

Creating High Performance Teams

*Getting the Ingredients Right and
Making them Work Together*

Paul Keijzer



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You know how there are cakes and then there are *cakes* – the perfect treat at the end of the day that you remember for the entire month? That’s what a high performance team is like. It’s not just a bunch of people who think they’re working together. Instead, they’re a group of people who function like a well-oiled machine.

They know each other’s roles, strengths, weaknesses and most importantly they understand how they fit together. This understanding is what gives them the insight on what they need to do to help each other complete their individual tasks leading to the accomplishment of the overall goal. A high performance team can work magic in a company, while a dysfunctional team creates chaos.

Take a moment to figure out what you have going on in your organization. Are you people creating the success that everyone desires? Or are they unknowingly throwing the whole thing off course? If you’re able to move your teams in the right direction you’re going to have some incredible outcomes.

Misconceptions that Destroy Businesses

The word team is probably one of the most misused words in the corporate lexicon. Everybody is part of a team and if you're not, you feel like an outcast. However the truth is that only a handful of people are actually part of a real team and even less in high performance teams.

In his 1993 classic, [*Wisdom of Teams, J. Katzenbach*](#), defines a team as:

A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

Pretending to be in High Performance Teams

There are so many people who believe they're part of a high performing team. However, when they're asked to assess their team on whether it:

- Is small in size
- Has diverse members who have complementary skills and roles
- Is truly committed to a common objective
- Puts the interest of the team ahead of their personal interest

I often get a stony silence as people realize that maybe their team is more a group of individuals. Instead of working together, this pseudo team pretends to work in the interest of the business but really do everything in their power to promote themselves.

When High Performance Teams Get It Right

If I then ask people how many of them have ever been part of a high performing team, I get a number of hands where people remember that one time they were part of a specific project / start up / transformation / launch team where:

- Team members had a special bond
- Were willing to go the extra mile for each other
- Were very good in what they did
- Where everybody was committed to team goals instead of their personal goals

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- Which put together led the team to achieve extra-ordinary results

I've been lucky to have been part of 3 amazing high performing teams. One was in my younger years, when I was part of a factory transformation team, under the amazing leadership of [Hans Droge](#). Another roller coaster experience was being a member of the management team responsible for [Unilever, Vietnam's](#) explosive growth story and lastly in [Unilever Pakistan](#) where we transformed the company's people philosophy through a technology platform called Me & U.

Many professionals have never been fortunate enough to be part of a high performing team. The question is:

5 INGREDIENTS REQUIRED FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

1. Complimentary Skills and Roles
2. Co-Created Purpose and Aspirational Goal
3. Aligned strategy and implementation plan
4. Clear execution processes
5. Adapt, Learn and Persevere

When all of us are aiming to create high performing teams, why are we not able to develop them more frequently and consistently?

The answer is that in order to have a high performing team you must get a lot of moving parts right and aligned. For this to happen, you need to know the ingredients of high performing teams, how they work and get everything moving in the right direction.

5 Ingredients Required for High Performance Teams

There are a lot of moving parts to get together to create a high performing teams. So what are these parts? Well, based on experience from supporting CEO's in transforming top teams in organizations across Asia and Africa (along with being inspired by true gurus like [Lencioni](#), [Drexler and Sibbet](#), [Dave Ulrich](#) and of course the original work of [Tuckman](#)), I've identified the following '5+1 Ingredients' required to develop high performance teams.

1. Have Complementary Skills and Roles

For a team to deliver members with proficient technical and professional skills which are required to fulfil the tasks and responsibilities for its deliverables are required. What's important is that everybody in the team is crystal clear about his / her responsibilities in the team.

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Less obvious is to ensure that the different team members can play different roles that suits their style and personality. For a team to be highly successful you can't have individuals who are all detail focused or want to take on the leadership role. You need people who can play a variety of roles from a person who comes up with the ideas, to the one who focuses on the details and he who makes sure each of the team members are looked after and can contribute.

