



Create a High-Performance Team

Building a Team

Whether you're trying to turn your company around or meet a specific performance goal, a team can make it happen. In their book, *The Wisdom of Teams*, Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith describe a team as a "small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."

Looking closer, here are the elements that lend themselves to the development of teams and foster superior work performance:

1. **Small number.** Most successful teams have two to 25 members and the majority have fewer than 10.
2. **Complementary skills.** A team cannot succeed unless its members contribute three types of complementary skills and knowledge. If necessary, the members can develop or increase any of these aptitudes as their work progresses:
 - Technical or functional expertise.* Lawyers can't practice medicine and doctors can't litigate. But together they can try a medical malpractice case.
 - Problem-solving and decision-making skills.* Teams must know how to evaluate problems and opportunities, plan strategies and make decisions.
 - Interpersonal skills.* Team members should be able to state their opinions clearly, listen actively and provide helpful suggestions to others.

No team can succeed without certain skills, but some managers ignore this and assemble teams primarily on the basis of

personal compatibility or organizational rank. At the other extreme, some managers overemphasize skills to the exclusion of such things as shared commitment, focus, accountability and enthusiasm.

3. **Common purpose and performance goals.** A team's immediate goals must correlate with its overall purpose. If short-term objectives don't match the long-term picture, team members will probably feel confused and discouraged.
 - Teams work best when management gives them a broadly defined job to do and lets them do it.
4. **A common approach.** Teams should devote ample time to developing their working approach. They should pay particular attention to the economic, administrative and social aspects of the working relationship.
 - Note that if the work isn't divided equally, resentment and non-productivity will result. The members should assign themselves specific tasks, agree on ways to set and stick to schedules, think about skills they might need to develop, and plan ways to make and change decisions.
 - The social functions of a team — challenging, interpreting, supporting, integrating, remembering and summarizing — should not be assigned. They will develop naturally as the team evolves and its performance needs become clear.
5. **Mutual accountability.** A group becomes a team only when it can hold itself collectively accountable. Underlying this accountability are the sincere promises that members make to themselves and others regarding commitment and trust.

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Most people enter a team cautiously. A tradition of individualism discourages them from putting their fates in the hands of others. While this distrust cannot be wished or coerced away, it can be resolved over time. Shared work toward common objectives eventually breeds trust within the group.

What Differentiates a High-Performing Team

Great teams make great organizations. Good and mediocre teams make good and mediocre organizations. They meet deadlines; they stay within budget; they maintain the status quo. But they do not push the envelope. They do not typically reach for performance breakthroughs. In *Great Business Teams*, Howard Guttman examines what makes great business teams stand out.

Guttman's research revealed a set of core attributes that have helped unlock the performance code of great teams. *Great business teams are high-performing, horizontal teams that operate as fully aligned entities to achieve increasingly higher levels of results.*

Guttman identifies five characteristics that great business teams share:

1. Great business teams are led by high-performance leaders who:
 - Create a “burning platform” — an energizing principle — for fundamental change
 - Are visionaries and architects
 - Know they cannot do it alone
 - Build authentic relationships
 - Model the behaviors they expect from their team
 - Redefine the fundamentals of leadership.
2. Members of great business teams are *us*-directed leaders. On a great business team, no one's performance — not even the leader's — is exempt from scrutiny and feedback.
3. Great business teams play by protocols. Ambiguity kills effective decision making and wastes precious time. Great businesses are specific about what decisions need to be made, who will make them and how.
4. Great business teams continually raise the performance bar. No matter how much it achieves, a great business team is never satisfied. On a great business team, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, continuous improvement and raising the performance bar are the norm.
5. Great business teams have a supportive performance management system. Whether your aim is to create a single great business team or an organization made up of great teams on every level, the shift is not merely structural but



Three Steps to Creating a High-Performance Team

Contributed by Howard M. Guttman

“A high-performance team is not a leaderless team, but a team of leaders,” a regional executive at Mars Inc. once told us. This means that every player on a high-performance team takes on powerful roles — with tremendous responsibilities — that they would not be asked to fill in traditional, hierarchical organizations.

With these new roles and responsibilities comes a new mind-set that each team member must embrace and live by. At first blush, this new way of thinking might seem strange, or even radical, but it brings results. Below are three steps to creating a high-performance team. After the regional executive implemented them in Mars's Latin American division, “We created so many business opportunities in the last two years, that we don't have the capacity to take advantage of them all.”

1. Think Like a Director: The members of great teams think like members of a board of directors. They keep their eye on the overarching goals and results that the company needs to achieve in order to stay ahead of the competition. Team members are interested in the health of the entire organization, not just their department or function.

