

What do you see as the recipe for great team performance? Is it...

- Warm togetherness?
- Skilful leadership?
- Regular meetings?

In this article the authors look at the characteristics of high performing teams. They examine the practicalities of how to attain and maintain a collaborative team climate, one which will deliver consistent results. The article describes four pillars of teamwork which can be deployed to build and sustain cohesive teams. These pillars are collaboration, communication, contribution, and commitment. The article looks at the role of the learning and development professional in helping teams reach high performance.

In the sporting world there are many examples of high performing teams. Team GB surpassed expectations of its performance during the Olympics this summer. However in a business and organisational environment, how are high performing teams created and what role can HR and L&D professionals take in this process? Let's start by looking at the characteristics of a high performing work team. In their best selling business book, 'The Wisdom of Teams' (Harper Business Books 1994), Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith define a team as:

'A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, a set of performance goals and an approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable'

Four pillars of effective teamwork

Using the insights from Katzenbach and Smith and others and combining it with our experience of team development, we believe a high performance team requires attention to four important areas. We see these as pillars which support great team performance.

Commitment

Managing and Developing High Performance Teams

Written by Sarah Cook

Friday, 01 February 2013 10:21 - Last Updated Friday, 01 February 2013 11:05

- How committed is the team to achieving its goals?
- Does the team share common objectives?

Commitment encompasses the creation of and commitment to common goals for the team and a willingness to achieve these goals. High performing teams have a well defined, mutually agreed and shared set of goals for which they hold themselves accountable. Whether a team is sending a space shuttle to Mars, a medical team in an operating theatre or a dispersed sales group, those teams that are effective share a commitment to a common sense of purpose.

Team commitment requires understanding of direction, so organisational and team goals need to be understood by everybody. Important aspects of commitment are likely to be how much all the team takes responsibility for the task outcomes, and the degree of shared understanding of their organisation. A leadership style and climate will support commitment by ensuring that the team members feel their contributions are appreciated and they are supported in achieving a sense of fulfilment about getting the team tasks done. Day to day, commitment is likely to be aided by offering interest and encouragement in the task. Nothing reduces commitment quicker than feeling one's work isn't appreciated.

How L&D professionals can help create a commitment

L & D can be most useful in helping a team to clarify where they are going through facilitation of setting team objectives. In addition, working with a team leader, L&D can help identify individual learning needs which will ensure that team members are competent and able to carry out their team tasks.

Communication

- Does everyone know what is going on?
- How openly is information shared?

Communication involves high levels of communication within the team and with other key stakeholder groups. A high performing team has open and high frequency channels of

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communication. Information is cascaded to and from the team leader, between the team members and amongst their key stakeholders. Also, a high communication team does not push differences under the carpet. They value challenge and openness and appreciate that conflict will help move the team forwards.

Communication is perhaps the most critical team process, and the majority of teams want this to be improved. One means of identifying improvements is to look at formal and informal communication channels, what works well, what should be enhanced or changed and then prompting individuals in the team to take ownership for these improvements. A litmus test will be how much use is made of both formal and informal communications channels, how much team members access information and share it and how effectively that information is absorbed. Importantly, team members will feel free to express themselves and be valued for their contribution. Team members are likely to be honest with each other with the knowledge that this information will not be held against them. This candid and open climate can help people to admit weaknesses and shortcomings and thereby create a better result unhindered by other agendas and impediments.

Working in physically dispersed teams poses particular communication issues. Interacting online or by telephone is the only way most of the time, given that members rarely have the opportunity to meet team colleagues. Whilst e-mail is useful for straightforward transactions like sharing routine information, for more complex areas such as shared decision-making or at times of misunderstanding, face-to-face is still preferable.

Amongst busy colleagues we know in one of the authors' teams, colleagues have adopted social media to communicate regularly, each team member starting the day by completing a few sentences on 'what are you doing today?'. This has proved invaluable in sharing information and promoting discussion of issues.

Implications and actions for L&D to help improve team communication

L & D can usefully facilitate a discussion through analysis of patterns of communication and then agree action plans on how to improve. Some of this may involve skills development exercises, highlighting the need to check understanding and the way communication can get distorted. Facilitating team meetings is another area L&D can usefully make a difference. Another is to act as an observer of team meetings so that you are able to provide feedback to the team on what is working well and where communication can be improved.

Contribution

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- Does everyone 'pull their weight'?
- Does the team work to each others' strengths?

Contribution is the degree to which work is shared across the team and people put in discretionary effort to deliver the team's goals. A mature team environment will manage the team's ability to get the job done efficiently and effectively. This will include knowledge of the team's strengths and weaknesses and understanding the degree of knowledge within the team and the team structure. A team that is contributing well will also be able to see beyond the current task and keep an eye on the environment any changes.

Have you ever been in a position in a team where roles and responsibilities are not clear? There may be duplication of effort or team member responsibilities are vague and important tasks fall into a black hole? In high performing teams everyone knows what their role is to do and what their individual responsibilities are.

