



**YOU ALREADY  
KNOW THE  
SECRET TO HIGH-  
PERFORMING TEAMS**

**After three years collecting data on teams, our research illuminates the greatest difficulties senior leadership teams face and affirms that change is possible when teams truly commit.**

**Practice makes perfect, right? Perhaps not when it comes to teamwork. It is rare to hear CEOs or their Executives say that they have a high-performing team. After years of working in different teams, why does team performance still feel like an elusive challenge?**

Yes, senior leadership comes with additional complexities and pressures: responsibility to set the strategy, rallying people around a vision and creating the right culture. There's also the often tricky dynamics of dealing with the board or investors, the scrutiny of media and other interested stakeholders – regulators, politicians, and the list goes on. Whilst those additional pressures place an added load on senior teams, barriers to becoming a high-performing unit are not that different, they just manifest differently. So why are senior leaders still seeking advice on how to become a high-performing team? Are they asking a question to which they already know the answer?

In most cases, teams already know where their performance is lacking - and where they could best improve. The issue is less about unlocking some sort of secret key to high performance, but enabling the necessary team dynamics to work on improvement collectively.

**OUR RESEARCH SURFACES FOUR COMMON CHALLENGES AND PRACTICAL STEPS FOR OVERCOMING THEM...**



**Clarity cannot be assumed; it requires conversation**

Whilst teams further down the organization may need help creating clarity to agree priorities and define individual versus shared accountabilities, in executive and senior leadership teams one would expect prioritization and accountabilities to be pretty clear. And yet our research indicates that clarity around these two areas is most in need for senior leadership teams. Why?

The strategic landscape means there is always more that a senior team could be doing. Stakeholder concerns create competing demands on their attention; there is a constant pull in different directions, both on individuals and in shared areas of focus. When it

comes to accountabilities, most companies have shifted their expectations of senior teams to hold collective responsibility for their organization, not just focus on their business unit or function. This can result in false assumptions as to who owns decisions and execution – or dislike of sharing ownership and reverting back into silos.

For these reasons, executives and other senior leadership teams need to spend as much time, if not more, discussing changing demands and revisiting shared priorities and accountabilities. Our data shows that after a program of team coaching, prioritization and accountability are the two dimensions of team performance that show the most significant uplift.



**Relationships are neglected; invest in your foundations**

Our data shows that the essential combination of 'respect' and 'challenge' are the dimensions of team effectiveness most lacking in those that sought out team coaching. These elements create the all-important and often referenced concept of 'psychological safety' – the lack of which can be biggest blocker to team effectiveness.

Effective teams have a balance of challenge and respect. They seek out and recognize different opinions whilst also challenging each other's assumptions to consider different solutions. Our research indicates that teams find it easier to increase their use of constructive challenge, but increasing the perceived presence of respect within a team requires more work. Qualitative data points toward two obstacles to increasing respect and psychological safety:

- Many teams default to a pattern of avoiding difficult topics or areas of misalignment, and do not invest time to disrupt the pattern to have more challenging conversations. When teams come together in small allotments of time, it is easy to stick to reactive or tactical issues and avoid the knotty, emotionally charged challenges that both require the building of psychological safety.
- The team leader's behavior can unconsciously undermine mutual respect in the team. If they only listen and give airtime to select team members, this sends the message of not respecting all views. Equally, if the team leader spends more time advocating their opinions and recommendations rather than asking questions to draw out other ideas, they implicitly send the message that they do not value the different experiences and views in their team.

Teams need to have time together to develop respect and trust. The team leader sets the tone through their own behavior and by the signals they give off about what they condone amongst the team.



## Dysfunction becomes the norm; disruption requires discomfort

In our experience, most teams know what would enable high performance – and yet the idea of voicing what is not working within a team is not easy. Our data shows that whilst there can be some variation in perceptions, team members are predominantly consistent in identifying their team strengths and weaknesses. And yet, it is not until the diagnostic data confirms their views that teams are more ready to talk about what is holding them back – and that's when real change happens.

This isn't to say that simply recognizing known problems is the solution. It's only the beginning of the journey toward better team dynamics and success. And that needs ongoing commitment.

Any form of transformational learning and growth requires some discomfort. The problem is that teams often want a quick fix for their dysfunctions – and yet they find reasons not to go there. We often see teams try to play it safe by addressing their 'operating' challenges, such as prioritization and shared accountabilities, more so than the often far more important relationship issues and feelings by members that they aren't being respected. However, challenges around purpose, priorities or accountabilities are often connected to a team's inability to build positive relationships.

Rallying around a shared purpose requires a cohesive team and collective commitment to the greater good. Narrowing down to fewer priorities requires constructively challenging conversations and a willingness to prioritize from an enterprise-perspective rather than a siloed view. For the entire team to thrive, individuals must sometimes be uncomfortable.



## Blame is the easy path; everyone needs to be all in

A common way for teams to cope with dysfunction is by blaming one person – whether a hapless team member or the leader. The latter is quite common. Whether it's the CEO, another executive or a manager, the leader has a weighted influence over the team dynamics. This creates a temptation to believe it all starts (or even ends) with the person at the top.

But everyone in a team has the opportunity to change the dynamic, and if several people are all pulling in the same positive direction, it can lead to change. Given teams often know their hindering habits, giving them a name can work as a great circuit breaker. There are some common dysfunctional patterns: 'playing ping-pong' is arguing different views back and forth without evolving the debate or 'circling' involves coming back around to an issue that was already settled. Everyone on the team is accountable for their team's performance – therefore everyone has a role to play in making it better. Think about team development as a team sport and make it clear that your team need to be 'all in'.

# IN A NUTSHELL

Rather than looking for articles or advice on creating high-performing teams, ask yourself what you already know to be your team's hindering habit. Don't dwell on what's wrong – instead engage your team in a discussion around the team they want to be. Challenge them to show up differently and break dysfunctional patterns to create a team they will look back on with pride. Stop blaming others and know that the solution sits within the team. You just have to invest the time to name it and then all work to change it.

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