# Leading Eclectic Teams

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Who are you and what are your eclectic teams?

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## Objectives

- Explore the five levers that unlock eclectic team performance
- Evaluate different practical actions that can be taken
- Consider the importance of context

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## Eclectic teams outperform homogeneous ones — but only when deliberately led

- Difference increases cognitive range and innovation potential
- Without integration, diversity produces friction not performance
- Leadership behaviour determines which outcome prevails

Example:

"Companies in the bottom quartile for both gender and ethnic/cultural diversity were 29% less likely to achieve above-average profitability, than were all other companies in our data set.

In short, not only were they not leading, they were lagging."

McKinsey 2018

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"It is the way in which leaders apply leadership practices, rather than the actual practices themselves, that demonstrates their ability to respond to the *context* in which they work."
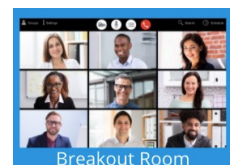
(Day et al 2000)

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# Organisational culture needs managing

"The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.

If you do not manage culture, it manages you, and you may not even be aware of the extent to which this is happening."

Edgar Schein



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## Eclectic difference extends beyond demographics to mindset, discipline, and power

- Cognitive styles (analytical, relational, strategic, operational)
- Professional "fields" (academic, pastoral, finance, operations)
- Risk appetite, status, influence, and authority structures
- Visible diversity ≠ performance diversity

- What else?

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# Leadership should be about influencing people in a positive way.
# Without trust there is no influence and without influence there is no leadership.


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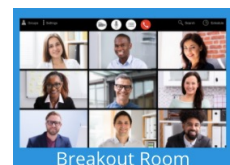
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# Building relational trust enables productive challenge and faster resolution

"When people believe you understand them, they give you permission to influence them."

(Richard Mullender)

"Psychotherapy research shows that when individuals feel listened to, they tend to listen to themselves more carefully and to openly evaluate and clarify their own thoughts and feelings. In addition, they tend to become less defensive and oppositional and more willing to listen to other points of view."

(Chris Voss: Never split the difference)

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# Trust grows when leaders model boundaries, reliability, accountability, integrity, non-judgment, and generosity.

Brené Brown – BRAVING

B – Boundaries (clear and respected)
R – Reliability (consistently doing what you say you're going to do)
A – Accountability (own, apologise and make amends for mistakes)
V – Vault (hold shared things in confidence)
I – Integrity (courage over comfort, right over fun, fast or easy, practising, not just professing, your values)
N – Nonjudgement (no judging, as well as the ability to ask for help)
G – Generosity (make generous assumptions in trying times)

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## Performance follows a predictable pattern: difference → tension → breakthrough or breakdown

- Initial friction is natural and productive
- Avoidance leads to fragmentation
- Integration leads to insight and stronger decisions
- Leaders must normalise productive discomfort

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## Most eclectic teams stall because invisible power dynamics remain unmanaged

- Different forms of capital (expertise, budget, influence, reputation)
- Status hierarchies shape whose voice carries weight
- Some functions dominate discussion unintentionally
- Silence often signals risk, not disengagement

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## Leaders must shift from referee to integrator

- Move from conflict management to perspective synthesis
- Surface assumptions explicitly
- Translate across professional "languages"
- Anchor disagreement to shared purpose

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# Psychological safety is the critical performance multiplier in eclectic teams

- Only a minority feel safe admitting mistakes
- Fear drives self-protection and guarded contribution
- Safety increases risk-taking, learning, and candour
- Safety does not mean lowering standards

Only **10%** of managers and individual contributors firmly believe that if they make a mistake, it won't be held against them. This leads to an undercurrent of fear and self-protection that weakens trust and team cohesion.

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# Psychological safety enables candid risk-taking, accelerating learning, innovation, accountability, and sustained high performance.

Psychological safety is a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

*It means people feel able to:*

- Speak up with ideas or concerns
- Admit mistakes
- Ask questions
- Challenge decisions
- Disagree respectfully

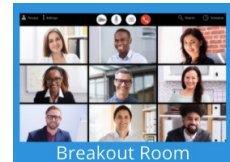— without fear of humiliation, punishment, or loss of status.

Psychological safety is **not**:

- Being nice all the time
- Lowering standards
- Avoiding accountability
- Consensus decision-making

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# How do you create psychological safety?


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### 1. Frame Work as Learning, Not Performance Theatre

- If people believe the goal is to "look competent," they will hide risk.

Instead:

- Say explicitly: *"We are solving complex problems; we will not get everything right."*
- Normalise iteration.
- Distinguish between **learning mistakes** and **negligence**.
- Psychological safety thrives where uncertainty is acknowledged.

### 2. Model Fallibility First

- Leaders must go first.
- Examples:
- "I may be missing something."
- "I got that wrong."
- "What am I not seeing?"
- Status reduces safety unless the leader redistributes it.

