PHENOMENAL
TEAMS

HOW LEADERS BUILD
HIGH-PERFORMANCE
TEAMS THAT LAST

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WHY TEAMS MATTER

often get a sense that people intuitively know what it takes to build high-performance teams. They might even feel they have been in one or were in one that almost hit the high-performance benchmark. But while many people feel that they have been in that high-performance team, they feel that they have been in some quite dysfunctional ones as well.

The problem we seem to have is isolating and articulating what is at the heart of that high-performing team. The challenge may well lie in how we bring all these collective experiences into one action-based framework.

Furthermore, if and when we are able to articulate it, how do we act on those fundamental differences between high-performing teams and dysfunctional ones? How can we use these learnings to start to act on where we believe or feel our team is at right now?

Outlining what is at the foundation of building your high-performance team is the focus of Part 1. Identifying and using some of the core elements that you will instinctively connect

to, which characterise high-performance teams, may determine not only where your team is at right now, but what you may need to focus on to start your team's movement towards becoming not just *better*, but *the best*.

IT'S NOT ABOUT TALENT

et's open our adventure with a scenario that I have experienced from a few perspectives as a would-be leader, as a manager, as a participant, and as a facilitator.

I would like you to quietly nod your head if you have been part of this sort of experience.

You go away with your team for a couple of days, doing some cool and fun group-related activities (notice how I have deliberately avoided the word 'team-building'). This may have included some really challenging things like raft building, or rope climbing, or abseiling, or 'trust activities' involving falling backwards and hoping someone catches you, or even overnight camping with none of life's essentials.

You then go home at the end of the offsite, having had a great time and having high-fived and back-slapped all of the other team members, all ready and excited to get back to work the next week.

Unfortunately, though, after a couple of days back at work, you notice that you and possibly others are once again doing what you always did. You notice that you are still accepting and tolerating some non-productive behaviour, or not challenging or innovating as quickly as you would like, or you feel like the business has slowed. And by the way, you are still not getting on with that person in sales who always gets really agitated when commissions are due!

'So, what happened?' you ask yourself. 'We made a brilliant raft last week, and we climbed up all of those ropes, and then we abseiled down that cliff face ... I thought we had fixed all of our issues and had become a great team!'

No amount of overnighting, raft-building, rock-climbing, abseiling, storytelling, back-slapping, high-fiving investments will add any long-term value to your efforts to build a high-performance team.

The much-heralded two-day offsites will not ensure you are building a high-performance team. These activities are short term and while they may be motivational in the moment, conversations on key issues around performance may still be avoided once you return to your day-to-day environment.

The question is: 'Why?'

TRUST ME

To help us understand where the real issue may lie, let me relate a real exchange I once had with a client.

I was chatting with a senior manager in the construction industry about his team's performance. He was lamenting the fact that, despite his team having many years' experience and its members having great expertise, it consistently missed deadlines and delivery dates. Now, in the industry he was in, it was not unusual for missed deadlines or delivery dates to be accompanied by significant penalties.

After listening to his challenges, my response, much to his dismay, was to suggest that there may well be a trust issue in his team.

As you can imagine, the manager immediately defended the team by declaring, 'It can't be that simple, Garie. These are all good people.' I had to agree – they *were* good people! They were all trustworthy and, no doubt, had honest intentions when it came to work.

However, the trust issue I was alluding to was not related to the character of any individual team member, but rather to safety – the safety to challenge what was currently considered acceptable within this team.

I asked him, 'Do you think a couple of the people in the team actually know why they consistently miss deadlines?' The manager, rather reluctantly, acknowledged that there were people who may well know what the issues were.

So, why weren't they highlighting them? Why weren't they challenging the current work practices? And, most important of all, why weren't they implementing solutions and holding others to account?

What was stopping these people from saying anything, from giving their input and ideas, from challenging current practices or behaviours that should not have been tolerated? Simply put: It was not safe to speak up.

Those people did not trust that their observations or comments could be heard without penalty – particularly by senior team members. They were worried about the ramifications to them if they *did* speak up. There was a culture in this team that did not reward those who challenged the established ways of working – even if those ways of working were inefficient, unsafe, or unprofitable.

In fact, it is highly likely that there was a culture that supported, and therefore rewarded, team members who *avoided* challenging the accepted ways of doing things.

With this story in mind, let's go back to the week after that wonderful offsite, when you observed that nothing had really changed. It may well be that your organisation's environment or culture is not based on safety, accountability, and performance. It may not be safe to challenge behaviours, work practices, or ways of doing things. And unfortunately, a couple of days away will not fix these trust issues.

