

# The Secret of Teams

What Great Teams Know and Do

Mark Miller

Coauthor of  
the international bestseller *The Secret*

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Foreword by Ken  
Blanchard

An Excerpt From

***The Secret of Teams:  
What Great Teams Know and Do***

by Mark Miller

Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

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# Foreword

*By Ken Blanchard*

When it comes to writing a book about teams, I can think of few people more qualified than my friend, Mark Miller, Vice President of Training and Development for Chick-fil-A. Mark and I have known each other for more than a decade. Over the years, we've worked together on several projects in the marketplace and in the not-for-profit world. Soon after we met, he and I teamed up to write *The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do*, which has become an international best-seller.

Fortunately for readers, Mark has been a student and a practitioner of teams for the last twenty years. I'm glad he's committed to sharing what he's learned on that journey. An accomplished communicator, he brings clarity to the often complex subject of building winning teams. In *The Secret of Teams*, he shares elemental truths about teams that, if employed, can transform not only your team but every aspect of your business. In the pages that follow, he'll show you how to create teams that can sustain unprecedented levels of performance.

So let this book inspire you and your team to give your management, shareholders, vendors, partners, and customers more than they expect. Whether you're part of a huge corporation, a not-for-profit organization, or a small company with just a few employees, apply the principles and practices in *The Secret of Teams* to make your workplace come alive!

— Ken Blanchard,  
Coauthor of *The One Minute Manager*<sup>®</sup> and  
*Leading at a Higher Level*

# Introduction

## An Amazing Journey

Teams are certainly not a new idea. Most of us have had some experience participating on a team. It may have been a sports team, a debate team, a team organized to solve a problem, as part of a nonprofit organization or maybe a team at work. As a result of our individual experiences, we will each read the pages that follow with a point of view informed by our past. However, I want to encourage you to put those experiences behind you because most of us have had team experiences that were far from ideal—most of us have never been part of a true high-performance team.

If you can approach the idea of teams with fresh eyes, you could be on the verge of a tremendous breakthrough. A breakthrough in performance, a breakthrough in the development of people, a breakthrough in your own leadership capacity, and perhaps most importantly, you could experience a breakthrough in your quality of life. I realize that's a lot to promise from the simple story that follows. However, this promise is not based on the power of the story; rather, it is based on the power of the ideas represented here and my belief in the tremendous untapped potential of your team.

Getting people to work together to achieve exceptional, sustained results is more difficult to deliver than it is to discuss. Pursuing high-performance teams as a strategy for improved performance is messy and extremely challenging. But the size of the challenge is just one reason why the idea itself represents such an inviting approach for creating competitive advantage.

This book contains simple ideas that can revolutionize your team and its performance, but none of them will be possible without your leadership. At the end of this book, you'll have a decision to make: *What will you do next?*

In an attempt to help you answer that question, I've included some suggested action items and a High-Performance Team Assessment. I hope you'll find these tools helpful as you chart your course.

Get ready to multiply your leadership, leverage the talent of your people, and generate remarkable results . . . get ready for an amazing journey!

—Mark Miller

# Study the Best

Debbie was discouraged. Her new team was proving to be more of a challenge than she had bargained for. Up to this point in her career, she had enjoyed success after success. Most noteworthy, she had led her previous dysfunctional team “from worst to first.” This feat had not gone unnoticed by management. In fact, Jeff, the CEO, had given Debbie her recent promotion in part due to her success and in part because he saw tremendous potential in her.

However, in her new role, nothing seemed to be going her way. With her former team, she had looked forward to every new day, but now she went to work only to be confronted by a team with real issues. Not only that, Debbie was feeling the stress and strain of trying to do more and more, often with less resources. Beyond her team issues, she was faced with a growing mountain of e-mail; there seemed to be more meetings than ever; and if there was any time left, she still had customers to serve. She was tired. The pace of her life was out of control, and she wasn’t sure what to do about it.

Besides her immediate issues, she had heard rumors that scores of other leaders and their teams across the company were also struggling. Evidence of this could be seen as the customer base was eroding and the stock price was sliding.

