HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

Collaboration And Teams

Every Team Needs a Super-Facilitator

by Jamil Zaki

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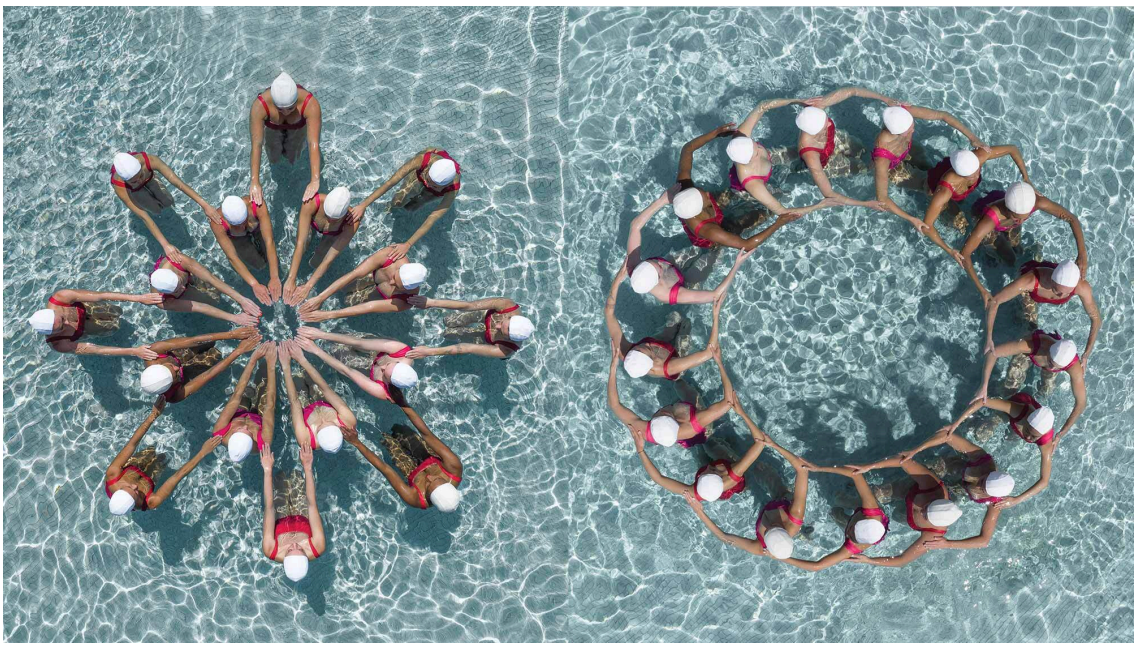


Brad Walls

Summary. Most of us have met *super-facilitators*—people with a talent for bringing individual group members together, combining each one's unique strengths to promote optimal team performance. Super-facilitators integrate diverse expertise,... **more**

Chris Paul has been in the NBA for two decades and has had a storied individual career. But one stat sets him apart: Four times he has joined a new team, and each time that team has posted, within two years, its best record ever. No other player has had that kind of impact. It's now known as the Chris Paul effect.

Paul might be unique in NBA history, but most of us have encountered people like him: teammates who make everyone around them better, combining each member's unique strengths into a sort of cognitive superorganism that accomplishes what no one could do alone. Let's call these people *super-facilitators*.

In recent years, a new wave of research has revolutionized our understanding of group success, and it showcases facilitators as much more than just talented team members. If the supercommunicators described by the best-selling author Charles Duhigg help people understand one another optimally, super-facilitators are architects of group performance who bring people together optimally. Super-facilitators integrate diverse expertise, promote equitable contributions, and cultivate trust. In doing so they generate *collective intelligence,* or a group's ability to reason, innovate, and solve problems. They are often team leaders but can also be teammates—like Paul—who bring out the best in their peers.

In this article I'll present key findings about super-facilitators, collective intelligence, and team performance, some of which my lab has generated. One of the most important of these findings is that super-facilitating is a skill, not just a trait. That's good news, because it means not only that people who are already natural super-facilitators can be identified and empowered but also that *anybody* can be trained to become one.

