



DEVELOPING AND LEADING HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS



DEFINING HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

At Break the Norm Leadership, we believe that no team starts great, but every team can become great. The question is: “Of the hundreds of things a team could do to improve its performance, which actions will yield the most benefit?” This handout summarizes what we’ve seen in terms of high-return actions to build and maintain high-performing teams.

- **A team** is a group of individuals with a shared or overlapping purpose whose members must rely on each other—at least part of the time—in order to be successful.
- **A high-performing team** is a team that demonstrates sustained performance, team resilience and ongoing vitality.
 - *Sustained performance* means the team consistently generates positive results
 - *Team resilience* means the team works through challenges and bounces back from adversity
 - *Ongoing vitality* means the team generates and maintains the energy and resources needed for future success

SEVEN DRIVERS FOR TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

Driver	Fundamental Questions
Capability	Do we have the right people with the right mix of knowledge, skills, and other attributes ?
Cooperation	Do team members possess the right beliefs and attitudes about their team?
Coordination	Are team members exhibiting the necessary teamwork behaviors for team success?
Communication	Do team members communicate effectively with each other and with people outside the team?
Cognition	Do team members possess a shared understanding about key factors such as priorities, roles, and vision?
Coaching	Do the leader and team members demonstrate the necessary leadership behaviors ?
Conditions	Is the context in which the team operates favorable performing effectively (e.g., ample resources, supportive culture)?

Capability: Even though most people have been on hundreds of teams in their lives, many haven't fully developed the 5 skills or 4 personal attributes needed to support high-performing teamwork.

Skills:

- Communication skills. Ability to send clear messages, ask effective questions, and listen accurately.
- Feedback skills. Ability to observe performance, and provide, elicit, and interpret constructive feedback.
- Conflict skills. Ability to disagree productively, diagnose conflict causes, and defuse or work through conflicts.
- Interpersonal skills. Ability to infer intent, interpret non-verbal cues, influence others, and regulate one's own emotions.
- Leadership skills. Ability to constructively hold others accountable, motivate others, teach others, and clarify expectations and priorities.

Personal Attributes:

- Cognitive ability. Capability for higher-level processes such as reasoning, synthesis, and problem solving.
- Collective orientation. Capability for promoting the team's interests above one's own.
- Adaptability. Capability for adjusting to fit the circumstances.
- Conscientiousness. Capability for being dependable, organized, and dutiful.

Cooperation: Some of the challenges facing teams that strive to be high-performing have little to do with the actions the team takes, and more to do with what individual team members believe. The following 4 beliefs support the development and maintenance of high-performing teams.

- Trust. I expect my teammates to have positive intentions and do the right thing.
- Psychological Safety. I believe my teammates will give me the benefit of the doubt.
- Collective Efficacy. I believe my team can win (i.e., "get it done").
- Cohesion. I believe my teammates are committed to the team.

Coordination: Members of high-performing teams routinely and intentionally practice 4 actions. They...

- Maintain situational awareness regarding internal and external factors that may impact team success.
- Provide support to one another in the form of advice, help, and back-up.
- Adapt to challenges by learning from experience and making adjustments to improve performance.
- Manage team emotions by taking actions to support high team morale and addressing conflict constructively.

Communication: To take effective action and make effective decisions, high-performing teams need to communicate effectively. More communication is not better; better communication is better. Members of high-performing teams consistently...

- Share unique information. Unique information would help multiple team members but is currently known by only one team member.
- Close the communication loop. They make sure they are understood by requesting communication receivers to confirm what they heard before moving on to action.
- Convey their understanding. In support of closed-loop communication, team members share their understanding of what they've been asked or directed to do.
- Share timely data with stakeholders. They communicate effectively with individuals, groups, and organizations outside of their team.

Cognition: Members of high-performing teams tend to have "shared mental models" which means they have shared understandings about things such as roles, priorities, and expectations. In high-performing teams, members would have similar answers to the following questions:

- Where are we going (i.e., what are we seeking to accomplish)?
- What is important (i.e., what are our priorities)?
- Who does what (i.e., which team members are responsible for which activities)?
- How do we do it (i.e., what are our standard operating procedures for X)?
- Why do we do it that way (i.e., what is the standard operating procedure for X the way that it is)?
- Who knows it (i.e., where does the knowledge about X live)?
- What if things go wrong (i.e., what is our contingency plan for known common risks)?
- What is going on (i.e., what success opportunities and threats are the team currently facing)?

Conditions: No high-performing team operates in a vacuum. There are 6 organizational conditions, 3 senior leadership conditions, and 4 team-specific conditions that define the context in which high-performing teams must... perform.

Organizational Conditions: To what degree do the following 6 organizational processes support or inhibit teamwork?

- Hiring
- Onboarding
- Promotions and opportunities
- Performance management
- Rewards and recognition
- Leadership Development

Senior Leadership Conditions: Even when senior leadership has little contact with specific teams, the behavior of senior leaders has a tremendous downward impact on whether teams are high-performing or not.

- Behavior Modeling. Do senior leaders behave like they are members of a high-performing team?
- Communications. Do senior leaders communicate how important teamwork is to business success through their official and unofficial communications?
- Creating Psychological Safety. Do senior leaders make it easier or harder for individuals to speak up, voice concerns, and offer divergent opinions?

Team-Specific Conditions: While organizational and senior leadership conditions will likely impact all teams within an organization in the same way, the following conditions can vary widely from team to team.

- Resources. Does the team have sufficient staff, budget, critical information, and equipment to perform?
- Time availability. Do team members have sufficient time to do their work and effectively collaborate with other team members?
- Autonomy/decision-making authority. Does the team have sufficient authority to make team-critical decisions promptly?
- Team mission/purpose. To what degree does the team have a mission/purpose that is compelling and that cannot be accomplished through individual excellence alone?

Coaching: Coaching is really about leadership. High-performing teams have a leader and multiple team members who regularly demonstrate the 7 leadership skills. High-performing teams don't rely on the person at the top to be solely responsible for leadership.

Task-focused leadership behaviors

- Ensure team members are clear about their roles and priorities, and aligned with one another.
- Hold teammates accountable for doing their job and keeping their commitments.
- Remove obstacles to team success and garner support/resources for team success.

Team-focused leadership behaviors

- Manage team emotions and attitudes to maintain high morale and manage conflicts constructively.
- Foster psychological safety so team members can speak up and do their best work.
- Encourage participation and empowerment so team members will step up and help when needed.

Team- and task-focused leadership behavior

- Promote learning and adaptation so the team can continuously improve and become more efficient and effective.