Accelerating **Team Performance**

Strategies and Actions That Distinguish Top-Performing Teams

Abstract

Improving "Teamwork and Collaboration" is a strategic objective for many companies. As a result, our team decided to identify the actions and strategies that distinguish the highest performing teams from the average performing teams. The goal was to determine those behaviors that make the greatest difference to team performance. Results from our multi-method, multi-year study showed that high performance requires three ingredients: (1) Partnership and accountability among the team, team leader, and management, (2) a balance between attention to the team's task (what needs to be done) and attention to the people involved (team members and how they work together), and (3) 11 distinct behaviors (referred to as *drivers of performance)* that increase trust, ownership, and higher performance. Study results provide a preliminary road map that lays out actions that can be taken by team members, team leaders, and management to strengthen the culture of high performing teams.

1 Introduction

Pressure, compressed deadlines, inevitable conflict, and unforeseeable turns of directions are typical challenges for drug development teams. While most teams are highly skilled technically and scientifically, only the top performing teams are able to navigate themselves through issues. Others struggle and get stuck in a loop of conflict, rework and fire fighting.

Why? How do the top-performing teams rise above the "noise" of the industry and do so well?

Several years ago, a group of team and organizational development experts engaged in a scientific research study to pinpoint the specific strategies and actions that differentiate those highly successful cross-functional teams.

The research involved collecting qualitative (i.e., interview) and/or quantitative (i.e., survey) data from over 500 team leaders and team members. The research was designed to answer the following question:

> **What specific team behaviors, practices and external "situational factors" differentiate the highest performing cross-functional teams from average-performing teams?**

It should be noted that this study was not focused on identifying the basic needs of work teams (goals, roles, norms, charters, meeting management). This study was designed to identify the actions and strategies that turn an average team into a top performing team.

Teamwork and Collaboration: A Strategic Objective

"Teamwork and Collaboration" has been identified as a strategic objective. To establish a high-performance team culture, all teams must master the strategies and actions that facilitate teamwork and collaboration. Thus, our approach was rationally designed to identify the drivers that propel certain teams to outperform, and to determine how this information can be developed into tools and resources that will aid cross-functional groups going forward.

The Need for Customized Research on Team Performance

Perceptions about why teams are effective and why they fail are not always reliable. Many are convinced that the best-performing teams are simply populated with the most competent and experienced team members. This common, but flawed, assumption presumes that team troubles are the fault of specific team members [1], "We would do so much better if it weren't for member x."

There is no doubt that experienced team members contribute greatly to team effectiveness, but research on this topic has long revealed an even more significant driver to team performance: Success is more common for teams that engage in productive team strategies and actions than for teams composed of the most talented members [2]. Engaging in effective team strategies and actions is the key to team success.

2 Study Results: Synopsis

Overview

The quantitative and qualitative data were clear and consistent in establishing that specific actions and strategies used by the team, the team leader and management make a difference. They can either accelerate and promote team success or slow it down. Synergy and alignment among all three counterparts are necessary for team success and for building a high-performance culture.

Eleven distinct strategies and actions were identified that were used more often by the high-performing cross-functional teams than the average-performing cross- functional teams. We labeled these strategies and actions "drivers" because they advance team effectiveness.

Three key findings in the study are described below:

1. Team success requires partnership and accountability among the team, team leader, and management

Our research makes evident that building a high-performance team culture requires the establishment of a strong partnership among the team, its team leader, and its key stakeholders, including senior management and governing bodies. All three groups play a key role as all three affect the team's probability of success. The high- performing teams we studied were clear about how each partner contributed to their success. To create a high-performance team culture all three partners must be accountable for their role. It is the responsibility of each member of the partnership to understand what he or she needs, and to seek it out if it is missing. The team leader must manage the boundary between the team and its sponsors. If resources are needed, the leader must speak up. If information and decisions are required, the leader must seek them. If requests are disruptive, the leader must negotiate a balance between meeting the needs of stakeholders and the needs of the team. Similarly, the team needs to move forward even if all the pieces aren't in place. Team members must work to understand the needs of their stakeholders and to be proactive and seek what they require to fulfill those needs. Management and stakeholders must provide the team with timely actionable feedback and demonstrate alignment around priorities.

The specific team and leader roles in the partnership are described in the drivers below. The role for management, which we developed from team-member and team- leader data, is presented after our discussion of the drivers.

