Overview

Teams that work well together are the dream of every front-line manager. Clearly, expecting perfection is unreasonable because teams are comprised of imperfect human beings. Yet my experience working with hundreds of managers through the years has revealed that high performance with minimal dissent is attainable. Here are six critical factors I have found teams need in order to perform at their highest level:

1. A clearly-defined team objective
2. Individual goals and tasks aligned to the team objective
3. Creative, nimble leaders who challenge team members, care and participate
4. Communication that is multi-directional and encouraged
5. An environment of trust and team loyalty
6. Accountability and recognition

Below, I have expanded on the importance of each factor, and have provided examples of symptoms you may be observing that would indicate an area in need of improvement. At the end, I have included a brief survey you can use with your own team.

1. A clearly-defined team objective

It is critical that every team knows its purpose. A common goal, whether for a short-term project or a critical initiative that relates to an organization's mission, has to be clearly communicated and understood. This provides the foundation for everything the team does. If decision-making becomes bogged down, revisiting the team goal can help get everyone back on track and moving forward again.

Symptoms of a team that needs more clarification about their objective include responding defensively to constructive criticism (i.e., “How could they..."

High performance with minimal dissent is attainable.

Determine a clear answer to: “What are we here to do?”

© 2011 ADVISA All rights reserved.
have expected me to know that!!?!?

2. Individual goals and tasks aligned to the team objective

Once there is an understanding of the common goal, or desired business result, there are a number of smaller initiatives and individual tasks on which everyone works to take the team there. If properly aligned, individual team members clearly understand their role on the team; how it relates to the work performed by other team members; and how everyone’s individual contributions accomplish interim steps that lead to the desired outcome.

This individual alignment - or “clear line of sight” - dramatically impacts engagement in the common goal by providing team members confidence in how they as individuals can contribute to team success.

3. Creative, nimble leaders who challenge the team, care and participate

Different teams can require variant leadership styles depending upon their goals and the working styles of the team members. Therefore team leaders must be nimble, with the flexibility to adapt and reinvent themselves to suit the team’s needs. The demanding, lean environment of the early 21st century raises the stakes for leaders ever higher. According to the 2010 IBM Global CEO Study, creativity is the most critical competency for leadership success over the next 5 years:

Establishing a clear line of sight to clearly defined goals is only the beginning of what leaders need to do to help keep team members on the correct path. Leaders must also: encourage productive collaboration; leverage talent; and demonstrate genuine caring toward individual team members. At times, leaders have to help clear the team’s path by serving as an advocate for the team’s initiative or marshalling resources. Simply put, a leader invested in their team has a team invested in the objective.
Some symptoms that can indicate a team needs more from its leaders include dissidence among team members; conflict over who should be in charge or play what role; self-serving initiatives that are not aligned with team and organizational objectives; and a lack of communication.

4. Communication that is multi-directional and encouraged

Research has proven that poor communication is self-sustaining because it eliminates an important feedback loop. If a team doesn’t feel that their team leader is receptive to communication, that leader is unlikely to hear about important concerns, issues or problems. These are then left to increase, multiply, and fester, as opposed to being moved toward resolution. Even communication that can have a negative connotation -- constructive criticism or messages resulting in unintended consequences -- still encourage the solidarity of a high-performing team because the focus can return to the team goals after discussion.

A lack of communication erodes trust, whether it be unintentional such as assumptions that others are “in the loop;” or intentional in the form of the hoarding of information. Fortunately, trust can be re-established; however, rebuilding trust requires much more effort. It is far better to make it a priority to prevent communication break-downs from the beginning.

Symptoms that a team is suffering from a lack of communication include unpreparedness and duplication of effort; lack of delegation to capable levels; bottlenecking of information via multiple meetings or extensive email tracks; and the forming of cliques or gossip circles.

5. An environment of trust and team loyalty

For all relationships to function well, trust is essential. Trust allows those involved to be comfortable pushing themselves to their full potential, sometimes even beyond what was originally envisioned to be possible. When team members work in an environment of trust, and there is misalignment between what was agreed upon and what is executed, the natural instinct is to “give the other person the benefit of the doubt”. Yet, when there is a lack of fundamental trust, the assumption can instead be that a team member acted with malice or poor intent.