There are a number of different team role inventories out there and I always prefer [Belbin team roles](#) since it's easy to explain, identify and use.

Action Oriented Roles	Shaper	Challenges the team to improve
	Implementer	Puts ideas into action
	Completer Finisher	Ensures thorough, timely completion
People Oriented Roles	Coordinator	Acts as a chairperson
	Team Worker	Encourages cooperation
	Resource investigator	Explores outside opportunities
Thought Oriented Roles	Plant	Presents new ideas and approaches
	Monitor-Evaluator	Analyzes the options
	Specialist	Provides specialized skills

Belbin team roles

2. Share a Co-Created Purpose and Aspirational Goal

[Recent research](#) indicates that although remuneration and rewards can stimulate people temporarily, for individuals to really have a sustained effort it's important that they are driven by intrinsic reasons. My favorite explanation of this concept is by Peter Fuda who through this animation explains that instead of creating a burning platform you would like team members to be driven by a [burning desire](#).

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To move a team from a collective group of individuals to a team that is willing to go the extra mile and sacrifice their own interests for the sake of the greater good it's important for each of the members to be intellectually and emotionally committed to a purpose and vision that inspires and excites each and every one of them.

3. Have an aligned strategy and implementation plan

Having an inspiring purpose is just the first step. In order to start delivering on that purpose you have to be able to answer the following questions:

- How you're going to achieve this?
- What your **5 Must Win Battles** are?
- Who will do what, where and by when?

4. Follow clear execution processes

At the end the best and most diverse teams with a strong purpose and aligned strategy will not be able to deliver if they don't agree on:

- How they will **make decisions**
- How they measure progress
- How they will communicate with each other

They need to identify what meetings are necessary for what purpose and how they plan to keep the 'outside world' involved and engaged.

5. Adapt, Learn and Persevere

Finally high performance teams are able to spot issues ahead of time and have the agility to change course if and when required to deliver results. They ensure that each and every members learns, encourage experiment, takes risks and looks for new ways of doing things. Finally high performing team members encourage and support each other to overcome obstacles, find alternative routes and keep the motivation up to stay the course.

So what's the '+1' ingredient?

The Secret Ingredient that Ties your Top Team Together

*The secret ingredient of my Secret Ingredient Soup is ... nothing! There is no secret ingredient!
It's just plain old noodle soup? You don't add some kind of special sauce or something?
Don't have to. To make something special, you just have to believe it's special."
– Kung Fu Panda*

The secret that determines whether your team will fall apart or stay together is ... the team itself! Each team is made up of individuals who have relationships with each other. No matter how good your team looks on paper, without the right intra-team relationships, it would not be able to achieve it's potential as a high performance team.

How Do You Know If Your Team Has The Right Relationships To Become A High Performance Team?

Here's a handy list of 10 relationship characteristics you should look for in your team:

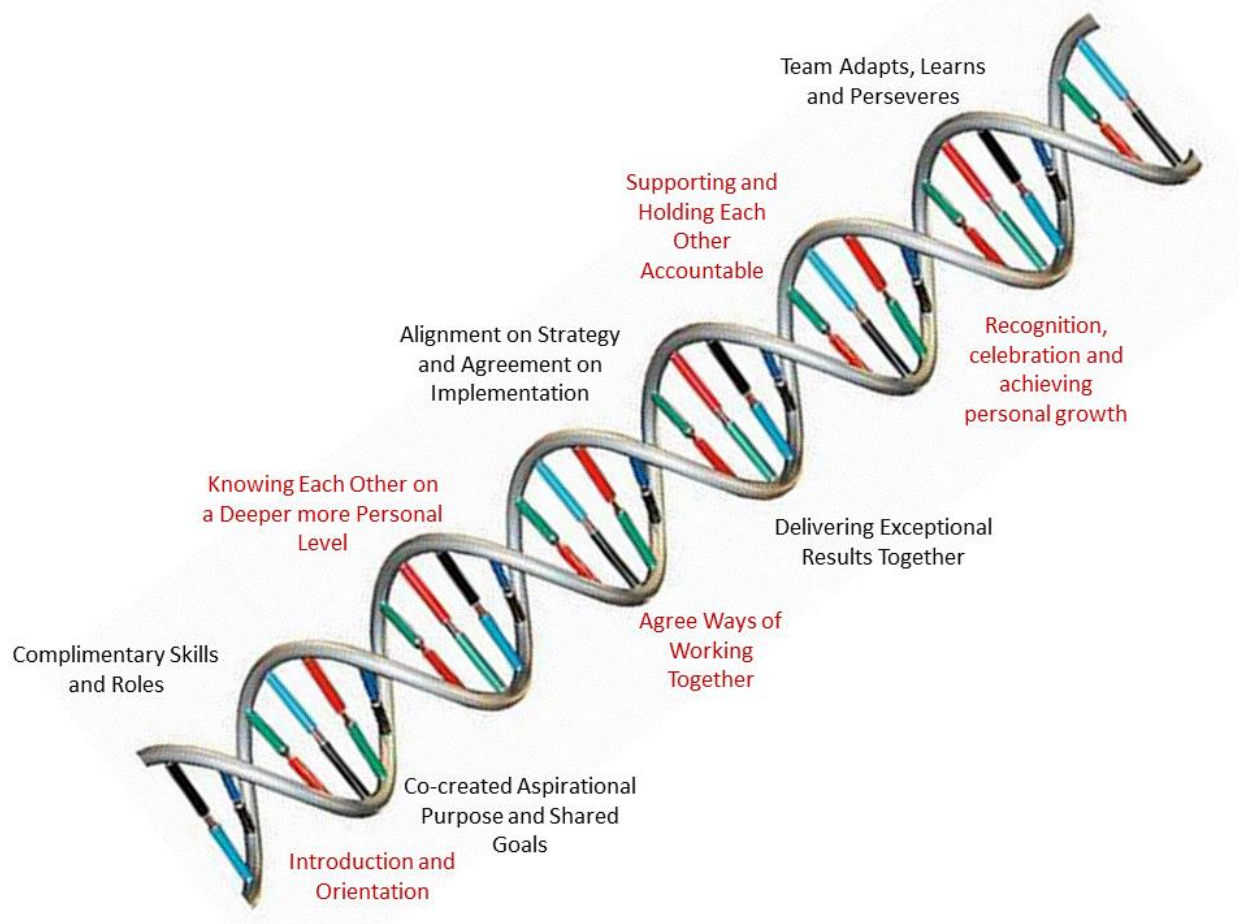
1. Deep awareness of each team member's background, personality and style
2. Commitment to build on each other's' strengths and a desire to support someone with his/her weaknesses
3. Willingness to care and look out for each other
4. Hold each other accountable
5. Willingness to disagree on issues that are important to the team
6. Ability to resolve conflict
7. To stand up for each other when confronted with an outside threat
8. To support each other and have each other's' back
9. Ability to give, and be open to receive, constructive feedback
10. Deep commitment not only to the team's success but also to each other's' individual success

The big question, of course, is how do you get people to that level of respect and trust? This is where I come in and help CEOs in building high performing top teams.

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The Helix Model of Top Teams

I have dubbed my high performing team model the 'Helix Model' as I see it as two strands that need to be 'spun and braided' together to create a powerful thread.



The Helix Model for Top Teams

The reason this double helix model works is because I believe you can't work on the '5 ingredients' and the relationship between team members in isolation. It has to be done simultaneously. So in my work with leadership teams I always develop interventions that have components of both strands: strategy and execution.

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How to Improve Communication within your Team: The Johari Window

What I often notice in teams that are not living up to their billing is that a real relation between members has never been established or is broken.

Even more surprising is that team members of teams that have been working for years with each other don't even know the personal circumstances of their colleagues. It has simply never come up. How is it possible for team members to trust each other if they don't even know each other?

To kick off conversations on the importance of getting to know each other for building effective teams I explain the concepts behind the [Johari Window](#).