The Team as Superorganism

Our culture tends to view innovation as a solo endeavor: a lonely climb up to an intellectual mountaintop. Great innovators toil in

obscurity, misunderstood or ignored by others until they make a breakthrough—and then the world follows.

This stereotype, when applied to leaders, can result in toxic organizational practices. In a 2019 study, my colleague Carol Dweck and others analyzed the mission statements of 433 *Fortune* 500 companies and compared them to Glassdoor ratings. They found that when companies emphasized a "culture of genius," spotlighting individual brilliance, they earned lower reviews. In follow-up work, the researchers found that those same companies also showed weaker collaboration, trust, and integrity. Also damaging is the leadership style in which a visionary CEO controls every level of a company. In 2024 Paul Graham, a cofounder of Y Combinator, coined the term "founder mode" to describe this style, which leans heavily into individualism and can be used to justify authoritarian, even abusive, behavior.

Genius, it turns out, is often a team sport. In 2010 the psychologist Anita Woolley and her colleagues developed an IQ test for groups. Like individual tests, this one examined the ability to excel at multiple types of problem-solving—for instance, making savvy economic choices, solving complex equations, and coming to consensus on ethical decisions. Groups that do well on some of these tests, Woolley found, tend to do better on others as well, suggesting that the teams possess collective intelligence.

You might assume that brilliant teams are made up of brilliant individuals. The data says otherwise. In Woolley's research, supergroups did not consist of especially talented individuals but rather of those with a "meta-talent" for organizing themselves based on each person's skills and trust in one another. Super-facilitators optimize these synthetic strengths.

This new insight differs from the "wisdom of crowds"—the idea that the average of people's answers to a given question will tend to be correct. Collective intelligence doesn't average people's

differences. It integrates them like the organs and limbs of a superorganism, each with its own specialty. Rather than duplicating effort, intelligent teams form *transactive systems,* in which each member holds on to the information they know best, pays attention to dimensions of a problem they understand deeply, and brainstorms solutions based on their own expertise. In transactive systems, people are assigned specialties, conduct deep work alone, and reconvene in bursts of interaction, during which members share information and converge on a plan. When teams use these strategies, members don't duplicate efforts. They use their time and minds efficiently. Instead of vying for power, they combine diverse knowledge and expertise and learn from one another.

But here's the key: To generate collective intelligence and harness its power, team members have to understand and believe in one another. In one classic set of studies, teams were asked to perform a series of tasks ranging from launching a mock product to assembling radios. The best performers were those who trusted their colleagues' expertise instead of looking over one another's shoulders.

Facilitator Superpowers

If collective intelligence harnesses the brainpower of a team, super-facilitators serve as the team's frontal lobe, orchestrating roles, enabling smooth interactions, and building trust.

How do they do it? Researchers have identified three main ways:

Attunement. As a point guard, Chris Paul is renowned for his "floor vision," which he uses to orchestrate his offense. He constantly reads the court, spots opportunities, and makes instantaneous judgments about who's best positioned to score. As one analyst put it, "He is able to see the game almost clairvoyantly, dissecting defensive coverages with split-second decisions to set up his teammates."

Super-facilitators have that same perceptive capacity—and they use it to create high-performing teams. In particular, they rely on empathy, the ability to connect with others' emotions. This makes sense, because empathy is socially magnetic. In my lab, we studied the networks that new college students formed when they arrived in their dorms. Empathic individuals quickly became central to their community and were especially likely to be named as trusted confidantes by their peers. In follow-up research, when we showed students pictures of their empathic dorm-mates, we observed an increase in activity in the parts of the brain associated with reward and social connection.

Brad Walls photographed the patterns and symmetry formed by the Aqualillies, an artistic synchronized swimming group.

Empathic people also have a sharper grasp of their communities. They're more likely, for instance, to know who is connected to whom in a social network. Super-facilitators excel at this skill,

which in a work setting allows them to involve team members in complementary parts of a project or meeting in a way that maximizes everyone's strengths.

Early collective-intelligence research highlights empathic attunement among super-facilitators. In one study, team members guessed the emotion others were feeling based on pictures of their eyes. Socially perceptive team members were better able than those with high IQs to coordinate their groups effectively and maximize their performance. In another study, people in pairs who mimicked each other's facial expressions were more likely to collaborate well, another hallmark of super-facilitating.