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### 3. Invite Input — Specifically and Structurally

- General questions like *"Any thoughts?"* don't work.

Instead:

- "What are the risks we haven't discussed?"
- "Who sees this differently?"
- Round-robin contribution formats.
- Anonymous pre-meeting input for sensitive topics.
- Structure reduces dominance bias.

### 4. Respond Productively to Bad News

- Your reaction determines future silence.
- When someone raises a concern:
- Thank them.
- Explore, don't defend.
- Separate the person from the issue.
- Avoid visible irritation.
- One defensive response can undo months of progress.

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### 5. Balance Safety with Accountability

- High safety + low standards = comfort zone
  Low safety + high standards = anxiety zone
  High safety + high standards = performance zone
- Make standards explicit:
- "We expect excellence — and open challenge."
- "Disagreement is part of quality."

### 6. Reduce Status Signals

- Don't let the most senior speak first.
- Rotate facilitation.
- Publicly value quieter contributors.
- Ensure decision rights are clear.
- Safety declines when power imbalances dominate.

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**7. Reward Voice, Not Just Results**

- Celebrate:
- Constructive dissent
- Early error reporting
- Intelligent challenge
- Integration across functions
- What you reward becomes cultural signal.

**8. Repair Quickly After Conflict**

- Psychological safety is fragile.
- If tension escalates:
- Address it openly.
- Reset norms.
- Reaffirm shared purpose.
- Avoid pretending it didn't happen.

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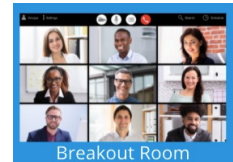
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# Micro-behaviours, not policies, create psychological safety

- Invite dissent before consensus
- Model fallibility and curiosity
- Equalise airtime intentionally
- Separate idea critique from personal critique

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# Eclectic collaboration improves when decision rights are explicit

- Clarify who recommends, decides, and executes
- Distinguish debate from decision
- Prevent power by default
- Avoid consensus paralysis

| | |
|---|---|
| **R** | **Responsible:** <br>• Who is/ will be doing this task? <br>• Who is assigned to work on this task? |
| **A** | **Accountable:** <br>• Whose head will roll if it goes wrong? <br>• Who has the authority to make the big decisions? |
| **C** | **Consulted:** <br>• Is there anyone who can tell me more about this task? <br>• Are any stakeholders already identified? |
| **I** | **Informed:** <br>• Anyone whose work depends in this task; <br>• Anyone who has to be kept informed about progress. |

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# High-performing eclectic teams design structured disagreement

**Why You Don't Want to Be Microsoft CEO**



- Red team / blue team debates
- "What are we missing?" discipline
- Rotate devil's advocate role
- Require cross-functional endorsement before final decisions

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# Managing tension constructively improves decision quality

**Healthy disagreement strengthens outcomes when handled well**
- Make trade-offs explicit
- Separate people from problems
- Use agreed escalation routes

NEFIART
(Name, Example, Feelings, Important, Accept, Resolve, Them).

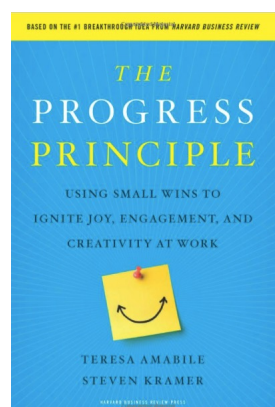*Susan Scott: Fierce Conversations*

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## Small, focused actions can significantly improve collaboration within one term

**Quick wins build momentum and confidence**

- Introduce one cross-functional forum
- Agree shared outcomes
- Clarify decision rights for one process
- Pilot shared KPIs



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**Collaborative Professionalism**

| | What we are doing now | What we could/ should be doing |
|---|---|---|
| Sharing | | |
| Trusting | | |
| Co-creating | | |
| Learning | | |
| Challenging | | |
| Critiquing | | |
| Including | | |
| Empowering | | |
| Debating | | |

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## Integration requires balancing competing forms of capital (power)

- Educational judgement
- Operational feasibility
- Financial sustainability
- Safeguarding and wellbeing priorities
- Performance emerges when these are aligned, not ranked.

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## Leaders must consciously elevate minority perspectives

- Identify whose voice is underrepresented
- Protect dissent during early-stage thinking
- Reward constructive challenge
- Measure contribution quality, not volume

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# Eclectic teams succeed when shared purpose overrides professional identity

- Define the non-negotiable mission
- Make trade-offs transparent
- Align incentives to collective outcomes
- Celebrate integrated wins

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# Five levers unlock eclectic team performance

- Clear shared purpose
- Explicit decision architecture
- Structured debate
- Psychological safety norms
- Accountability for integration

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## Leading eclectic teams is less about harmony and more about disciplined integration

- Tension is not failure
- Silence is risk
- Integration is a leadership skill
- Eclectic advantage is designed, not accidental

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# Stay in touch

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