The building of trust is at the very heart of building high-performance environments and teams.

Trust is the foundation stone of any attempts we make at building a phenomenal team. The building of trust will accelerate your movement toward having that phenomenal team, which is led by many, and which will, in turn, accelerate and amplify your team's performance.

THE IMPACT OF TRUST

Much has been written, and equal amounts of evidence gathered, showing the relationship between trust and speed – in other words, that performance is quicker when there are high levels of trust. We can link economic reality to the existence (or not) of trust.

Hence, the cost or impact of not building high levels of trust in your team will show up in many ways.

People's time is expensive. The time you allocate to dealing with issues that others won't deal with is expensive. Having to continually redo projects, or to start them only to have to change course because they weren't planned well enough or the barriers and solutions were insufficiently discussed, is expensive. And in the case of the real example we opened the chapter with, missing deadlines or not delivering on time is expensive.

Poor or inconsistent teams are characterised by really low levels of trust. Phenomenal teams move quicker because it is safe to address issues quickly.

Let's look at Figure 1 to help us understand.

Figure 1: The Trust Pyramid
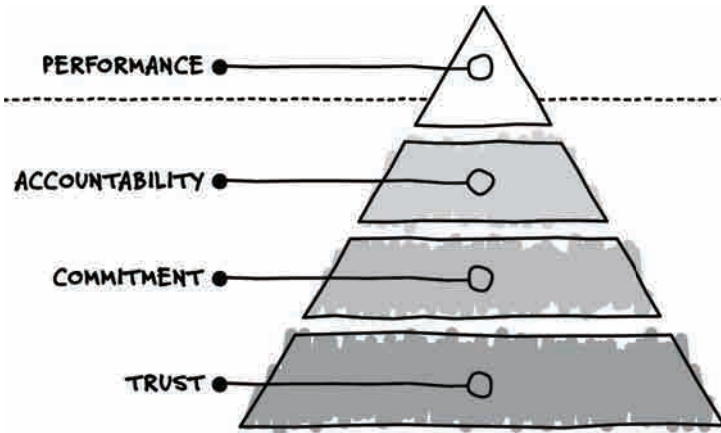
The pyramid has long been viewed as one of the most enduring man-made structures because of the strength of its foundations.

Trust is at the foundation of your team's growth. The building of trust will ensure that your team has a solid and sustainable foundation for growth.

By building high levels of *trust*, team members *commit* both to the team and, of equal importance, to each other. They don't

want to let each other or the team down. They take the team's performance personally.

As a consequence, they welcome being held *accountable*, and are equally comfortable holding others to account. It is safe to address issues affecting the team's performance.

They trust the intent of their teammates, and they trust that any feedback or conversations they have with their teammates will be taken in the right spirit and with an understanding that this is about the team's performance.

The result is inevitable improvement in performance.

Trust will be the foundation on which your team's performance and growth will be built.

UNDERSTANDING THE CASH MACHINE

I am sure you know people who have gone to withdraw money from an ATM and been confronted with the unsettling words 'Insufficient funds'.

The building of trust is no different.

To ensure there is trust, you need to make deposits of trust every day, for there may – in fact, there most likely will – come a day when you need to withdraw some of those funds.

Trust is not built in a day, but it is built daily!

We all mess up at some time, and when we do, we inevitably have to withdraw some of that trust from our account. What we need to ensure is that we have plenty of trust deposited in the bank when we make that withdrawal.

Equally, you may have to challenge a long-established operating process, or a senior person's behaviour. If the trust levels are high – that is, lots of deposits in the trust ATM – this conversation will be welcomed. If not?

Well, at this point, it is not unusual for me to be told: 'We *do* have high levels of trust in this team; we all get on really well!'

Trust, and therefore safety, is less about getting on with each other at a superficial level than it is about feeling safe enough to address those key issues and challenges that exist in the operating methods and behaviours that may well be stopping you and your team from growing.

One of the challenges you may have when looking to build higher levels of trust in your team is embracing the notion that building meaningful working relationships adds far more value than 'getting on well'.

The building of meaningful working relationships is really the key step in building high levels of trust.

If trust is the foundation of your team's performance, then the building of meaningful working relationships is the mortar that holds that foundation together.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Imagine that tomorrow you are going to be brave and actually stop to check in with that person you typically just acknowledge. What would be safe to talk about and wouldn't give too much away, but would be better than the 'grunt' you have been using for the past six months and would at least move the relationship along?

