

The Three Virtues of an Ideal Team Player

From *The Ideal Team Player: A Leadership Fable* by Patrick Lencioni (2016)

Defining the Three Virtues

The model centers on three essential traits required to be an ideal team player:

#1: Humble

- Lacks excessive ego or concern for status
- Quick to point out contributions of others
- Slow to seek attention for personal achievements
- Shares credit
- Emphasizes team over self
- Defines success collectively

Humility is the single greatest and most indispensable attribute of being a team player.

#2: Hungry

- Always looking for more to do, learn, or take responsibility for
- Constantly thinking about the next step or opportunity
- Self-motivated and diligent
- Loathes the idea of being perceived as slacking

Hungry people rarely need to be pushed by a manager to work harder.

#3: Smart

- Possesses common sense about people
- Has sound judgment and intuition about group dynamics
- Understands the impact of words and actions
- Demonstrates practical emotional intelligence

“Smart” refers to interpersonal awareness, not intellectual ability.

The Power of the Combination

What makes humble, hungry, and smart powerful is not the individual traits — it is the required combination of all three.

Common Combinations:

The Get Out of Here (None of the three)

The Pawn (Humble, but not hungry or smart)

The Bulldozer (Hungry, not humble or smart)

The Charmer (Smart, not humble or hungry)
The Accidental Mess-Maker (Humble and hungry, not smart)
The Lovable Slacker (Humble and smart, not hungry)
The Skillful Politician (Hungry and smart, not humble)
The Ideal Team Player (Humble, hungry, and smart)

Application #1: Hiring

The Interview Process

Strong interviews reduce risk. Weak interviews create it. Structure matters. Follow these guidelines:

- Don't be generic

Avoid predictable, surface-level questions. Tailor questions to the actual role and the real challenges the person will face. Probe for patterns of behavior, not rehearsed answers.

- Debrief each interview as a team

Immediately compare notes while impressions are fresh. Look for alignment and disagreement. Discuss evidence, not feelings alone.

- Consider group interviews

Let candidates interact with multiple stakeholders at once. This reveals how they think on their feet, navigate dynamics, and communicate under light pressure.

- Make interviews nontraditional

Move beyond Q&A. Use case discussions, problem-solving sessions, or informal conversations to see the candidate in different contexts.

- Ask questions more than once

Revisit key themes in different ways. Consistency in answers over time often reveals authenticity—or exaggeration.

- Ask what others would say

This reduces defensiveness and surfaces self-awareness. It often produces more honest reflections on strengths and blind spots.

- Ask candidates to perform real work

Give a small, relevant task. A short presentation, analysis, or writing sample is more predictive than another hour of conversation.

- Don't ignore hunches

Instinct isn't proof, but it's data. If something feels off, dig deeper rather than dismissing it.

- "Scare people with sincerity" (be clear about expectations)

Be candid about the real demands of the role—the pressure, pace, and standards. The right candidates lean in; the wrong ones self-select out.

Interview Questions

HUMBLE

Tell me about your most important career accomplishments.
What was your biggest failure or most embarrassing moment?
How did you handle it?
What is your greatest weakness?
How do you handle apologies, giving or receiving?
Tell me about someone better than you in an area that matters to you.

HUNGRY

What is the hardest you've ever worked on something?
What do you like to do when you're not working?
Did you work hard as a teenager?
What kinds of hours do you typically work?

SMART

How would you describe your personality?
What do you do that others might find annoying?
What kinds of people annoy you most, and how do you handle them?
Would colleagues describe you as empathetic?
Can you give an example of demonstrating empathy to a teammate?

Questions for Candidate References

Start by putting the reference at ease, then move toward specifics. Avoid yes/no questions and focus on areas of doubt.

In what capacity did you work with this candidate, and for how long?
What were they specifically responsible for?
What are strengths that truly distinguish them?
Where did they struggle or need the most support?
How did they respond to feedback?
Would you hire them again? Why or why not?
What type of environment do they thrive in?
What kind of management style works best for them?

Application #2: Assessing Current Employees

Review the definitions of humble, hungry, and smart. Recommend managers and employees perform self-evaluations on these terms. Formulate explicit questions around these and phrase them to encourage honesty.

Where do you add the most value to the team?
Where do you struggle?

How do you handle feedback?

If such questions are too overwhelming, have employees rank the three virtues they demonstrate from best to worst to use as a starting point for discussion.

Application #3: Developing Employees Who Are Lacking

Development only works with consistency and clarity. Leaders should:

- Provide constant reminders
- Set clear expectations
- Offer direct, honest corrections
- Model the standard as a leader
- Reinforce passion for mission and team
- Use strong team members as peer coaches
- Remember that “ideal” means committed to growth, not perfect

Developing Humility

Focus on reducing ego and increasing team awareness.

Identify root causes (e.g. insecurity, fear of invisibility, past reward systems, etc.)

Create opportunities to share credit

Model humility at the leadership level

Developing Hunger

Encourage ownership and initiative

Increase responsibility

Model strong work ethic

Teach discipline and follow-through

Developing Smart (Interpersonal Awareness)

Improve judgement and social effectiveness

Build awareness of group dynamics

Coach on impact of words and tone

Model empathy and tact

Application #4: Embedding The Model Into Company Culture

Leaders employing this model must be explicit and bold by clearly stating that they expect employees to be humble, hungry, and smart. In addition:

- Communicate expectations openly
- Inform outsiders what the team stands for
- Highlight visible examples of the three virtues
- Call out violations quickly and tactfully