Debbie knew that in her role, she was supposed to help the organization resolve these issues; but in her heart she knew that before she could help others, she would need to start with her leadership, her team, and her own life.

She decided to take the matter up with Jeff. Not only had he served as her mentor several years before, but he had continued to provide valuable counsel over the years. Thankfully, he always seemed to have the time—or make the time—to see her when it really mattered.

“I just don’t know what to do,” she admitted to him candidly.

“I understand, Debbie. You want things to work. You want your team to excel. That’s one of the traits we value about you.”

She beamed, despite the circumstances that had brought her to Jeff’s office.

“So how can I help?” Jeff asked.

“Well, you could tell me what you’ve done to create such an effective team. How do you achieve such alignment and outstanding performance from your executive team?”

Jeff thought carefully before responding. “I wish I had a magic formula to give you, but I don’t.” He paused. “Remember years ago when you asked me about the secret of great leaders?”

“I do. As it turned out, it was the best question I think I’ve ever asked.” Debbie was almost overwhelmed as she thought about how that single question, and Jeff’s response, changed her life and her leadership style forever.

“Today, I’m turning the tables,” Jeff said. “I need you to find the secret of great teams.”

“Where should I start?” Debbie asked.

“Study the best.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“Find teams that are doing it right. They don’t have to be teams in our company. You can go outside. Look anywhere you want. The truth is, we *need* answers.”

There was a tone in Jeff’s voice that Debbie had never heard before. She decided to probe a little further.



“Thanks for the advice, Jeff. Based on what you’re saying, combined with the rumors I’ve heard, it sounds like this assignment is much bigger than the issues I’m dealing with when it comes to my team.” There was clearly a question in her tone.

Jeff hesitated for just a second before he responded. “I thought you’d probably heard the buzz. Our company is in trouble. Thanks to increased competition, increased costs, and some other issues we’re trying to uncover, we’re struggling. We’re even worried about a hostile takeover bid. The answers that you discover in your quest to help your team excel may help other teams within our organization. Are you willing to take on that challenge?”

“I am!” Debbie replied confidently. “And I promise I won’t let you down!”

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Debbie took Jeff’s challenge back to her office and began to prepare for her team meeting. This sounded like the most important thing she had worked on during her career. In many ways, it was similar to the challenges that she had faced as a young leader, but this time they were multiplied a thousandfold. She now realized that it wasn’t just her team struggling; it was the entire organization.

She understood the assignment, but she wanted to get a better grasp of the underlying problem before she launched her work.

*How did we get in this situation?* she wondered.

To find the answer, she began to make a list. Unfortunately, the ideas flowed all too easily. She wrote the following:

*How did we get in the state of affairs we’re in today?*

- *More competition than ever.*
- *Increasing complexity in the business—it’s just harder than it used to be.*

- *More demanding customers—they have higher expectations than ever!*
- *Our leaders are struggling to get it all done—they have reached their capacity.*

Debbie decided quickly that her next step would be to involve her team in helping her “study the best.” She knew that would not be easy. Since she had left the Operations Group and become the head of Leadership Development, she had to work with what remained of a team that had never been very effective. Their next meeting was in two days, and Jeff’s new assignment would be the focus of the meeting.

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By 9:00, everyone had arrived for their weekly meeting, and Debbie said, “Good morning!” in her usual warm and personable style. “It’s really good to see all of you again. Let’s take a few minutes to reconnect. What’s going on in your life?”

One by one, members of the team shared an update. There seemed to be some reluctance at first, but as people began to open up a little, it was quickly apparent that what they wanted to talk about were things outside of work.

Tom bragged about his new grandbaby, with pictures, of course. Javier said that his mother was coming from his home country to visit—she’d be with him for a month. He told the team that he hadn’t seen her in two years.

Jo shared an update on her mom. The previous weekend, the family had placed her in hospice care—her illness was too severe for additional treatment. The group saw the sadness in Jo’s eyes. Although none of them had personally experienced what she was going through, they were trying to understand her pain.

