

Teamwork Tune-up: Creating a High-performance Team

*Bo Sellers, Program Specialist, WVU Jackson's Mill Experiential Learning Center
Patrick Nestor, Extension Specialist, Volunteer Leadership Development*

Introduction

Educators and business professionals have recognized that to facilitate teamwork at a high-performance level, seven characteristics must be present. Characteristics of high-performance teams can be remembered by thinking about the first letters in the word "PERFORM."

Purpose: team and individual goals stated clearly

Empowerment: team members share responsibility for leadership

Relationships: active participation and communication by all

Flexibility: members respect different views and adapts well to change

Optimal Performance: high standards, productivity, and creativity

Recognition: team celebrates success, members feel appreciated

Morale: team enjoys working together; work can be fun

A great foundation for any team is the establishment of a clearly defined team purpose. Team members should know what the team's work is, what their individual roles are, and why the work is important. Team members should also feel empowered to use their creativity in making decisions and taking action when needed. Organizational policies should encourage team members to share responsibility for team development and decision-making within understood boundaries.

Another important characteristic to consider when creating a high-performance team is the members' working relationship and their communication. Relationships within the team should be cultivated that respect different ideas and perspectives, allowing for open and honest collaboration. Honest and considerate feedback allows a team to become aware of strengths and weaknesses. High-performance teams have also been characterized as being flexible, meeting challenges through the unique talents of all team members. The team is always open to exploring new ways to approach situations and adapts well to change.



A vital characteristic of high-performance teams is that team morale has a high priority. Individual and team accomplishments are enthusiastically acknowledged by team members, team leaders, and the entire organization. This leads to team members who feel highly regarded within the team and have a sense of personal accomplishment in relation to team results.

By starting with a clear purpose, empowering people, developing relationships, incorporating flexibility, and maintaining high morale, the team will consistently produce with high standards and be committed to optimal performance.

Participant Observer

To be a member of a high-performance team, one must make the transition from traditional teamwork and become a "participant observer." A participant observer allows himself or herself to focus on the problems facing the team, but also is aware of the dynamics of the group.

Participant observers look for:

- **Communication:** Who talks; who listens; are there cliques?
- **Decision-making:** How do they choose to take action?
- **Conflict:** How is conflict dealt with?
- **Leadership:** Who has influence on the team?
- **Roles:** Who does what; what are the individual tasks?
- **Norms:** What are the ground rules for team behavior?
- **Problem-solving:** How do they find solutions and analyze results?
- **Behaviors:** What are the actions and attitudes of the team and individual members?

Stages of Team Development

All teams go through stages of development, which are much like the stages of life. As a child, we are developing the foundation for life; early development for a team establishes a foundation for all the work that follows.

During adolescence, we often struggle with the conflicts

within us as we cope with our desire for control and our acceptance and trust with others; as a team, we also struggle with these issues.

As young adults, we are faced with the challenges of early self-management and becoming more productive members of society; as

a team, we also cope with that brief period when we must clearly define and integrate team and individual goals to increase the team productivity.

As mature adults, we strive to live by our values, maintain our relationships, and challenge ourselves to continue to grow and to learn; as a team, we also continually challenge ourselves to have high standards, to discover optimal performance, and to grow as a team.

Stage 1: Orientation

Characteristics

- High expectations and enthusiasm
- Dependence on authority for direction and support
- Anxiety about roles, acceptance, and trust
- Polite behavior, some testing of boundaries

Needs

- Team purpose
- Group norms
- Individual roles
- Discover team members' characteristics

Issues

- Personal well-being
- Acceptance
- Trust

Orientation Example Activity: Build-a-Word

A wonderful activity to lead with large numbers of people...usually lots of laughter is involved creating words using letters on index cards.

Create at least one 3x5-inch index card for each person with one letter of the alphabet on each card using big block letters. One set of cards = 26 letters (all letters of the alphabet). If you have fewer than 26 people playing, give some people two cards. If you have more than 26 playing, have a second set of index cards (26 letters) ready to hand out.

1. Supply each person with one card, which they must keep throughout the activity (no trading cards or handing them off).
2. When you give the signal, they are to form a three-letter word. Once they've formed the word, they must stay with the word (group) until the next set of directions. Give the group about 60 seconds to form their words. Ask all those with unused letters to come to the "lost and found" area (so they can help each other).
3. After the words are formed, take a moment to see what all the words are (let everyone see each other's words). Most likely all the letters won't get used in each round.
4. Round 2: Now form four-letter words (but not the bad kind!) Everyone plays, even the lost and found letters.
5. Round 3: Now form five-letter words, etc.
6. Six- and seven-letter words start to be a little over the top, but if you have fanatical group give it a try.

Debriefing Points: Use this activity with your group when discussing inclusion versus exclusion. Think about giving a vowel to someone who is normally a loner. Vowels are used often...the owner of a vowel will usually feel included when the group needs their help to form words. On the flip side, consider giving a "tough" letter (Z for example) to someone who is outgoing. It can be helpful to the group to hear how these two people were treated.



