

CHAPTER 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAM

I am sure that everyone in IT would like to be part of a high-performance team. This chapter outlines for you:

- The characteristics of teams that succeed.
- The benefits of teamwork.
- The role of the team leader.

It also provides you with a diagnostic tool to rate your current team performance.

A team or a group?

IT professionals are often viewed as working in isolation. People who are not in the profession can view them as seeming to prefer the company of themselves and their computers and other electronic devices to that of their colleagues. Yet much of life and work involves various forms of team working; and to gain the most from this, individuals need to realise what team working is, what it means and what the benefits are for all concerned. The challenge for you as an IT manager is to turn a group of individuals into a high-performance team.

In a group each member is responsible only for their own individual contributions. He or she can work in relative isolation without too much concern about the other members of the group. They may report directly to a leader but have little interaction or dependency on other members of the group.

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Within a group there are no shared goals. Each person is responsible for their own outcomes. The potential attitude is 'I did my bit, it's up to them how they do theirs'.

So what are the characteristics of a high-performance team?

Definition of a team

Let's start with the definition of a team. In their best-selling business book *The Wisdom of Teams* (Harper Business Books 1994), Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith define a team as:

- 'A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, a set of performance goals and an approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable'

The characteristics of a high-performance team therefore are:

- A clearly defined and commonly shared purpose.

High-performance teams have a well-defined, mutually agreed and shared set of goals for which they hold themselves accountable. From a team tasked with sending a space shuttle to Mars to a medical team in an operating theatre, the teams that are effective share a common sense of purpose.

- Mutual trust and respect.

In high-performance teams members have a high degree of trust and respect for each other. There is recognition that everyone has diverse skills and backgrounds and that all contributions are valid.

- Clarity around individual roles and responsibilities.

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Have you ever been in a position in a team where roles and responsibilities are not clear? Where there may be duplication of effort or team-member responsibilities are vague and important tasks fall into a black hole? In high-performance teams everyone knows what their role is and what their individual responsibilities are.

- High levels of communication.

A high-performance team has open and high-frequency channels of communication. Information is cascaded to and from the team leader, between the team members and amongst their key stakeholders.

- Willingness to work towards the greater good of the team.

Individuals working in a high-performance team recognise that there will be times when they need to put the needs of the team before their individual goals. Captain Oates was a good example of this. He sacrificed his own life rather than be a burden on the rest of his team. In a high-performance team individuals recognise that at times they may have to make sacrifices for the overall good of the team.

- A leader who both supports and challenges team members.

Leaders of high-performance teams demonstrate a balance of supportive behaviour and challenge. They encourage their team, listen and provide ongoing recognition. At the same time they are not content with the status quo. They challenge the team to do greater and better things, question current ways of working and encourage ongoing improvement.

- A climate of co-operation.

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High-performance team members are co-operative rather than competitive. They support one another and work towards the common goal rather than being divisive.

- An ability to voice differences and appreciate conflict.

Finally, a high-performance team does not push differences under the carpet. They value challenge and openness and appreciate that conflict will help move the team forwards.

So how do you make people who prefer to work on their own want to be part of a team?

Here is a simple exercise that you can do with individuals who work for you who may not be inclined to work in a team. Ask them to spend three minutes (I suggest that you time them) to write down, without looking, as many capital cities as they can think of. They should not share their list with anyone during this time. After three minutes, ask individuals, still not sharing their list, to count the number of capital cities it contains.

Next, tell the whole team that they now have three minutes to collectively come up with a list of capital cities in the world. Time the team. After three minutes ask them to count the final number. You will find that the list is much longer when everyone pools their ideas.

Hold a discussion with the team about the benefits that they see of teamwork, where best practice and innovation can be encouraged and how working together will be helpful to your stakeholders.

I suggest that you allocate specific team responsibilities to individuals who prefer to work on their own so that they

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need to interact with other people on the team and thereby come to see the benefits.

Lessons from geese

One useful analogy of a high-performance team is the behaviour of geese. The 'Lessons from Geese' listed below were transcribed from a speech given by Angeles Arrien at the 1991 Organizational Development Network. It was circulated to Outward Bound staff throughout the United States Organizational Development Network. It is based on the book *Lessons from the Geese* written in 1972 by Dr Robert McNeish of Baltimore. You may like to share these facts and discuss them with your team.

Fact 1

Geese fly in a V-formation as this helps them to move more quickly through the air. As each goose flaps its wings, it creates a slipstream for the geese that follow. This adds 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

Lesson

People who work in a team share a common goal and sense of direction. Goals can be achieved much more quickly and easily as a team than as individuals because the team travel in each other's slipstream.

Fact 2

If a goose leaves the V-formation it finds it more difficult to make headway as it suddenly feels the drag and resistance

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of flying alone. It soon comes back to the formation so that it benefits from the slipstream of the other birds in front of it.

Lesson

Like the geese, people in teams are able to help and support each other. Goals and objectives are more likely to be achieved if everyone is going in the right direction.

Fact 3

When the goose leading the V-formation tires, another bird takes its place. The geese take the lead in turn.

Lesson

Like the geese, everyone in a team has specific talents and abilities. It pays to take turns to do challenging tasks and share leadership, and to take collective responsibility.

Fact 4

To give encouragement to the geese at the front of the formation, geese further back honk so that they keep up their speed.

Lesson

When there is an atmosphere of encouragement, the team is more likely to achieve more. Working in an encouraging environment means that individuals as well as the team reach higher goals.

