



4 Common Denominators of High Performing Teams

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Many teams in the working world have various symptoms of dysfunction. You can observe all kinds of back biting, laziness, sabotage, lack of support, passive aggressive behavior, grandstanding, and numerous other maladies if you study the inner workings of teams. Yet some teams are able to rise above the petty problems and reach a level of performance that is consistently admirable.

I have studied working teams for decades and have concluded that there are four common denominators successful teams share. If your team has these four elements, you are likely enjoying the benefits of a high performance team. If you do not see these things, then chances are you are frustrated with your team experience.

A common goal – This is the glue that keeps people on the team pulling in the same direction. If people have disparate goals, their efforts will not be aligned, and organizational stress will result. If people on your team are fighting or showing other signs of stress, the first thing to check is if the goal is really totally shared by everyone. Often people give the official goal lip service but have a hidden different agenda. Eventually this discontinuity will come out in bad behaviors.

Trust – When there is high trust between team members, the environment is real. Where trust is low, people end up playing games to further their own agendas. Achieving high trust is not simple, nor is it the main topic of this paper. I have written extensively on the creation of trust elsewhere. One caveat is that trust is a dynamic commodity within a team. You need to keep checking the trust level and bolster it when it slips. Constant vigilance is required.

Good Leadership – A team without a leader is like a ship without a rudder. But the leader does not have to be the anointed formal leader. Often a kind of distributed leadership or informal leadership structure can make teams highly effective. But beware if there is a poor leader who is formally in charge of a team. This is like the kiss of death. No team can perform consistently at a high level if the official leader is blocking progress at every turn. The best that can be achieved is an effective work-around strategy.

A Solid Charter – I have coached hundreds of teams and discovered that the ones with an agreed-upon team charter always out perform ones that have wishy-washy ground rules. A good charter will consider what each member brings to the team so the diversity of talents can be used. Second, it will contain the specific goals that are tangible and measurable. Third, it will have a set of agreed upon behaviors so people know what to expect of each other and can hold each other accountable. Fourth, the team needs a set of

ground rules for how to operate. Ground rules can be detailed or general, it really does not matter, but some ground rules are required. Finally, and this is the real key, there need to be specific agreed-upon consequences for members of the team who do not abide by the charter.

The most common problem encountered within any team is a phenomenon called “social loafing.” This is where one or more members step back from the work and let the others do it. This inequity always leads to trouble, but it is nearly always avoidable if the consequences for social loafing are stated clearly and agreed upon by all team members at the outset. People will not knowing slack off if they have already agreed to the negative impact on themselves, or if they do it once and feel the pain they will not do it again. This last element of successful teams is the most important ingredient. When it is missing, you are headed for trouble eventually.

There are numerous other elements that can help teams succeed, but if you have the above four elements, chances are your team is doing very well. All high performance teams have these four elements in play everyday. Make sure your team has these as well.

The preceding information was adapted from the book Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.

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