LEADING AND BUILDING HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

By Debbie Craig & John Gatherer (as published in the Human Capital Review in 2010)

Introduction

The high performance organisation is a community of hundreds of disparate groups of people working in teams, throughout its structures and across its geography. For an interesting biological imagery, imagine looking through a microscope at an organisms cell structure and observing the countless amoebic movements, energy and growth formations which then split away and dissolve within the mass, just to reform elsewhere in a continuous cycle of purpose, growth, change and death.

Teams and teamwork share the same frenetic activity, complexity and evolution as described in the organic example. Organisations form teams to craft strategy, manage diverse functions, commission projects, create new ideas, review operations, monitor progress and negotiate agreements with external stakeholders. There are executive teams, management teams, functional teams, matrix teams, workplace teams, logistical teams, organizing teams - the list is endless….!

Businesses models are moving from closed hierarchies to open, networked, global formats requiring the ability to work in and collaborate with multi-functional, multi-level teams in order to achieve results. Team effectiveness is one of the key competencies required to operate effectively in the current and changing business environment. Increasingly, the strategic and financial success of companies is tied to the ability of work teams to deliver more new products and services to the market with ever-rising quality in customer service.

But the age-old question has to be asked….*"How effectively are these teams performing?"*

From our corporate and consulting work with thousands of managers, leaders and teams across Africa, South East Asia, China, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada, we have designed a **high performance team framework**, which includes the critical elements leaders need to be aware of and manage to build sustainable high performance teams.
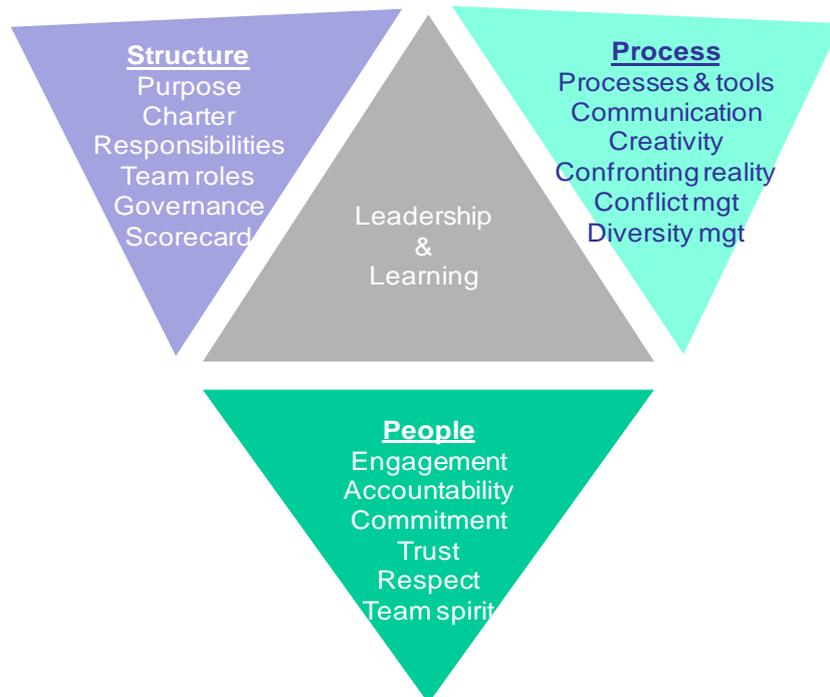
High Performance Team Framework

Leadership and Learning

The single biggest factor impacting a team's performance is its **leader** and the leader's ability to create a high performance, continuous **learning** and improvement culture. Successful teams have engaging team leaders who mobilise people from different cultures, with different personality preferences and forge their collective contributions into a cohesive team. We have sadly seen many examples of the converse – where leaders are ineffectual and the team dynamics, derailing behaviours, mistrust and role confusion work together to create a spiral of dysfunctionalism within that team – with obvious inferior results.

So how can leaders lead teams more effectively to achieve stretch goals, embrace diversity, leverage creativity and craft solutions to the myriad of business challenges?

There are three major clusters of success factors that we believe need to be in flow for a team to be recognised as a high performance team: team structure, processes and people. These are described below.

Cluster 1: Structure

It is imperative that, from the outset, the leader addresses the common **purpose** of the team with the members and clarifies the modus operandi, the style of team participation and ground rules, the objectives of the team and a sense of the future. This is best achieved by the team participating in the development of a **team charter** which acts as the team's navigation system (GPS). A one page summary is the most useful for keeping the team on track and should include the following aspects:

- Team objectives and scope

- Rationale and imperatives for change

- Critical success factors

- Vision, mission and values of the team

- Roles of team members, reporting structures and resources

Once the team charter has been finalised, the leader needs to address the **roles and responsibilities** of the individual members of the team. Team members will typically have a wide range of knowledge, specialist and general skills, creative ideas/ thinking and past experience that all need to be tapped into and optimised in the teamwork activities. It is therefore essential that everyone knows what they're doing (or supposed to be doing), what licence they have for advancing the team actions, what accountabilities they have to each other, as well as the collective responsibility of the team. In our experience huge frustrations and lost opportunities have been associated with this significant step - the requirement of the leader to define and agree on roles and responsibilities, including joint roles, interdependencies and potential conflicting roles. The measures and rewards attached to these roles also need to be clear, as many conflicts arise from expecting teamwork but rewarding individual performance.

