

High Performing Teams - the only way to sustained benefits

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WHY HPT

This article describes how high performing 'on the ground' teams are an essential ingredient to the constant change that businesses face today.

Many businesses have great ideas which make intellectual sense, but which are never implemented. How often do we find instances of realities so difficult that change fails? And how often are 'experts' that are empowered to design and solve some business issues accused of sitting in an 'ivory tower'?

Although there are many grand and exacting strategies constructed by business, the reality is that there is never enough focus on the people who actually deliver value added work to the business. It is only these people and their joined up thinking across a process that can create lasting change. The effort required to implement and operate change, make it practical, applicable and sustainable, is a seemingly formidable task – the reason why so much benefit, articulated and well reasoned on paper, is never delivered.

Reorganisation, performance measurement and extrinsic performance based motivation, can also only go so far in priming the organisation for change, for the intrinsic will of people at the 'coal face' truly delivers. A developed 'intrinsic will' operated by a

cross-functional group is a good starting definition for a high performing team. High performance teams at the 'coal face' are essential for a business that is going through fundamental changes in its operations.

WHAT MAKES AN HPT WORK

So how do we create such a team and what are its characteristics? Whenever I approach anyone and ask about the best time they worked in a team (whether at work or in the community) or saw a team delivering excellence, these are the things they say:

- 'Fun'
- 'Exciting'
- 'Everyone is self motivated'
- 'We wanted to deliver'
- 'We used to dream of success'
- 'I felt team members were my best friends'
- 'Looking back, we delivered more than we all expected'
- 'Some fantastic ideas'
- 'We were all leaders'
- 'We always knew how well we were doing'

HPT's are creative and innovative with high aspirations. The Australian Cricket team have experimented with ambidextrous players and recently hired a baseball coach to see if this could assist their game. The team

clearly have aspirations that are beyond their present level of excellence.

Another example of this is in the theatre where, although individuals roles are known, fast feedback and respect is essential if the group is to deliver excellence night-after-night.

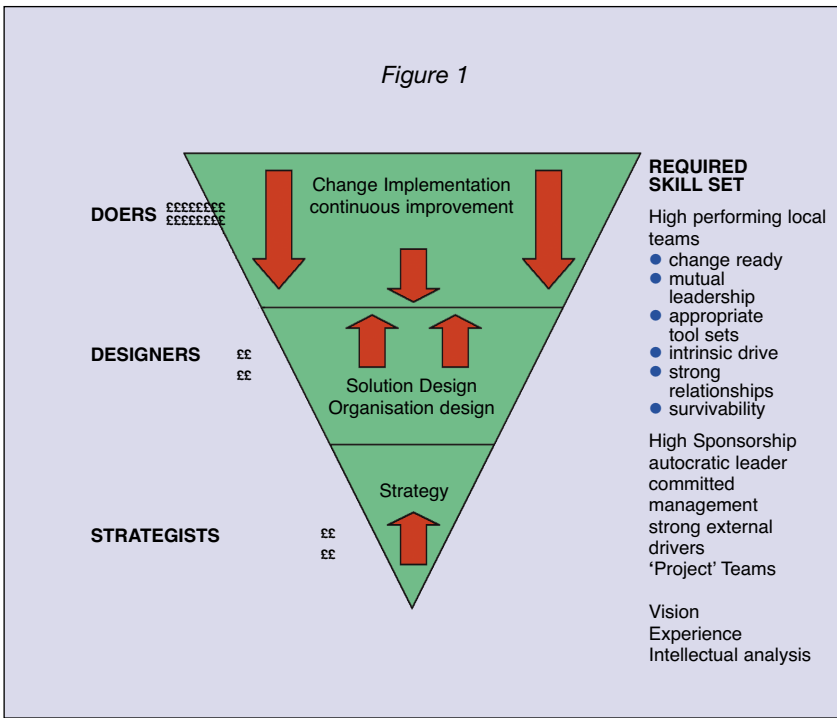
High Performance Teams not only achieve their focused goals, but more importantly create an environment that is open to change and learning and thus enables flexibility and the realisation of strategy (figure 1) overleaf

HOW TO CREATE AN HPT

Whether it be winning a trophy in sport, making a product or solving specific business process problems, all the experts agree that High Performance requires focused time bound challenges, but with sustainable results. Having the right competence and abilities is a must – but this is just a starting point. There must be genuine respect for team members and overall ownership for its shared activities – but with individual accountability combined with initiative to ask for support or help.

Clive Woodward, ex England Rugby Coach, stated in 2003; "Getting the right people is the biggest trick in business, and if you get one wrong coach in there it can take you a long time to sort out".

Figure 1



could fix them quickly and move on.” The team actually created a process that did not solidify decision making, but just helped to move forward to a better understanding of the ‘ground realities’.

High Performance Teams create an inner desire for success and this is often reflected in fun and humour being commonplace - a very important ingredient. Fun and humour means a relaxed environment, but importantly also triggers creative ideas. During a coaching workshop, I set up team exercises, such as building paper towers or mock ‘desert survival’ games to engage them in lateral thinking skills. Such relaxation often unveils unknown team abilities and characteristics that team members didn’t know existed. I have seen senior directors to ‘hard nosed’ shop floor workers thriving in the challenge of working creatively with each other and so absorbed in their common goal that they forgot their status or background.

“A high performance workplace can expect to achieve a 20 per cent increase in productivity and profitability”

Chartered Institute of Personnel Nov 2003

The coach should be someone from the organisation (say a change agent or well respected individual) or in the short term someone external who brings detachment and fresh ideas

Hewlett Packard is a good example of where coaching has been practised successfully for decades. One employee says about a Manager practising the HP Way "He only put in his oar when the project was on the line. Then he'd make some comments, guiding us to some direction. When the direction was established, he stepped away."

