



THE ESSENTIAL ACTIONS TO BUILDING UNSTOPPABLE TEAMS

Alden Mills

Care is the soil from which teams grow; a leader's focus provides the fertilizer.

Unpack that statement, and you'll understand what it takes to grow a group of individuals into an Unstoppable Team. I get it, people aren't plants—although sometimes you might find yourself wondering what to do with that “bad apple” before it spoils the whole “bunch.” But, as you can probably already tell, I like using analogies and I love telling stories to get my points across. They are relatable and memorable, and after all, if you want to learn something, you first need to be able to remember it before you can practice it. So if you're at all interested in how to accomplish more by building teams that will break down walls to achieve the goal, then read on, because I'm going to share the four essential actions required to transform a gaggle of individuals into an unstoppable team. These lessons learned come my 25 years of leading Navy SEALs, start-ups (one was the fastest growing consumer products company in the US), non-profits, and community action groups. Spoiler Alert! The four actions are the same no matter what field, industry, environment, or sector in which you wish to build a team. If your team involves humans, then your focus is on building relationships where trust, direction, contribution, and ownership are the goals. It's easier said than done, but in the paragraphs that follow, I'll share my framework for how I've successfully built teams that are ten times more powerful than a disconnected group of individuals halfheartedly attempting to muddle through the day.

Before we get into team building, there are three principles I want you to be aware of: the Action Formula, the Mirror Effect, and the Care Boomerang. These three principles are critical drivers to building and leading teams. The four essential actions will not be helpful to you without first understanding these critical principles of how and why humans do what we do. This isn't intended to answer all the mysteries of human action, but knowing these three principles will dramatically help you in finding success building and leading teams.

The Action Formula

Have you ever thought about what makes you take an action? I'm not talking about a reactionary one like what happens when you touch something hot or backing away from the ledge that's too high; I'm referring to an intentional action like the ones you decide to make or not towards your goal. How is it that some can keep taking actions toward a goal when others who have similar capabilities decide to give up? Persistence is the name of the goal achieving game, and knowing what goes into making an action happen can go a long way toward winning the goal game.

I call it the Action Formula but fear not: it's not a complicated formula. It's simple, just hard to do consistently. An action is generated from two drivers or variables: thoughts and feelings. The actual end result, meaning literally the movements made, is dependent on the stamina of your body. The last part, the execution, is the simple part. Your body (bones, muscles, nerves, etc.) is a sensory system for your brain—your body obeys your brain (first thing taught in SEAL Team training by the way!). If you're not careful, your brain will obey your body. The complicated part of taking an action comes before your body goes to work, in the conversation between your head and your heart, between your thoughts and your feelings.

What you think about, and how you feel, are the main deciding factors on what command you want to give your body (i.e. what kind of action to take—such as press on or pull back). Here's the formula in really simple terms, where “thoughts” are expressed as “T” and “feelings” expressed as “F,” and your body's overall condition or stamina expressed as “S.”

S (T + F) = Action

T and F are the deciding factors of either a positive or negative action, and stamina is your limiting co-efficient. If your goal is to climb a mountain and if you're mentally and emotionally focused on making it happen then the only thing left is your physical bodily limits (i.e., it's fitness level). The rub is the battle that goes on inside of your head—the battle between “I can” and “I can't.” Those would be your thoughts. Your feelings can influence how you think, in particular how much you care about something. And caring can trump pretty much any negative thought so long as you make a connection for yourself on why it's so important to you. What happens is many forgot why they care, and when that happens they stop daring. They stop going all-in; they stop giving it all they have.

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Win the battle in your head and you've won 80% of the challenge. The rest is taking the action and repeating it. I know it sounds simple, but it's hard in practice because life gets in the way. Peer pressure and distractions can prevent you from achieving your potential. Succeeding isn't normal, and people can be afraid or jealous, or both, because people have a natural inclination to fear those things that aren't normal—that aren't within their comfort zone of control.

Actions produce results, and your ability to take repeated actions are the key to finding success. Repeated actions, also called persistence, is the difference maker between succeeding and failing. All too often you hear about folks who were so close to success but they gave up just before finding it. Taking the first action is a big step, but the biggest step are all those seemingly little steps that must be taken day after day after day toward your goal—those are the ones that can be the hardest because many times you don't notice any progress. And when that happens, you get demoralized, you lose steam, you feel discouraged. As helpful as it is to know the simple formula of taking an action: S (T + F) the next step—how to keep taking an action after the first one—is even more important.

In a word, it's called "focus." Your focus determines the action you take. Feel tired? If you keep your focus on how tired you feel guess what happens? Not much. Feel Fired UP? Think you'll feel negative or unmotivated? Doubtful. More than likely you'll be moved to take all kinds of actions. The key is knowing that your focus is the driver to making action happen.