After Jo finished, the team was quiet. Debbie was sensitive to the moment. “We all have a lot to be thankful for, and we all have a lot we need help with. I’m glad we have one another for the journey.”

There was a long silence. Everyone now had shared an update except Steve. Debbie looked at him to see if he wanted to say anything; he didn’t. Debbie decided to move the meeting forward. “I know you received the agenda for today’s meeting, but I’m going to make a change. As you’re all aware, the business has really been struggling. I met with Jeff on Friday, and he’s given us an assignment. He’s asked us to help take our teams across the organization to the next level.”

“What exactly does that mean?” asked Javier, in a respectful tone.

“Well,” Debbie said, “what do you guys think?”

“Okay, wait a minute,” Jo jumped into the conversation. “You met with Jeff? The fact that you’re asking for our input means he didn’t tell you, right?”

“Well, he told me part of the answer . . .”

Steve interrupted her in a tone that reflected his impatience with the conversation. “What *exactly* is the problem we’re actually trying to solve?”

Debbie ignored Steve’s sarcastic tone and thanked him for his question. Based on his question, she decided to take an opportunity to tell the team about some of the issues facing the business. She spoke briefly about complexity, competition, growing customer expectations, and leadership capacity constraints. Then she said, “So, Jeff believes that our teams are the best way for us to turn around our performance. Here’s something to think about: where do you think our teams are on a scale of 1 to 10?”

Bob joined the conversation. “That’s not a fair question.”

“Why not?” Debbie pushed for a response.

“We have hundreds of teams around the world. They are all over the board. Some are a 10 and others are a 1,” Bob said.

Javier said, “Some aren’t even a 1 yet.” They had talked about the state of teams before. It was widely known that although every business unit *said* they were organized in a team structure, in truth, many were not teams at all.

“Okay, exactly what is the assignment?” Then Jo attempted to answer her own question. “Are we supposed to help each team in the organization go to the next level—whatever that may be for them?”

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*Although every business unit said they were organized in a team structure, in truth, many were not teams at all.*

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“Yes, that’s part of it,” Debbie responded.

“There’s more?” Bob asked.

“Yes. Jeff challenged us to ‘study the best.’”

“And . . .” Jo paused.

Debbie finished her sentence: “We get to figure that out. We get to decide who we’ll learn from on this topic.”

“Don’t we already know the answer?” Javier said.

“Yeah,” Bob joined in. “Debbie, you’re a rock star around here. When you were in Operations, you took your team from worst to first. You had an amazing team back then.”

“And what are we, chopped liver?” Sally smiled.

“Chop, chop,” Steve muttered under his breath. Everyone ignored him.

“Jeff believes we’re the right team to take on this task, even though I told him that we’ve got a lot of room for improvement ourselves,” Debbie said. “He still insists that we can help the entire organization take our teams to the next level. And who knows? Maybe we’ll grow in the process.”

“So why can’t we just tell Jeff and the rest of the organization what you did in Operations?” Javier rephrased his question.

“Prophets are not accepted in their own land,” Sally said.

“Is that in the Bible?” Jo whispered to Tom.

“I don’t know, but if it’s not, it should be.” Tom grinned.

“You know what I mean,” Debbie continued. “We want to enhance the credibility of our message by validating it in other situations—inside our company and in other organizations.”

“So in summary . . .” Jo was always good at helping the group with closure. She went to the flip chart and wrote:

### **Our business challenges**

*Complexity, competition, customer expectations,  
and leadership capacity*

### **Our assignment**

*Help our leaders take their teams to the next level*

### **Our first step**

*Study the best*

“Great summary,” Debbie said.

“So who do we study?” Tom was curious.

“Let’s talk about that.” Debbie wanted the team’s input on this decision. She asked the group, “where do we see examples of Great Teams?”

