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Key Attributes Of High-Performance Teams All Leaders Must Know

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“ A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves. ”

- Lao Tzu

As a college athlete I thought I understood what it takes to build and lead high-performance teams. But I had no idea what that really entailed until I joined the Navy SEAL teams in 2001. At TakingPoint Leadership (TPL), the team draws from many of the same leadership, mindset, behavior and culture principles from the world of special operations to help committed leadership teams drive high-performance, growth and sustainability. But there are many key attributes leadership teams must leverage in order to develop a culture of performance and continuous improvement. Effective leadership however can only take an organization so far without sound processes and standard operating procedures. A healthy sense of urgency and appropriate degree of adaptability must always rest upon a foundation of stability.

So, what is a high-performance team?

A «**high-performance work team**» refers to a group of goal-focused individuals with specialized expertise and complementary skills who collaborate, innovate and produce consistently superior results. The group relentlessly pursues performance excellence through shared goals, shared leadership, collaboration, open communication, clear role expectations and group operating rules, early conflict resolution and a strong sense of accountability and trust among its members.

One of TPL's long time strategic partners, Avion Consulting, developed a great framework for high-performance teams. The model begins with two dimensions: **(1) Relationships** – because all high-performance teams are made up of what? PEOPLE! And **(2) Results** – because ultimately high-performance is about generating results and desired outcomes.

The Relationships dimension is supported by the **three T's**:

- **Transparency** – the cornerstone of our culture of accountability in the SEAL teams begins with our ability to engage in peer-to-peer learning, candid feedback, and having critical conversations rooted in respectful truth over artificial harmony.
- **Trust** – outside of accountability, trust is the other most important culture pillar for high-performance teams and must be nurtured by creating environments of psychological safety and a deep sense of belonging.
- **Tone** – leaders get the behaviors they tolerate and therefore must define and reward behavioral norms that support the mission, values and desired results the team must accomplish.



The Results dimension is supported by the **three A's**:

- **Alignment** – this is a key factor and one many well-intentioned leaders and teams struggle to maintain as the business evolves and internal and external competing priorities plague their battlefield. Trust me, I've been there. Alignment at all levels of the organization is not a one-and-done initiative – it must be continually pursued. Alignment on mission. On roles and responsibilities. On accountability, goals and objectives.
- **Agility** – In the SEAL teams we are action oriented and learning focused. We embrace adversity as a gift. Our battlefield requires the individual operator and team to be nimble and thirsty for knowledge. We spend 90% of our time engaged in professional development. This allows the team to have the skills necessary for adaptability in chaotic environments.
- **Accountability** – and finally (and most important) is accountability, also referred to as “extreme ownership” in the SEAL teams – a moniker captured in Jocko Willink and Leif Babin’s phenomenal bestselling book titled Extreme Ownership. In high-performance teams, all take ownership over wins and losses. Each team member is always asking themselves what else they can be doing to drive mission success.

Given the importance of team-based work in today's modern "workplace," over the years we have focused on using evidence-based organizational research and executive feedback to pinpoint the defining attributes of high-performance teams. Despite varying approaches to describing high-performance teams, some common characteristics seem to be strong indicators of a team that is NOT functioning at its peak, or that needs some level of intervention:

Nonparticipating leadership

One obvious but common factor in teams that are failing to meet objectives involve inadequate leadership participation. This fuels confusion regarding belief in the mission and drives disengagement and lack of participation at all levels.

Lack of process and procedure

Standard operating procedures and tools even for the most mundane or seemingly simple tasks are imperative for streamlining efficiencies. Here is an easy example. As Markus Mikola, founder and CEO of ContractZen, recently explained to me in an email conversation, "Online connectivity means that your operations team, executive team, and your clients should never have a disconnect in any business process. The pandemic has accelerated digitalization and the move away from "paper-based" contracts and meetings. With new online collaboration tools, paperless meetings and e-signing, you can draft, finalize and e-sign any document almost instantly so that they are available when needed – on any device. This means huge time savings, lower costs and faster processes." Process improvement through even the most basic digital transformation is key to gaining more time back from priority initiatives.

Diversity not valued

When diversity of thought, experience, cultural background and everything in between is not valued in an organization, leaders reap what they sow. Mediocrity. A couple great ways to help diversity thrive beyond just talent acquisition strategies, is to create cross-functional work teams and invest in continuous personal and professional development for the organization. This allows the organization to benefit from the full depth of its talent pool.

Inability to manage conflict

This is a common hurdle for many well-intentioned leaders and teams. Typically, we don't like to engage in conflict. But navigating conflict in any team – especially high-performance teams – is not only inevitable, it's crucial for survival.