2. Team First, Function Second: Players on great teams are team-members first and functional representatives second. They are always thinking about how they can contribute their technical expertise across functions, so that their talent and experience become force-multipliers throughout the organization. High-performance team players aren't thinking about protecting their turf from others because they see the entire organization as “their turf.”

3. Embrace Accountability: The attribute that most separates high-performing teams from others is accountability. Sure, high-performance team members are accountable for their own performance and that of their direct reports — that's true in any business environment. But high-performance team members also hold both their *peers* and *leaders* accountable. This is a radical concept in most organizations where people are expected to keep their eyes fixed on their own desk and ignore what's going on in the next cubicle. Let's look deeper into just how this works:

Holding Peers Accountable: High-performance peers set deadlines and goals with each other, keeping everyone honest and on schedule for meeting targets. This can happen because team members depersonalize feedback, delivering critique in a rational, “just the facts” manner and getting the point across without personal judgments. Conversely, those receiving the feedback aren't defensive. They embrace colleagues' feedback as valuable coaching.

Holding Leaders Accountable: High-performance team members hold their leaders accountable. If leaders don't get the business results they promised, don't observe the team's agreed-upon rules or violate the team's behavior code, team members are obligated to point out these shortcomings. But holding a leader accountable doesn't always mean pointing out poor performance. When Cathy Burzik led the top team at Applied Biosystems, her team pointed out to her that she was too involved in nitty-gritty details and that her energy would best benefit the organization if directed toward creating a “go forward” strategy for the organization. It was valuable advice that most team leaders would never hear from subordinates.

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profoundly cultural. In order to effect permanent behavior change, a team's performance management system must support the new expectations. Team and individual goals have to be crystal clear; the necessary technical and interpersonal skills have to be provided; performance has to be monitored; and feedback has to be timely and well thought out.

For an organization to raise its level of performance, every team on every level must be a great team. It must be aligned in five key areas:

- Business strategy
- Business deliverables coming from the strategy
- Roles and responsibilities at individual and business unit or functional levels
- Protocols, or ground rules, for decision making and conflict resolution
- Business/interpersonal relationships and interdependencies.

The alignment process is the foundation for building the performance-based, leader-player relationships that characterize the high-performance team. A team alignment is an opportunity for collective deep-think and reevaluation — and for the leader and his or her team to establish the blueprint for high performance.

One of the characteristics of all great business teams is that they continually raise the performance bar. But the performance-improvement attitude is an acquired one, which often requires not-so-gentle prodding from the leader.

High-performance leaders seek to leverage power, not to monopolize it, but to put it to use to drive up their team's or organization's performance. As a means to driving up results, high-performance leaders favor “distributive power” — putting power and authority in the

hands of teams and their members, provided the conditions are right, the protocols are in place and the players are sufficiently evolved to deliver maximum payoff.

The Role of a High-Performance Team Leader

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, author Patrick Lencioni identifies five dysfunctions that are consistently at the heart of why teams struggle:

- Absence of trust
- Fear of conflict
- Lack of commitment
- Avoidance of accountability
- Inattention to results.

Like a chain with just one link broken, teamwork deteriorates if even a single dysfunction is allowed to flourish. Here is Lencioni's advice on what a team leader's role should be:

To build trust. Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible. The most important action that a leader must take to encourage the building of trust on a team is to demonstrate vulnerability first. This requires that the leader risk losing face in front of the team, so that subordinates will take the same risk themselves. Team leaders must create an environment that does not punish vulnerability. Displays of vulnerability on the part of a team leader must be genuine; they cannot be staged.

To overcome the fear of conflict. Teams that engage in productive conflict know that its only purpose is to produce the best possible solution in the shortest period of time. It is key that leaders demonstrate restraint when their people engage in conflict and allow

resolution to occur naturally, as messy as it can sometimes be. A leader's ability to personally model appropriate conflict behavior is essential. By avoiding conflict when it is necessary and productive — something many executives do — a team leader will encourage this dysfunction to thrive.

To build commitment. In the context of a team, commitment is a function of two things: clarity and buy-in. The two greatest causes of the lack of commitment are the desire for consensus and the need for certainty. More than any other member of the team, the leader must be comfortable with the prospect of making a decision that may ultimately turn out to be wrong. And the leader must be constantly pushing the group for closure around issues, as well as adherence to schedules that the team has set. What the leader cannot do is place too high a premium on certainty or consensus.

To instill accountability. In the context of teamwork, accountability refers specifically to the willingness of team members to call their peers on performance or behaviors that might hurt the team. One of the most difficult challenges for a leader who wants to instill accountability on a team is to encourage and allow the team to serve as the first and primary accountability mechanism. Once a leader has created a culture of accountability on a team, however, he or she must be willing to serve as the ultimate arbiter of discipline when the team itself fails. This should be a rare occurrence. Nevertheless, it must be clear to all team members that accountability has not been relegated to a consensus approach, but merely to a shared team responsibility, and that the leader of the team will not hesitate to step in when necessary.

