Trust: Essential for High-Performing Teams

Whether strategic, project-based or operational in nature, organisations want high-performing teams. Why? High-performing teams are recognised for the quality and quantity of work, and their capacity to solve problems and create solutions that are not tenable to a lesser team. With several decades of experience in team settings, I can count on one hand, without repeating the use of fingers, the number of teams I have been part of that were truly high-performing.

My absolute favourite team was a short-duration team of 4 of us brought together for a very specific purpose. None of us had worked together before, or even known each other. For the six weeks we were together we spent most of our waking time together. We were in Twizel, highly remote back in the 90's, and effectively we only had each other. We were individually and collectively committed to success. We worked tirelessly on our individual tasks. We collaborated whenever we dealt with interfaces or one of us had struck a problem that was anything more than routine. We had rich conversations about problems and possibilities, potential

Author

Stephen Harrison

Abstract

Developing a high-performing team does require the normal team management functions. However, a necessary ingredient that sets it apart from an ordinary team is the trust, and the behaviours that consistently encourage and build trust that exist within the team.

Keywords

High-performance, interdependence, leadership, relationship with others, team coaching, trust

First Published

6 October 2016

Copyright

"High"-Performing aerobatics team working in unison

solutions and validating client expectations against our deliverables. As the project manager, I managed the work, not the team. Other than attending to issues and concerns as they arose, team management was not needed. In the context of what we were doing, I was an equal member of the team to everyone else, with my 'technical role' consisting of work, delivery and customer management responsibilities. We were peers. We trusted each other thoroughly. We knew all the others had our backs, were supporting us, and that if we were straying from what we were there to do, one of them would respectfully bring us back in. It really was hard work. Being on that team was fantastically rewarding. As much as I would love to claim 'I created a high-performing team.' I cannot. It was high-performing, and I certainly ensured that my contribution did not thwart it being high-performing.

High-performing teams result from the team as a whole creating the environment and enabling it to happen. If anyone opts out, or gets in the way, of the process, the fullness of a high-performing team cannot occur.

Why do I put such stock in trust that I name it as an essential ingredient? You can manage teams, assign tasks, ensure roles and responsibilities are clear, establish clear decision-making and problem solving protocols, and monitor performance. The bigger the team, the greater the management burden, which may also extend to ongoing recruitment, performance management and other human resource processes. While all that is in place for a high-performing team, you don't "manage" the team. You facilitate it. You lead it. You allow and encourage and attend to the culture, values and interpersonal relationships within the team. High performance is nurtured and developed, not mandated. It is established through leadership and owned by everyone. It requires commitment, shared purpose and values, and a willingness and capacity to name and deal with whatever is getting in the way. Those behaviours within a team environment require significant trust. High-performing teams really are all about trusted relationships.

Common behaviours that erode team performance include one-upmanship, back-stabbing, political positioning, withholding from others (relative to team function and work space) and irresponsibility for self and to others in the team. This is not an exhaustive list by any means. What other behaviours have you observed that undermine trust and interfere with achieving cohesion and performance?

Developing high-performing teams is a prime area for team coaching. The coach, as an impartial outsider, is able to observe team functioning and dynamics, and call attention to behaviours that are getting in the way. A coach cannot make a team high-performing. That requires the team's effort and commitment, but a coach sure can make it easier for those committed to the process, willing to receive feedback, and open to personal growth (adjusting their own attitudes and behaviours where necessary). High-performing teams can and do occur, and the experience of being on one is an incredibly satisfying and fulfilling experience.

Contact Stephen if you'd like support in developing the performance of your team.

Coaching can support you create the best outcome when working with areas covered by this article. Follow these links for coaching information:

- Coaching Overview
- Individual (Leadership/Executive) Coaching
- Team Coaching
- Group Coaching
- Why Sponsor Coaching?
- **Offer: Free Individual Coaching Session**
- Stephen's Profile