High Performing Work Teams
Key Factors which Drive Performance

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The move from bureaucratic to more adaptive structures has seen an increased focus on teams and groups in organisations. The definition of 'team' refers to a group of individuals that are responsible for producing an output or that share a common goal. The concept of high performing teams is defined by Hackman (2002) as those that serve their customers well and become increasingly capable over time. Hackman (2002) also states that people receive personal learning and fulfilment in a high performing team. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) argue that high performing teams have a deeper sense of purpose, more ambitious goals, complementary skills and fuller mutual accountability. The factors that contribute to a team being high performing are well researched and documented. While many of the factors vary according to research design and focus, there are other factors that are more prevalent and consistently referred to in the literature. These findings provide a conceptual model of high performing teams upon which interventions can be based.

Most common factors

There were four factors that were consistently highlighted in the literature as critical drivers of high performing teams. These were positive climate, sound communication, shared goals, and constructive conflict. The findings propose that these four factors may be the fundamental features of a high performing teams model.

Positive Climate

Factors associated with a positive climate were the most mentioned within the literature in terms of determining whether or not a team will be high performing. Positive Climate refers to the degree to which an organisation or group emphasises appreciation, recognition, concern for employee well-being, leadership, and learning and development (What is organizational climate and why should you warm up to it?, 2009). Many authors suggest that a supportive environment where fellow teams members provide ongoing support to each other can lead to a team becoming high performing (Holmes, 2005; Nelson, 1997; Salas, Burke, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). Nelson proposes that support bolsters team morale, which in turn encourages a more functional team. He states that support is best communicated through praise, listening and facilitating. A sense of mutual respect among team members is also mentioned as a main constituent of a high performing team (Holmes, 2005; Nelson, 1997; Salas, Burke, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). It is also suggested that recognising the value of all team members and ensuring they have awareness of the value of their contribution is important to performance (Annunzio, 2005; Nelson, 1997; Sax, 2012). This is thought to lead to positive relationships among members, where individuals have a desire to work with others to achieve goals and are enthusiastic about common tasks and goals (Chong, 2007; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Sax,2012).

Sound Communication

According to the literature, effective and consistent communication is of considerable importance to high performing teams. Research has found that the effectiveness of team member communication has a considerable impact on group effectiveness (Dina, 2010). It has been found that teams are more effective if they are committed to open communication (Holmes, 2005; Nelson, 1997). This involves freely sharing information between team members, being open and honest, listening to all team members and providing positive and constructive feedback (Holmes, 2005). These processes allow for team learning, the expression of a range of ideas, a common understanding of purpose and the provision of feedback (Brueller & Carmeli, 2011; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Salas, Burke, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). Brueller & Carmeli (2011) state that team learning processes such as seeking feedback and reflecting on processes and performance are essential to enhancing team performance, as it enables the team to have a better understanding of their situation. A study by Sampson & Clark (2011) found that individuals in a high performing group were more likely to discuss an idea before accepting, rejecting or modifying it, than individuals in lower performing groups. They suggested that team discussion provides the opportunity to critique, clarify, add to or revise ideas. This is then likely to lead to a more effective decision, thus contributing to a team becoming high performing.

Constructive Conflict

Constructive conflict is considered to be an important driver of a high performing team. Research has found that constructive conflict within teams has a positive impact on group outcomes (Sampson and Clarke, 2011). Kozlowski & Ilgen (2006) suggest that conflict can be functional and contribute positively to team performance when it is moderate, focuses on task issues, and reveals different points of view, important information or solutions to problems. A study by Sampson and Clarke (2011) found that individuals in higher performing groups contributed a greater proportion of oppositional comments than did individuals in lower performing groups. It is suggested that this type of interaction stimulates more in-depth discussion and critical analysis ideas. It has been found that team members of high performing teams value differences of opinion and perspectives and are able to provide and accept feedback (Dina, 2010; Nelson, 1997; Salas, Burke & Cannon-Bowers, 2000). Katzenback & Smith (1993) state that this constructive conflict provides a common team understanding and purpose. The successful management of conflict is also highlighted in the literature as being an important driver of team performance (Holmes, 2005; Nelson, 1997). Holmes (2005) states that high performing teams are effective at identifying and resolving team conflicts, and also aim to minimise the occurrence of conflict within the team. A longitudinal study by Jehn & Mannix (2001) found that high performing teams were characterised by low but increasing levels of process conflict, low levels of relationship conflict and moderate levels of task conflict. Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) suggest that team members should develop sound interpersonal skills and build trust in order to manage conflict effectively.

Shared Goals

Shared team goals are another factor commonly sighted in the literature as being an important contributor to high performing teams (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996). Nelson (1997) suggests that shared team goals provide direction, which improves productivity. Many authors support the notion that a shared team mission that defines (Mullen & Cooper, 1994) (Mullen & Cooper, 1994) the specific purpose of the team's existence can lead to high performance (Holmes, 2005; Nelson, 1997; Sundstrom, DeMeuse, & Futrell, 1990). Additionally, the creation of clear and achievable, mutually agreed goals that relate to the team's mission provides direction and motivation (Nelson, 1997; Sax, 2012). This encourages teams to share a sense of common purpose, and increases their awareness of their intended goals and the team's contribution to the success of the organisation (Dina, 2010; Holmes, 2005). Specific goals allow a team to attain small achievements and thus build commitment and motivation (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993).

