT

2

OWNERSHIP

1

TRUST
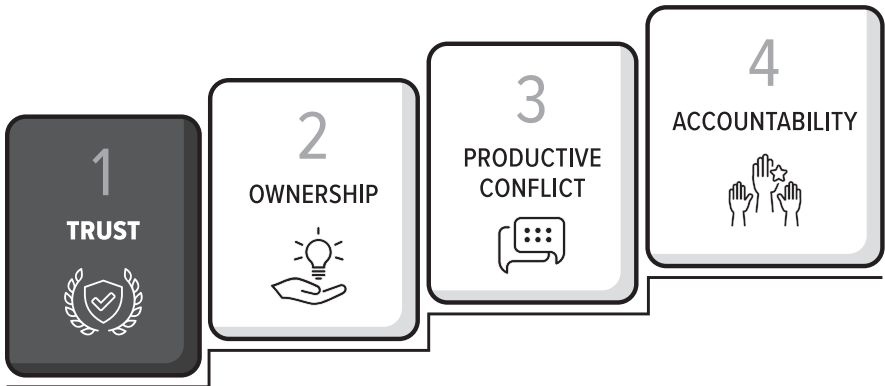
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

I n 2012, Google set out to determine, with mathematical precision, the formula for the perfect team. At the time, the tech giant had more than $50B in revenue and more than 50,000 employees worldwide. Keeping this juggernaut on its upward trajectory meant constantly expanding its massive employee base, and when a company operates at that level of scale, even small improvements can make a substantial difference to its bottom line.

With that in mind, and being a pioneer in data analytics, Google turned its talents inward, conducting a study of 180 of its own teams. They examined a wide spectrum of data points to determine the factors that best predicted which teams would be successful over time. Decades of prior research (not to mention most people's intuitions) suggested that factors like education, standardized test scores, GPAs, socialization outside the office, and personality styles might play a strong part in predicting a

team's success. Google being Google, they appointed data-driven experts in their People Analytics Division—yes, they have a People Analytics Division—to collect these metrics and progressively track teams' performance.

But no matter how they examined the data, they could not find any support for the notion that a specific combination of individuals with certain traits was likely to be more successful than any other. In fact, as Abeer Dubey, the head of this initiative, told the *New York Times Magazine* when the results were publicly released in 2016, "The 'who' part of the equation didn't seem to matter."[6]

Instead, one factor stood out more than any other: whether the team members had enough *trust* to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other without fear of being embarrassed, punished, or rejected—otherwise known as "psychological safety." Teams with psychological safety achieved their goals more often and drove more value for the business. Those without it fell behind.

This study—known as Project Aristotle—was a turning point in a long debate about what makes great teams. Leadership books for many years touted the benefits of trust and psychological safety. But many leaders and executives still held on to more traditional views and sought to avoid concepts they saw as "touchy-feely" or "squishy." Now Google, a tech company with an aggressive work culture (in spite of what you may have heard about office playgrounds and catered lunches) was not only bringing mathematical proof for its assertions about what makes great teams, but they were turning these insights into actions around the company, from how they interviewed candidates, to the content of their internal trainings, to their employee assessments.

Almost overnight, every tech company was trying to follow Google's lead, and other industries were not far behind.

But there was a problem. The theories were well and good, but putting those ideas into practice became, for some, a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Every industry, not to mention every organization, is different. As the ripple effects from Project Aristotle spread to other sectors, the examples and best practices shared by Google seemed less and less applicable. Ideas are not enough, after all; the hard part is *execution*.

Law firms have been particularly slow to adapt. As lawyers, we work differently than most employees at Google. True, both environments are competitive. Both have long hours. But ours are billable. Our time is sold to clients. As lawyers, we *are* the product we sell. And while law firms work hard to tout differentiation, many clients see firms as more or less fungible, forcing us to be even more aggressive to win (and hold onto) their business. So who has time for trust-building?

The fact is, law firms and other legal organizations no longer have a choice. If we fail to build legal teams around a strong foundation of psychological safety, the lack of trust will translate directly into attrition and erode our practice groups and our business. Your associates may not use the words "trust" and "psychological safety" on the way out the door. They will talk about feeling like a cog in a machine, or not having opportunities for mentorship, or not feeling connected to the firm. But all these roads lead back to trust.

If you accept that this investment is necessary, then the question becomes: how do you put these principles into practice most efficiently? We need to turn the "soft stuff" into something more concrete. First, we have to clarify what we mean by "psychological safety."

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

At its core, psychological safety is a measure of professional trust within the team: trust that team members can admit mistakes, express their honest opinions, and ask questions, all without fear of judgment or reprisal.

It may be easier to see why this is so essential by envisioning a legal team without this quality. If team members are routinely concerned that their opinions will be ignored, mistakes berated, and questions judged as a reflection of lack of competence, what happens next? Most lawyers in this situation would retreat to self-protection: "I'm just going to keep my head down and focus on *my* work." Because they are treated like cogs in a machine, they act like cogs in a machine, meaning they do only the minimum necessary to get their tasks done successfully. Nothing more, nothing less.

This is the "stay in your lane" mentality, and lawyers fall into this trap at every level, from junior associates who just want to avoid ruffling a senior associate's feathers to partners who want nothing to do with internal politics. Attorneys focused on self-protection do not think, "How can I make the firm or practice group better?" Such a mentality would require taking on risks, including engaging in difficult conversations, providing feedback, or making suggestions that might be rejected. In this type of discouraging environment, the stay-in-your-lane mentality becomes the norm, attorneys clock in and out like a factory, and turnover rates rise while innovation and autonomy wane.