Stage 2: Dissatisfaction

Characteristics

- Discrepancy between expectations and reality
- Dissatisfaction with dependency on authority
- Confusion and frustration about roles, acceptance, and trust
- Competition for power, authority, and attention

Needs

- Redefine team purpose
- Reestablish group and individual norms
- Develop a communication process (conflict management, nonjudgmental feedback, active listening)
- Value team diversity
- Give encouragement

Issues

- Power
- Control
- Conflict



Stage 3: Integration

Characteristics

- Increased clarity of and commitment to goals, roles, tasks, and structure
- Willingness to share leadership and responsibility
- Growing trust, cohesion, and respect
- Diversity valued
- Conflict avoided (“groupthink” utilized)
- Using “We” instead of “Me” language

Needs

- Integrate team goals with roles and norms within the team structure
- Continued skill development (problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and trust)
- Shared responsibility for leadership and functioning
- Recognition and celebration of successes
- Focus on increased productivity

Issues

- Sharing control
- Avoiding conflict

Integration Example Activity: Group Juggle

This classic activity requires the group to share the leadership responsibility and integrate team roles and goals to increase their productivity.

1. Participants stand in a circle.
2. Using a soft object like a fleece ball or small stuffed animal, toss the object to someone across the circle.
3. The person who caught the object then tosses it to someone who has not received the object yet. This continues until everyone in the circle receives the object one time only.
4. The last person to receive the object tosses it to the person who started the process; this establishes a sequence that starts and stops with the same person, and everyone receives the object one time only.
5. Make sure the group has the sequence memorized by tossing the object through the sequence a second time.
6. Now add three objects to the initial one and challenge the group to complete the sequence with all four objects as quickly and as efficiently as possible.
7. The rules for this activity are: All four objects must start and stop with the same person as they travel through the sequence; the established sequence must include everyone; and the sequence may not change.

8. Time the event, starting with “Go” as the first object is passed and ending with “Stop” as the last object returns to the first person.

9. Encourage the group to find a new strategy or technique to decrease the time within the rules. With each new attempt, encourage the group’s creativity and challenge them to become more efficient and faster.

Debriefing Points: This activity can be very rewarding for group members as they develop trust, cohesion, and respect for one another. Your role as a facilitator is to channel their energy and focus on increased productivity and shared control as they experience an appreciation for diversity. Ask the group to discuss what changes occurred that resulted in positive outcomes as well as what “sticking points” led to decreased productivity. Other areas that may be explored are: how do you decide when your results are “good enough”? Did the group think “out of the box”? What do the objects represent in their lives? This activity can be extremely enlightening for group development.

Stage 4: Production

Characteristics

- Clear team purpose, goals, roles, and values
- Empowerment for increased energy and improvement
- Strong relationships built on trust, respect, and openness
- Shared leadership and flexibility
- Optimal productivity and standards
- Recognition of team and individual accomplishments
- High morale and enthusiasm

Needs

- New challenges
- Continued focus on productivity
- Decision-making autonomy within boundaries
- Individual acknowledgment

Issues

- New challenges
- Continued growth and learning

Productivity and Morale

High-performance teams require attention to their needs by the team leaders in two areas – team productivity and team morale. The leader provides the team with what they are missing, depending on the stage of development. Team productivity and team morale are two key areas to high performance and need the leader’s attention. However, the team leader should empower team members to care for these issues. Then the leader’s role can be slowly reduced to the role of a “situational leader.”

The situational leader does not conform to traditional styles of autocratic control or democratic, bureaucratic leadership principles. A situational leader provides direction and support to the team, but stays out of the way. The situational leader must realize that he or she is teaching the team members to become a high-performance team. Team members need a leader who is willing to help them discover how to perform at a high level and then stay out of the way.

At Stage 1, the leader must provide structure for the team by giving high levels of direction with very little support. At Stage 2, the leader needs to assist the team in resolving issues with high levels of direction and support. At Stage 3, the leader should collaborate with the team members and give them support but allow them to direct their own efforts. Finally at Stage 4, the leader should validate the team’s efforts while allowing direction and support to be provided from within the team.



Individual Assistance

If the situational leader needs to assist an individual on the team, the role of leadership shifts to a more direct style. Stage 1 emphasizes “directing” the individual to find solutions to problems. Stage 2 emphasizes “coaching” the individual to deal with inner conflict and struggles. Stage 3 places the leader in a “supporting” role that assists the person in growing and developing. Stage 4 is the time for “delegating” as a leader; the team member needs to continue to be challenged with opportunities to learn and grow.

Conclusion

High-performance teams don’t just happen! Team leaders must be willing to become aware of certain characteristics and recognize the stages that develop in the growth of a team. By becoming skilled at recognizing these situations and applying the correct leadership approach, team leaders will be fine-tuning their team’s performance and finishing first in the race for successful teamwork.

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