# Characteristics of High-Performance Work Teams and Why They Work

The dynamics and components of teams have been studied, evaluated, and utilized since biblical times. “Two people can accomplish more than twice as much as one; they get a better return for their labor. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But people who are alone when they fall are in real trouble. And on a cold night, two under the same blanket can gain warmth from each other. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken” (Ecc. 4:9-12 NLT). High Performance Work Teams, when properly assembled, have the extraordinary ability to outperform ordinary teams as well as individual efforts.

Why Teams?

HPWTs have the fundamental characteristic of creating synergy, “the interaction of two or more agents or forces so that their combined effect is greater than the sum of their individual effects” (www.dictionary.com). Their ability to achieve success is due to synergy and diversity within the group which includes ethnicity, background, personality, knowledge, experience, perspective, and opinion. These traits enable the team to generate not only more solutions to the task at hand but more inventive responses. Interaction among the group helps to establish and encourage constructive relationships among its members. The team learns their individual strengths and weaknesses as well as those of other team members. This creates awareness of learning opportunities and provides a more knowledgeable and global view of the functions and processes of the team.

How are high-performance work teams different?

“A high-performance work team (HPWT) is a group (two or more) of interdependent individuals who work together in a specific manner to achieve a common objective. As its name indicates, what separates an HPWT from any other team is its ability to perform at the highest level for an extended period of time and to accomplish its work in the most efficient and effective manner possible” (Holmes).

A HPWT is task-oriented, eventually judged by outcome. “RESULTS MATTER. Teams must execute. They MUST make it happen” (Jordan). There is an intense desire for performance and the environment is high-energy, forceful, and exhilarating. HPWTs have strong performance standards and that is what drives them to accomplish their mission in the most efficient and effective way possible. There is a high level of personal obligation to each other as opposed to standards teams that simply share a common goal of success by achieving the identified assignment. HPWTs embody and demonstrate a disciplined quest of a demanding performance challenge.

Characteristics of a High-Performance Work Team

**Goals and a Plan**

Purposes, functions and positions can change but every team will have a clearly defined mission statement and a plan to accomplish their goal. Goals must be clearly declared to identify the team’s mission and each individual’s role to help achieve success. Productive meetings must be utilized as a tool to recognize the problem or objective starting by identifying the source of the problem. Open and honest communication through discussion and brain-storming to invoke potential solutions, outcomes, and consequences are necessary to engage all members of the team. The role and day-to-day activities of each individual are broken down to help ensure that every team member knows their position and how important their efforts are to the success of the mission.

**Team Leaders and Their Individual Roles**

Ineffective team leaders are the single biggest reason for team failure. HPWTs have leaders that clearly define macro goals and individual micro goals and expectations. They set the standard in regards to levels of commitment and work performance. An effective leader will recognize strengths and weaknesses of each team member and strive to take advantage of strengths and diminish personal weaknesses while creating an environment of cooperation and facilitating learning opportunities. Leaders need to evaluate the individual contribution and production of each team member as well as the productivity and performance of the group as a whole dimension. Successful team leaders encourage active participation; reiterate main concerns on a continuous basis, and work to construct an encouraging environment that will generate success. Leaders must be capable of motivating the team to accept nothing less than exceptional performance from both the team and the team members.

**Team Members and Their Individual Roles**

Although each HPWT needs a capable and competent leader, that would only go so far without team members and each of their specific, definable roles and duties. “Team members must buy-in and believe in their goal” (Jordan). Each team member must be committed to the shared purpose of achieving the common goal and compelled to excel above average performance demands. Effective communication must be strong in each individual to enable open and honest discussion including constructive criticism and feedback with courtesy. A team can be quite powerful the more diverse it is if they guide those differences into synergy. There must be a foundation of respect and profound commitment to one another, demonstrated by support, trust, and cooperation. Each member of the team must move beyond individual recognition and glory to strengthen ties to other members of the team. One must take full responsibility for the performance of others and allow others to reciprocate, focusing on and maintaining the highest performance standards.

**Develop Effective Communication**

Effective communication is the very means of collaboration that enables collective thinking. The major motivation for a company to utilize a HPWT is that team-based problem solving is faster, fluid, and quick to respond. HPWTs engage in productive discussions with clear and truthful opinions, listen to each other, and supply feedback and constructive criticism. The communication process starts with the team leader and a specific route to distribute information on a regular basis to ensure all members are fully briefed. Members are encouraged to share their views, thoughts, knowledge, and suggestions. This process helps facilitate a streamlined approach to problem solving and decision making. Strong communication skills are an exclusive feature of HPWTs.

**Cultivate Relationships**

A HPWT must have “personalities that supplement each other” (Hart). “Team members must complement each other. Every individual has strengths and weaknesses. A good leader put people together to use strengths to be successful” (Hart). Assignments that put individuals in contact with people they typically do not work together with create learning opportunities for both involved. This strengthens bonds between members and creates camaraderie. “Members must care about what they do and trust and respect each other” (Jordan).

**Manage Conflict**

Conflict is a normal dynamic of any team. Misunderstandings and miscommunication will happen, potentially more with a diverse team. A HPWT will capitalize on it and use it to strengthen the team instead of damage it. The key to resolving the conflict quickly is to anticipate and be ready for it. By intentionally implementing open communication channels and active participation, conflict may be minimized.

**Provide Development Opportunities for Team Members**

Discovering hidden talents and interests is a benefit to participating on a team. When working with another team member who compliments weaknesses, the quest for knowledge may be ignited for a particular process, subject, or procedure. Personal growth and development opportunities may be further explored and mastered in a variety of avenues. The learning format may include partnering with someone of proficient skill, coaching and mentoring, self teaching, classroom learning, books, or online learning. Learning is naturally incorporated in a team environment and helps to keep the good aspire to great.

**Make Decisions and Solve Problems Efficiently**

An HPWT works together to solve problems on a consistent basis. When a problem arises, the group recognizes the problem, discusses solutions, and makes a decision about the next step through straight talk. The group benefits from an individual members strengths and skills. Due to an array of different skills, knowledge, and experience, HPWTs are successful at developing and executing plans to solve problems in an efficient manner.

**Operate in a Dynamic Manner**

Positions on a HPWT are empowering. The skill level, quality of goals, and the environment are charged with potential and energy. The atmosphere surrounding a team like this is of a higher caliber than a standard team. This is what fuels a HPWT to operate in a dynamic manner. The team upholds extraordinary levels of performance, providing them with the assets and talent needed for success. Work is completed in a timely manner, focusing on quality. Team processes and procedures are evaluated and measured according to their high standards. HPWTs select, dissect, and then master their methods for achievement.

Any group can call themselves a team but it is the discipline, leadership, relationships, and caliber of performance that sets an HPWT apart from other teams. It is these fundamental characteristics that will enable an HPWT to excel over an ordinary team every time. “Groups become teams through *disciplined action*. They *shape* a common purpose, *agree* on performance goals, *define* a common working approach, *develop* high levels of complementary skills, and *hold* themselves mutually accountable for results. And, as with any effective discipline, they never stop doing any of these things” (Katzenbach and Smith 14).

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