Another important area is to plan and manage the **governance** structures of a team. This includes the reporting and key stakeholder relationships in a departmental team or the sponsorship, steering committee, project manager and reporting relationships in a project team. An important tool is a stakeholder plan that identifies the stakeholder groups, rates how critical they are to the success of the team and develops specific actions and accountabilities to improve these relationships with the team.

In addition, the team needs to agree targets, measures and milestones with their key stakeholders to ensure they meet expectations. A useful tool is a team **scorecard** linked to a progress report for regular tracking and updates on how the team is doing against the measures.

Lastly, in structuring a team for success, there needs to be an appreciation of the diverse collection of **team roles** played naturally by individuals in a team based on personality preferences. The classic research by Dr Meredith Belbin proved the necessity of nine different team roles present in a team for effective team performance**.** These roles include the co-ordinator, shaper, resource investigator, plant, teamworker, implementer, specialist, monitor evaluator and completer-finisher. If one or more of these team roles is missing from a team i.e. the personality make up of the team members do not indicate this preference; there will be a weakness in the team. As an example, if a team lacks a natural Plant (idea person), it may be necessary to recruit or invite a "plant" as a guest to bring in creative and innovative ideas into a meeting. If a person is not available, then a secondary alternative is to ensure a creative thinking process is introduced into the team on a regular basis.

Cluster 2: Process

The second major cluster of team effectiveness elements relates to the practical workings of the team. This typically covers the leader initiating work/project planning with the group, structuring and distributing work and the utilization of tools, processes and methodologies for best results.

The most effective teaming organisation that we have witnessed had developed and trained teams in a number of customized team **processes and tools.** These included team charters, stakeholder plans, meeting planning tools, listening and communication guidelines, after action reviews, creativity tools, innovation processes, decision making tools and problem solving techniques. This particular organisation has trained facilitators that are part of every team meeting, to ensure balanced inputs are obtained and objectives are met in the timeframe. Every time a team gets constituted, all the members know the process and their role to get the team to high performance. These processes and tools provide a common frame of reference, common language for team members as well as a greater rigour to the teamwork challenges.

Effective **communication** remains the "Achilles heel" with both individuals and groups and a leadership style, utilising an open, participative and engaging communication approach will always be more productive for building the synergies from the talent within the team. Regular face to face engagement, soliciting ideas and suggestions from team members and having the correct balance of debate to decision making is always preferable in any working group – for all concerned! The biggest frustration that people complain about is the length, content and process of team meetings. Effective facilitation is critical to ensuring effective and efficient communication. E-mail communication also needs to be managed with guidelines to prevent lengthy mails, over-copying or emailing taking the place of important face-to-face meetings.

Change in organizations is brought about by difference and difference requires different thinking. The leader who is able to harness the **creativity** and true potential of a team will achieve breakthrough results and at the same time develop a culture of possibility thinking and risk taking. Creativity and innovative thinking does not "just happen" and the leader needs to shape this process, make time available to implement ideation techniques and out of the box thinking and encourage the team in the prioritizing and implementing of these new ideas and applications into products and services that have commercial value.

A "hot topic" in recent times is the leader's sensitivity in dealing with team turmoil, derailing behaviours and attitudes that do not always align to the team values. A leader needs the emotional intelligence and skills to hold honest or crucial conversations to address any dissension or discordance, and reach agreement to a plan of action. It is also necessary to hold special team sessions to **confront the brutal reality**, address problem issues and explore options to resolve them. It is also important to encourage a culture of transparency and ongoing feedback – the invitation to speak freely about one's feelings and surface any internal feuds, unhappiness and concerns. It's about getting what's under the table, on to the table – so it can then be addressed openly and dealt with.

One of the pillars of **diversity** management is respecting difference – cultural differences, different life experiences, different views and perspectives, different generations so it is inevitable that there will be natural tensions and disagreements that occur within a team. The leader needs to accommodate **healthy conflict** but react in a deliberate way to channel the conflict if the energy and heated interactions starts manifesting themselves in unacceptable and dysfunctional behaviours!

Cluster 3: People

One of the pivotal differentiators of a transformational leader is an engaging leadership style. A leader engages a group of people successfully when they feel involved and are committed to the team actions and goal, when they find personal meaning and motivation in their work, when they have a stake in the outcome, when they enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for their contribution. **Engagement** is one of the pillars of a high performing team and it is the leader's impact that will "turn on" or "turn off" the team players!

It is critical that a team leader is able to instil a principle of full ownership, **accountability** and responsibility in team members. Accountability for individual and team tasks creates a sense of pride, camaraderie and belongingness within that team. There is nothing worse than having a team member disrupting the flow of work or reneging on commitments with no consequences.

