

LEVERAGE THE POWER OF TEAMS



Having high performance as the norm in your organisation by focusing on team excellence.

**MAY
2022**



FOCUS ON TEAM EXCELLENCE

High performance is an aspiration of many businesses; however, few organisations manage to nurture and sustain high performance as a long-term status of their organisation. Many factors play a part, but a significant contributing factor is the individual team's performance.


Katzenbach and Smith had some interesting findings on teams. When teams are correctly understood and supported, they **outperform** individuals. They found that many managers do not understand their teams well, and most do not act on the information they know. Perhaps not always due to their fault, but this pattern repeats in many organisations worldwide.

Team managers – fresh or experienced – face the arduous task of putting a team together and getting the members to deliver as best as possible. Often, managers face an uphill battle. They are unsure which areas to focus on and are not that well-tuned to their team members' individual **needs** and **desires**. Perhaps they cannot even meet specific needs that they are aware of.

Research at Leaderonomics has found three components in making a team function well and thus achieve high performance. As the team's custodian, the **manager** is the best person to effectively see that these components are in place. The three identified components of high-performing teams are:

1. Having an **action** plan,
2. Having an **engagement** plan,
3. Having a **learning** plan.

These components are critical to bringing the collective best out of all team members simultaneously.



DEFINE FOCUS FOR THE TEAM

Let's look at the main elements of each component and what we feel each team manager should also look into to ensure they set their team up for success:

ACTION PLAN

Castka, Bamber, Sharp and Belohoubek call these system factors. Essentially we are looking for clarity in the team, which is clarity of **purposes, objectives**, and **strategies** to reach team and organisational goals. Managers, therefore, need to **concentrate on the following areas**:

a) Define focus for the team – Ensure clarity on the purpose of the team and how it contributes to the organisation's mission. What is the **expectation** in terms of output or impact? What is the decision-making process? It is important to ensure clarity on the team and project goals as well as the strategy to get there.

b) Alignment and interaction with external entities – Explicit knowledge of the kind of information flow are necessary, and how to ease the flow between teams within the organisation or external stakeholders such as clients.

c) Organisational impact – Understand how the team contributes to the organisation as a whole, and also what the team needs from the organisation in order to work effectively. Team members must also see how their contribution positively impacts the organisation's goals.

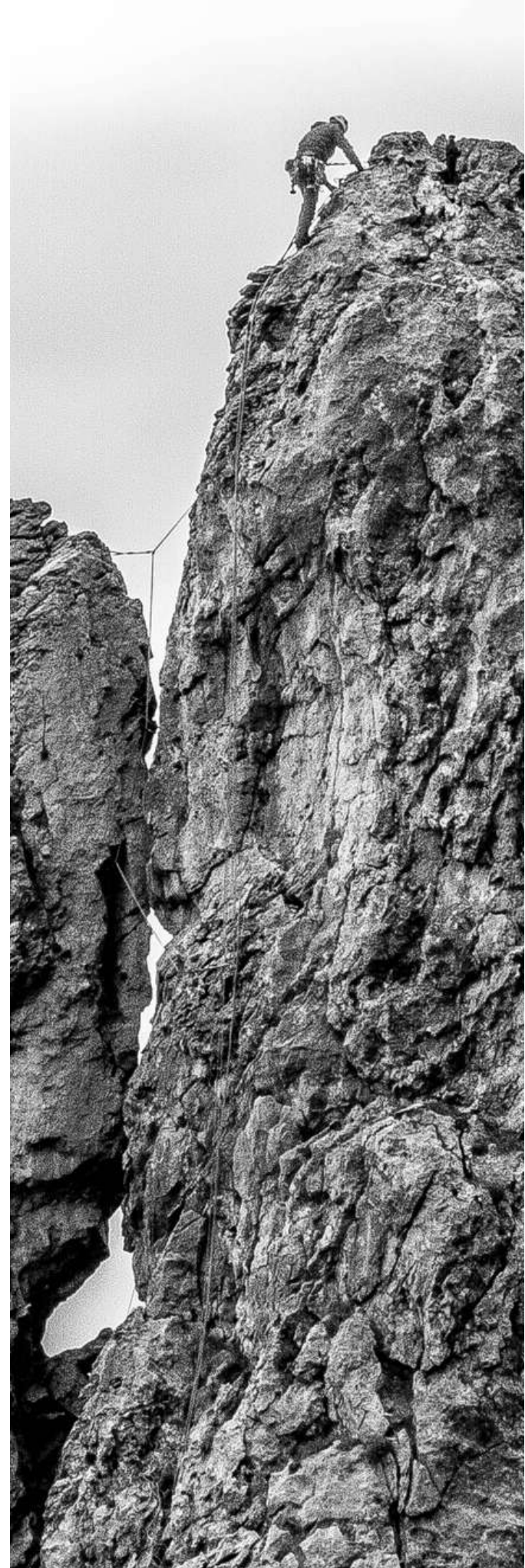
d) Measures of performance – Understand how the team gets measured and how these measurements are communicated.

e) Competency – Staff the team with the right people who have the necessary skills (or at least mindset) needed for their work.

f) Individual performance of team members – Understand the personal capacity of team members and how this affects their output of work and their relationship with other members.

g) Team size – Look at the size of the team and the role the team has to play to determine whether the team is of the suitable size.