Common Factors

Although they were not as commonly discussed as the factors listed above, there was a range of factors mentioned in the literature as being important drivers of high performing teams. Their rate of occurrence in the literature suggests that these factors are reasonably relevant to a model of high performing teams.

Role Clarity

Research supports the importance of role clarity in high performance teams. The research indicates that the clarification of team roles and responsibilities is correlated with team performance (Dina, 2010; Chong, 2007). Holmes (2005) proposes that a high performing team has members who understand their level of responsibility and authority, understand their own role and those of others within their team. Nelson (1997) suggests that high performing team members understand their role in realising the team's vision and achieving team goals. These are thought to drive high performance in a team.

Efficiency

There were many articles that discussed the importance of efficiency and quality orientation to team performance. Research has found that for a team to produce results, the team members must have a strong ability to perform the tasks required of them in a timely manner (Nelson, 2010). Holmes (2005) found that high performing teams had the required skills, ability to work in a timely manner and used the relevant measures to evaluate overall efficiency. Nelson (1997) proposes that high performing teams have a commitment to high standards and quality performance. He suggests that the importance of establishing systems and methods to promote efficiency are imperative to the performance of a team. Additionally, Chong (2007) found that team members in high performing teams work well under pressure, and spent an appropriate amount of time on activities.

Effective leadership

Effective leadership was a common theme that emerged from the literature regarding high performing teams. Research found that high performing teams had leaders who defined team

objectives, facilitated interaction and collaboration, managed performance and produced opportunities for success and achievement (Holmes, 2005). Holmes (2005) also found that leaders of high performing teams encouraged active participation, provided ongoing clarification of goals, and endeavoured to create a supportive team environment. Chong (2007) found that high performing teams exhibited effective leadership through the leader disseminating information to team members and defining team roles, whilst Nelson (1997) suggests that high performing teams had team members that shared the responsibility for leadership. In support of this, Guttman (2011) proposes that in high performance teams, every member is a leader and equally accountable for the success of the team.

Solidarity and Cohesion

The research indicates that there is a positive relationship between team cohesion and performance. Meta-analytic reviews that have been conducted in the past 20 years have consistently found a positive relationship between cohesion and group performance (Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006; Mullen & Cooper, 1994). Sax (2012) suggested that a desire to work with others within the team to achieve team goals is imperative to high-level team performance and the attainment of objectives. Additionally, Nelson (1997) stressed the importance of team members experiencing a sense of personal as well as collective power. He proposed that members of high performing teams feel a sense of pride in terms of being part of the team and are enthusiastic about its mission.

Decision Making and Problem Solving

Effective decision making and problem solving have been found in the research to be important to a high performing team. Holmes (2005) found that high performing teams were effective at identifying and resolving problems, in addition to making effective and successful team decisions. They also make a concerted effort to involve all team members in the problem-solving and decision-making process. Dina (2010) stressed the importance of involving team members in decision making, while Katzenbach & Smith (1993) stated that in order to perform, teams need to be able to identify problems and opportunities, evaluate their options and make decisions about how to proceed.

Competence

In order for the team to be able to complete their required tasks, research suggests that the composition of team members must include individuals with the relevant skills and abilities to be effective (Shahedul Quader & Rashedul Quader, 2008). Katzenbach and Smith (1993) emphasise that a team cannot function without a minimum complement of skills to meet its performance goals. They found that high performing teams must have an effective combination of skills, such as technical, interpersonal, problem solving and decision-making skills.

Flexibility

Team flexibility and adaptability is considered to be important to team performance. Nelson's (1997) research found that high performing teams are fluid and flexible and are able to adapt to changing conditions. Kozlowski and Ilgen

(2006) also suggest that high performing teams are able to adapt to changing conditions, and adjust their resource allocations to meet dynamic task demands.

Less Common Factors

There were a number of factors considered important to high performing that were cited fewer times in the literature than the previously mentioned factors. These may be of importance to teams in certain environments, industries or organisations. However, as they are not as well supported academically as the previously discussed factors, they may not be as relevant to a more generic model of high performing teams.

- *Diversity:* A diverse combination of team members has been found to contribute to team high performance (Hackman, 2002).
- *Autonomy:* A positive relationship between group autonomy and team performance has been found in the literature (Nakata & Im, 2010).
- *Empowerment:* Research has found that there is a positive relationship between empowerment and team performance (Nelson, 1997)
- *Seizing opportunities:* Research has found that teams perform at a high standard when they established an environment that encouraged members to seize opportunities (Annunzio, 2005).
- *Commitment:* Research has found a positive relationship between commitment and team performance (Chong, 2007).

- *Development opportunities:* There has been research that has found that high performing team members are provided with ongoing development opportunities (Holmes, 2005).
- *Clear rules:* Research has found that effective teams develop clear rules of conduct (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993).

Conclusion

The literature suggests that there are many factors that are important to team performance. According to the research, high performing teams are those that have a positive climate, sound communication, engage in constructive conflict and have shared goals. These were very strongly emphasised in the literature, suggesting that these may be the fundamental factors that drive high performing teams. Other factors that were commonly mentioned in the research were role clarity, efficiency, effective leadership, solidarity and cohesion, decision-making and problem solving, competence, and flexibility. There is sound support for the inclusion of these factors in a model of high performing teams. Additionally, there were some factors that were mentioned less commonly throughout the research but were, however, considered important in their respective pieces of research. These may not be inherent factors in a generic model of high performing teams, but may be valuable in certain industries or organisations.

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