Imagine for a moment you've been working out for 30 days, you step on the scale and notice you haven't lost a pound. Where your focus goes will determine how you handle your next action. If your focus is on how much you sacrificed, how much you have given up with no results, you'll find yourself pretty quickly saying "screw it, losing weight isn't for me. Time for Ben & Jerry's!" The result? You give up or, at the very least, the focus on your past efforts leads you to re-establish bad eating habits which set you back.

Shift your focus from what the scale just said to trying on your skinny pants, and you notice they are looser than 30 days ago. Then you ask yourself “why?” Your brain goes to work and says to you “I remember hearing that a pound of muscle is 5 times smaller in volume than fat. Hey, good job self, you may not be losing weight but you are getting leaner and stronger!” The result? You are energized to hit the next 30 days even harder. You look in the mirror and try on old clothes more than step on the scale. You keep working out!

Focus directs your energy, and energy makes actions happen. Your focus is the secret weapon to staying on course versus running your proverbial ship aground. So what drives your focus, you ask? The building block to the most powerful emotion there is: CARE. What you care about decides what you focus on, and what you focus on determines your actions. Don't care about a subject in school? Gee, how do you think your grades will be in that subject? Conversely, find a subject you really care about and you won't watch the clock, you'll work on it night and day, because it's important to you. Care bonds your thoughts and your feelings into a singular focus that turbocharges your ability to work. Care and focus are swim buddies (a Navy SEAL's smallest team: two people)—between the two of them, they dictate your direction.

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The Mirror Effect

Okay, brief summary here before I go into the second principle: actions come from your thoughts and feelings and how much action you take, and how long you take it is dependent on your physical ability (i.e. physical stamina) and your focus. You may ask why this is important and what's it got to do with team building? Good question! Here's the answer in a nutshell: how you lead yourself is how you'll lead others. It's called the Mirror Effect. Your team actions are a direct reflection of the team leader's actions.

The very conversation you are having between your head and your heart is most likely a very similar one that your teammates are having as well. If you cannot lead that "conversation" inside of you, how will you lead it with your team? Furthermore, your focus directs the team's focus. This is critical, for focus funnels energy to make actions happen. If you lose your focus or aren't clear on the team's focus then, like a mirror, these reflective "actions" will produce unfocused results. The Mirror Effect is exactly why all SEAL leaders (officers) go through exactly the same training as SEAL enlisted men. SEAL officers (I was one) are evaluated daily on their ability to lead themselves and others. And they aren't just evaluated by instructors, they are also reviewed by their peers—their future teammates—the enlisted SEALs.

Civilian leading is no different than SEAL leading. Leaders must first understand that their ability to lead themselves... and HOW they lead themselves is reflected upon those that they are responsible for leading. All too often, people in positions of authority think they can give themselves a "pass" on doing something only to discover that their teammates are emulating their actions and taking that same "pass" for themselves as well. How you take actions directly impacts how your team will take actions. Please understand, you can have all the great intentions in the world, but it's your actions that matter and get mirrored.

The reason I've explained these two principles first is so when you embrace the four actions that follow you'll be set up for success in building and leading your own Unstoppable Teams!

Remember, your actions as a leader are the fertilizer for team growth. Lose your focus and take ineffective actions and you find yourself struggling to grow a group of individuals into a team. However, put your focus on taking actions that matter, and you'll discover your people growing deep roots while reaching and growing to new heights.

The Care Boomerang

"No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care."

—President Teddy Roosevelt

One of my favorite all-time quotations because it's so true. Think about it for a moment. When are you truly engaged with someone else—when they are talking about themselves or when they are asking about you? Even better, how do you feel when they say "how can I help you?" What's your instinct when someone shows interest in you versus interest in themselves? You know the answer. You lean forward, you shift your weight from the back of your heels to the balls of your feet, your mind races thinking on how to put to use this person's willingness to help. More importantly, how do you feel when this person follows through with their request of helping you and actually provides you with valuable assistance? You naturally want to repay their efforts with efforts of your own to help them. I call this principle the Care Boomerang. I'm certain there's a more scientific phrase for it, but the fact is we humans are wired to reciprocate with care. (Okay, not all of us—there's a very, very, VERY small percentage of humans that don't respond to care, and those people are called psychopaths.) Think of the simplest of care-based-acts, such as holding a door for a person. Almost on instinct (which it is!) that person will turn around and hold the door for someone else.

The Care Boomerang might come immediately back to you on the door holding example, but when it comes to caring for teammates they will return your care to you. It might not seem like a quid pro quo return on care investment at first, and you'll most likely have to make the first care investments (i.e. throwing the boomerang), but over time if your care is authentic and you're caring without expectation of return, you will receive the boomerang effect of care. How it comes back to you will depend on your focus, for the recipients of your care will want to reciprocate by bestowing you with care that is meaningful to you. Hence, the importance of understanding the Action Formula and the Mirror Effect!