The Team themselves must agree at the start a ‘way of working’, including ‘how to run meetings’, the scope of the problems they are going to tackle and the ‘ground rules for all to obey’. For example at Network Rail, as Depots were taking part in full time coaching, they agreed upfront the working times, their individual commitment and created the team ground rules (Table 1 opposite).

These ‘ground rules’ mean a fair and disciplined way of working and clarity about the boundaries that the team operate in.

High Performance Teams will survive because they continue to learn and embellish change and new learning’s. Furthermore change is welcomed. At Avon Cosmetics, it is

Management's job to encourage learning in areas that have no direct link with the cosmetic business. Avon has recognised that the best way of keeping their staff is to help them fulfil their intrinsic motivation.

HPT’s will make decisions with knowledge and act upon them, without fear of failure. 3M is probably best known for its efforts to institutionalise innovation, allowing employees to devote 15% of their work time to independent ventures, without any arbitrary financial targets for ‘success’. For the Mars Pathfinder programme the idea of ‘Decision making on demand’ was used. Project manager Brian Muirhead states “rapid decision-making was a hallmark of our implementation of the Mars Pathfinder mission. The leadership had a deep knowledge of what was going on, so when problems arose we

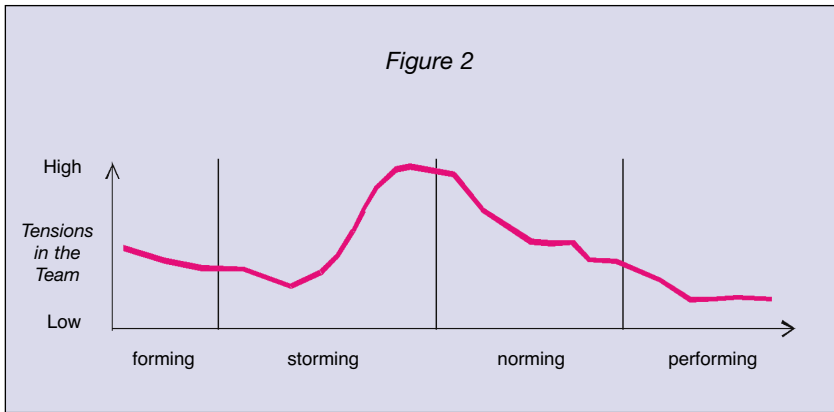
Table 1

Example of Ground Rules

GROUND RULES
Mobiles on silent
All questions are good questions
Freedom to fail
Arrive on time
Have fun!

How often do you find teams using individual methods or using just ‘gut feel’ without following a process that encompasses all angles to a problem? A common language and way of working is essential to ensure that misunderstandings do not occur. There are many ways of problem solving from using Deming's Plan Do Check Act Cycle, through the Problem Solving Wheel, to Root Cause Analysis. The soft issues can be dealt with by understating the emotional cycle of change and getting feedback on the state of the team’s ‘emotions’.

Being aware of all these tools and their necessary methodologies means that the language of problem solving is common and systematic. Consequently the team, when confronted with a performance challenge, readily ‘dig’ into their common toolkit and follow the process to its solution.



MEASURING HPT'S FOR SUCCESS

They are several way of assessing how a team is performing and the stage that they are at.

Many of the traits of HPT's explained earlier do not happen naturally...there is a cycle before a team is performing (Figure 2 above). After a team formation, there needs to be 'storming', a real heart-to-heart about specific issues, or the 'ways of working', and unless this happens the team never performs. This is evident in sport , with both the Manchester United football team and the English Rugby Team for example, where they have been through a 'storming' period. In fact the trick for High Performance Teams is to get through storming cycle quickly, as only after

this can the team start performing.

Table 1 shows the difference between a high performing team and a normal team. This is a good measure of assessing the nature of the team. The next time you see an assembled group of people to agreeing a strategy or solving a problem, ask yourself are they High Performing?

Do High Performance Teams need the right emotional balance of people? Examples of key roles is given in Table 3. Each individual will have one or more traits that contribute to the team, but the important thing is to have balance - a High Performance Team is going to be short lived without an 'Implementer' or too many 'Plant' roles.

In summary, there is a huge

benefit from any kind of teamwork in an organisation, but in organisations that are adapting to a new world or going through intense change, High Performance Teams create the capability to absorb and implement change for sustainable outcomes. This effort is likely to reduce the 'waste' in implementation as well.

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About the author

Ketan Varia MIOM helps to create and coach High Performance Teams, and to solve real problems, via a tried and tested approach. Ketan is an independent consultant specialising in process improvement, who previously worked for Ernst & Young Management Consulting. He runs tailored workshops and has coached and created several High Performance Teams.and runs a one day introduction to High Performance Teams His consulting experience includes work with Motorola, The NHS, Barclays Bank, DARA, Network Rail, Marconi, and Land Rover.

Table 2

Difference between a Team and a High Performance Team

	Team	High Performance Team
Leadership	Single Leader	Shared Leadership
Ownership	Individual	Mutual
Purpose	Specific	Highly Focused
Development	Some	Continuous Development
Meetings	"Let's Discuss a problem"	"Let's make Decisions and act on them"
Relationships	Good	Strong and deep
Aspiration	More than sum of individuals	Beyond expectation
Size	Varies	< 8

Table 3

Belbin Model of Eight key drivers of people

Role	Traits
Co-ordinator	Let's get everyone together
Shaper	Let's do this now
Implementer	I am going to make this happen
Completer	I must finish this task
Monitor/Evaluator	We are falling behind
Team Worker	If the Team wants it - I'll do it
Plant	What if we changed direction?
Resource investigator	I know someone who knows