Other elements to consider are the **co-location of teammates** and how it affects their work, **workload size**, and **tenure** of the team as a unit and individuals within it.



ENGAGEMENT PLAN

Loosely correlating to Castka, Bamber, Sharp and Belohoubek's human factors, the engagement plan has to do with the **needs of the individuals** within the team and how comfortable they feel there. The "conditions" may vary significantly across teams within the same organisation, even when a company feels it has a strong company-wide culture.

Therefore, looking at the following areas will help managers assess where their team needs more emphasis.

a) Psychological safety – Amy Edmondson of Harvard University introduced the term 'psychological safety' in learning. She defined psychological safety as "a **shared belief** held by team members that the team is safe for **interpersonal risk-taking**". Psychological safety was found to be the most crucial element of high-performing teams in Google's Project Aristotle. In her TEDx talk, Edmondson offers three simple things individuals can do to foster team psychological safety: Frame the work as a **learning problem**, not an execution problem, **acknowledge** their fallibility, **model curiosity** and ask lots of **questions**.

b) Dependability – This was the second most important contributor to a high-performing team in Google's case: Understanding whether team members can trust the rest of their peers to get things done on time and meet the organisation's high bar of excellence..

c) Meaning – When it comes to having an engaged team, team members must find their work personally important. When assigning work tasks, therefore, ensure you also do so based on individual development needs and interests and ability and expertise.

d) Connectivity – The interpersonal relations between team members can make or break teams. Everyone should be comfortable with one another to share ideas and joke around.

e) Inquiry-advocacy, other-self, and positivity-negativity – Marcial Losada, in his study of high-performing teams, used these as indicators of highly engaged, effective team members. The concept is simple: Are team members looking to ask questions and contribute to the betterment of the team's collective opinion and quality of work? Or, are they merely looking out for themselves (as an individual or a team), arguing in favour of their viewpoint? Equally, showing support, encouragement, and appreciation are usually behaviours observed in high-performing teams instead of disapproval, sarcasm, and cynicism in low-performing teams.

f) Needs of the individuals – In addition to meaning, team members need to feel that their personal needs and interests and aspirations for the future (personal and career) are met.

LEARNING PLAN

In addition to the engagement and action plan, we believe that they need to have a clear team learning plan for a team to be truly effective. We do not mean learning in the narrow sense of training, but rather the openness of team members to learn from all sources that are around them.

Edmondson studied 52 teams in an office furniture manufacturing company of less than 500 individuals, where she conducted a series of interviews, observation of team meetings and surveys. She found a strong correlation between psychological safety and learning behaviour. Edmondson found that for teams, "learning behaviour consists of activities carried out by team members through which a team obtains and processes data that allow it to adapt and improve. Examples of learning behaviour include **seeking feedback, sharing information, asking for help, talking about errors, and experimenting**. It is through these activities that teams can detect changes."

Let's take a look at a few areas in particular.

a) Knowledge and skills - Even though a good basis is a prerequisite, team members should be open to learning (in terms of training, on-the-job learning, coaching, or on their own). Assessing the type of learning that works for the team are a great start in ensuring the team members are given a good chance of improving. Looking at the range of learning types, the proactiveness of members to pursue their own learning and the frequency of this learning, as well as the sharing and application elements of it, is a good way to get an idea of where the team stands.

b) Seeking feedback - Since the objective of providing feedback is for the receiver to learn something from it and improve, looking at how team members embrace feedback from the team lead, their peers, and other teams in the organisation, or from external individuals or teams is important. Do team members **actively** ask for feedback even if not offered? How do they deal with the feedback received, and how do they make use of it?

c) Sharing information - How **open** and **willing** are team members to share information with each other? How open are they to sharing information with others in the organisation and external parties? Are they **proactive** in seeking out information? Do they know where to look for certain information, within or outside the organisation?

d) Asking for help – How willing are team members to help each other with the workload? How willing are team members to seek help from outside the team, i.e. from subject matter experts or appropriate individuals?

e) Talking about errors – Admitting to a mistake that someone personally made can be challenging. Looking at how willing team members are to bring to attention problems and seek or offer solutions indicates much about the team culture. The willingness to reflect on mistakes and learn from them will increase if there is psychological safety within the team. Equally, how willing are team members in pointing out another team member's error?

f) Experimenting – Not all companies are open to this, but generally speaking, a company advances if there are sufficient amounts of innovation, which involves experimentation. How willing are team members to experiment with a new idea, not knowing if it will succeed or not? How open are they to suggesting a new initiative?

The long list that we provided above can be used as a reflection and observation exercise for an interested manager. From there, it would be the manager's job to identify which of these areas are more in need of attention. If many areas seem to be in need of attention, you'll need to prioritise.

HOW WILLING YOUR TEAM IS TO HIGHLIGHT A PROBLEM AND OFFER SOLUTIONS IS AN INDICATOR OF TEAM CULTURE AND THE LEVEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY.