You may already know that this is a communication model that is used to improve understanding between individuals. The word "Johari" is taken from the names of Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham, who developed the model in 1955.

The Johari Window encapsulates two key ideas:

1. That you can build trust with others by disclosing information about yourself.
2. That, with the help of feedback from others, you can learn about yourself and come to terms with personal issues.

By explaining the idea of the Johari Window, you can help team members understand the value of self-disclosure, and you can encourage them to give, and accept, constructive feedback.

Making the relationships between team members more open and trustworthy does not mean that team members have to be or become friends for life. What it does mean though is that the relationship between high performing team members is that of respect and absolute trust.

The secret ingredient is the belief that you CAN be a top team.

6 Innovative Team Building Activities

6 INNOVATIVE TEAM BUILDING ACTIVITIES

1. Speed Dating
2. Hard Talk
3. Personality Tests
4. Mask Exercise
5. Lifeline
6. Hot Seat

The bottom line for getting top teams aligned is that people need to really know each other before they can become a high performing team. When team members have understood and accepted the power of disclosure I do a number of team building activities that helps them get everything together. Here are a few of these to get you started.

1. Speed dating

A non-evasive team building activity to kick off discussions about personal relationships is a speed dating exercise in which you request team members to answer a number of different speed dating questions. Example of some of these questions are:

- What makes you happy/sad/angry?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- What is your dream job?
- What are you most passionate about?
- What would you take with you to a desert island?
- If you had to be someone else for a day, who would you be and why?
- If you could invite anyone, dead or alive, to dinner, who would it be?
- If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
- What's the most reckless (or embarrassing) thing you've ever done?

The answers to these questions are often fun and more importantly very revealing what the person is about and provides a great

2. Hard Talk

One of my favorite and often the most impactful team building activities is HARDtalk in which the leader of the team is exposed to hard hitting questions. The key is the first questions, which needs to be the toughest one, the one that everybody wants to know the answer for and the one that people gossip about.

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The results are spectacular. As the audience gasps and holds their breath at the audacity of me to ask the question everybody wants asked but nobody dares to. Then, I keep on digging deeper with follow up questions that doesn't let the boss off the hook but forces him/her to explain their actions and address the consequences.

3. Personality Tests

Personality tests like [MBTI](#) or [Belbin](#) are great, non-intrusive ice breakers, in which team members get an insight in the personality type and preferred styles of their colleagues. This exercise as well as the next two exercises can't be done straight of the bat and require some team gestation time.

4. Mask Exercise

This exercise asks participants to draw one of the mask they wear. It's used to help people go deeper into themselves or to break open a "stuck" group. In the mask drawing they can include their characteristics, dreams, interests, weaknesses, strengths, basically anything that explains the individual to his/her team members in a non-threatening manner.

After having drawn the mask, the person is asked to share his mask in the larger group in which members can ask questions to clarify or further explain certain characteristics.

5. Life Line

This team building activity is similar to the mask exercises since it requires people to share their 'life-line' and specifically the events in the past that have shaped them today. It requires significant introspection and for some people past events can be of a traumatic nature; they might have issues thinking of them, let alone sharing them.

6. Hot Seat

I often do the Hot Seat exercise only if the team has displayed solid steps on the 'trust ladder' since it requires each individual to give feedback to the other person in the presence of other team members. One person is asked to sit on the 'hot seat' and his colleagues are asked to answer the following two question for the colleague in the hot seat:

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- I would like to thank you for.... and
- I think you can significantly improve your performance if you...

All these exercises will help team members to get to know each other better and this is required to move to the next level of trust and relationship building in the team which then focuses on:

- Agreeing ways of working and delivering together
- Supporting each other and holding each other accountable
- Recognizing, celebrating and achieving personal growth

5 Ways to Stop Leadership Teams from Self-Destruction

Building high performing teams is one thing, building high performing leadership teams is a completely different kettle of fish! If you've worked anywhere near a leadership team before, you know that getting the synergies of key thinkers aligned is a pretty difficult task. So how do you build high performing leadership teams? Your first understand why they're inherently on the path to self-destruction.

