



TEAM LEADERSHIP

High Performance Teams: What It Takes to Make Them Work

Properly functioning and thriving teams can improve creativity and productivity, yet aren't called upon enough when it comes to improving organizational performance. Teamwork is essential to creating competitive advantage, improving innovation, and achieving goals in the most efficient and effective way possible. All too often, teams are formed to accomplish important tasks, but are not always given the skills or proper training to reach peak performance.

In its Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte outlines that it found key trends—employee engagement, culture, time to market, innovation—were best addressed via a network of teams. The challenge that arises in this scenario is the proper management of teams and inter-team communication so that each is working in alignment on their respective projects.

Harvard Business Review reveals that three out of four teams are dysfunctional, all because the organization lacks a systematic approach for supporting them. And Blanchard research estimates that three out of five new teams fail to achieve their goals. Key reasons are inadequate planning, resources, shared leadership, and training.

Approximately 60%
of teams fail. A key
reason is lack of
training
—Blanchard research

Teams are defined as any group of two or more people working toward a common goal. A high-performing team is any group that performs at levels that surpass the skills of any individual on the team. When team members are able to tap into and leverage each other's strengths, the momentum can be unstoppable.

As the nature of teamwork in today's organizations continues to evolve, new research conducted by *Training* magazine and The Ken Blanchard Companies found, in polling 1,300 employees and managers, that while people spend more than half of their work time in teams, significant gaps exist between what people want and what they are experiencing in terms of clarity, accountability, and leadership practices.

The survey identified a perceived lack of clarity among team members as the number one obstacle to team performance, and identified trust in other team members as the number one factor in determining the amount of effort the respondents put into a team.

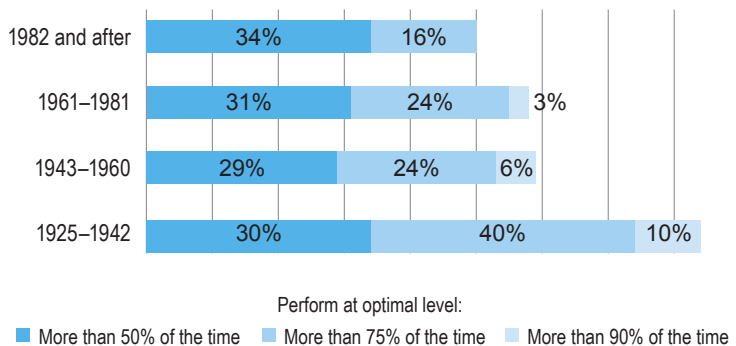
The survey found significant gaps between the amount of support high-performing teams receive and the support average-performing teams receive—at both an individual leader and organizational levels. With today's accelerated pace, teams don't have as much time to form, experiment, and organically develop along the way. This leaves an opportunity for Training & Development professionals to review the state of teams in their organizations and take steps to close the gaps.

PERCEIVED LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE— SOME GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

As a part of the survey, respondents were asked how often teams perform at optimum levels in their organizations. Overall, only 27 percent of respondents said their teams perform at top levels a majority of the time, while 43 percent said their teams operate at optimum levels less than half of the time. The survey uncovered some generational differences in perceptions, with team performance being rated higher by older respondents than by younger respondents. Respondents born in 1942 or earlier scored their team experiences the highest; all other generations (people born from 1943 to 1960, 1961 to 1981, or 1982 and after) evaluated their team performance at significantly lower levels.

Millennials (people born after 1982) experienced the largest gap between expected and actual team performance. Only 50 percent of millennials said their teams perform at an optimum level more than half of the time, and only 16 percent said their teams operate at optimum levels a majority of the time.