Hopefully, the problem is becoming obvious. Attorneys who stay in their lane, by definition, focus on their tasks, not the practice's broader goals. They don't contribute to making the team itself better. They don't volunteer peer feedback, much less upward

feedback. They want to perform well, but only to the extent that it boosts their career trajectory, not because they feel a sense of genuine commitment to the firm or the client. And because they focus on doing "what they are told," their managers must do an awful lot of "telling." Say goodbye to the vision of a team that doesn't need you every five minutes. Say hello to micromanagement.

This is why we need trust on our legal teams. Some people roll their eyes at the word "trust," thinking of trust falls, friendship bracelets, and other clichés. That is not the kind of trust we are seeking. In fact, we should clearly differentiate between personal and professional trust.

Professional trust—the kind of trust our teams need—is less about knowing the intimate details of one's personal life (although that kind of connection has value) and more about creating an environment where team members feel that others will support them, listen to their concerns, and respect their contributions, even if they occasionally make mistakes or step on someone's toes. In a professional environment, that kind of trust greases the machinery of collaboration. And I think we can all agree that a truly collaborative team beats a mere "collection of smart individuals" any day of the week.

THE ROLE OF VULNERABILITY

Before diving deeper, we need to cover an important prerequisite, one that will resurface over and over through the next several chapters. To unlock trust, leaders have to encourage—and model—vulnerability on their teams. This is a topic that makes many attorneys squirm in their seats, but it is necessary. Too often, leaders worry that vulnerability will be perceived as

weakness. This derives from the assumption that leaders are supposed to have all the answers, meaning they should never question their own ideas, ask for help, or make (much less admit) mistakes. But that model of invulnerability sets up a hierarchical paradigm where psychological safety *cannot exist*.

Imagine a junior attorney on a team where the partner leading the team appears to be perfect in every way. The standard of the "perfect partner" implies that the junior associate's goal is to achieve that same pedestal of perfection. Admitting mistakes and asking for help would seem to reinforce how junior the associate is. Far better to err on the side of arrogance ("I already know the answer") or at least deference ("I'll do it exactly how you showed me") rather than admit weakness ("I could use some help here"). When an attorney's job is simply to execute the will of the impeccable partner, the attorney is once again reduced to a minion, just hoping to survive long enough to take a place at the top of that hierarchy (or burning out long before getting there).

On the contrary, when senior attorneys model and lead from a place of vulnerability—admitting mistakes, apologizing, asking questions, seeking help—mutual trust is not only possible, it's *inevitable*. This type of leadership builds a deep level of respect, boosts confidence in junior associates, and demonstrates an honest openness to feedback.

This attitude also reflects a level of authenticity that today's lawyers crave in a leader. Attorneys want to work for human beings, not demigods. Those late nights working together to hit a deadline, back against the wall, making tough calls despite imperfect information—these are the kinds of moments that actually bring teams together. It is the messiness, the ambiguity, the knowledge that we do not know everything—these are the

times when partners show themselves to be just as human and prone to imperfection as anyone else. And these moments of vulnerability build loyalty.

As we proceed through the next few chapters, keep these core principles in mind. In order to unlock trust on our teams, we need to encourage psychological safety, and to have psychological safety, we need vulnerability. Follow this path, and not only will we achieve trust, but we will also unlock access to the other traits of high-performance legal teams—ownership, productive conflict, and accountability—that await in the remainder of this book.

A RIGOROUS APPROACH TO TRUST

Many tend to assume that trust can only be built naturally, a little bit at a time, through shared spaces, projects, accomplishments, and failures. If you want to wait that long, be my guest. By the time you have built trust organically, your attorneys will have left for greener pastures.

Allowing trust to build organically is inefficient for modern legal teams, where attorneys have to parachute into new cases or deals and ramp up to maximum effectiveness as quickly as possible. And today, most teams have embraced some element of hybrid or remote work as part of COVID-19's post-pandemic reality, reducing the frequency of casual, face-to-face interactions that used to drive much of a team's culture. In other words, we cannot simply wait for trust to happen, given enough time. Managers, you are responsible for *making* it happen.

The chapters that follow will explain why trust is often elusive on legal teams and how to build strong bonds of trust that unlock more collaborative, more productive, and higher-retention teams.

First, we will explain the barriers to trust. As it turns out, our brains are wired in ways that make trust more difficult to form due to two common challenges that we will discuss next: the fundamental attribution error (Chapter 2) and working style differences (Chapter 3). Although these barriers have natural causes, they can be overcome with awareness and practice. This understanding can not only improve our teams but help in our efforts to reduce systemic inequality in our organizations.

Chapter 4 will then offer specific exercises attorneys can use to build trust on their teams. The kind of trust we need—genuine, professional trust—is built brick by brick, both through thoughtful one-on-one interactions and group activities designed to break down the barriers of trust discussed earlier and promote healthy bonds across team members.

We need this kind of rigorous roadmap because relying solely on our intuitions can only get us so far. In fact, as we'll see in the next chapter, our "gut instincts" can sometimes lead us in entirely the *wrong* direction. But to understand that, we have to back up a few million years.