



## Article:

### Creating a High Performance Team

Teamwork, often asserted as a key principle or value by organisations is difficult to argue with. But working recently with a client helping them to build high performance teams highlighted how unfocused and often misunderstood the term really is and how little time is actually dedicated to enabling intact teams to work on building high performance.

We have recently been working with intact teams, helping them to become more effective and deliver higher performance. One of the more interesting aspects of the work that has emerged is how little time teams dedicate to themselves and how they operate. At the start of each of our workshops we have asked 'How often have you met in the last two years to engage in a conversation about yourselves as a team, in which the content is focused only on you and not the usual business agenda?' The answer invariably given; 'never.'

This is not really surprising. Very often extra 'team time' is not considered as being very productive and efficient. Instead 'team time' is usually focused on schedules, objectives, what is happening to satisfy customer needs, procedure and business updates of one type or another. And yet, high performance team work is seen as crucial to strategy execution. Explore a typical set of organisational values and 'Teamwork' will be on the list sooner or later. It is seen as a core capability, or principle, by which an organisation will deliver its brand promise and fully execute its strategy. The challenge for most organisations we have worked with, however, is that they have either looked at the subject superficially – purely from a skills perspective – or have emphasised team development events and activities that are later difficult to translate to the reality of their workplace.

Another interesting feature of working with this particular client was the discovery from our diagnostic phase that no clear, complete and mutual understanding of the term 'high performance team working' actually existed in the business. Of course there were several opinions; many coinciding in a variety of ways, but no single, crisp, commonly understood definition predominated. This is often no unusual in many organisation that give cursory scrutiny to what high performance team working could look like in their business.

This factor is important to address in itself. The need to have a single definition of the term that could be translated, tangibly, into the way the business works is an important starting point. Many good definitions exist, but in our view one that best brings together the varying aspects of high performance team working is:

"A small number of people with complementary skills, who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach, for which they hold each other mutually accountable."

Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith. [The Wisdom of Teams.](#)

The definition resonated at all levels with our client and formed the basis for the series of interventions we held with intact functional teams. Exploring with team members what this definition meant for them, led us to discuss the three levels at which a highly effective, high performance team operates. The research is very clear.

High performance teams operate at:

- The individual effectiveness and inter-personal level. That is the complementary skills brought to the team and the way they manage relationships.
- The process level. The way that they decide to work together; how decisions are made and routines are put in place or emerge in order to work effectively together.
- The cross-functional / cross-team level. All teams or functions are part of a bigger organisational entity in which an internal supply-chain and its associated interdependencies exists.

Most teams perceived to be 'good' are effective in managing, for the most part, the first two levels. Where many organisations fall short is in building and reinforcing collaborative relationships across the organisation, between teams, as a conscious and intentional way of working. Typically managing cross-functional interdependencies are often reliant upon personal relationships, friendships and 'work-arounds' that smooth out some of the barriers between teams and functions.

In our experience many organisations, despite their teamwork values, unintentionally conspire against more effective cross-functional collaboration. Performance management and reward systems and organisational structures – even matrixed structures – very often have the opposite intended effect, making true collaboration and high performance across the organisation difficult to achieve.

An interesting aspect of high performance teams is that they are led and together are conscious of a concept not often apparent in organisations; the notion that they are working for the success of another team. Performance management systems and bonuses are typically focused on measuring and rewarding the results of individual effort or the achievement of particular team goals. With this mindset and performance focus, it is unsurprising that teams do not spend much time worrying about how other teams in their internal supply chain are doing.

Satisfaction with team effectiveness often shows up in employee surveys. When asked about team work, employees report they are satisfied with their own team, but express dissatisfaction with other teams.

High performance teams, by contrast, spend time and effort building cross-functional collaboration. This is supported by a mindset that recognises that their value is not measured purely by their own output, but also by the extent to which they have contributed to the success and achievements of another team with whom interdependency exists. This attitude is challenging to sustain if the only perceived managerial focus and recognition is on their own outputs.

So having a crisp, well understood definition of high performance team working and recognising how all three levels in which teams operate is a fundamental starting point in creating high performance teamwork in an organisation.

As we worked with our client, helping them to come to grips with the realities and implications of these factors we started to focus in on intact teams. We asked them to begin the process of analysing and assessing themselves against a set of characteristics that are typically seen in high

performance teams. These eleven characteristics are not meant to be exhaustive, or that they are the only characteristics that lead to high performance team working. They are, nevertheless, the characteristics that study after study, and our own experience, show are the most typical.

High performance teams have key characteristics. They:

- Share and are committed to a common vision and purpose
- Establish clearly defined goals and expectations
- Share information in ways that directly add value to the team effort
- Set high standards of performance for themselves
- Are aware of their complimentary skills and how to utilise them
- Are aware of their weaknesses and how to minimise their impact on team performance
- Hold themselves mutually accountable for the successes and failures of the team against agreed goals
- Create and continually feed the team spirit and manage the climate
- Continually seek ways of improving how they do things
- Build collaborative and cooperative relationships
- Manage their inter-personal relationships

We worked with several intact teams in our client organisation and seeing them work through these characteristics as they were perceived to exist in their own teams was fascinating. A simple question such as, 'which three characteristics does the team feel, if worked on, would have the greatest impact on team success?' drew out excellent debates. Of course the answer to the question was different for different teams, but for once – in some cases the first time – they had an opportunity to discuss and debate varying views about what was important and they cared about as a team. This activity by itself was very bonding for team members. Facilitating discussions that enabled individuals to first understand and then appreciate different perspectives and, what we call, the 'thinking behind the thinking' was greatly valued.

But moving to the outcome. Most teams we work with are typically outcome focused. Through a series of interventions and activities that enabled team members to experience the characteristics we were able to move them through a process of decision-making. This decision-making is about where the energy and true commitment lies for sustaining the effort in creating high performance team working.

As an intact team, members were able to set goals and decide on actions that were realistic and tangible in their day-to-day work context. Here we were able to coach the team in building awareness and promoting action. Each team decided on goals they wanted to achieve around becoming a high performance team, determine indicators of success and the steps they would take in order to achieve their goals.

And this approach raises another aspect of high performance team working. In time, high performance teams become self-managing and moderating. They embody the characteristics listed above and feel autonomous enough to want to continue sustaining that culture and climate in their team. So much so that they become self-reliant, more effective and perceived by others as role models of a high performance team.

## **about the author**

Joe España is Managing Director of Performance Equations, a specialist organisational development and change consultancy. Performance Equations helps companies and individuals become more competitive by directly linking strategy to people and business performance. Their areas of focus are: Organisational culture & change, Leadership development, Team development and Service excellence. Joe and his team provide measurable solutions that are bespoke to particular needs, and that deliver performance where it matters most; the bottom line.

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