In high performing teams, there is recognition that everyone has diverse skills and backgrounds and that all contributions are valid. This leads to optimum use of resources and a measure of flexibility to meeting changing demand. The development of a high degree of trust and respect for each other is another positive outcome.

L&D's role in encouraging team contribution

L & D can help develop a team through analysis of the team roles that are performed to ensure there is an appropriate balance of creativity, short-term and long-term development. There are a number of helpful team psychometric instruments which can be used to generate awareness and facilitate discussion.

Collaboration

- How well do team members share their expertise?
- How flexibly does the team work together to adapt to changes?

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Collaboration involves a high degree of support and sharing as well as healthy challenge that team members display to achieve win/win outcomes. High performing team members are cooperative rather than destructively competitive. They support one another and work towards the common goal rather than being divisive and self-centred.

Collaborative working is required to weld together sometimes separate – perhaps even competing – individuals, teams to achieve mutual goals. Complex reporting lines and divided loyalties may exist and collaborative working amongst virtual or dispersed teams requires additional effort to ensure it is effective.

One element of collaboration is how the team responds flexibly and collaboratively in the face of changing task demands. This might include taking on new roles, tackling new problems, as well as more making radical changes to plans such as responding to changing demands. Collaboration will assist in handling change. For example, team members may share their expertise to crack new problems.

How well team members share their expertise, and how effectively the team learns and develops is a significant marker of collaboration. Team members express a sense of belonging to the team, a feeling of being involved with the team activity and respecting members' contribution.

How well does the team manage to achieve social integration between team members? This is assisted by such things as a shared sense of humour, feeling a sense of fun from team interaction and having some social contact outside the work environment. Team members are free to express themselves in ways that they feel valued. This requires honesty between team members, assured confidentiality and a willingness to admit personal shortcomings within the team.

A collaborative environment is likely to feature reinforcing team celebrations of success, people taking the trouble to maintain morale and deal with criticism in a positive manner. Empathy is a learned skill essential to make collaborative teams work successfully: this enables team members to pick up on other team members' feelings, share concerns and have the skill to challenge inappropriate behaviour and give honest feedback. For teams to work together collaboratively, focussing purely at a task level is unlikely to lead to continuing success.

Implications and actions for L&D in encouraging collaboration

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Team-based activities with appropriate feedback can start to help people to work together in solving team problems and also to start to feel the benefit of team working. L& D can play an important role in facilitating such events and also providing team development opportunities.

Skills development can usefully consist of such skills as listening, empathetic understanding and other team behaviours such as emotional intelligence.

Look out for signs of ill-health

One aspect of team success is well-developed team maintenance skills. It pays to be alert to signs and symptoms of ill-health in the team, for example:

- blaming others
- in-group fighting
- unclear goals and priorities
- avoiding personal responsibility
- reliance on a few to 'make it happen'

Too much of a good thing?

Each component of a team can cause difficulties with the wrong emphasis, where too much of one can impact on the team, for example:

Commitment

Too greater commitment without support or mental and physical robustness can lead to individual or collective burnout.

Communication

It is not just the amount of communication, but also the quality of communication that is important-too internally focused communication can lead to excessively internal pre-occupation.

Contribution

If there is too much focus on the contribution of one or more individuals, the reason for combining resources is diminished, resulting in members acting independently of each other.

Excessive collaboration

Too much 'togetherness' may well mean the quality of thinking and challenging suffers, resulting in poor outcomes.

Working with teams to improve performance

Working effectively in teams is challenging: people are complex and groups of people even more so and the context of organisations makes this even more complex. The kind of leadership employed has a significant influence on the quality and way a team functions. It creates the unspoken norms that people work to, such as what is sanctioned; what can be challenged; what are the priorities; what is the way you go about things. Learning and development and HR professionals can take a key role in helping leaders work with team members to identify how well they are working together and where they need to improve. They can play a role in helping a team look at four pillars of effective teamwork.

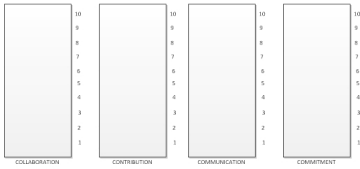
Whether you are leading a team, managing it or a member of it, it is valuable to have a 'health-check' toolkit to enable you to stand back and assess how the team is working. In fact, a diagnostic is not just a simple analysis – through discussion within the team, it can in itself be an intervention that can create energy, revitalise and bring about change. The L&D professional can play a key role in highlighting team members' awareness of their behaviour in relation to these four pillars. We suggest you use the attached team performance template to facilitate a discussion in a team:

1. First, ask each person to complete the sheet individually, rating the team in each of the four pillars on a scale 1 being weak and 10 being strong
2. Ask what are the overall team STRENGTHS in each of the areas?
3. Then ask what are the overall team DEVELOPMENT NEEDS in each of the areas?

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