Communication. Throughout his NBA career, Paul has been a mentor for younger teammates. In 2021 a basketball journalist referred to him as "a veteran superstar that everyone on the roster can lean on and use as a developmental sponge." Many of his teammates share that view. Julian Champagnie, of the San Antonio Spurs, has described him as "like a coach and a friend all in one," adding "I can go to him for anything." And Jonathan Kuminga, of the Golden State Warriors, has said, "He brings so much knowledge to the court and just life."

Those comments suggest one great way to identify super-facilitators: Listen to what others say about them. Researchers often ask workers questions such as, "How well does your leader recognize your potential?" and "Do you know where you stand with your leader?" People led by super-facilitators answer those questions positively. They see their best selves reflected in their leaders' eyes.

Even more powerful, when super-facilitators communicate their belief in people clearly, their colleagues *become* their best selves. In a study of the Canadian Armed Forces, soldiers who reported having strong, positive relationships with their commanding officers were also more confident in their ability to achieve their

goals, and they performed more effectively as a team. This is especially important when a team member struggles. Many leaders tend to stereotype underperformers, imagining that they can't change, and thus don't directly address the underachievers' issues. Super-facilitators, by contrast, pinpoint and explicitly highlight those teammates' potential. This produces what economists call "earned trust," in which people step up to meet high expectations. This does not mean super-facilitators are doormats. When underperformers can't find their place on a team, super-facilitators communicate that clearly but with compassion, rather than dragging them along.

> **Super-facilitators are architects of optimal group performance. They generate *collective intelligence*, or a group's ability to reason, innovate, and solve problems.**

If empathy is a super-facilitator's state of mind, conversation is their tool for bringing it into the world. Through one-on-one conversations, super-facilitators help their teammates find and develop their best qualities—and use those qualities in service of the team as a whole. Researchers once examined more than 50 teams of students who worked together on a series of projects over 10 weeks. When team leaders expected strong collaboration among team members and made that clear, the result was lower levels of conflict, more-efficient problem-solving, and stronger coordination among team members—all features of collective intelligence.

Distribution. A point guard's main job is to run the offense. Great point guards read momentum and feed the hot hand. They get new players involved. They set up struggling teammates for easy wins in order to boost the players' confidence.

Super-facilitators do something similar. During bursts of collaboration, they help distribute time and attention across the team so that everyone contributes and no one dominates. That's harder than it sounds. At your next meeting, imagine a chess clock on the table in front of each person. Each time they speak, the minutes and seconds on their clock increase, representing the cumulative time they've held the floor. When the conversation ends, is everyone's time similar? Probably not. Most teams are skewed—some people eat up the clock whereas others barely touch it.

This pattern saps morale and drags performance down. Multiple studies have shown that collective intelligence is best predicted not by who the team members are but by how they interact. When turn taking is relatively comparable, each member can contribute their best insights, which translates into more-agile, synthetic problem-solving. When one or two individuals dominate, other people's unique skills go unused.

Super-facilitators manage the clock, first and foremost, by not using up too much time themselves. In fact, they boost the collective intelligence of their team, Anita Woolley once told me, by *not* "dominating the airtime." Instead, they distribute attention in the way that great point guards make passes—anticipating openings and creating opportunities for everybody on the team to contribute.

Super-facilitators fight groupthink, too. Crowds are not always wise, and when leaders encourage dissent and healthy disagreement, as super-facilitators do, collective intelligence rises.