When the leader is able to leverage **commitment** from individuals and the team to the myriad of team and business challenges, the level of collaboration, trust and mutual respect will also reach new heights. Commitment becomes contagious within the team – commitment to the common purpose, goals and work approach, commitment to one another's growth and success and a deep commitment on the personal perspective – by holding each other mutually accountable.

There is a wonderful saying "people hear what we say, but they see what we do, and seeing is believing!" **Trust** and credibility go hand in hand and the leader's ability to walk the talk, deliver consistently on promises and align personal values closely with actions will go a long way in the team's belief in and regard for their leader. Trust also needs to be a strong team value because if trust is compromised, the strength and psychological fabric of the team is adversely affected and it takes a long time to regain.

Trust is often linked to **respect**. People get assigned to teams because of their talent and skills and not because they like each other. An effective team leader will ensure that team members develop a healthy respect for each other and an appreciation of the skills, talents, preferences and differences that each person brings to the team.

Many leaders make the investment and effort to create a conducive climate for people from all walks of life coming together and forging a team culture that they relate to and respect. The leader knows intuitively that the more congenial and stimulating the work conditions, the greater the performance level of the team. The tone of any organization is set from the top. The team leader plays a significant but meaningful role in creating the **spirit of team** through infusing **fun** into activities and creating sufficient time for team members to get to know each other in a more relaxed environment. This can be done through team lunches, team building sessions, story-telling, visits to customers or just time out in a busy day to share, laugh and relax.

Team effectiveness assessment tool

The above factors of high performance teams can be used to assess how well the members of the team rate their own effectiveness against the elements and then develop an action plan for continuous improvement. The elements also provide organisation with a model to leverage team training and development to support a healthy culture of effective teamwork across regional and geographic boundaries and organizational structures.

Developing a high performance team

The process of achieving high performance is an on-going process of awareness, feedback, assessment, team sessions, skills training, action planning and review. A typical team undergoes sequential stages of growth and development through establishing a team, building a team, handling challenges as a team, developing a team and performing as a team as depicted in the diagram below. Strong team leaders believe that time invested in team-development activities is well invested in future team performance.

1. Establishing a Team
"Getting the business basics right"

2. Building a Team
"Proactively building effective team processes and team spirit"

3. Handling Challenges as a Team
"Learning to manage the challenges of team and work life"

4. Developing a Team
"Building capacity for continuous improvement and sustainable performance"

5. Performing as a Team
"Raising the Bar to Superior Performance"

Conclusion

Our experience has shown us that those organisations that recognise the power and impact of effective team functioning, with the appropriate team structure, processes, tools and nurturing of people, do outperform those that allow teams to have a life of their own. Team leaders need to have a deep understanding of the phases of team development, the time it takes to achieve this and the components of team success. The leader who is able to explore and practice these success elements will have a far better record of achieving successful results compared to a leader whose approach to teams is crisis management, shooting from the hip and allowing the team dynamics to work against the team purpose. The team leader who uses these high performance factors will also be learning from experience and moulding expertise and leadership style to raise the "personal bar" for every new team experience!

SOURCES: Belbin M and Belbin R.M.1966. *Team Roles at work*, Oxford: Butterworth – Heinemann

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

DEBBIE CRAIG

Debbie has over 18 years' experience in the field of strategy, leadership development, change management, talent management, high performance teams and organisational development. She has worked and consulted at leading local and global organisations in the private and public sector throughout Southern Africa and internationally in the UK, Australia, South East Asia, China, South America and the USA. Debbie is a skilled strategist, design architect, team builder, a powerful facilitator, change agent and executive coach. Her passion is transformation and empowerment which she facilitates through individual coaching and empowerment workshops, team-development workshops, corporate training and consulting assignments and organisation wide strategic change interventions. Debbie is the founder and Managing Director of Catalyst Consulting which she has grown into a successful consulting company with her business partner, John Gatherer.

Debbie has published a book, "I am Talent", on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous articles, appeared on radio talk shows and presented at conferences.

JOHN GATHERER

John has over 38 years' experience in the fields of HR, labour relations, training and development, leadership and strategic change management, having held senior and executive positions in Anglo American plc. and the De Beers Groups. John joined Debbie Craig at Catalyst Consulting as Principal Consultant, specialising in strategic change, leadership development, talent management and executive coaching, working locally and internationally. John brings a deep and practical knowledge and expertise to his roles as facilitator, consultant and organization development specialist as well his ability to think strategically and design innovative solutions. John has managed large scale people management projects and transformation journeys in Africa, Asia, China, the UK, India, Kuwait, Australia and the USA.

John has co-authored a book, "I am Talent" with Debbie Craig, on optimising potential and career aspirations, has written numerous journal articles and contributing chapters to Management education publications and presented at conferences and workshops. John's other passions include photography and travel and he has written and published a number of photographic "coffee table" books on African Wildlife and Adventure Travel.

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