

INSIGHTS

Struggling to Boost Your Team's Performance? These Issues Are to Blame

Reflect back on your last team building event, workshop, retreat, or initiative. Ignore the swag bags, rope courses, and trust falls. Instead, ask yourself: "Eighteen months after that team building effort, how were we behaving differently as a team, and what was the visible return on investment?"

We have nothing against rope courses and trust falls. Yet we find ourselves asking this question often. The question is important, because the current state of market disruption, and a growing gap between organizational needs and available talent, means that every moment invested in a team cannot simply be invested to maintain current levels of performance. Instead, we must actively pursue driving already high performing teams toward higher performance. Otherwise, teams and organizations are destined to run in place, tire, and fall behind the competition.

With that in mind, we considered existing high performing teams within our client organizations and asked ourselves: "What drives consistent and sustainable high performance in team environments? What holds teams back?"

Through this process, we discovered that high performing teams envision, design, and pursue opportunities to continually transform their team culture and process, driving long-term performance and results. This entails identifying key issues hindering performance. With these issues firmly in mind, high performing teams were able to clear roadblocks to communication, cohesion, and collaboration far faster than other comparable groups and organizations.

If your team is struggling to boost its performance and drive results, perhaps you should look at the underlying problems as well.

ISSUE #1: TRAPPED CAPACITY

Trapped capacity is a concept often applied to business processes, but far less often to people. Yet individuals' mental and emotional capacity to create value and drive results within organizations is something every team leader should consider. We like to ask executives and team leaders a simple question: "How much of your people's mental and emotional capacity would you guess is consumed by what you think of them and their performance?". The responses range between 30% and 50%. Stunning! When we ask about similar preoccupation amongst their peers, we get a similar range of estimates. Even an impromptu poll, like the one above, indicates the massive opportunity to access trapped team capacity.

Multiply that percentage by an entire team. A minimum of 30% to 50% of your team's capacity is likely trapped by concerns about others' expectations and perceptions. These concerns, if allowed to fester, will inevitably drive burnout and attrition.

Imagine if this capacity could be unlocked. Often, it can be as simple as consistently giving feedback in the moment, like asking "what went well and what could we have done differently?" or holding critical conversations to clarify team and role expectations, purpose, and future vision. This kind of transparency creates opportunities for improved performance by freeing capacity, no matter where the team currently finds itself.

ISSUE #2: INNOVATION BLIND SPOTS

Generating consistent long-term value and avoiding industry-shaking disruption requires constant teamwide innovation. Innovating at the team level can be very difficult, however. By definition, teams are driven by a sense of homogeneity and structure, performing in lock-step to drive current efforts. It is this sense of team identity that can cause teams to suffer from innovation blind spots.

Current efforts and successes will only take teams so far before new and unforeseen obstacles arise. Innovation blind spots must be mitigated in order for teams to creatively perform into the future. Innovative teams drive strategic efforts more successfully, enabling the long-term health of their organizations.

Yet innovation blind spots are frustrating precisely because they are blind spots. Teams are simply unable to see them.

When coaching teams to identify their blind spots, we encourage one key change first and foremost: increase the diversity of perspectives. Diverse perspectives are critical for uncovering blind spots. We are poor self-observers, and it requires bringing in different viewpoints to successfully discover our weaknesses. [Cognitively diverse teams more successfully solve problems and surface innovative opportunities](#).¹ Bringing in outside perspectives, including cross-functional perspectives, will shake up team homogeneity and reveal innovative ideas and initiatives. Temporary creative chaos can provide what teams need to change existing practices. Invite divergent approaches into crucial conversations to bypass blind spots and prioritize strategic, innovative opportunities.

In addition to team diversity, it is also crucial to treat innovative thinking as something other than a business skill that simply requires more training. As Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal note in *Stealing Fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and Maverick Scientists Are Revolutionizing the Way We Live and Work*: "creativity is essential for solving complex problems... [yet] we have very little success training people to be more creative. And there's a pretty simple explanation for this failure: we're trying to train a skill, but what we really need to be training is a state of mind."² Creative thinking requires a mindset that permits us to exist in the tension between opposing viewpoints, perspectives, and concepts. Thesis crashes against antithesis, and the resulting synthesis drives innovation forward.

ISSUE #3: LACK OF FOLLOW THROUGH EXECUTION

No amount of unlocked team capacity or uncovered strategic opportunities will drive high performance in the long-term without follow through execution. Too often, we work with teams that have the concepts and frameworks necessary to drive performance but are missing the ability to execute successfully. Two factors often contribute to the failure to execute: lack of consistent accountability and lack of habit-forming quick wins.

Teams require accountability, but efforts to hold each other accountable typically end in voiced aspirations and not systematic implementations. Teams must embrace and own change efforts, inspect their actions as they occur (instead of waiting for failure), and hold critical conversations with one another to make change stick.

Likewise, we are all creatures of habit, and driving change requires both breaking old habits and forming new ones. Leaders must incentivize and inspire their teams for change to occur. Subsequently, teams must take action every day and celebrate quick wins, forming a positive feedback loop and enforcing high performing behavior.

DRIVE RESULTS – NO MATTER HOW YOUR TEAM IS PERFORMING

Virtually every leader we connect with believes they and their teams have the ability and opportunity to achieve higher performance. Often, they are simply uncertain as to how to increase their capacity. Now, more than ever, teams must seek to hold critical conversations that reset expectations and unlock capacity, diversify perspectives to reveal blind spots and opportunities, and require accountability to drive execution and boost performance. Diagnosing these key issues, and driving change within your team daily to combat them, will accelerate your team's performance in real time, no matter their current level of success.

REFERENCES

1. See: Alison Reynolds and David Lewis, "Teams Solve Problems Faster When They're More Cognitively Diverse", *Harvard Business Review*, March 30, 2017.
2. Steven Kotler and Jamie Wheal, *Stealing Fire: How Silicon Valley, the Navy SEALs, and Maverick Scientists Are Revolutionizing the Way We Live and Work*, Dey Street Books, 2017, p.46.



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