I am sure the inevitable topics come to mind – the weather, sport, television, celebrity gossip, and the age-old classic: 'How was your weekend?'! Certainly, all good starting points. But they are only starting points.

It is also not unusual for the question 'How is work?' to pop up at this level. Is that meaningful? No. You're just *acknowledging* that person.

I have seen a wink, a thumb in the air, a nod of the head, or, in some environments the all-purpose response: 'Mate!'

The next level of engagement, beyond just acknowledgement, tends to be characterised by *asking*, or, in some cases, *telling* someone about a work-related issue, while not genuinely caring about the response.

Is this building a meaningful working relationship? No!

I once heard someone in a workshop that I was facilitating suggest that they had a meaningful working relationship with a person in another department 'because they always do what I need them to do when I'm in a hurry'! This sounded a little self-serving and was very much in the 'telling' space.

I also had a senior manager claim that they could have the conversation around performance with anyone in the room. However, when I asked the rest of the team if they felt the same way toward this manager, not one person felt that *they* could have the same conversation with *him*.

Simply feeling safe to *tell* people something is not a conversation that builds trust.

Once you move beyond telling, you actually start to ask more questions, and start to truly *seek* answers.

At this level, you are seeking to understand the reasons *why* the other person had a great weekend or *why* they are so busy or tired, and you may even seek out and share ways you could help them with their workload. You are seeking to *understand* what is going on behind their initial response.

It is in this phase that trust starts to be built, and we start to *share*.

Both you and your fellow team member now feel safe bringing up the real issues and sharing your thoughts – sharing how

you're really feeling, sharing the fact that you need help, sharing your confusion with where the business is going. You may even be able to share how the other's behaviour is having an impact on *your* performance and the performance of the team. When trust is built, these become common conversations.

> *Seeking to understand why someone chooses a particular behaviour and sharing with them the impact it is having on you and others is a far richer and more valuable conversation, in terms of building trust, than just telling them they need to change.*

A simple starting point in the building of meaningful working relationships is to have the conversations around, rather than giving a directive about, your expectations of each other.

STOP AND REFLECT

In meaningful working relationships, both parties *really* feel:

- valued and respected;
- understood, appreciated, and aware of a shared set of values and experiences; and
- safe to be vulnerable and to share and seek.

And they can *really*:

- talk openly about how they feel;

- define and share their own values, beliefs and principles, and align their behaviour to them; and
- articulate what is acceptable in the relationship and what they expect from each other in the relationship.

So, stop and think about the key relationships that you need to have in your team right now, and maybe reflect on these two sets of key elements.

Could each member of your team genuinely say 'yes' to each of these key elements when discussing their relationship with other members of the team? Could you?

Phenomenal teams have these wonderful, rich conversations regularly to ensure that trust levels are continually growing.

If conversations are being avoided, then there is every chance one (or more) of these key elements is missing, or not being genuinely felt to the extent you may be assuming it is.

On a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis, your investment in the building of meaningful working relationships will only serve to strengthen the levels of trust in your team's environment.

Having conversations that increase your understanding of where team members are at is vital to getting to the heart of this.

Some members of the team may need clarity of the *vision*, or their role in the delivery of the *purpose*, or even their *key performance indicators* (KPIs). They may need to get agreement from you about what you expect from them and which behaviours are aligned with the team's values, and, equally important, team members may need the opportunity to outline what *they* expect from *you* as their leader.

You may need to understand team members' learning styles – some team members may need clearly defined processes and systems, and some may need a forum to express all of their wonderful ideas for new ways of working they have been dreaming about!

Addressing, recognising, and implementing all these elements serve to strengthen the relationships and, subsequently, that foundation of trust.

Building meaningful working relationships builds a feeling of safety and value, and it is this feeling of safety that truly reflects and impacts the level of trust in your team.

TIME OUT TO TALK ABOUT:

- Where do you really think the level of trust is in your team right now?

- How safe do you think it is in your team right now?

- Do all members of your team challenge the status quo and offer new solutions?

- Do you have the conversations that really matter around individual and team performance?

- Do you feel as though your team has slowed down?

- Where are your relationships with each team member relative to the circle of trust?

- Do you ask to speak, or ask to seek?

- Do you know what drives, motivates, or scares each member of your team?

- Do you ignore small issues because you are 'too busy' or 'doing well'?