**Figure 1:
Perceptions of Team Performance
by Generations**



PERSONAL EFFORT CONSIDERATIONS

Respondents were also asked to identify which conditions impact the level of effort they put in to the teams they work on. Eleven conditions were listed; respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:
My Personal Effort Depends On...**



When asked, "As a member of a team, the amount of effort I contribute to a team depends on ...," the three statements respondents most agreed with were

- Whether I trust the other team members
- The level of support I get from my team leader
- Whether or not team members are allowed to share opposing opinions and disagree with each other

The three statements respondents deemed least important were

- Whether team success contributes to my own goals
- Whether I like my team members
- Whether my compensation is affected by team performance

97% of employees and executives believe lack of alignment within a team impacts the outcome of a task or project

—ClearCompany

A metanalysis of more than 50 studies and 8,500 participants reinforced the high value of training in all teams' effectiveness

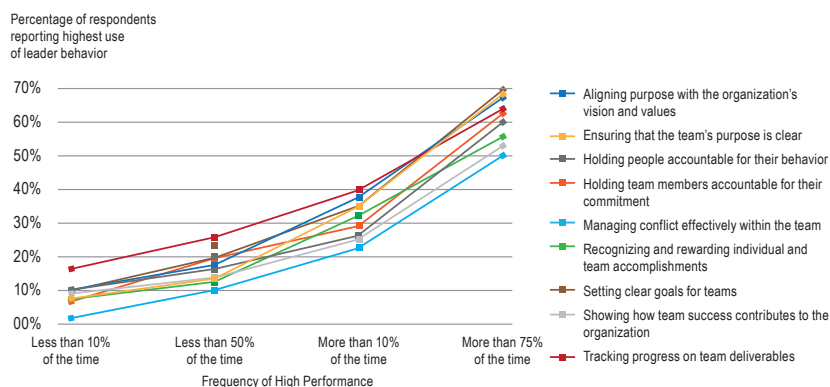
THE TEAM LEADER'S ROLE

An expanded analysis of the survey results correlated leadership behaviors with team performance. A total of nine key leadership behaviors were studied. Nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated that these leadership behaviors were critical or very important to how teams function:

- Aligning purpose with the organization's vision and values
- Ensuring that the team's purpose is clear
- Holding people accountable for their behavior
- Holding team members accountable for their commitment
- Managing conflict effectively within the team
- Recognizing and rewarding individual and team accomplishments
- Setting clear goals for teams
- Showing how team success contributes to the organization
- Tracking progress on team deliverables

The more that respondents observed positive leadership behaviors, the more likely the team was to be high performing.

**Figure 3:
How Key Leadership
Behaviors Impact Team Performance**



THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Taskwork training (which focuses on developing technical competencies) and teamwork training (which focuses on team coordination, leadership, adaptation, and feedback) have been shown to have a significant positive impact on team performance outcomes. In a metanalysis, researchers found significant support for the concept that teamwork training is an effective and successful way to foster and improve teamwork and team performance. In addition, the researchers found that approximately 70 percent of adverse events in medical settings are not due to individuals' technical errors but are a result of breakdowns in teamwork, suggesting that teamwork training can indeed be a useful way of enhancing team effectiveness.

The metaanalysis, which included more than 50 academic studies and more than 8,500 participants, concluded that there were ultimately beneficial and positive effects of teamwork interventions for improving team effectiveness, regardless of industry. It also concluded that the empirical evidence to date shows that teams can be improved via teamwork training.

In Blanchard’s study, we looked to correlate perceived training and support with team performance. The survey found that the highest-performing teams enjoy greater levels of support in general as well as higher levels of training for team members and team leaders. For example, when asked to what degree their organization supported teams to help them be more effective, 62 percent of people in organizations with high-performing teams agreed or strongly agreed that their organization provides a lot of support—more than double the overall average of 29 percent.

When respondents were polled specifically about the level of training team members and team leaders receive, organizations with high-performing teams outpaced average-performing teams (53 percent to 26 percent) on doing a good job with team-member training. Organizations with high-performing teams outpaced average-performing teams (46 percent to 25 percent) on doing a good job of training people specifically on how to lead teams (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4:
Agree or Strongly Agree**



A key reason for the need for training: only 27% of people surveyed felt their teams were high performing

—Blanchard research

THE ROLE OF THE TEAM LEADER

For organizations looking to improve team training to meet increasing needs, it’s important for leaders to identify areas where team might not be performing at optimal levels.