Lack of goal clarity

What? How could this be?! Lack of clarity – and alignment – on the WHAT, WHY and HOW is another common barrier to reaching peak levels of team performance. Luckily, this is relatively low-hanging fruit but often requires a bit of outside facilitation from a nonbiased party to reach maximum clarity

Poorly defined roles and responsibilities

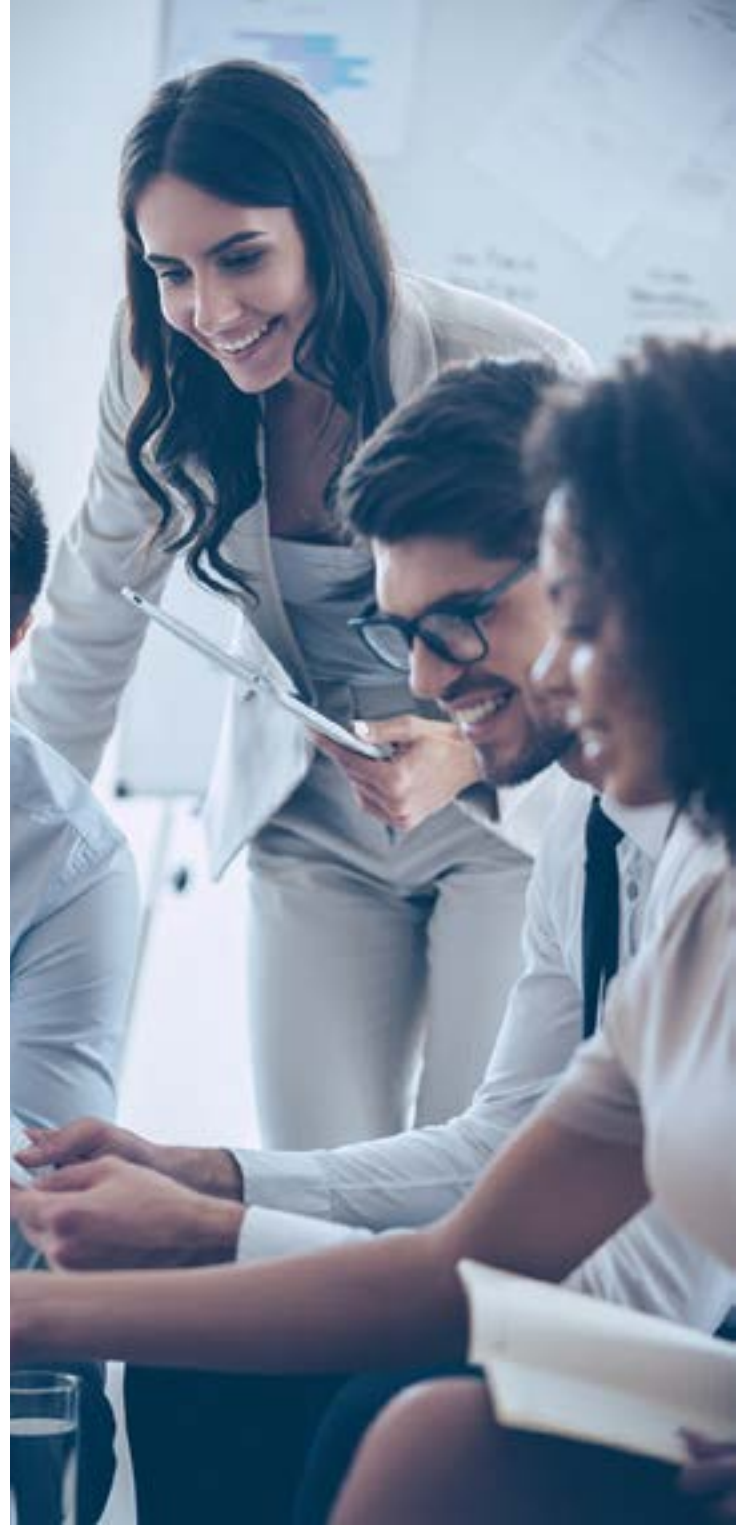
Role clarity and a solid RACI model (defining who is responsible, accountable, consulted and informed) from the macro strategic level all the way down to the project execution level is imperative. High-performance leaders understand this and make it a priority. Sometimes simple, but not easy.

Relationship issues

Our research shows that the number one issue infecting organizational (and personal) workplace performance and resilience is challenging interpersonal relationships. These must be resolved by fostering mutual respect among team members.

Broken culture

Team culture encompasses everything we've reviewed thus far. Essentially, it can be defined as how team members collectively think, act, and behave. The culture of a high-performance team is well designed, managed, and structured to achieve specific outcomes.



There isn't necessarily a perfect recipe for any particular organization, but when leaders and manager make these attributes behavioral and structural imperatives for the team, high-performance and desired results are sure to follow.



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