



Management Application Note

High Performing Teams – Step 1

Introduction

In our complex, competitive, networked and interdependent world, teams have never been so important. Whilst much of the recruiting effort of HR functions is to find high performing individuals, these stars are nothing without being able lead but also work in effective teams. Teams create and deliver far more than individuals ever can. This Management Application Note examines the pre-conditions for getting effective and high performing teams.

Key Words

Teams, teambuilding, high-performance teams, trust, vulnerability-based trust, Lencioni

Detail

Much of management attention is on star performers. HR functions search far and wide for the star performers, who are head hunted rather than merely recruited. The star, when he or she joins is feted - a saviour has come to rescue the business! Such stars are sometimes imputed to have superhuman capabilities, and unlike mortal man can jump insurmountable hurdles and defy gravity. Until it all goes horribly wrong, that is, which is often the case, with the recent levels of CEO firings upⁱ and generally low levels of C Level tenureⁱⁱ. And it goes wrong when it becomes finally apparent that the laws of gravity do actually apply to stars as well as lesser men, and that the company hired an ego, and not a team-based capability.

In other words, it goes wrong when people realise the limitations of primarily depending upon one or a few key people to do the heavy lift. And in a networked, complex and pressured world, everyone is operating at or near the limits of their capabilities, and it's a very tight line between success and failure. So the smart people realise that even they have limitations. In fact smart leaders throughout history deep down acknowledge and accept their limitations, and they use others (yes, sometimes manipulating others), to cover up and compensate for their weaknesses.

Thus, smart people also realise that high performance is not about just them driving and directing business results, but actually a cooperative effort, where the power and capability of the team is harnessed and exploited. I once heard it said that a senior Japanese businessman once commented "You know, we Japanese will always triumph in business over you (Westerners)". When asked what he meant and to explain some more he said, "Because in the West you look for powerful individuals as leaders and use them to get results, whereas in Japan we use the power of everyone in the team"

It might seem that the power of teams is obvious and hardly worth necessary to argue the case for. But understanding and recognition of the benefits is by no means universal, and in some organisations it's individuals who rule the roost, and where it's just lip service that is paid to teams - not real acceptance of the notion that it's the team that is the vehicle for achieving superior performance. Finally, in a few organisations - but very few - the team is supreme.

Perhaps surprisingly to some, but professional armies are one organisation where the team is supreme. This is because they know very well and have learned the hard way that they need all parts of the organisation to work. When the officers trust the men and the men trust the officers, then the team really starts to achieve amazing things.

Football teams can operate with a few stars, and maybe score some goals. But real teamwork can subsume and obviate the need for stars. Football fans might know of how the English football with more stars than the Milky Way performs miserably in the Championships, because it's not a true team. Or how the Greek football team, with few or no stars, were rank outsiders in UEFA Cup in 2004, but went on to beat the favourites and the host nation, and win the championship.

But teams take time and effort. They require building, they require love and care and nurturing. Working via teams can take more time and sap the effort. Or so it may seem at first sight, whereas in fact a high performing team, once it's up and running will require less time and effort than trying to do everything yourself.

So maybe now you're convinced and ready to give it a go, but where do you start? We like and use Lencioni's model - the five dysfunctions of a teamⁱⁱⁱ. Of the five dysfunctions, he starts with trust, or rather the lack of it.

Absence of trust

Whilst there are many models of teamwork, Lencioni's model hits all the right buttons, because his basic tenets run so true. Lencioni's argument is that no quality or characteristic is more important than trust and that this is the first step on the route to getting high performance teams. He also says that trust, whilst being important, is rare. Because where true trust exists, it implies some form of vulnerability.

Think of your own personal life and experience. Partners who are happily together trust each other, but being trustful naturally implies vulnerability - partners, who really share things, reveal things - things, events and secrets are known about the one partner by the other, and this inevitability exposes them, make them vulnerable. But the vulnerability is never a problem as long as real trust continues to exist.

Of course as soon as the trust starts to go, the vulnerability does become a real problem, because it's no longer an act of faith, and faith and trust have been replaced by fear and concern. So the team leader absolutely has to win the trust of the team members.

Overcoming absence or trust

We can perhaps appreciate that vulnerability-based trust is key requirement between loving partners, but is this really the same for the work situation? How do you overcome the absence of trust and get trust anyway, and how do you do this in a work environment, as opposed to the home?

First, experience shows that developing true, vulnerability-based trust is as an essential pre-condition between colleagues, bosses and subordinates in the work place as it is in any other situation where you are trying to build a team approach. But it is an essential pre-cursor and condition, therefore somehow, it has to be done. Nowhere and at no time is it easy, and no less so in the workplace, so all the prospective team members may experience acute pain, embarrassment and discomfort in so doing, but it starts with members of the team exposing their hopes and fears, their innermost thoughts, and starting to share secrets, confidences and home truths with each other. This makes the team members vulnerable to one another, and if the team members are really prepared to do this, then you have a basis for working towards understanding each other, accommodating each person's likes and dislikes, strong points and weaknesses, and the process of gaining and keeping trust can begin.

In business this usually starts with the potential team taking some extended off-site sessions, and starting to awkwardly dismantle some of the perceptions, misconceptions and mistrusts they have of each other. This can be a painful and highly uncomfortable session for all concerned. Team working assumes that leaders trust their staff and the staff trust their leader, so it has to be led from the front and there's no comfortable hiding place for the leader who has to be first in line to embark on the process of revealing themselves and earning vulnerability-based trust. All of this of course has to be properly and objectively coached and facilitated.

Once you have overcome absence of trust, you are on Step 1 of the 5 dysfunctions, so you are then ready to explore the other pre-conditions for a high performance team, so please read the other Application Notes in this series in order to find out what to do next!

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