Conversely, if each team member trusts in the capabilities and performance of the team, they will more readily share knowledge, opportunities, challenges and victories with each other. In such an environment of trust, one can be loyal and dedicated, without fear.

Symptoms of a lack of trust include a mind-set of self-protection; posturing against team members; elevating self-interests; and continually decreasing engagement.
6. Accountability and recognition

Each of us has some amount of choice in the level of effort we give to an assignment beyond the minimum required. It is this discretionary piece that can affect the outcome of a team’s efforts -- with huge repercussions to the bottom-line.

As reported in May 2010 edition of *The Economist* magazine:

- 63% of workers say their employers do not appreciate the extra effort
- 57% of workers feel that they are treated as dispensable commodities
- The number of workers willing to put in discretionary effort has dropped by almost half since 2007
- 59% of workers are considering/actively seeking a new job
- More than 85% who are not, say it’s only because the market is dismal

Accessing the discretionary effort of employees begins with setting clear expectations of accountability. Clarifying roles, deliverables, and metrics for how success will be measured allows team members to fully engage in their work and interact confidently with one another. Clear boundaries contribute to a healthy spirit of accountability and to the trust mentioned previously. When people know they are both *doing things right* and *doing the right things* it creates a “parachute” of self-confidence. The desire to perform successfully outweighs the fear of failure or hyper-competition, both of which can cripple a team.

Relevant recognition for a job well done is much easier to provide when success has been quantified. Recognition helps to ensure that team members remain loyal and positively engaged. But this is also really important: *what defines meaningful recognition differs among individuals.* There are a couple of ways to go about determining what works best for each person. One way is to simply ask team members what they prefer. Another method is to use a high-quality personality assessment. Human capital analytics provided by personality assessments guide leaders in providing recognition that individual team members will most appreciate -- which in turn, can unlock the full effort and potential of that individual.

*Symptoms that your team may be suffering from a lack of accountability or recognition include continually asking for guidance rather than seeking their own solutions; needing permission to make decisions within the scope of one’s*
role or continually taking excessive liberties beyond that scope; an inability to acknowledge the accomplishments of fellow team members or accept responsibility for personal errors; and regular complaints about the allotment of time and/or resources.

Conclusion

If a team lacks any one of these six critical factors, performance will be affected, valuable time will be wasted, opportunities will be missed and the possibility of disengagement will skyrocket.

If you would like to improve a team in your business, assess the group honestly on each of these factors to help pinpoint areas on which to focus your efforts. I’ve provided a brief survey on the next page to help get you started.

If you would like to chat about the specifics of your situation and how personality assessments can provide reliable data to guide team improvement, I am happy to be in touch. I look forward to hearing from you!

- End -

Want to talk more about high-performing teams?

Contact Aszure by any of these methods:

Phone: (317) 249-2250

E-mail: agray@advisausa.com

ADVISA website: http://www.advisausa.com

LinkedIn: http://www.linkedin.com/in/aszuregray


Twitter: @aszureg
Critical Factors of High-Performing Teams

1. A clearly-defined team objective
2. Individual goals and tasks aligned to team objective
3. Creative, nimble leaders who challenge, care and participate
4. Communication that is multi-directional and encouraged
5. An environment of trust and loyalty to the team
6. Accountability and recognition

Add up the total

Score of 6 to 10: HIGH RISK

It’s unlikely this team is achieving desired objectives; communicating necessary information; or working in alignment with organizational goals. It is urgent and critical to determine which factors require attention, and develop a plan of action for resolution immediately. Without doing so, this issue can only grow as performance declines.

Score of 11 to 14: HIGH POTENTIAL

This team has unrealized potential that, with the proper tools, could yield exceptional results. This is good news! Is it a matter of increasing engagement; improving communication; or, perhaps creating strategic and tactical plans to ensure alignment with the organization? If you’ve been wondering why your intelligent team isn’t accomplishing their objective, there’s a reason. Investigate and resolve it.

Score of 12 to 18: HIGH PERFORMERS

This is the team others strive to be: high-performing with individual team members who are accountable, challenged and trust one another. Information flows and when there are issues, they are addressed constructively. Leadership is nimble and proactive, leading you to logically ask, “What’s next?” Continue to work on these key elements with retention as a priority. (Your competition notices the accomplishments of your top talent as much as you do.) And, if your future leadership is present, what proactive measures are you taking to groom and develop them for succession?