In the absence of data, there is a tendency for leaders to overestimate the effectiveness of their teams. It’s especially important for senior-level leaders to first get an accurate picture of what is happening in their organizations. For example, the *Training* magazine/Blanchard survey identified a 15 percent gap in how executive-level leaders and individual contributors see team performance

levels. For executive leaders, 35 percent say high performance is more frequent, while only 20 percent of individual contributors see the same frequency of high performance. Teams go through four predictable stages; these stages are defined by the team's current levels of productivity and morale, and each requires different behaviors from the leader to keep the team focused and moving forward. Team leaders can influence the team's productivity and morale by staying in tune with the needs of their team and helping it address four team focus areas required for high performance.

THE ROLE OF THE LEADER IN EACH STAGE OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Stage 1 – Structuring

In this stage, the team is just starting up. Members may or may not know each other or why they've been convened as a team. Most likely the team members will have questions about their roles and the team's purpose. In this stage, leaders should

- Set the context for the team's work
- Orient team members to one other
- Provide structure for developing the team charter
- Establish boundaries

Stage 2 – Dissatisfaction

In this stage, team morale and performance can drop for many reasons. Perhaps the work is harder than initially imagined, or team members begin to have unresolved differences of opinion on how to proceed. In this stage, leaders should

- Address and leverage conflict
- Encourage candor and curiosity
- Provide feedback on progress
- Ensure all voices are heard

Stage 3 – Integration

In this stage, morale and performance begin to climb. Generally, problem solving and communication are improving along with collaboration and competence. In this stage, leaders should

- Encourage participation and inclusion
- Cultivate trust
- Recognize contributions
- Foster accountability

Stage 4 – Production

In this phase, the team has reached a high level of performance. Morale and productivity are high, and performance and communication are flourishing. In this stage, leaders should

- Relinquish control
- Encourage creativity, agility, and risk taking
- Recognize and celebrate the team
- Help the team apply lessons learned to new challenges

FOUR TEAM FOCUS AREAS FOR BUILDING HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

There are four team focus areas that are the building blocks of high performance.

1. Align for Results
2. Communicate during Conflict
3. Build Team Cohesion
4. Sustain High Performance

Successful team leaders provide appropriate leadership behaviors to help their teams focus on what is important as they move from getting started to high performance.

1. Align for Results

Does the team understand what they are doing and why? Do they know how they will accomplish goals? Do they agree on how they will work together? It's critical for teams to have clarity about their purpose, the goal and roles of each team member, and the behavioral norms they will abide by in order for them to get off to a good start.

2. Communicate during Conflict

Do team members feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions without fear? Are they open to learning from the diverse perspective of others? To move beyond issues and conflicts that arise, a team needs to learn how to communicate in a constructive manner by participating with candor, listening to the ideas of others with curiosity, and valuing the diversity of all team members so that they can move forward.

3. Build Team Cohesion

Has the team begun to work together better? Have they learned to work through challenges but are still a bit tentative? Teams require a high level of trust, both in the team and in one another, in order for them to become a cohesive unit. As they shift from learning to doing, they must learn to work collaboratively, take on more responsibility for holding one another accountable on team commitments, and build trust and support for each other.

4. **Sustain High Performance**

Has the team demonstrated they know how to work together as one? Are they productive and ready to take on more? Teams who have achieved a high level of performance want to maintain their stride. They appreciate a greater sense of autonomy and can take on the responsibility of shared leadership. The synergy they have developed over time must be upheld while they strive for continuous improvement.

MODEL THE BEHAVIOR

For organizations ready to begin improving their teams, it's important that Training & Development professionals be proactive and model an inclusive learning attitude. Involving others in crafting a clear purpose, values, and goals for your teams is one way. And having leaders follow through by reinforcing what was agreed upon, demonstrating supportive behaviors, and walking the talk builds trust between leaders and their direct reports.

Talking openly and creating an environment of safety and trust makes people comfortable about speaking out regarding improving team performance without worrying about upsetting the status quo.

Sometimes it's important for leaders to learn how to let go in order to build collaboration. That way everyone can take responsibility for creating a collaborative environment. When people are busy, it's normal to want to focus on getting individual work done but it's important to remember: If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. Knowing the characteristics and needs of a high-performing team is critical.

The results of the *Training* magazine/Blanchard survey provide a snapshot into today's teams. The survey results give Training & Development professionals a target to shoot for and recommended first steps as they look to create or enhance team-training programs in their organizations. Consider how these results and findings can help begin a dialogue about team performance in your organization.

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