2. The best performing teams balance actions between task (what needs to be done) and people (team members and how they work together)
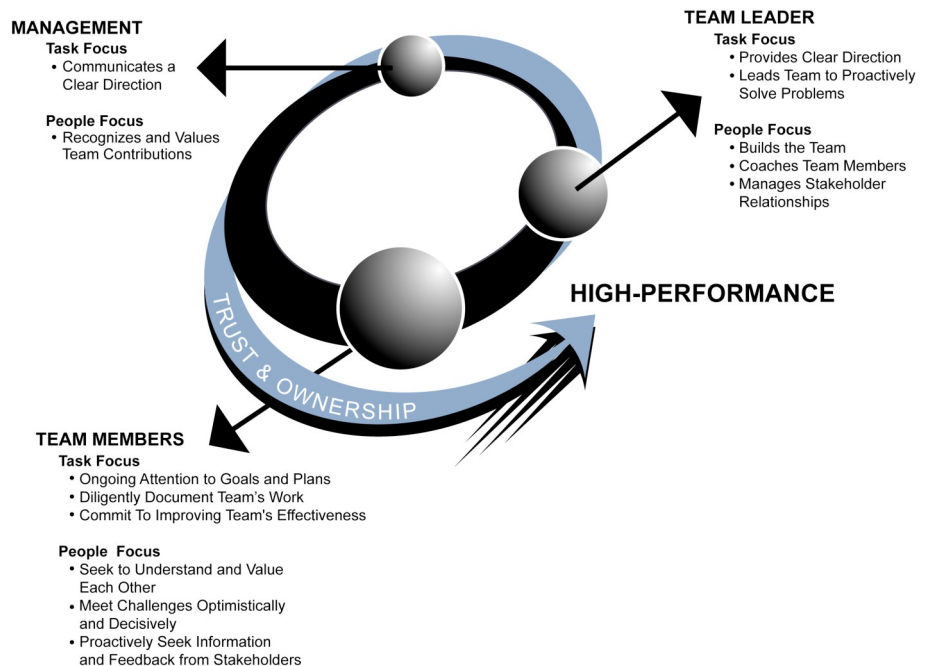
Sixty years of research on work teams suggests that teams must create a balance between their attention to the task and their attention to the people [4]. We anticipated

this would be true and it was true. The study data suggest that high performance is caused by both actions and strategies that focus on task and those that focus on people. Research indicates that the predominant reason for team performance problems is a lack of attention to people issues [5]. Team members are often task experts. They are rarely well-versed in the actions and strategies necessary for smooth team functioning.

3. There are key drivers that increase trust, ownership, and high performance in cross-functional teams

The accompanying model depicts the dynamic flow of partnership, accountability and balance, and the role each plays in the process. Eleven drivers affect performance – we mention three here that stand out as noteworthy.

- **Diligent documentation of the team's work affects performance.**
  High-performing teams are meticulous about documenting the team's work and decisions. They continually update and review their plans while keeping their eye on their target goals. Average-performing teams are simply not as disciplined about the documentation process.

- **Proactively seeking feedback and information from stakeholders affects performance.** High-performing teams invest time in gaining a clear understanding of the concerns and needs of their key stakeholders, and go after the input of these stakeholders. Average-performing teams more often do not fully understand stakeholder needs.

- **Leaders of top performing teams are directive and decisive when necessary.** High performing team leaders were able to provide clear direction for their team. Also, when needed, they engaged in an authoritative or directive style of leadership that clarified expectations and helped to focus the team. Average performing leaders were often more tentative in their directives.

MANAGEMENT
Task Focus
• Communicates a Clear Direction

People Focus
• Recognizes and Values Team Contributions

TEAM LEADER
Task Focus
• Provides Clear Direction
• Leads Team to Proactively Solve Problems

People Focus
• Builds the Team
• Coaches Team Members
• Manages Stakeholder Relationships

TRUST & OWNERSHIP

HIGH-PERFORMANCE

TEAM MEMBERS
Task Focus
• Ongoing Attention to Goals and Plans
• Diligently Document Team's Work
• Commit To Improving Team's Effectiveness

People Focus
• Seek to Understand and Value Each Other
• Meet Challenges Optimistically and Decisively
• Proactively Seek Information and Feedback from Stakeholders

3   Study Results: Drivers of High Performance Teams

THE ROLE OF TEAM MEMBERS

Team Member Focus on Task

Driver #1: Demonstrates Ongoing Attention to Goals and Plans. This driver reflects a relentless concern with aligning the team's goals and plans with the business, and maintaining a clear, specific, and detailed action plan for achieving the goals.

We expected that having clear goals and plans would matter for team success – and it does. We also found that goals and plans are moving targets in this environment and thus, that higher performance is linked to the amount of discipline the team applies to updating and aligning team goals and plans. High-performing teams told us that they regularly review and update their project plans, goals, and action plans; it was a continual part of their work. One member told us that her team regularly builds project plan reviews into their timelines. Another described how his team continually checks in with members to ensure that they are aligned and supportive of team goals and plans.

