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High-Performance Work Teams and Organizations



Francesca Flood¹ and Michael Klausner²

¹Hope Verdad, LLC, Lake Frederick, VA, USA

²University of Pittsburgh Bradford, Bradford, PA, USA

Synonyms

Excellent collaborators; High performing groups

Definitions

Organizational Climate	The collective personality, values, and ethos that create the internal and external image of the organization (Rao and Bullayya 2017).
Values	Defined in behavioral terms they describe how team members should behave in pursuit of team goals (Edmonds 2010).

Introduction

Although public and private sector organizations differ in a variety of ways, there are strong similarities in key values such as: accountability, expertise, reliability, efficiency, and effectiveness

(Van der Wal et al. 2008). In some areas, public and private sector organizations may compete and must rely on organizational and team performance (Rao and Bullayya 2017). According to the Blanchard Institute (2014), there are five common elements in both the public and private sector. These include: communication, cultivating creativity, removing obstacles, support, and providing resources, contributing to high-performance work teams and organizations.

High-performance organizations delineate themselves through sustainable growth, market leadership, employee retention, and producing value to stakeholders (Blanchard Institute 2014). These organizations identify changes in their industry landscape and undergo transformation to stay relevant (Cancialosi 2015). Specific characteristics such as: organizational climate and human resource management have been identified as integral to the success of these organizations (Anderson and Caldwell 2018; Rao and Bullayya 2017).

Fostering high-performance teams who thrive in these environments requires subset features that cultivate such teams. Such features include: clearly defined goals, alignment of values, communication, collaboration, autonomy and authority, and effective leadership (Abdallah and Ahluwalia 2013; Blanchard Institute 2014).

High-Performance Organizations

Radical changes in technology, globalization, and the changing generation of workforce have caused organizations to undergo major transformation in structure, policy, procedure, market response, and value alignment with all stakeholders (Blanchard Institute 2014). A high-performance organization (HPO) is only sustainable when it can sense shifts in the market, adapt, respond, and seize opportunities to remain relevant (Powell and Felin 2016).

Culture-Climate

Organizational/agency culture drives the behavior and performance of the group (Cancialosi 2015; Rao and Bullayya 2017). Climate develops through shared values and formal/informal group and individual behaviors, whether sanctioned or not (Gupta 2009). Cultures are distinguishable by the sum of attitudes, customs, roles, norms, values, and beliefs (Flood 2017). To achieve long-term and sustained growth, high-performance agencies have shifted from top-down authority to a polyarchy workforce, where authority is widely distributed, autonomy is encouraged, and social proofing fosters peer alignment (DeWaal 2007; Powell and Felin 2016).

Communicating goals, transparency, and building trust throughout the agency create an environment where all stakeholders feel safe to provide feedback, make recommendations, and commit to action (Cancialosi 2015). When the culture of an organization inculcates commitment and trust, accurately measures performance, and embraces esprit de corps, it may outperform others (Anderson and Caldwell 2018).

According to a recent Gallup study surveying more than 30,000 team members (Abdallah and Ahluwalia 2013), quality leadership, communication, effective performance management systems, customer centric focus, and training were identified as vital to an HPO culture.

Human Resource Management

To create and sustain an HPO, human resource management plays an integral role through hiring practices and establishing policy, procedure,

and programs that foster employee commitment, retention, and empowerment (Anderson and Caldwell 2018; Rao and Bullayya 2017). When training, compensation, performance measurements, and clearly defined goals are aligned to administrative practices that reinforce the larger objectives of the agency, high performance can emerge.

Cooperative behavior between the organization and its stakeholders is maximized when core values and strategic priorities are aligned. According to Bundy et al. (2018), a *fit* between the two dimensions of value and priorities increases trust, predictability between the parties, exchange of ideas, and heightened communication.

High-Performance Work Teams

Teams are a ubiquitous feature of virtually all work organizations regardless of the entities' nature or mission. Unlike a group which is comprised of individuals who act independently of others, teams function cohesively, utilizing complementary skills, holding mutual accountability, and focusing on a common goal (Cancialosi 2015; Katzenback 1996; Katzenback and Smith 2005). To a large degree, the success and/or failure of an organization is dependent on the quality of its people and their performance as a team. Certain subset factors must be present in high-performance work teams (HPWTs). Such factors include: clearly defined goals, alignment of values, communication, collaboration, autonomy and authority, effective leadership, and support (Abdallah and Ahluwalia 2013; Powell and Felin 2016).

Clearly Defined Goals

Goal clarity is one of the most important features of high-performance teams. Indeed, it has been cited as *the* most pivotal feature (Sidebottom 2017). This requires that team members understand their goals and tasks in relation to broader goals (Anderson and Caldwell 2018). Without goal clarity, measuring and rewarding

performance would be difficult (Larson and LeFasto 1989). Goals must be specific, meaningful, challenging, realistic, and measurable to assess if targets are being met.