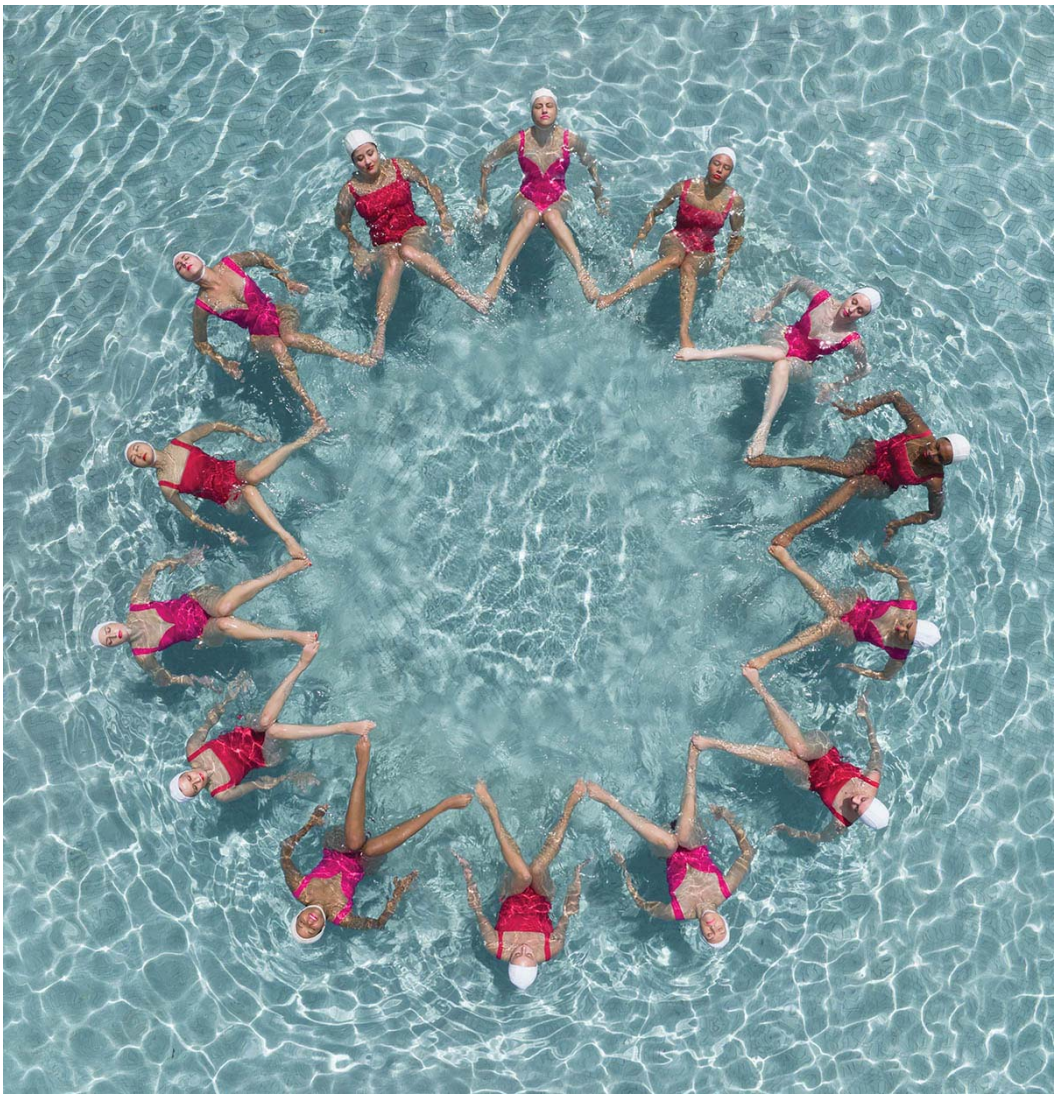
Empowering Teams for the Long Term

In "founder mode," leaders use the people on their teams to realize their own vision. Super-facilitators, on the other hand,

empower the people on their teams to imagine and create a shared vision.

Both approaches have their place. Scientists once brought teams together for a complex strategy task. Half of the teams' leaders were taught a "directive" strategy, which entailed projecting authority, instructing others what to do, and making sure their team followed orders. The other half were taught an "empowering" style, in which they encouraged others to bring new ideas to the table and collaborate deeply. Directive leaders had the edge at first. Their teams moved fast and hit benchmarks. But over time the empowered teams pulled ahead. They solved harder problems and generated more-original ideas.

If a leader knows exactly what needs to happen, and needs it done yesterday, a command-and-control approach can work. But when it comes to long-term vision, problem-solving, or innovation, one person seldom has all the answers. Great leaders create the conditions for everyone to contribute—and then they spark collective intelligence by letting everybody work on big problems together. They create spaces for collaboration and creativity.