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Fact 5

If a goose becomes sick, or is wounded, and leaves the formation, two other geese accompany it to the ground. They then help and protect it by staying with it until it either dies or is able to fly again. At this point, returning geese either rejoin the formation or form another one so that they can fly on to their destination.

Lesson

In high-performance teams, team members stand by each other in bad times as well as good. They help and support each other outside the team as well as within it.

Benefits of team working

So, as we have seen, a team can achieve things that individuals can't. They can use the knowledge and skills of all team members to arrive at a solution. Being part of a high-performance team generates ownership and commitment. It is a highly motivating experience. People who work in high-performance teams are more likely to be engaged with their organisation. As a result they are more likely to go the extra mile for the customer and for the benefit of the business.

The role of the team leader

Leaders have a direct influence on the environment of the team. The degree to which they support and challenge their team members has a direct impact on team performance.

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Offering support means that the team leader provides positive feedback, listens, empathises and assists. The team leader provides advice, guidance and back up for others, gives them permission to act and actively helps with resources.

Challenge involves offering developmental feedback, encouraging others to do better both by the requests you make of them and by the challenges you set them. It can also mean challenging team members to rethink their actions and decisions by questioning and offering alternatives, setting stretching targets, stating positive and negative consequences of actions and confronting issues assertively.

The degree to which the team leader provides support and challenge can lead to very different working environments.

Figure 1 illustrates the resulting team climate dependent on the levels of support and challenge that the team leader demonstrates.

So what is your leadership style and how is this impacting on your team?

How is your team performing now?

Here is a diagnostic tool that you can use with your team to help identify where the strengths lie in your team and where there are areas for improvement.

When you request team members to complete the assessment, encourage them to do so as honestly as possible. I suggest that you then facilitate an open discussion on what is working well and where and how your teamwork can be improved.

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SUPPORT	High	COMFORTABLE Feels easy, relaxed, comfortable, content, calm, 'stuck in a rut'	HIGH-PERFORMANCE Challenged, stimulated, Exciting, motivated, driven, know where you are going
	Low	APATHY Feel bored, lethargic, lazy, dull, neglected	STRESSFUL Feel pressured, worried, Pushed, tense, Out on your own
		Low	High
		CHALLENGE	

Figure 1: Team environment created by the leader

The diagnostic is based on the need to have four elements in place to create an effective team:

- skills and knowledge
- work methods
- leadership
- climate.

Skills and knowledge

A team needs an appropriate blend of team skills as well as technical or functional skills to work effectively. This aspect includes:

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- Having the right balance of technical skills and know-how.
- Using previous knowledge and relevant experience.
- Knowledge of the organisational and team goals.
- Brainstorming and decision-making skills.
- Time and self-management skills.
- Interpersonal skills – for example, listening, supporting, challenging, differing, compromising.

Work methods

Teams need to have agreed systems of working together. This includes providing a structure to undertake tasks or projects, solve problems and make decisions. Also important to all teams is an effective communication framework to aid work flow. Work methods include:

- objectives
- work plans
- agendas
- guidelines
- standards
- timekeeping
- an appointed leader
- decision making
- briefings/communication frameworks
- feedback mechanisms.

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Leadership

The primary role of the leader is to provide the right amount of direction, challenge and support to the team to enable the team to perform effectively in achieving its objectives. Effective leadership includes:

- listening
- gathering information
- refocusing
- supporting
- directing
- checking and testing understanding
- summarising/recapping
- persuading
- building on ideas
- mediating.

Climate

A good climate is the product of the other three elements – skills and knowledge, work methods, leadership. Climate is also a result of the depth and quality of the relationships developed between team members: the level of openness and trust, the values which team members share. An effective team climate includes:

- honesty
- trust
- openness
- stating feelings

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- candour
- self-disclosure
- acceptance that mistakes are part of the learning process.

The four elements of team working are highly interrelated. If one is lacking then the team's performance is likely to suffer.

Rate your own work team

Ask your team members to complete the following assessment by filling in the statements. There are no rights or wrongs.

Work methods

- The way we work together as a team is ...
- Our systems and procedures are ...
- A strength of how we work together is ...

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- One thing that would improve our work methods is ...

Skills and knowledge

- The key skills and knowledge I bring to the team are ...
- The strengths of other people in the team in terms of skills and knowledge are ...
- Where skills and knowledge are lacking in the team is around the area(s) of ...

Climate

- The climate in the team is ...

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- What I feel about working in the team is ...
- A strength of this team is ...
- One improvement I would like to see in the team is ...

Activities to undertake with your team

In addition, here are some ideas for sharing the key learning points from this chapter with your team. Invite them as part of a team meeting to undertake all or some of the following activities:

- Produce a definition of a team.
- Describe the benefits of working in your team.
- Brainstorm the characteristics of an effective team.
- Rate your team on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) against each of the characteristics of an effective team that they have described.
- Recognise what is working well in the team based on the highest ratings.

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- Identify improvements that can be made in the team based on the lowest ratings.

Summary

This chapter has introduced the benefits of team working and described the characteristics of great teams. Like each of the subsequent chapters it provides you with a diagnostic tool to rate your current team performance. By the end of this book you will therefore be equipped with tools and techniques to create a high-performance team.

At the end of each chapter is a series of questions that you might want to reflect on personally or use as the basis for department or team discussions. In addition, any of these questions might serve as the basis for IT/stakeholder conversations prior to creating a new team.

- What is a current strength of your team? How can you build on this further to enhance your performance?
- What do you and others identify as a weakness of the team? How can you overcome this?
- How are you perceived as a team leader by your own team and others in the IT department? How do you know this is the case?
- What skills and knowledge are missing in your team?
- How can you enhance the work methods and climate in your team?