Meaningful goals refer to the degree they are relevant to the organization's larger mission and the impact achievement might have on society. As an example, Richard Feynman, one of the physicists on the Manhattan Project that was charged with developing the first atomic bomb (1942–1946) indicated that his team behaved differently when members became aware of its purpose. When they learned that successful completion could result in defeating the enemy, a "complete transformation" occurred. The pace, quality, and quantity of their work improved given the stakes of their work (Goleman: 1998, p. 228). When HPWTs recognize the implications of their work are beyond the boundaries of the organization, a deeper sense of purpose and mission can be built (Fisher and Thomas 1996).

Goal specificity has the advantage of timely feedback, enabling the team to gauge progress and make necessary corrections. Another benefit of shared goals is reduced interpersonal conflict, having members focus on goal attainment rather than on internal squabbling. The best teams come together in a shared commitment, operating in a collective performance (Katzenback and Smith 2005). Team cohesion forms when there is a shared mission statement, purpose, and understanding of how work performance contributes to the success of the organization (Fisher and Thomas 1996).

Alignment of Values

Organizations may create grandiose mission and purpose statements that, while noble, are not clearly understood by employees and more specifically, what they can do to accomplish them. According to Edmonds (2010), there are three integrated steps required for a values-aligned culture: clear performance expectations, define value in behavioral terms, and accountability of leadership and staff. "Values defined in behavioral terms describe how team members should behave as they pursue their team goals" (Edmonds 2010, p. 3).

Clearly defined roles are aligned to performance expectations. If team members do not have a clear understanding of their role within the team, feelings of uncertainty, frustration, anxiety, and conflict may develop. Conversely, when members understand what is expected of them individually and as a collective part of the team, the concept that no one individual is as strong as the team develops (Fisher and Thomas 1996). HPWTs integrate the individual and collective team knowledge for a common purpose (Cancialosi 2015). When the economic imperatives of the organization are tied to value-based priorities, high-performance teams emerge (Anderson and Caldwell 2018). Behaviors, such as integrity, commitment to service, and dedication are seen and experienced rather than viewed as abstract concepts (Edmonds 2010).

Communication

Good communication serves two essential roles: disseminating the information employees need to do their job and creating relationships between team members (Doyle 2018). High-performance teams require access to data through information technology structure, hearing from leadership, and transparency in the workplace. If the agency is on fire, that is in trouble, knowledgeable employees can be recruited to help put out the flames (Anderson and Caldwell 2018).

Open, honest, shared, and nondefensive communication are vital to individual and team performance. Such features inspire trust, which is essential to competing in today's world (Anderson and Caldwell 2018). Lack of shared information and easy access are major roadblocks to effective teamwork (Fisher and Thomas 1996). In addition to technical skills, HPWTs utilize effective communication characterized by interpersonal skills, honesty, assertiveness, confidence, listening, empathy, respect, and open-mindedness (Doyle 2018; Nelson and Quick 1997).

HPWT members exhibit effective persuasion skills, using logic and empirical data to support their views. Additionally, team members must possess empathic skills and able to read the emotional states of others (Doyle 2018). Empathic

understanding provides an astute sense of what is important to other members, conveying an understanding of their position (Conger 1998). Persuasive skills are a key factor that differentiate HPWTs from average ones, pulling team members together to advance ideas, galvanize action, and develop constructive solutions (Goleman 1998).

Collaboration

According to Guzzo and Salas (1999, p. 3), “Task-required interdependence is an essential element of teams.” Effective teamwork requires ongoing interaction, exchanging information, sharing resources, assisting with workloads, and maintaining mutual accountability. Such activity inculcates a trusting environment that encourages growth and development (Abdallah and Ahluwalia 2013).

In a collaborative environment, the goal has been internalized by team members as the personal goal of each person (Larson and Fasto 1989). Trust conveyed through communication generates collaboration versus competition. Collaboration between team members fosters problem solving where efforts are synergistic, successively building on presented ideas. When HPWTs collaborate, the sum of the efforts exceeds the sum of individual contribution (Maznevski 1995).

A team’s performance is the combined outcome of contributions from members who have the requisite skill set plus positive socio-emotional factors such as morale, open communication, and commitment, resulting in team chemistry that facilitates goal attainment. When the socio-emotional factors are positive the “...results can be more than simply additive – they can be multiplicative with the best talents of one person catalyzing the best of another, to produce results far beyond what any one person could have done” (Goleman 1998, p. 205).