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A classic example of this process involves Pixar, the animation mega-studio. It's described in detail in *Collective Genius* (2014), by the Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill and her coauthors, and in the September 2008 HBR article "How Pixar Fosters Collective Creativity," by Ed Catmull, a former head of Pixar. The Pixar story is often used as an illustration of what great teams can achieve. But today, with the benefit of all sorts of new research on teams, we can see it in a new light: as a model of collective intelligence that reveals a set of best practices for super-facilitating.

Central to the story is the Brain Trust—a group of directors, writers, and creatives Pixar brings together to sound out each of the company's projects. The Trust itself functions as a kind of super-facilitator: Today, whenever a new script is brought to the Trust, its members spend hours in a freewheeling back-and-forth

about how to make it better. Are the characters fleshed out? The visuals evocative? Does the storyline cohere, surprise, and delight?

Several features of the Brain Trust encourage collective intelligence. First, it has no formal authority; its members can suggest but never demand. This flat structure frees Trust members to be both candid and kind, and it frees the people presenting their script to feel both challenged and supported. Second, the Trust relies on what Catmull has called "catalytic questions," which serve as expressions of curiosity rather than criticism. Saying "That character doesn't work" flattens a conversation, but if you ask, "What role is this character playing in the scene?" or "How does he grow during the film?" then the whole room can respond. The Trust's focus on deep collaboration also scales up to Pixar as a whole: Each project brings together hundreds of people with highly specialized technical and creative skills—all part of an effort, as Catmull has put it, "to make something together that no one can make alone."

A Super-Facilitator Playbook

Any organization can emulate the Brain Trust's super-facilitating principles—of nonhierarchical conversation, catalytic questions, and collaboration first—to amplify the brilliance of their own teams. Here are three tactics that can help you get started.

Learn and play to each person's strengths. The first principle of super-facilitation is that difference is a strength, not a weakness. Teams thrive when individuals play unique roles each suited to their strengths. To make that happen, leaders must first understand those strengths. This can begin through a deeper approach to hiring and onboarding, in which managers learn not only what a person has done but how they think and the types of tasks and knowledge that come most naturally to them.

After building a team with complementary talents, engage in "role-crafting." The idea is this: After you launch a project or

initiative, don't merely carve up the work and distribute it across your team. Build out each person's tasks with an eye toward what drives them and where they function best. Ideally, bring the entire team into the process of role-crafting. When people have agency over their part of the job and knowledge of everyone else's, they commit more deeply and are less likely to duplicate effort—allowing collective intelligence to bloom.

Communicate your belief in others. Super-facilitators tend toward empowering leadership, but anyone can lean into that style. When possible, make strategic decisions collectively. When diving into a new project or subject, start with questions for the group rather than answers or (worse) instructions that come without explanation. When decisions must be handed down from the top, rely on "procedural justice": That is, be transparent about how and why you made your decisions, and create space for people to ask questions and feel heard.

To empower others as a leader, make clear that you believe in them, which is vital to helping them believe in themselves and achieving earned trust. To supercharge that effect, try trusting loudly: Voice your faith in people openly. As you empower someone to take on a role suited to their strengths, tell them that you *know* they will excel at that work, and explain why. Offer support but pull back on micromanaging, showing trust in actions, not just words. These signals all encourage people to see themselves through your eyes and grow into those great expectations.

Keep the ball moving. When teams come together for discussion, super-facilitators ensure everyone gets a chance to shine. This means being mindful and active in monitoring who might hog the ball when left to their own devices. Bringing chess clocks to your next group meeting might not be a good idea, but keep an eye on how much each person is contributing. If you pose a question to the group, extroverts might jump in with their answers while introverts remain quiet. To avoid that outcome, consider asking everyone to spend five minutes jotting down their thoughts about the question and then ask everyone to share an idea—a technique that has been shown to raise introverts' likelihood of joining in.

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Chris Paul is a star player in his own right, but he's also a star-*maker* for his team. In his presence, others shine more often and more brightly. His super-facilitating skills might be preternatural, but we can all find, elevate, and celebrate super-facilitators in our midst. Even better: We can become them ourselves. With the right mindset and a few key practices, anyone can turn talent into trust, and groups into something greater than the sum of their parts.

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