

Five Themes for High Performance Teams

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Overview

The way senior teams work together has a huge influence on results. If you want to boost the performance of management teams, here are five good areas to consider:

Theme	Problems show up as:	Benefits of getting it right:
1. Is it a team, or is it just a committee?	Turf wars, politics, silo behaviour, lack of action	The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts,
2. Are people aware of different decision making and communication patterns?	Unnecessary friction, misunderstandings and 'personality clashes'	Effective collaboration, reduced errors, reduced conflict
3. Are the goals big enough?	Lack of inspiration, going through the motions	Energy, enthusiasm, challenge
4. Is there clear role separation?	Too many requests to leader to sort out turf wars, lots of time wasted spinning wheels	Cooperation and coordination, individuals feel they are making a clear contribution
5. Does the team use best practice for meeting productivity?	Boring unsatisfying meetings, lack of follow-through on agreed actions, unwillingness to attend	Best use of skills and talents of members, increased project speed, better decisions, clearer accountability

1. Have you actually got a team, or is it just a committee?

A lot of so-called teams are actually committees made up of independent parties with individual agendas. Their meetings are arenas for wasteful zero-sum games (politics, turf wars etc). Here are some questions to test whether you have a team or a committee:

- Is each member's main responsibility and accountability for the group as a whole, or for the performance of his or her own unit?
- Are people clear why they are meeting and what they are supposed to be doing together?

- Is the team too large for people to get good at coordinating with each other (the research suggests that more than 6 or 7 is the danger limit).
- Do substitutes often attend in place of team members, causing a lack of cohesion and continuity?

Sometimes, subconsciously, the leader prefers a committee, because they believe that running the organisation is their job alone, and don't want the team to make important decisions at all. However, they rarely find this satisfactory: they may be exhausted and frustrated with the lack of shared responsibility.

Key point: How can you arrange things so that the group win or lose together: they all share in the rewards of success etc? Can you design your teams to keep the numbers to around 6? If you are the leader and fear losing control to the team, learn about leadership frameworks such as Vroom & Yetton's that allow you adjust control and delegation to the circumstances (contact us to learn more about this framework).

2. Avoiding communication traps: be aware of own and other peoples' decision making and communication patterns

A lot of time is wasted going round in circles that look like fundamental personality clashes, whereas actually they are just mismatches of communication style. In the 1990s I did research with Dian Hosking (she's now Professor of Organisation at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands) looking at organisational failure in an aircraft component manufacturer. We found that managers and engineers were at loggerheads, and constantly obstructed each other, even though they shared the same vital interest in the company's success. The engineers claimed to be the guardians of safety, the managers the champions of viability: they ended up producing an unsafe product and nearly going out of business! They were all pleasant and rational enough to deal with on their own, but when they got together, their different communication and thinking styles, conditioned by their different education and training, conspired to produce clashes and errors.

Two major differences to watch for are how people prefer to collect information and how they prefer to make to decisions. For example, the FD may want nitty-gritty details, while the marketing director is talking big picture – the FD gets frustrated. In-house counsel may be quick to point out problems with a plan, not to rain on anyone's parade, but because it is their pattern to spot what could go wrong. Spotting risks is a pattern that is essential for a lawyer, but it can interrupt the flow of idea generation when looking for alternative courses of action

Often big changes in team functioning can be brought about just by changing the sequence. For example, you might let the marketing director generate an idea, have the operations or engineering director flesh it out into something concrete, and then do the risk assessment (often a neglected area in decision making) by letting the FD and in-house counsel look for potential downsides.

More generally, increased awareness of one's own and others' thinking and communication styles and perspectives can greatly increase the quality of results from team meetings, and make the process much more enjoyable and energising.

Key Point: What are you doing to further develop your own self-awareness and to adapt to other communication and thinking styles? Who are your key stakeholders? What are their styles, and their perceptions? We have to start with the intention to build functioning relationships with everyone on our team, and with our key stakeholders, if we want to expedite business results.

3. Really big goals are easier to achieve than 'realistic' ones

'Realistic' goals are based on current perceptions about what's possible. Those perceptions are very often plain wrong – i.e. not realistic at all. And even when they are effective, SMART goals and things of that ilk are usually pretty modest, boring and uninspiring. Goals should get peoples' blood pumping. The response you are after is "WHAT!?! We can't do that! But wouldn't it be GREAT if we could. Hang on, there might be a way". People on a high performance team want to be part of a vision that is compelling, inspiring, and maybe a bit scary.

In coming up with a vision, it's vital NOT to extrapolate from the present (see my article <link> for more on that). Instead start from the future. I say to clients: "Imagine we work together to produce a vision and strategy. You turn out to be highly successful. I come in to see you in three years time and you tell me all about it. What do you show me and tell me about while you are giving me the tour? What accomplishments and milestones are you most proud of? What were some of your key challenges? What's NEXT?"

Key Point: What are you doing to "raise the bar" on your team's vision? Many teams are successful in delivering short-term results, but high performance teams have a compelling, somewhat scary, vision that everyone on the team can get inspired by. Sometimes the thing to do with comfort zones is to leap so far outside them that the old objections to taking action don't make sense anymore.

4. Clear role separation: "Tie two birds together, and although they have four wings, still they cannot fly"

Lack of a clear role is a huge obstacle to individual and team performance. It leads to people constantly getting in each other's way instead of focusing on delivering key results. Each role needs to be clearly aligned with key results so as to help focus individuals and to help set priorities. And, this information needs to be shared with everyone on the team to foster collaboration, minimize conflict, and prevent "silo behaviour". Nancy MacKay lists the following aspects of role clarity for consideration: reporting line(s); purpose; value added; deliverables; responsibilities (e.g., customers, finance, people, products & services); interdependencies; decision-making authority; guidelines and boundaries; competencies;

compensation; and working conditions. Without clarity, you find out all about the wisdom of the old Kung Fu movie quote I used to introduce this section.

Key Point: Who is accountable for role clarity and key results? The longer you wait, the more people get stressed about "putting in time" versus delivering key results.

5. Team meeting productivity: Meetings are time- and energy-eating monsters

When I facilitate team meetings and retreats, my first question is always: "How will you know that the meeting has been of value? What will be the specific evidence?". In the absence of this kind of focus, most meetings concentrate on inputs (agenda items, information that should have been shared before the meeting, mind-numbing PowerPoint slides) or politics. High performance teams manage meetings well by ensuring that nothing gets onto the agenda unless it is tied to key results, and that most information sharing is done prior to the meeting. They also establish mechanisms to prevent side-tracking, political point scoring and other discussion irrelevant to the goals of the day. For more information, see our article (<http://www.bassclusker.com/info/articles/meetings1.aspx>) or contact us.

Key Point: What evidence would you offer to convince an outside party that a particular meeting had been valuable? Focus on improving your team's information sharing, problem-solving, and decision-making abilities to expedite team results.

If you would like to find out more

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Alternatively, you can visit us at www.bassclusker.com