Teams are nothing more than a collection of relationships that have been collectively and consciously focused on accomplishing a common goal. Building any relationship requires our most fundamental emotion: care. Love, our most powerful human emotion, comes from care. Care, and how you consistently demonstrate your care for your team, is the deciding factor between average and awesome performance. When care exists people naturally shift their selfish wants to the teams required selfless desires. One of the major differences between groups and teams is the willingness for teammates to relinquish their selfish motivations and adopt a selfless focus on helping the team achieve its goal. This is no small feat.

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We are also wired to look out for ourselves, a polar opposite driver to what a team requires. The only way we willingly supplant our selfish drivers for selfless ones is when care is present. When people feel cared for, they shift their focus from worrying about themselves to figuring out how they can help the team. This is when the magic and the force multiplying effect occurs. Caring leads to daring.

The Care Boomerang is unbelievably powerful. How powerful you ask? Well, let me tell you a story that I call the “Story of the three Michaels.”

On September 29, 2006, a 25-year-old Navy SEAL petty officer named Michael Monsoor was on a patrol in Ar Ramadi, Iraq. His responsibility that day was to provide machine gun cover fire and support for three Navy SEAL snipers while also providing training to Iraqi Army soldiers. This particular day’s mission was to prevent the enemy from conducting an attack in a highly contested area of the city of Ramadi. The squad of 4 SEALs and 3 Iraqis took up a fighting position on top of a small building. The snipers went to work eliminating enemy targets who were positioning themselves for a counterattack on the small SEAL/Iraqi team. While snipers engaged the enemy, Michael protected the snipers. He provided cover fire as well as guarding the only exit on the rooftop. During the gun battle, an unseen insurgent threw a grenade into their position that bounced off of Michael’s chest. Without hesitation, Michael jumped on the grenade. He lived for 30 minutes before paying the ultimate sacrifice. His actions saved the lives of his three teammates and the Iraqi soldiers.

What made Michael jump on the grenade? We don’t train people to jump on grenades in SEAL Team. There is no “standard operating procedure” for placing your body over a live grenade. Why would Michael knowingly sacrifice his life when he could have saved it by jumping down the exit ladder? Michael Monsoor used his body for a shield for the same reasons another Michael nine months earlier did something similar.

On June 28, 2005, Lt Michael Murphy and three SEAL teammates were conducting a mission deep behind enemy lines in a mountain range of Afghanistan. The team's position was comprised by local unarmed villagers. Lt. Murphy made the call to let the villagers go, knowing they would most likely alert nearby Taliban forces of his team's presence. The SEAL's mission quickly changed from "hunting" to being "hunted" by over 50 Taliban fighters. A two-hour gun battle ensued. The enemy flanked the four-man fire team on three sides and pushed them into a steep ravine that blocked their communication signals to reach help. The team's only hope for survival was to alert their teammates who were at base on the other side of the mountain range. Running dangerously low on ammunition and with all of his teammates wounded, Michael chose to leave his protected location and expose himself to direct enemy fire. While transmitting his location to SEALs at the nearest base, Michael dropped the radio when he was shot in the back. He composed himself, calmly picked the transmitter up and continued to relay his situation to his awaiting teammates. After completing the radio transmission, Michael made it back to his three wounded teammates and continued the fight. His brothers from the nearby base mounted a helicopter rescue operation in broad daylight against an unknown enemy size and into some of the most unforgiving terrain in the world. The main helicopter carrying 16 special operation warriors was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade near the battle scene of Michael's team. All 16 men in the helicopter perished. Shortly thereafter, Michael and two of his teammates died, along with an estimated 35 Taliban enemy fighters. It was the single greatest loss of life for the Navy SEAL Teams since World War 2.

Like the first Michael, a similar question arises, what makes someone sacrifice their life for others? In SEAL Team, we don't practice jumping on grenades nor do we practice running into the line of fire. So why did he do it? Because there was a third Michael, named Michael Thornton, who thirty-three years earlier did exactly the same thing Michael Murphy did, except this time it was an enlisted man attempting to save the life of his platoon commander, Tom Norris.

On October 31, 1972, Petty Officer Michael Thornton, LT Tom Norris, and 5 South Vietnamese special operators landed on the wrong beach in North Vietnam for what was supposed to be a reconnaissance mission. Shortly after swimming ashore, they were confronted with over 50 heavily armed enemy troops. By accident, one of the South Vietnamese engaged the enemy, alerting them of the team's presence. The small squad retreated quickly to the sea while under heavy enemy fire and as they started to swim out of the surf, Michael turned to ask one of his Vietnamese teammates where the "boss" LT Tom Norris was, and learned that was dead—shot in head, somewhere on beach. Michael refused to leave Tom behind, and returned to the beach to retrieve him. His officer was shot in head, unconscious, but was actually alive. For the next two and half hours, Michael swam his unconscious platoon leader out to sea for an eventual rescue. His actions saved the life of Tom Norris, who despite his wounds made a full recovery. More remarkable still, as they would both discover a few years later, Michael's actions were historically unique, for it was the first time a Medal of Honor recipient had saved the life of another Medal of Honor recipient. Tom Norris had unknowingly been up for the Medal of Honor for another mission he led months earlier.