To focus a team on results. The ultimate dysfunction of a team is the tendency of members to care about something other than the collective goals of the group. Perhaps more than with any of the other dysfunctions, the leader must set the tone for a focus on results. If team members sense that the leader values anything other than results, they will take that as permission to do the same for themselves. Team leaders must be selfless and objective, and must reserve rewards and recognition for those who make real contributions to achieving group goals.



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Understanding the Relationships Within a Team

Given the right tools, it's possible to build relationships flexible and strong enough to sustain stellar performance in teams — both over time and under pressure, according to Diana McLain Smith in *Divide or Conquer*.

We all bring to relationships our own characteristic ways of interacting with others, given our behavioral repertoires. Built out of experiences, these repertoires are organized around key themes, such as power, conflict, control or success. When people first meet, their themes interact to give rise to distinctive patterns of interaction.

In the second stage of development, people renegotiate their formal and informal roles, as initial impressions give way to more stable interpretations and people come to know each other for “who they really are.” These more stable interpretations — called *frames* — inform people's negotiations about who should do what and turn early patterns of interaction into more stable informal structures.

All relationships develop over a series of stages, as people adapt to each other and the circumstances around them. Some adaptations are better than others.

When people get to the point where their difficulties must be addressed, most of them have long since reached conclusions about each other — *he's a wimp, she's a control freak* — and most have spent months, perhaps even years, trying to get the other person to behave differently.

Once a relationship gets into trouble, it can be awfully hard to get out. We're so riveted on the other person — on divining his or her motives or avoiding his or her impact — that we don't take a close look at what we, ourselves, are doing to create a relationship neither of us wants. Unaware, we wait for others to make life easier for us, while we make it harder for them to make it easier for us.

To change the course of a relationship, people need to slow down and look at what they're actually feeling, thinking and doing with each other, so they can see that they're not nearly as helpless as they think they are.

The best way to avoid each person waiting for the other to calm down and see things his or her way is for people to help each other shift perspective so they can regain their collective cool. While shifting perspectives won't make feelings go away, it will make it easier for people to use their emotions to think things through together.

To shift perspective, it helps to reflect and reframe, first alone, then together. Over time these two cooling strategies build a relationship's cool system by adding maps to the system that are tightly connected to the hot buttons triggered by stressful events.

Team Player Styles

Effective teamwork is based on an effective mix of people who exhibit a variety of styles or approaches to teamwork. Research shared by Glenn M. Parker in *Team Players and Teamwork* offers four types, or styles, of team players. He cautions that each style has a downside when carried to an extreme. Here are brief descriptions of each:

Contributor: A task-oriented team member who enjoys providing the team with good technical information and data, does his or her homework, and pushes the team to set high performance standards and to use their resources wisely. Most people see the Contributor as dependable.

Collaborator: A goal-directed member who sees the vision, mission or goal of the team as paramount but is flexible and open to new ideas, is willing to pitch in and work outside his or her defined role, and is able to share the limelight with other team members. Most people see the Collaborator as a “big-picture” person.

Communicator: A process-oriented member who is an effective listener and facilitator of involvement, conflict resolution, consensus building, feedback and the building of an informal, relaxed climate. Most people see the Communicator as a positive people person.

Challenger: A member who questions the goals, methods and even the ethics of the team, is willing to disagree with the leader or higher authority and encourage the team to take well-conceived risks. Most people appreciate the value of the Challenger's candor and openness.

The Challenges of Strengthening a Team

Relationships that are highly important and highly interdependent are those that operate along organizational fault lines — interfaces where coordination is as essential as it is difficult. It's on these critical few relationships that a company's leadership should focus its limited resources, according to Diana McLain Smith in *Divide or Conquer*.

All relationships require effort to work, but not all relationships within teams require the same amount or kind of effort. Smith offers the following segment-specific approaches:

- If two or more people don't depend much on each other and their relationships aren't strategically important, you can ignore these relationships and any negative effects they create, at least until circumstances suggest otherwise.
- If people's roles are highly interdependent but the people aren't uniquely qualified to fulfill those roles, structural separation — maybe through transfer or promotion — is often the best way to handle relationship problems that resist resolution.
- If people are vital to their roles but the roles themselves are not that interdependent, you should be able to effectively manage any negative effects a relationship creates, because they should be infrequent.
- If people are vital to strategic roles and their success cannot be achieved without their depending on each other, it's usually more efficient and effective to transform these relationships than to manage or ignore them, or to separate the people involved. ♦