A collaborative climate is produced from a high degree of psychological intimacy among members, involving feelings of “affection, warmth, unconditional positive regard, opportunities for emotional expression, and emotional support” (Nelson and Quick 1997, p. 265).

Mutual accountability is an essential feature of collaboration and occurs when team members believe that everyone on the team bears responsibility for the team’s performance. (Katzenback and Smith 2005). Such mutual accountability must be deeply felt by the team for a team to exist. Members can self-police and are not dependent on outside influence to motivate them. They hold themselves accountable individually and collectively to the overall result.

Autonomy and Authority

Market dynamics have forced agencies to rethink organizational structure. Hierarchical style management has given way to disbursed empowerment (Cancialosi 2015). Authority is no longer exclusively seated at the top tier of the organization, but rather imbued as a polyarchy. Here, employees who are closer to fast moving developments in market conditions are enabled to rapidly respond (Powell and Felin 2016). Such flexibility enables organizations to adapt to changes quickly and compete in cycle time, delivery, and sustainability (DeWaal 2007).

The rapidity of changes in technology, social media, customer preferences, and product development requires individual specialists and response teams to have true autonomy to address issues and leverage opportunities (Powell and Felin 2016). Although leadership in many agencies would like to retain authority while paying lip service to autonomy and polyarchy, high-performance teams will not thrive without alignment between action and words.

While disbursed autonomy and authority are vital to high-performance teams, without adequate, formal structure, such organizational construct could lead to chaos. To prevent this, organizations have incorporated social proof mechanisms such as the rule of three, where individual capabilities are bound by social influence that fosters harmonized and accepted behaviors (Powell and Felin 2016).

Effective Leadership and Support

Effective leadership is a key element of HPWTs and has become less hierarchical, command-and-control oriented (Benett et al. 2013). Teams perform better than their peers, when leaders loosen

the reins, demonstrate competence and knowledge, and possess interpersonal skills (Anderson and Caldwell 2018). When leaders demonstrate their confidence in a team's ability through autonomy and empowerment, staff flourish (Larson and LaFasto 1989).

Effective leaders cultivate leadership qualities in others by providing each member of the team an opportunity to lead in an area of his/her expertise (Katzenback and Smith 2005). Leaders that encourage the team to engage in self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement were found to be characteristic of HPWT leaders (Manz and Sims 1987).

When leaders acknowledge the value of the team's contribution and convey the relationship between their performance and the mission of the larger organization, performance can be maximized (Fisher and Thomas 1996). Goleman (1998, p. 223) posited that the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership harmonizes when, "...the best team leaders are able to get everyone to buy into a common sense of mission, goals and agenda...it may be the single most important contribution of a good leader."

While teams may have autonomy or work remotely, they are not isolated entities, but rather part of and dependent upon the larger organization for support. Reliability becomes an essential factor, where teams know they can depend on their leadership through consistency, follow-through, and congruency between action and words (Anderson and Caldwell 2018). Without this support, morale can suffer, erode confidence in the organization's commitment to the team, and adversely impact performance. Support can include: providing sufficient training, giving access to needed tools and information, and encouraging teams to become the best possible version of themselves (Anderson and Caldwell 2018).

Additionally, when a team is working at its optimum performance, recognition is essential. Whether psychic income such as praise, encouragement, or symbolic gesture, or tangible recognition such as financial incentive, acknowledgment, or lack thereof will impact the team's

performance (Larson and LaFasto 1989). While individual rewards can be provided at the onset of work based on skill sets brought to the team, once the teamwork begins, financial incentives must be linked to the collective outcome of the team's performance rather than any individual (Caudron 1994). As the team begins to coalesce and develop a sense of collective identity, a team-based reward structure can be implemented. This in turn facilitates team identity and cohesiveness.

Organizations characterized by HPWTs have a cordial, collaborative, and congenial relationship with their teams. Team members are viewed as stakeholders with a vested interest in the organization (Cancialosi 2015). This results in the essential trust required for any high-performance endeavor and outcome.

Conclusion

High-performance organizations and work teams are not mutually exclusive or random occurrences. These are inextricably linked phenomena that require specific characteristics to inculcate a culture of flexibility, empowerment, and adaptability to embrace change. Today's global economy and technological advances require rapid respond. High-performance organizations utilize the talents and skills of their staff through empowerment and authority. Agencies have become structurally flatter enabling teams to problem solve, develop ideas, and adapt to the market. Optimizing the next generation of workforce will require dismantling the legacy organizational constructs that no longer apply or work. Like the private sector, public agencies are evolving to meet the demands of an ever-changing landscape.

Cross-References

- [Authority in Organization](#)
- [Culture and Organizations](#)
- [Flattening Organizations](#)
- [Performance Management and Culture](#)

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