

Designing the Team Alliance

Why the Best Teams Don't Leave Trust to Chance

If you've ever been part of a team that just clicked, you'll know how it feels: trust is high, communication flows, & even conflict tends to strengthen the team rather than fracture it. That kind of alignment isn't luck. It's designed — & one of the most effective ways to design it deliberately is through a Designed Team Alliance (DTA), sometimes called a team agreement or charter.

What Is a Designed Team Alliance?

A Designed Team Alliance is a structured conversation in which a team co-creates the conditions for how it wants to work together. It isn't a set of rigid rules; it's a living agreement on what success looks like, how the team wants to communicate, & how it will navigate the difficult moments when they come.

Left to itself, a team's way of working is usually assumed rather than agreed — and unspoken assumptions are where frustration quietly builds. A DTA makes the expectations explicit instead. Done well, it builds psychological safety & gives the team a shared language for how it actually operates, rather than how its org chart says it should.

The concept traces back to working as allies – on the same side - originally a one-to-one coaching for effective contracting in the coaching relationship. Of course, this is also essential for teams.

The Building Blocks of a Strong Alliance

A DTA conversation tends to work through the same core territory, whatever shape the session takes:

- **Shared purpose** — why does this team exist, & what impact do we want to have?
- **Ways of working** — how do we collaborate & communicate effectively?
- **Conflict navigation** — how do we handle disagreement when it arises?
- **Accountability & feedback** — how do we hold ourselves & each other to account?
- **Commitments & agreements** — what behaviours will we all commit to upholding?
- **Psychological safety** — how do we create an environment where people can speak up, share ideas & take risks without fear of embarrassment or punishment?
- **Equal voice** — how do we make room for every voice, & stop the loudest ones taking over?

Focus on what the team needs, the work needs, the project needs... and balance that with what individuals need.

How to Build a Designed Team Alliance

1. Gather the Team for an Intentional Conversation

Set the tone up front: this is a shared agreement the team is creating together, not something handed down from the top. A few well-chosen questions early on do a lot of the trust-building work before the “real” conversation even starts:

- What's something about you that people often misunderstand?
- What's your preferred way of receiving feedback?
- What's one thing that makes you feel valued in a team setting?
- How do you handle conflict, & what helps you work through it?

2. Discuss & Define the Alliance

From there, the conversation moves through a natural sequence: the values that should guide how the team shows up; what's currently working & what's getting in the way; & the specific commitments that will help the team become the team it wants to be. Communication norms deserve their own space within this — how the team signals when it needs support, what habits shut a conversation down (interrupting, dismissing ideas too quickly, passive-aggressive asides), & what structures create room for quieter voices, such as round-robin discussion, anonymous idea submission, or smaller breakout conversations.

3. Document It & Keep It Alive

Capture the key themes in a simple, one-page document — & then actually revisit it. An alliance that's signed once & filed away stops being a living agreement. Bring it back when a new member joins, & especially when the team hits a rough patch; that's precisely when it earns its keep.

Expanding into a Team Charter

Teams that want to take this further can grow a DTA into a fuller team charter by adding clarity around:

- **Roles & responsibilities** — who owns what, & where do the overlaps sit?
- **Decision-making** — how do we actually make key decisions?
- **Communication cadence** — what meetings, check-ins & tools do we use, & why?
- **Feedback** — what's the best way to give & receive it constructively?
- **Candour** — how do we create space for honesty without it costing the relationship?
- **Conflict resolution** — what do we actually do when tensions rise?
- **Inclusivity** — how do we make sure every perspective is valued & has a way in?

A few working examples of what ends up on the page:

“We commit to speaking honestly while maintaining respect. We assume good intent, but we also recognise impact.”

“Feedback should be timely, specific & focused on growth. We ask, ‘Would you be open to feedback?’ before offering it.”

“If conflict arises, we agree to address it directly within 24 hours, using ‘I’ statements & staying curious.”

“We rotate meeting facilitators to encourage balanced participation, & we agree to name it when a discussion is being dominated by a few voices.”

The Payoff: A High-Trust, High-Performance Team

When a team invests in building its Designed Team Alliance, it builds a foundation of trust, clarity & accountability underneath everything else it does. It's a simple step, but rarely a small one — it tends to be the difference between a team that merely coordinates & one that's genuinely aligned.

If your team hasn't done this yet, it's worth setting up the conversation. Whether that's a thirty-minute alignment session or a deeper dive into a full charter, the time invested pays dividends in how the team operates from that point on.

References & Further Reading

References:

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