

# So you think you know your team?

## Discover how hidden factors can support high performance

Whilst teams are instrumental in bringing about success and high performance at an organizational and individual level, modern teams are facing ever greater challenges to their cohesiveness, with remote working and organizational change impacting on team functioning. Where managers focus narrowly on *tasks* and not on the team environment, there is a risk that teams – and the individuals within them – are not well equipped to operate at their best.

This paper considers the factors that are essential for developing a well functioning team, and illustrates that some of these factors are not always easily seen. It promotes a focus on the *processes* that shape team environment and culture, in addition to the tasks the team needs to achieve. An awareness of which characteristics are most relevant in analysing team performance, and which of these might be hidden from view, can form the basis of productive, insightful development that ensures the team has a positive impact on overall organizational success.

## Introduction

It is widely accepted that a well functioning team can be more effective than a group of individuals working independently. High-performing teams provide different perspectives on problems, mutual support for achieving objectives and a shared sense of accomplishment. Effective team-working also has numerous benefits at an organizational level, including increased productivity; an enhanced quality of products or services; and a faster, more responsive approach to business opportunities.

In combination with an effective business strategy, the benefits of developing and supporting positive team attitudes and behaviors can translate to increased bottom-line performance and drive business growth.

However, teamwork often presents challenges, because it requires individuals with different viewpoints to work closely together to accomplish a goal. Members of a team must learn how to listen to and communicate with one another, and to truly understand and appreciate how their teammates see the world and prefer to work – even where there are unspoken or hidden differences between them. In addition, team members must learn how to leverage their differences, not just tolerate them, in order to achieve the best possible results.

Despite these challenges, it seems that highly functioning teams are becoming increasingly important. An emerging trend in the modern workplace has been the increase in organizational restructuring and downsizing, resulting in flatter hierarchies. This has created a greater need for collaboration and a rise in the emphasis placed on teamwork.

In addition, the advent of globalisation and growth of international trade mean that achieving effective team-working is now more difficult than ever. People no longer operate in settled and static work groups; instead teams are constantly forming and re-forming. The increase in virtual teams and international working has meant that many

teams communicate remotely, making contact more infrequent and prone to difficulties. Business challenges have increased in complexity, and the timescales within which teams are expected to form and become productive are often short.

So how can leaders of teams be sure that they are achieving maximum effectiveness? What signs should they look for to identify whether or not a team is performing – and how can they encourage effective team development?

Historically, organizations and leaders have tended to focus their energies on **'getting the job done'** (the *task* element of team performance). This task focus has typically outweighed the attention given to **how the team interacts** in order to achieve their goal (the *process* element).

However, recent research has highlighted that truly high-performing teams are those that focus on both the **task** and the **process**. This means that, in addition to considering *what* teams have to achieve, effective development should also focus on developing the team's awareness of *how* they are working together: the interpersonal dynamics and relationships within the team.

High-performing teams focus on both the task and the process

## Team dynamics: making or breaking the workplace

Effective teams positively impact on those around them as they consider and adapt their behavior in constructive ways. In contrast, poor teams can infect, pollute, and hold back the entire system, especially where issues exist at senior team level. *Team effectiveness therefore has a huge impact at an organizational, team and individual level.*

The consequences at an **organizational level** are wide ranging; wasted time, ineffective use of resources and disengaged employees are bad enough, but these can further lead to a

serious lack of agility and motivation in tackling business challenges, and make the organization unresponsive or ineffective in seizing opportunities or quickly resolving problems. Furthermore, dissatisfied employees can create a breeding ground for staff turnover, leaving an organization with a dwindling and disaffected workforce. These issues have crucial implications on productivity and impact bottom-line profitability.

At a **team level**, a perception amongst team members of an ineffective or acrimonious team environment can perpetuate poor productivity, unresponsiveness and disengagement. A lack of collective interest means that team members are unlikely to work together in a collaborative way, which can lead to unhealthy competition and individual agendas coming to the forefront – fuel to the fire in an already hostile working environment.

Finally, working within an ineffective or unhappy team can have serious consequences at an **individual level**. A lack of ownership, responsibility or engagement with team goals can lead to staff feeling unacknowledged and unvalued as individuals.

A lack of engagement at work can lead to depression, lethargy and poor health

These are key drivers towards motivation and job satisfaction, and without them individuals can be left with an absence of meaning and purpose in their working lives. A lack of involvement and engagement at work can have repercussions as serious as loss of self-esteem, lethargy, depression and poor health.

In order to avoid the harmful effects of poor team functioning, leaders of teams need to know first what characterises an effective team, what hidden elements to be aware of, and finally what steps to take to ensure that their team reaches its potential.

## How to recognise an effective team

Whilst it is crucially important to consider both the task and the process elements of team performance, the importance of team **competence** must not be overlooked.

High-performing teams have the confidence that they have the necessary knowledge, skills and capabilities to successfully deliver the required outputs. If it does not, the team needs to have access to the relevant skills and resources, either within the organization or externally, as well as the support of the wider business. High-performing teams have effective procedures in place to ensure they recruit the best people and invest in the development of existing team members.