The 6 Steps of Self-Destruction

Let's first identify why leadership teams are different from ordinary teams. There are many reasons but the ones that stick out for me are:

1. Most executives are appointed on the basis of:
 - Individual leadership skills
 - Their professional competency
 - The results they have delivered

They're almost never assessed on their ability to

- Be a constructive team player, or
- How their style compliments the rest of the team

2. Executive leadership teams are often not "real" teams since they have members that are either there on historical, temporary or worse political reasons. CEO's usually take the easy way out by letting people join a leadership team without having an actual reason to be there, just to avoid confrontation.

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Spot Check: Ask your CEO and each executive team member how many members they think are on your company's leadership team. I promise you that the answers even from the people that are on the team will vary wildly.

3. Leadership teams don't untangle the different functions they have (decision making, coordination, information sharing) and combine them into one meeting. They assume that every team member needs to be present in each meeting, creating confusion, boredom and often frustration amongst its members.
4. Executive leadership teams are often either bogged down by the operations of the business or have the opinion that they should focus solely on strategy. Few leadership teams create a clear division between their two main roles: delivering results today and building capabilities to deliver results tomorrow.
5. Most leadership team members are like the United Nations and see themselves as the representative of their function/division/department. Few see their main role as leading and making

Spot Check: Ask each individual top team member what the purpose of their leadership team is. Don't confuse the team purpose with the company's strategy. See how many different answers you get.

the best decisions for the entire company.

6. Few CEO's understand the power of a high performing team and see little value in investing in team building and creating conducive team dynamics. Building a high performing team is hard work

Spot Check: When was the last time your company leadership team spent a significant amount of time together, not talking about the company's results or strategy but how they as a team could lead the company better?

and requires significant conviction and investment from the leader as well as other members.

What Leadership Teams Should Be Doing

Now that we know why leadership teams are so different than “regular” ones it becomes easier to identify what they should be focusing on. Being able to check off the 5 points below will ensure that your leadership team is on its way to success rather than destruction.

1. **Real Team:** Make sure you only have people on the team that need to be there, have the motivation and skills to add value to the team. Take out (no matter what the short term consequences are) people that don't add value, are de-railers or are in the team for the wrong reasons.
2. **Team Charter:** Create clarity on the roles, responsibilities and what your team's purpose is. Agree on how you'll work together and how you to hold people accountable for delivering on their commitments and behaving in the agreed manner.
3. **Team Governance:** Discuss and agree how you will make decisions, involve and inform stakeholders, prepare for meetings, set agenda's, follow up on results and how you will structure your meetings to ensure you delineate the operational, strategic and team maintenance components
4. **Team Meetings:** Structure your team meetings around the different functions you play. My favorite meeting structure is Patrick Lencioni, who in his book [The Advantage](#) advocates to have:
 - Daily 10 minute huddles to discuss issues
 - Weekly ops meetings to discuss results and operational items
 - Ad-hoc specific topic meetings, and
 - Quarterly 'feet-in-the-air', how-are-we doing, what is happening in our industry discussions and are we on the right track conversations.
5. **Invest in Team Dynamics:** At a regular interval, ideally a 2 day session once a year and quarterly 1/2 day follow up sessions, talk about how you as a team are performing, investing in forging personal bonds and discussing how you are leading the organization. Do a pulse check of all your stakeholders (not only employees) to understand how they assess your team performance and get clarity on future expectations.

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[Paul Keijzer](#) is the CEO and Managing Partner of Engage Consulting in Malaysia, Pakistan and U.A.E. He focuses on transforming top teams and managing talent across Asia's emerging and frontier markets. Paul has a firm belief that outstanding results can only be achieved through people, by engaging teams and building commitment by creating a new paradigm between company and employee. Paul has delivered transformational interventions for more than 50 blue chip organizations in countries across Asia including Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, Fiji, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Egypt, Korea, U.A.E. and India. For more transformational leadership, signup to [Engage Asia with Paul Keijzer](#).

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