

LESSONS FROM OUR ROOKIE SEASON

Build capacity: We invested time up front to build our team's skill. That way at kickoff we already had team members who knew how to use the equipment, who understood safety, who knew how the mechanical systems worked, and who knew how to code. The build season is very hectic, but having that capacity in place early on was a major advantage.

Communication is key: We needed a way to manage internal communication. We decided on a Discord server. Discord allows for distinct channels for different subteams, which streamlined communication, and it was effective at co-ordinating the work schedules of different groups. We even maintain a parents' channel to give updates on team meetings, outreach events, and competitions.

Be humble (and realistic): As a rookie team, we decided to set realistic goals. We had ideas for much more complex mechanisms, but settled on a simple, robust design that we knew we could implement. Then we worked on perfecting that design, making small and incremental improvements until we felt we'd build the most reliable, efficient version of the concept.

Be open to change: Throughout the season we had a lot of ideas for our robot, our strategy, our logo, and even our team name. It was critical that all members of the team were open to new suggestions, and were willing to abandon a concept when presented with a better alternative. We learned to "fall in love with the problem, and not the solution".

We learn from our failures: Fail early, and fail often. We had many things that didn't go as planned, but we always learned from our setbacks. Over time we learned a lot by studying our errors, and eventually we found ourselves asking questions about things that were totally unexpected to us. We've learned that when in doubt we should just test the idea, gather data, and go from there.

All jobs count: FIRST is about so much more than the robot. We had many people bring different skill sets to the team, and that helped us take on a lot in our first year. Whether someone was building, coding, wiring, doing communications, doing outreach, scouting, or helping to clean the shop, all of those jobs helped our team accomplish its goals.

Help other teams: Although we were "just" rookies, we still found many opportunities to help other teams throughout the season. Whether it was lending out tools and hardware, helping teams with code, or welcoming teams to practice in our shop, we always tried to contribute to the community. That helped our team build confidence, and gave us a sense of belonging in the FIRST community. Having positive relationships also made us more comfortable seeking assistance when we needed it.

Build partnerships: As a new team we needed to actively search for partnerships. We found partners who generously contributed tools, metal, hardware, laptops, colour printing, and even our team t-shirts. We were also connected with mentors, and found outreach opportunities to help build our team's profile. Starting those partnerships early ensures the necessary resources are ready for kickoff.

Community engagement: FIRST is about making an impact in the community. Our team hosted FLL and FLL Jr events, offered a series of FLL workshops, had a televised appearance on CP24, ran demonstrations at Twitter Canada and Science Rendezvous, and even drove our robot down Yonge St as part of the TDSB's Pride Parade contingent. We're always looking for more ways to connect with the community, and that's led to fun and rewarding experiences for our team.

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