If the team is not equipped with the key skills and knowledge to deliver its objectives, no amount of team development will be able to ensure it reaches high performance.

However, the technical competence, skills and knowledge within a team are not in themselves enough to ensure maximum team effectiveness. Our experience and research has shown that there are also **seven additional factors** that are absolutely key in nurturing a team so that it will excel in an organization.

### 1. Trust

An absence of trust within a team makes collaborative working almost impossible. Low confidence in other team members' intentions, and an unwillingness to admit to weaknesses and mistakes (or ask for help) all prevent the building of trust within a team. Teams with low trust in each other may display undermining or dismissive behavior, gossip, or be unwilling to share information.

In contrast, teams with high levels of trust are flexible and resilient in the face of controversy and challenge. Members support each other and openly share their ideas, concerns and beliefs in order to achieve the best possible outcome for the team. High levels of trust mean that individuals are able to be honest, authentic and vulnerable, sharing

their genuine ideas, views and feelings without fear of being devalued or made to feel insignificant if there are differences or if mistakes are made.

Trust is the absolute cornerstone of team development and provides an essential foundation for all of the other elements of high performance.

## 2. Team orientation

A sense of camaraderie and team spirit provides a great motivation for a team. When team orientation is high, members derive satisfaction and enjoyment from working together. Even heated debate and disagreement does not undermine the underlying commitment and loyalty team members have for one another. In contrast, individual agendas and quests for personal recognition can detract from or clash with the pursuit of team success. When individuals can identify with and 'buy into' the team's goals and mission, they are likely to put aside their own goals and agendas in the interests of overall team performance.

## 3. Communication

In teams where communication is prioritised, members and stakeholders are encouraged to participate, and to listen to and clearly understand the team's goals, plans and progress. They tend to communicate in a direct, unambiguous manner, and discussions are purposeful and end in effective plans for action. Conversely, in teams where communication between people is poor, neither team members nor stakeholders feel 'up to speed' on what the team is doing or plans to do. Team discussions ramble and rarely lead to agreement. This has grave implications for the productivity and collective focus of the team.

## 4. Conflict management

Conflict can be a key cause of disharmony and ineffectiveness in teams. Research by The Myers-Briggs Company has found that the average employee spends 2.1 hours a week dealing with conflict. In the UK alone, this equates to 370 million

lost days every year as a result of conflict in the workplace.

Teams with poor conflict-management skills either avoid conflict and open debate of issues, or lack the ability to manage conflict productively. They tend to go with whatever decision is endorsed by the loudest voice, and rarely deal well with difficult or sensitive topics. This creates an environment where team members feel unable to express their true feelings around important issues, which can lead to ineffective decision-making, and affect the quality of work and team morale.

In contrast, teams with effective conflict-management skills value open discussion and encourage each other to be fully candid and open with their opinions. They strive to get multiple, often competing views or ideas on the table, then have effective processes for managing the debate so the final decision has maximum buy-in and support.

## 5. Process

Where teams have developed effective processes, they make good use of their meetings in order to rapidly gather ideas, prioritise opportunities and take action. They are likely to be very effective at project planning, accessing and managing resources and delivering results on time and on budget. They will also be willing and able to discuss how they are working together. In contrast, teams that are low on process make little use of effective meeting management and team facilitation techniques, and struggle to go beyond discussing issues to deciding on actions.

Teams with well defined processes are also clear about the specific roles and responsibilities within the team. Different members' strengths are recognised in the allocation of tasks and actions. This means team members can enjoy autonomy to make decisions and do their work.

## 6. Alignment

A shared sense of purpose and a clear vision of the team's mission are essential characteristics of well functioning teams. Teams with a strong alignment

between members set unambiguous milestones to track progress and measure success. Team meetings are focused and efficient, leading to clear action plans and deliverables for work between meetings. Without this clarity of purpose, teams can lack focus or energy, and this is likely to have a negative impact on productivity.

Where there are high levels of alignment, team members are also more likely to hold each other accountable for agreed actions that contribute to the team's success. This means that they are less dependent on a team leader and are more able to self-manage, define their own processes and address any challenging issues themselves.

High-performing teams will ensure that they have alignment within the team, showing clarity of purpose and vision. However, they will also ensure that these objectives are clearly aligned within the wider organizational priorities.

## 7. Innovation

An effective team must continuously explore and be receptive to opportunities for change and innovation in response to market trends and organizational climate. This includes ways to improve processes, products or outcomes. Innovative teams respond quickly to challenges and can still perform effectively when faced with unique or unfamiliar issues. They tend to be good at both defining what innovation is needed and planning how to implement change. In contrast, teams that are more resistant to change tend not to respond well when pushed out of their comfort zone, and have trouble adapting to changing conditions.

Innovative teams are also open to continuously developing the way that they are working together. Team members may not immediately be able to recognise where there are issues in the way they work together, but they will be keen to develop and improve – even where this means they need make changes themselves in order to be more effective as a team.

## The hidden elements of team dynamics

Many teams focus only on the visible behaviors of group working when considering how to develop and improve their performance. While this is important, without considering the hidden elements that lie below the surface, a team can risk derailing, without realising until it is too late. If these invisible elements are ignored, the observable, surface behaviors will always be performed sub-optimally.