WHAT IS HOLDING MANAGERS BACK?

Studies have been ample. But, what is it that keeps managers from taking action in ensuring a detailed execution and monitoring of the three components necessary to have a high-performance team?

We discuss below the main **obstacles** that managers may face.


a) Time - This may indeed be the most common factor stopping managers from looking into the details of the three components that will empower their team and push them to high performance. While chasing deadlines

and firefighting, very often managers make the mistake of putting the matters discussed here in the “important but not urgent” quadrant. They often do not get around to dealing with it until it is too late. Prioritising this part of a manager’s responsibilities may make all the difference and turn around the team performance to unprecedented levels.

b) Lack of clarity across the organisation - When clarity does not exist across the organisation, it becomes even more difficult for managers to provide that clarity to their own people. However, working on being transparent and offering as much clarity as possible based on what is possible can make a difference.

c) Pressure to put company needs above team member needs - It is a common occurrence that employees’ needs may be put aside at times when the business needs seem more urgent. This may push managers to also spend less time understanding their team members, or feel that they can accommodate less of their needs, at that point in time. However, depending on the needs, this may not always need to happen, and this team member needs may be resolved, sometimes fully, sometimes in a creative manner. Being open and genuinely interested to help is the key here.





e) Hierarchical structures - In many traditional organisations, the culture dictates a very hierarchical structure. At times, this may encourage certain beliefs that different levels should not be too open to discuss. This unfortunately creates a barrier between a manager and team members and makes concepts such as psychological safety and trust look more distant. Bringing down such barriers and role modelling desired behaviours that would help build the bridges would be beneficial in this case.

f) Lack of transparency - In organisations where there is a lack of clarity and hierarchy, it is possible that the employees feel there is also a lack of transparency. This once again creates a barrier to communication and trust and hinders teams from performing together at a high level. It also becomes an obstacle for managers to behave differently in their own teams in order to nurture a healthier culture within the team.

g) Conflict avoidance - A big aspect of learning in a team requires honest, open conversations – with the right intentions of course. In organisations where people are generally not used to giving open feedback – good or bad – this may not work successfully, hindering the team’s ability to learn and grow together and individually. A manager must role-model this behaviour of openness and demand it from the team members to drive the team’s learning more successfully.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO NURTURE HIGH- PERFORMANCE TEAMS

We will now discuss what can be done to facilitate teams and managers to focus on the three areas that will allow high performance in teams. We will split this into two groups of the targeted audience: the managers, and the organisation (top management and Human Resources).

WHAT MANAGERS CAN DO ON THEIR OWN

- a) Assess the team objectives, and provide clarity to the team. To the best of their ability, managers should aim to clearly explain to team members what their purpose is, how they fit in with the rest of the organisation, and how each of their individual work and the team's collective output contributes to the bigger picture.
- b) Assess systems and processes to ensure that the team is constantly improving its performance, without having to waste time on unnecessary and time-consuming tasks.
- c) Relook at skills and competencies within the team and assess how these align with what the team needs. If there are discrepancies, come up with a plan on how to realign these.
- d) Cultivate an open sharing habit and willingness or interest to understand team members at a deeper level. Building trust among the team members and indicating that as a manager, you are willing and interested to help in any way possible. This will enhance the levels of engagement.
- e) Create opportunities for learning within the team. For example, show-and-tell sessions, learning Fridays, or even open, honest constructive feedback with the intention to help a team member improve. Once expectations are set and the behaviour is modelled by the manager, the rest of the team will soon follow.

WHAT THE ORGANISATION CAN DO ACROSS ALL TEAMS

- a) Work on having **clarity** across the organisation. Remember that even companies that are big on clarity always have much room for improvement. Finding new ways to have clear communication at all levels is an ongoing task.
- b) Work on building a culture of transparency, accountability, and trust across teams.
- c) Enhance **opportunities** for management and managers to understand employees much better. Engagement tools (like Budaya) can go a long way to convey the message that the organisation is serious about understanding its people, and at the same time facilitate the managers' ability to understand their teams deeper.
- d) Look at breaking down **hierarchical structures** as much as possible, or shortening the gap between levels to encourage better understanding, dialogues and better communication overall.
- e) Help managers understand the need to spend more **time** understanding and resolving issues with their team members. Training them on how to do so will also help them take this task on more willingly, as it may not be something they are used to doing.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Having a **high-performing** organisation is not as easy as one would like it to be. It takes a lot of effort, and a big part of this responsibility falls on managers because the smaller units of an organisation – teams – are the ones that need to be high performing in order for the whole to be high performing as well.

For teams to be high performing, managers need to look into three distinct components that will allow the team to become high performing, i.e. having an **action plan**, an **engagement plan**, and a **learning plan** for the team. While these require a variety of issues to be dealt with, one needs to be aware of what is often seen as holding managers back in looking at these, and see how managers and organisations can work together to overcome barriers and kickstart high performance in the organisation.

We hope this guide has started you on a journey towards achieving high performance, for your team and ultimately for your organisation.



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