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All three Michaels received our Nation's highest honor, the Medal of Honor. They are Navy SEAL heroes. Michael Monsoor and Michael Murphy's actions of bravery and courage have been honored with two state-of-the-art Guided Missile Destroyers with their names on them. So why did they do it? Why did they consciously give their lives so others could live? I know their kind, and I know why they did it, and I know there are many others like them that would have done the same thing. As a former Navy SEAL platoon commander, I had the honor of serving with lots of like-minded "Michaels." They did not give their lives for recognition or monetary gain or the naming of a ship. They did it because they cared so deeply for their teammates and what their teammates stand for that the thought of letting them down was unthinkable. Their level of care approaches the same intensity of love that a father or mother has for their children. They did it because of the promise they made to each other, because their team was their family, because of what their teams stand for. They willingly made these sacrifices because they knew of others who had given of themselves and made similar sacrifices. They did it because breaking their promise to their teammates was a worse outcome than keeping their promise.

I share these three stories to demonstrate the ultimate in team sacrifice: giving your life so others may live. The point is not to pressure others into giving similar sacrifices, but instead to show the power of what I call an Unstoppable Team. These three "Michaels" span more than 30 years of service and they all served in different SEAL platoons, yet all performed similar acts of uncommon valor. Though their circumstances were all different, their actions remained the same. Why? What's the common thread? Sure, you can say the obvious "they were all SEALs," but beneath the bravado, the commando mentality, the SEAL Team ethos is about the exceptional amount of care we have each other. There's a confidence that comes from this level of care that can be best explained as "I've got your back." That knowledge propels each teammate to never let the other one down—no matter what situation you're in.

I've had the privilege to build and lead several different types of teams that I would call Unstoppable Teams. From building and leading three SEAL platoons to creating America's fastest growing consumer products company (in 2009) to leading a 150 person charity group to chairing a \$30MM bond campaign for our local school, all of these teams, though different in direction, are all the same in principle—they were CARE-based teams, and they all shared a similar element of "I've got your back." These teams didn't come from luck or good fortune, they were galvanized from purpose-driven actions (learned over years of making mistakes!) that built trust, direction, contribution, and ownership. I'm not the best at memorizing things so I built a memory aid to help you (and me) always remember the actions required to build Unstoppable Teams. The memory aid is CARE, and the letters stand for:

- C – Connect
- A – Achieve
- R – Respect
- E – Empower

Each of these essential actions is composed of several smaller actions that, when done in concert, will help you build an Unstoppable Team. These essential actions build trust, set direction, create environments of contribution and develop team owners. Here's the thing, these are actions are a loop—I call it the CARE Loop. They are a loop because caring is never done, is not a destination but a continual human journey of helping and serving others. For, when they feel cared for, people on your team don't just care for their teammates, they also care for their customers, their team contributors (i.e. vendors, supplier, etc), and the communities in which they operate. Great team leaders broaden their team's boundaries to include these three "C's"—Customers, Contributors and Communities—and when this occurs, teams transition into unstoppable forces with both internal and external teammates participating in helping the team achieve.

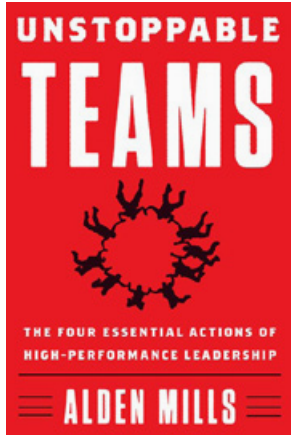
The CARE Loop, the 3 “C’s”, numerous colorful stories and much more await you in my new book “Unstoppable Teams: the four essential actions of high-performance leadership.” I offer you this article because I care deeply about helping as many who are willing to build unstoppable teams to tackle the great challenges of the 21st century. From here on out, the challenges we face will only be conquered by unstoppable teams committed to caring for each other, for their communities, and for the greater tasks at hand. I’m an eternal optimist, for I have witnessed firsthand the collective power of the human race at its finest, and I know for certain there is no obstacle too great for an unstoppable team.

Go forth, team-up, and make greatness happen! 🚀





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About the author

Alden Mills is a three-time Navy SEAL platoon commander, and was the CEO of Perfect Fitness, one of the fastest growing companies in America. A longtime entrepreneur, with more than forty patents, and more than twenty-five years of experience working with high-performing teams, he lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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