Within the seven high-performance elements, the **invisible** characteristics affecting team dynamics are **trust** and **team orientation**. *Trust* is the cornerstone of high performance in teams. Trust leads to better relationships and a greater sense of connection, producing higher collective interest. Increasing levels of trust therefore lead to greater *team orientation*, where team members actively commit to common goals and objectives.

The characteristics that can be **both visible and invisible** include **communication** and **conflict management**. Some elements of these are directly observable, and others stay below the surface. In teams where there is trust, people engage in more honest and open *communication*. More issues are raised and discussed, rather than remaining unspoken, where resentment can build. Where there is trust, the team feels safe to engage in constructive *conflict* supported by open communication – where the integration of opposing points of view creates more productive outcomes than if these differences are ignored.

The characteristics that are usually **visible** in team dynamics are **process**, **alignment** and **innovation**. High-performing teams have clear *processes* that support their objectives and enable efficiency in the way they work. Highly *aligned* teams are clear in their mission and strategy, with their explicit goals and objectives aligned to wider organizational priorities. Effective teams also support each other and create an environment that embraces change, having an *innovation* mindset.



### Steps to developing a high-performing team

So how do team leaders harness these seven characteristics of high-performing teams to ensure their team reaches its full potential?

Team development events, designed and run by an experienced facilitator, can be a helpful way of raising a team's awareness of how it is working together. Using an external facilitator can offer a neutral and objective perspective, and can be particularly effective in challenging existing assumptions within the team. An experienced facilitator will be able to work with the team to uncover the invisible aspects of team dynamics, using these to identify and support lasting change.

The best starting point for a team development event is to gather data on the team's effectiveness and interpersonal **dynamics**. This will enable the facilitator to determine objectively how the team is currently performing, and identify any underlying issues that need to be addressed.

This can be done by measuring the seven high-performance characteristics using a team performance feedback questionnaire, or through interviews.

**Psychometric instruments** are often helpful in encouraging team members to understand the personality dynamics of the team, raising awareness of self, others and the team as a whole. Psychometric tools can also be an excellent way of

de-personalising conflict, by taking the blame out of a situation, creating a common language for team development and offering team members a chance to discuss issues in a non-threatening way. This will encourage open and honest conversations, and will encourage a deeper understanding of relationships and interdependencies between team members.

### Knowing your blind spots

Gaining an understanding of the development areas of both the individuals and the team as a whole is a crucial step in becoming a high-performing team. If the team is only considering issues from a particular perspective or thought process, the resulting blind spots can quickly lead to ineffective decision-making. More generally, this is likely to impede the team's overall effectiveness, especially in terms of their communication with the rest of the organization, their strategies for dealing with conflict and their approaches to problem-solving.

By helping teams to uncover their blind spots and understand the importance of considering these, there is a great deal that organizations can do to create a broader and more balanced perspective for the future, enabling them to make better quality decisions. Team development events can also help the team to recognise and appreciate differences within the team, particularly amongst diverse teams, leading to more inclusive teamwork.

If teams are able to identify where they have blind spots in their thinking, they can take steps to ensure these are overcome through individual development of existing team members. They can also seek to incorporate others with different viewpoints into the project team to help bridge the gaps in their thinking, and avoid the pitfalls of dysfunctional group behavior and ineffective decision-making.

### Influence of the team leader

Another key element in how teams develop is the influence of the team leader, as they are likely to hold the closest relationships with team members. Team leaders need to be willing and able to set the climate for trust within the team, through their own relationships. Where individuals are able to trust the team leader, they are more likely to be able to build trusting relationships with the wider team. The leader therefore has an important role in modelling honesty and vulnerability in order to build this trust.

Additionally, leaders need to be aware of how teams develop and what they can do to support high performance. While many organizations develop managers to have general leadership skills, few specifically equip leaders to understand how to develop high-performing teams.

Most importantly, team leaders need to understand the impact of their own style and behavior on the team dynamic. They need to be comfortable to exercise a range of leadership styles in order to provide guidance where necessary, but also to allow teams to find their own processes. Leaders need to have the ability to let teams experience difficult conversations and conflict without rushing in to 'save' the individuals or the process.

The most effective team leaders will have a well developed awareness of their own strengths and development needs so they can understand how they themselves impact the team dynamic.

## How to ensure continuous team improvement

The following steps help ensure that team development isn't just a one-off, token event, but a way of bringing about lasting success.



## Conclusion

It is all too easy for managers and team members to assume that their dynamics are straightforward and obvious – or not to think proactively about how the team is working together when the focus is on the completion of challenging tasks. However, there may be certain factors that have a significant and crucial effect on team performance, and therefore the accomplishment of the team's goals.

Personality assessment and team development interventions offer a powerful way of encouraging the very highest levels of team performance. With the support of the right instrument and an expert facilitator, team managers can aspire towards generating insights, challenging existing thinking and supporting change. In doing so, they produce the energy and commitment required to dramatically enhance team performance – generating a significant and lasting impact on their organization.

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