This started a rather awkward brainstorming session and discussion. There were plenty of ideas. However, Debbie had to constantly challenge the group to suspend judgment. After a lengthy session, the team created a list of more than forty different organizations or groups in which the presence of a strong team was obvious. After an hour of debate, the group had shortened their list to ten options. They knew that was still too many, but it represented progress. Here’s what they had so far:

***Where do we see examples of great teams?***

Emergency Room Staff	Football Team
Firefighters	Special Forces in the Military
Orchestra	Auto Racing Team
Cycling Team	A Local Restaurant Company
A Large Church	Broadway Play Company

With that list made, the team had a brief discussion about the pros and cons of each of the options.

In the end, they decided to eliminate the football and cycling teams. Although they agreed they could certainly learn from both of these, they felt that traditional team sports as the predominant illustration for teamwork had been overused. They would look for their best practices in other fields.

“Let’s do this as a next step,” Debbie suggested. “What if we each do a little research on our own? Let’s think about

who we may know who could help us. We'll bring our findings to our next meeting. Then we can chase the hot leads.”

The team was still skeptical about Jeff's assignment. However, Debbie could sense the seed of excitement in their conversation. This project was going to help the company and their leaders; it would expand their own world as they looked outside their company for best practices; she was hopeful that it would help her team go to the next level; and it would probably be fun, too!

# Truth Is Truth

As the team left the room, Debbie had already decided she wanted to get a meeting on Jeff's calendar to get input on their list. He was really well connected, and she was confident he could make some introductions. To make their time more productive, she decided to send him an e-mail in advance.



Jeff,

Our team met today. We did some brainstorming, re: your encouragement to **study the best**. We've not yet finalized our choices. We're looking for input and connections. I'm going to get a short meeting on the calendar for us to talk about our next steps. To make that time more productive, here's what we're considering:

- Emergency Room Staff
- Firefighters
- Auto Racing Team
- A Local Restaurant Company
- Special Forces in the Military
- Orchestra
- A Large Church
- Broadway Play Company

I look forward to your input. We'll talk soon!

Deb



As she hit the Send key, she couldn't help but think about the options. She felt her team could learn a lot from all of these organizations. Any of them could help their teams move to the next level. She had so many questions. What would they learn? Would they hear the same things from each of these very different teams? How would the lessons learned match her experience? She sensed it was going to be an amazing journey.

Debbie was excited to find that Jeff was available for a meeting in just a few days. On the day of the meeting she went to his office, which had been her practice now for many years. There was something encouraging about the space. The unassuming décor and his welcoming spirit made it very inviting, the kind of place where collaboration and innovation were common occurrences.

"Good to see you again." Jeff greeted Debbie at the door with a warm smile and a firm handshake.

"Yes, it's good to see you again, too." Debbie smiled. "I know we just met last week, but I wanted to spend a few minutes to see what you think about the direction we're taking on this project."

"Thanks for checking in. I think you're on the right track. Anything else?"

Debbie knew this was Jeff's attempt at humor. She decided to play along.

"No, that's all. Thanks." She got up to leave.

"Wait," Jeff said.

"There's more?" Debbie exclaimed in an exaggerated tone—but with a smile.

"Yes. Don't forget *your* experience with this topic."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I still stand by the idea of 'study the best.' However, don't think about that exclusively as an 'outside-the-organization' idea. We need to study our best, as well. We can't

do that without learning from your success with your team in Operations. You brought a team from worst to first, and contrary to what you currently believe, you appear to be making great strides with your current team. I think you know a lot about building outstanding teams.”

“Thanks, Jeff. I feel very fortunate to have been part of a great team in the past. And . . . I pray that my current team can go to the next level as well. However, I don’t want to bias the process by injecting my past experience.”

“I have a thought and a suggestion.”

“Please,” Debbie said, notepad in hand.

“Don’t undervalue your experience. You have done

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*The keys to building great teams are universal.*

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what we’re trying to help others do. I admire your restraint regarding ‘the answer.’ I think we agree the answer may look different for different teams.

“Here’s my suggestion: Capture your thoughts on how to build a great team—based on what you learned while you were in Operations. You don’t even have to share them with anyone. The visits that you and your team are about to make will be even more interesting for you if you are able to compare what you find with your own experience. I’m actually quite confident that what you’re going to find are the same principles manifested in many different ways. Truth is truth. I believe the keys to building great teams are universal.”