Members of the average-performing teams did not spend as much time reviewing or updating project plans, seemed to have less clarity about their team goals, and rated themselves less supportive of their team goals.

Driver #2: Diligently Documents Team's Work. This driver reveals a strong concern for clearly documented communication before and after meetings.

All of the individuals we interviewed discussed the overwhelming amount of information and detail they had to manage. We found that focused meeting management was important, but the team's diligence toward documentation was a strong driver of top performance. Their systematic documentation frees up the higher-performing teams to focus on the strategic issues important for team success. If team conclusions and action items were not documented clearly and accurately, team members came to their own conclusions, resulting in misunderstandings and conflicts. Thus, members of the high-performing teams told us that they create "histories," "records," "communication tools," and "team minutes that are concrete and *very, very* accurate." Members of average-performing teams also documented decisions, actions, minutes, etc.; however, they stressed this less often and did not use systematic documentation as a strategy

Driver #3: Commits to Improving the Team's Performance. This driver reveals a strong desire to improve the team and its processes, and recognizes that learning and reflective discussions are necessary to facilitate improvement

As expected, high-performing teams take actions to facilitate team learning and improvement. The high-performing teams periodically stepped back and reflected on their work and their process. They also routinely conducted meaningful "lessons-learned" discussions after reaching milestones.

High-performing team members spoke often about their meaningful debrief sessions after a review with a governing body. They focused on what could be done better next time, what was learned via the process, and what worked or didn't work well. They also told us that when low points occurred within the team, they turned to "lessons-learned" discussions. The best teams also discussed how well they were working together as a team, and periodically gave one another feedback.

Team Member Focus on People

Driver #4: Seeks to Understand and Value Each Other. This driver reveals a strong value for understanding the views, attitudes, cultural differences, interests, concerns, strengths, hot buttons, and weaknesses of team members.

We expected to find that friendly team-member relationships would increase team success. Instead, we found that team success is linked to team-member willingness to learn to understand each other's attitudes, views, work styles, hot buttons, and cultural differences. Our study results suggest that participation and the integration of knowledge and ideas occurs more easily when the members of cross-functional teams actively seek to understand and value one another.

Members of the high-performing teams consistently and frequently told us that they knew each other quite well – well enough to understand each other's idiosyncrasies. They also discussed using this knowledge to facilitate their work. One member discussed knowing "what can and can't be said" and "how close you need to get and how far away you need to stay from specific team members" in order to improve team discussions and processes. Another told us in detail that a "hot headed" team member is allowed to cool off, and how a "pessimist" is allowed to talk about the sky falling in. But, at the end of the day, the team comes together and works well. One team member discussed how she consistently tried to understand personality and cultural differences, and kept them in mind when trying to understand a teammate's perspective.

In contrast, members of the average-performing teams spoke significantly less often about understanding one another or trying to get to know one another. One member of an average team said that members were just spread out too far to know each other very well (yet, several of the high-performing teams were equally dispersed). Members of the average-performing teams more often viewed "get-to-know-you" activities as a waste of time. They don't recognize the link between familiarity and the ability to grasp and appreciate a teammate's point of view.

Driver #5: Meets Challenges Optimistically and Decisively.
This driver reveals a strong bias toward addressing problems, obstacles, and conflicts in a productive and decisive manner.

We expected to find that high-performing teams would make effective decisions under challenging circumstances. In fact, the high-performing teams were able to remain optimistic and decisive during challenging times. Optimism has clear advantages in the team environment. Neuroscientists have found that stress reduces the brain' ability to process information and make effective decisions [6]. In contrast, positive emotions such as optimism increase a team's ability to be expansive, creative, and to take in and process new ideas [7]. When challenges were presented, the high performing teams in our study refused to get caught up in fear or negativity.

They maintained a norm of optimism. They did not achieve this by stifling negative emotions, but by "quickly moving past non-productive discussions" to discussions focused on ways of overcoming challenges.

Average-performing teams reported that they were significantly less optimistic when facing challenges, significantly less able to move past non-productive discussions during difficult times, and significantly less able to be decisive when facing problems.

Driver #6: Proactively Seeks Feedback and Information from Stakeholders. This driver reveals a desire among team members to address the needs and concerns of key stakeholders, and to seek their feedback and input when making important decisions.

We expected to find that sponsorship would be important for successful team performance and that the extent to which teams managed their stakeholders would make a difference to performance. A clear finding was that the higher-performing teams were proactive about sponsorship. They worked to gain a thorough understanding of the needs and concerns of their stakeholders, and to engage their support and involvement. Members of the high-performing teams refused to feel powerless when it came to getting information and feedback from their stakeholders. They took charge by seeking out stakeholders, asking them questions, and then attending to priorities.

