

Beyond Authority: Navigating Challenges, Earning Trust, and Building High-Performance Teams in FSP and Outsourced Delivery Models

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ABSTRACT:

In today's dynamic clinical research landscape, effective leadership is no longer defined by position alone—it demands emotional intelligence, adaptability, and inclusivity. This paper explores the nuanced challenges faced by leaders assuming new responsibilities - navigating the complexities of managing diverse personalities, fostering team cohesion, and driving compliance in both functional service provider (FSP) and outsourcing delivery models. With a focus on real-world lessons learned, it delves into strategies for gaining buy-in for routine processes, earning trust without authority, and managing both neurodivergent and neurotypical team members. This work includes experiences of leading a functionally distinct team, managing difficult personalities in low-visibility settings, and maintaining stability in rapidly evolving environments. Emphasizing practical tools for conflict resolution, inclusive team dynamics, and remote leadership, this paper offers a candid, experience-driven perspective on how human-centered leadership can effectively "put out fires" and build resilient, high-performing teams.

INTRODUCTION

Technical expertise is no longer the golden ticket to leadership success in clinical trials. The evolving ecosystem—driven by globalization, decentralized teams, FSP partnerships, and diverse workforces—demands a more human approach. Managing the complex dynamics of FSP & outsourced models revealed that the challenges were not just logistical but deeply interpersonal.

This paper shares a practical account of leading through ambiguity and tension. We will journey through the key themes of earning trust without authority, fostering psychological safety, and resolving conflicts - particularly in environments where high bill rates do not always mean high performance, and where cultural and neurodivergent dynamics reshape traditional team structures.

LEADERSHIP WITHOUT AUTHORITY: CHALLENGES IN DIFFERENT DELIVERY MODELS

Leading without formal authority requires navigating influence over enforcement. This is particularly true within a Functional Service Provider (FSP) model, where the boundaries between sponsor, vendor, and contractor roles are often unclear. One major challenge is the inconsistent communication across different resources—miscommunication can undermine team morale and strain client-vendor relationships.

Operating in low-visibility environments adds another layer of complexity. Much of the leadership in FSP settings happens behind the scenes, and missteps may go unnoticed until they have significant consequences, potentially jeopardizing long-term partnerships.

Securing buy-in for routine processes is particularly challenging when leading inherited teams with ingrained habits or when implementing new protocols.

In these moments, the key is not to command, but to connect.

EARNING TRUST

To lead effectively, it is imperative to build trust through consistency, visibility, and empathy.

Strategies that worked:

- Establishing a cadence of 1:1: Most powerful tools of communication. These offered insight into both professional roadblocks and personal motivators. They were not status updates, but relationship-building conversations. Professional and personal issues were considered thereby building trust, uncovering obstacles to performance, providing more effective support.
- Recognition & Documentation: Celebrating win-big or small—motivated team members. Constructive feedback, documented specifically and kindly, helped transform behavior without shaming.
- Creating a Safe Environment: From anonymous surveys to open-door policies, make space for honest dialogue. Many from non-expressive cultures were silently struggling, so proactively invite conversation, especially when morale dipped.

- **Understanding Cultural Nuances:** In global teams, dissatisfaction can manifest in culturally coded ways. Recognizing helps avoid misinterpretations and support team members effectively.
- **Visible Leadership:** Show up, even virtually. Presence matters. Whether it was attending team huddles or joining informal Teams channels or 1:1s, signal, “You matter. I am here.”
- **Balance Optimism with Realism:** During turbulent times, sugarcoating damages credibility. Deliver tough news transparently, paired with action steps and support.

BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

A team cannot achieve high performance without a bedrock of psychological safety, from which structure, clarity, and success can emerge.

What Made the Difference:

- **Investing in Training & Planning:** Good performance does not happen by accident. Clear trackers, SOPs, communication plans, and training modules made success repeatable and visible.
- **Frequent Feedback:** Regular feedback helped team members correct course early, not after damage was done.
- **Development Plans with Accountability:** If someone was struggling, co-create action plans—and make sure to follow through. Credibility is lost when one does not revisit promises.
- **Play to Strengths, Not Just Roles:** One team member with ADHD excelled at high-pressure problem-solving but struggled with long-term planning. Shift responsibilities to let them thrive—and the results were exponential.
- **Tailored leadership:** Not everyone thrives under the same level of autonomy. Adjust leadership style to match comfort levels with independence.
- **Shared Goals and Clarity:** Vague goals kill momentum. Build clarity into every project, from purpose to deliverables. When every member understands the “why,” performance skyrockets.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Teams should not be afraid of conflict. This leads to artificial harmony, where important issues go unaddressed. Recognizing and managing emotions can prevent escalation and facilitate more productive discussions. But without trust, conflict becomes dangerous, leading to passive aggression, withdrawal, or attrition.

