

How to Build High-Performance Teams

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The value of a high-performing team has long been recognized. This why investors often value the quality of the team and the interaction of the founding members more than the idea itself. According to a study by the Harvard business review, ninety percent of investors think the quality of a team is the single most important non-financial factor when deciding if to invest in an organization.

Amid the myriad sources of advice on how to build a top team, here are some ideas around team composition and team dynamics that have long proved their worthwhile.

Fostering a healthy team dynamic

The most effective leaders are those who empower their team and who are able to focus on the relationships between people and their dynamics in the team. A healthy team dynamic is crucial to high performance: it allows teams to make effective use of their time, to be truly engaged creatively, and therefore – to find optimal solutions to problems. How do effective leaders enhance team members' self-awareness and awareness of the team's dynamics?

Feedback culture - One of the greatest challenges in providing others with feedback is that it often feels unsolicited, and the consequence is twofold: firstly people feel uncomfortable sharing feedback and secondly, the recipient is defensive. When teams institute regular weekly or monthly feedback sessions, members become more skilled at formulating and receiving feedback.

Creating psychological safety to foster innovation - Paying attention to relationships in a team is not only important for productivity and efficiency, but for innovation as well. Studies suggest that teams that focus on relationships have an important crucial ingredient called "[psychological safety](#)" (Edmondson, 2008). It reflects the notion that team members feel safe and supported by the team, are not afraid of making a mistake and feel greater freedom to experiment. Psychological safety makes the difference between traditional efficiency-focused organizations and more innovative learning-focused companies.

A prominent [example of a company that focuses on the importance of psychological safety](#) is Google. After much internal research and data gathering, Google (with the help of social scientists and anthropologists) established that their best performing teams have one thing in common – team leaders who recognize the importance of psychological safety and who role model to their team how to open up and disclose the vulnerability. In one particular case, a team leader even shared his personal story of cancer in order to set an example that emotional conversations are not only allowed but also encouraged in the team. Such conversations enhance empathy and engagement in the team and ultimately have a positive effect on the bottom line.

Characteristics of High-Performance Teams

Although there is no simple measure of performance effectiveness for groups, and no team is identical, there seems to be a shared understanding of what makes an effective group work. High-performance work teams are generally composed of a combination of purpose and goals, talent, skills, performance ethics, incentives and motivation, efficacy, leadership, conflict, communication, power and empowerment, and norms and standards.

Team purpose, goals and roles - High-performing teams are synergistic social entities that work toward the achievement of a common goal or goals—short term and long term. They often exemplify a total commitment to the work and to each other. Team members do better work when their roles are clear: They know how to do their jobs and why they are doing them. Each member must understand and support the meaning and value of the team's mission and vision. Clarifying the purpose and tying it to each person's role and responsibilities enhance team potential, as does the inclusion of "stretch" goals that increase the challenge necessary to motivate team members.

Talent, skills and work ethic - High-performance teams begin by recruiting and retaining their best talent while quickly helping low-performing members find other places to work. Morale typically increases as performance increases. After selecting for talent, it is critical to ensure that the team members possess complementary skills. Team members must exhibit a sustained commitment to performance excellence, exercise candor, and mutual respect, and hold themselves and their organizations accountable at both the individual and team levels.

Incentives, motivation, and efficacy - Both monetary and nonmonetary systems that encourage high performance have a positive impact on tactical implementation of the team's goals. Over the long term, intrinsic motivators such as personal satisfaction at work and working on interesting projects provide the greatest impact on performance. In addition, a belief in one's self and abilities encourages people to take more strategic risks to achieve team goals.

Leadership - High-performing leaders generally accompany high-performance work teams. Essential leadership qualities include the ability to keep the purpose, goals and approach relevant and meaningful; build commitment and confidence: ensure that team members constantly enhance their skills; manage relationships from the outside with a focus on the removal of obstacles that might hinder group performance; provide opportunities for others without seeking credit, and get in the trenches and do the real work required. There is widespread agreement that effective team leaders focus on purpose, goals, relationships and an unwavering commitment to results that benefit the organization and each individual.

Conflict and communication - Conflict management is an essential part of becoming a high-performance team. Open communication in such teams means a focus on coaching instead of directing and a focus on the ability to immediately address issues openly and candidly. The key to team performance is open lines of communication at all times to provide motivation, maintain interest and promote cooperation.

Norms and standards - Like rules that govern group behavior, norms can be helpful in improving team development and performance. Norms for high-performance teams include open lines of communication, early resolution of conflict, regular evaluation of both individual and team performance,

high levels of respect among members, a cohesive and supportive team environment, a strong work ethic that focuses on results and shared recognition of team successes. The key is that high-performing teams actually discuss and agree to their operating rules—standards that each team member agrees to uphold and for which they hold each other accountable.

In summary, when composing high-performance teams, leaders must pay attention to team size and to ensure a diversity of thought and perspectives. Leading teams to high-performance require open conversations about the relationships inside the team – how are we all similar; how are we all different; and how are these differences and similarities manifested in our collaboration? Such conversations are important for creating a feedback culture, but ultimately also result in team agility by ensuring a safe space for failing, learning, and therefore – innovating.

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