“We’ll find out. Thanks, Jeff.”

This time as Debbie headed to the door, Jeff added one more thing. “If you decide to explore the Special Forces, I know someone who would help. I’ll send you an e-mail with his contact info and a brief bio.”

“Thanks! That would be very helpful.”

Debbie left feeling on track. She liked Jeff’s idea of capturing the key lessons from her past experiences. She also agreed with him that she shouldn’t share her answers with the team before they made their visits. She wanted to see what principles and practices they would discover without her input. She’d record her thoughts regarding what she believed to be true about creating a great team and put it in a sealed envelope. Then, she’d give it to one of her teammates to be opened when the team finished their work.

When Debbie returned to her workspace, she had already received an e-mail from Jeff. In typical form, Jeff had not only helped, but he had helped in a major way. She read the e-mail and was excited about the possibilities.

Deb,

Here’s the name of someone who might be helpful:

Brigadier General Roger Grant (retired)

Special Forces Commander

35 years of distinguished service; served in Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and probably a lot of other places he can’t tell you about. Roger and I have become friends. We serve on the board of a nonprofit together. If you decide you want to arrange a visit, I’ll be happy to make the introduction.

Let me know how I can serve you. Thanks for your leadership on this project!

Jeff



Debbie thought, *Wow!* She would want the team to weigh in on this, but it was certainly an incredible lead.

At the next team meeting, they began as usual with a time of catching up. There was again a mix of business and personal information. Jo reported that her mother's health was declining rapidly.

"We're sorry to hear that," Tom offered. "Anything we can do to help?"

"Well . . . I'm not sure right now, but thanks for asking."

Javier added, "You don't need to do this all by yourself. Let us know what we can do."

"I will. I'll keep you posted. Right now, it's mostly waiting."

Debbie was glad the team was trying to help Jo. This was a huge sign of progress. This attitude of caring about people as people, not just coworkers, was one of the things she always tried to nurture in the team—a willingness, even an eagerness, to help one another.

Debbie looked at their agenda and said, "We've got one big topic today. Where will we go to study the best? Has anyone had any insights or found any good leads?"

The group began to share one by one what their independent research had revealed. Debbie shared the contact that Jeff had provided.

The team quickly decided not to pursue several of the remaining ideas. The list was getting shorter and more focused as the team continued to debate each of the finalists.

"I've got a great contact with the racing team. It's a NASCAR hookup," said Sally. "My husband's company is one of the sponsors of a car. He thinks we can get access to the cars, the drivers, and the owners."

"That sounds easy," Javier said. "Let's do that one."

The group agreed.

“Okay. Somebody help me with the restaurant company. That feels too different from us. Besides, what could we possibly learn from them?” Jo didn’t conceal her concern regarding this option.

“Good question,” Debbie said. “Any responses?”

Tom said, “I have to confess, I felt the same way as Jo two weeks ago. However, I did some research, and I’ve changed my mind.”

“Why?” Jo asked.

“Three reasons: These guys are good. They’ve won numerous national awards for food and service. They execute with excellence—consistently. They’re in a high-turnover industry, just like we are. Yet, they’ve figured out how to do this in thousands of locations all over the world. We have to figure that out, too. We have operations in thirty-five states and fourteen countries. We’re not as big as they are, but they’ve figured out how to make teams work at a high level in a decentralized model.”

“That’s a compelling argument, I think,” Jo said. “I’m in.” Everyone else agreed.

“So that leaves the emergency room. What do we want to do with that one?” Javier asked.

“I don’t like blood,” said Steve.

“Me neither,” said Jo. “Besides, I’ve spent way too much time in hospitals in the last three years.”

Debbie said, “Here’s my proposal: Let’s go with the Special Forces, the NASCAR team, and the restaurant. If we need more information after that, we can always revisit our list. And if we choose the emergency room . . . .”

Steve interrupted, “I’ll let someone have my seat on that trip.”

“Me, too,” Jo added.

Debbie closed the conversation. “That sounds like a plan. Let’s get started.”

this material has been excerpted from

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