The following principles can be followed for crucial conversations:

- **Start with Heart:**
 - Ask yourself what it is you really want (for the team, the outcome)
 - What do you not want to happen (e.g.: emotional explosion, withdrawal, silence, passive aggression)
- **Restore Psychological Safety:**
 - Watch for signs of silence/ passive aggressiveness or violence (aggressive, manipulations, attacks)
 - Restore safety, use language like I am not accusing you, I am trying to understand.
- **STATE your path:**
 - **Share the facts.**
 - **Tell your interpretation of the story.**
 - **Ask for their interpretation of the story.**
 - **Talk tentatively (stay open minded)**
 - **Encourage disagreements or correction.**
 - **Explore their path:**
 - Ask
 - Mirror (you seem disappointed – did I get that right?)
 - Paraphrase
 - Priming (use a tentative tone – I am picking up some hesitation regarding the presentation, is there any concern regarding budget?)
- **Move to action:**
 - What is the action plan – who will do what?
 - By when
 - How will it be followed up on?

This approach not only resolves active conflicts but prevents future ones through new processes and deeper understanding.

Based on context and emphasis conflict resolution is relevant in both building high performance teams and building resilience in teams.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

In teams striving for high performance, effective conflict resolution is essential to:

- Sustain clear communication and strong collaboration.

- Preventing productivity loss due to interpersonal friction.
- Promote healthy debate that drives innovation.

Result: Leveraging disagreements to enhance team effectiveness and output.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE CONTEXT OF TEAM RESILIENCE

Within resilient teams, conflict resolution supports the ability to:

- Preserve psychological safety following conflict or setbacks.
- Manage stress and recover from interpersonal tension.
- Avoid lasting damage from unresolved disputes.

Result: Supporting recovery and cohesion during or after challenging situations.

If looking for:	Then conflict resolution is under...
Optimizing team effectiveness and productivity	Building High-Performance Teams
Supporting adaptability and emotional strength	Building Resilience in Teams

NEURODIVERGENT VS NEUROTYPICAL

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in human brain function, including conditions such as autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, and dyspraxia. These differences are not shortcomings; rather, they reflect distinct ways of thinking, perceiving, and processing information. Although neurodivergence is often invisible, it significantly influences communication, problem-solving, creativity, and emotional expression. On a societal level, acknowledging neurodiversity challenges traditional notions of “normal” and broadens our understanding of intelligence, productivity, and human capability.

SOCIETAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT:

Historically, neurodivergent individuals have faced exclusion due to social stigma, education systems, and workplaces built for neurotypical patterns of thinking. This has contributed to underemployment and marginalization. Yet, when environments adapt to accommodate different cognitive styles, neurodivergent individuals offer unique strengths, such as heightened attention to detail, innovative problem-solving, and pattern recognition. Supporting neurodiversity is therefore not only equitable but also strategically advantageous, enhancing creativity, resilience, and overall team performance.

Lessons Learned:

- **Understand Cognitive Differences:** Recognize that ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and other variations represent alternative ways of processing information. These differences are assets, offering fresh perspectives and problem-solving approaches.
- **Tailor Communication:** Saying “ASAP” might be fine for one person but anxiety-inducing for someone who needs structure. Be specific. Use timelines. Clarify context.
- **Praise Specifically:** Abstract praise like “good job” falls flat. Acknowledging precise achievements—for example, “Your audit prep identified all five protocol deviations—excellent work”—reinforces meaningful contributions.
- **Mindfulness ≠ One Size Fits All:** Meditation may calm some but overwhelm others. Allow team members to explore self-regulation strategies that suit their cognitive style.
- **Safe Space First, Self-Advocacy Later:** Many neurodivergent individuals will not disclose or ask for support unless they feel truly safe.
- **View Differences as Strengths:** Neurodivergent individuals often identify inconsistencies or patterns overlooked by others, contributing critical insights and improving outcomes.
- **Avoid Ableist Language:** Words like “crazy,” “slow,” or “normal” subtly alienate. Language reflects inclusion.

Neurodiversity reshapes traditional concepts of intelligence, efficiency, and productivity. Leaders who adjust the environment to support a range of cognitive styles, rather than expecting individuals to conform to neurotypical norms, create teams that are more innovative, resilient, and high performing. Embracing neurodivergent talent is both ethically responsible and strategically beneficial, enhancing organizational success and enriching societal perspectives on human potential.

CONCLUSION

Within FSP and outsourced delivery models, the paradigm of leadership has shifted from hierarchical authority to cultivated influence. Relying on positional power to motivate, correct, or inspire proves ineffective. Instead, a leader must build influence through deep listening, continual adaptation, and a clear, compassionate vision.

This imperative translates into specific actions: transforming conflict by establishing safety, addressing underperformance through coaching instead of condemnation, and customizing management styles for neurodiverse talent. Ultimately, the foundational principle is to recognize team members as individuals with unique challenges, not as interchangeable resources.

As Brené Brown beautifully says, “Caring for and connecting to the people we lead is an irreducible prerequisite to effective leadership.”

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