THE ROLE OF TEAM LEADERS

Team Leader Focus on Task

Driver #7: Provides Clear Direction. The team leader provides clear direction for the team and, when needed, engages in an authoritative or directive style of leadership that clarifies expectations and helps to focus the team.

We expected to find that the team leaders of the high-performing teams would empower their team members and take on a facilitative role. While this was true, what truly differentiated the high-performing team leaders was their ability to know when clear direction was needed and then to be directive and decisive. Members of high-performing teams described leaders who were not afraid to tell them exactly what they wanted done and exactly how priorities needed to be aligned. These leaders also had explicit expectations about what should or shouldn't happen in team meetings. For example, one leader told us that he simply didn't tolerate anyone raising his or her voice in a team meeting. Another told us that on her team, it was not acceptable to prematurely foreclose the planning part of a discussion. One leader told us that he imposed a ground rule that prohibited the use of computers during conference calls. In a follow-up question, the interviewer asked the leader what he
did when a computer was used during a meeting. The leader firmly stated that this simply did not occur.

Leaders in the average teams were often more tentative in their directives. Rather than take proactive measures to steer the team in constructive directions, they found themselves in a reactive mode. These teams seemed to often get stuck in the cycle of "consensus" at times when the team needed the leader to guide or direct it to a decision.

Driver #8: Leads the Team to Proactively Solve Problems. The team leader takes advantage of opportunities and encourages others to anticipate team-related problems or obstacles.

Leaders of the high-performing teams worked hard to anticipate where problems might occur. These leaders frequently asked their team to think ahead about what problems and questions might arise in the future. They'd ask to hear any and all anticipated criticisms. The high-performing team leaders were also tenacious in their preparation for stage-gate or functional reviews. They made sure the team gathered potential questions, criticisms, and "deal-breakers" in advance, and proactively thought through the best responses to those issues before the meeting.

Team Leader Focus on People

Driver #9: Builds the team.
The team leader recognizes that it is his or her responsibility to build strong relationships between and among team members, while also creating a sense of team identity and a shared feeling that "we are in this together."

We expected the leaders of the high-performing teams to be team-oriented leaders. We did not anticipate the passion we'd find in their team orientation. These leaders clearly understand the relevance of team camaraderie to the team's level of effectiveness, particularly during challenging periods. They recognized that it was this camaraderie that enabled the cooperation and selfless effort required during times of high pressure and deadlines. One member of a high-performing team said that time and time again her leader would emphasize that "they'd succeed as a team or go down as a team." Another team leader told us that he made sure his members developed an "extremely well-functioning well-oiled team" because it was amazing what the team could achieve when it pulled together.

Leaders of the average- performing teams discussed their role in team development less often. When they did discuss team development, they did so with far less enthusiasm or commitment.

Driver #10: Coaches Team Members.
The team leader has a good understanding of team member personalities, styles and needs, has a genuine interest in developing the skills and abilities of team members, and provides members with constructive support.

The team leaders of the high-performing teams were not only focused on developing their team, they were focused on developing the individual members of their teams. Leaders of the high-performing teams recognized that the effective input of every single team member was essential to group functioning. Higher-performing leaders were available, and provided feedback and coaching offline from team meetings. These one-on-one discussions worked well because the leaders understood team members' idiosyncrasies, and had taken the time to get to know each one of them. Thus, they could easily anticipate the reactions of each member to certain directives or decisions.

For example, one team leader told us of a coaching session with a team member whose anger was disrupting the team. Because he was so familiar with this individual's style and personality, he was better equipped to coach. The leader knew that high stress triggered anger in this individual. Their discussion about disruptive behavior focused on finding ways to reduce the team member's stress.

In the average-performing teams, team-leader coaching was discussed less often. When coaching did occur, it was clear that the leader was not as familiar or aware of member positions and needs.

Driver #11: Manages Stakeholder Relationships. The team leader ensures that the team's interests are represented effectively with key stakeholders, that the team gets relevant information in a timely fashion, and that team members are protected from issues for which they need not be concerned

Leaders of the high-performing teams were active, assertive, and effective liaisons between upper management and the team. They developed good relationships with stakeholders, and these relationships paid off. These leaders were able to obtain timely information, buffer the team from unrealistic expectations, and challenge senior management without negative consequences. Previous research suggests that managing the stakeholder relationship may be one of the most performance-enhancing roles played by a team leader [8].

Leaders of the average-performing teams seemed less aware of the importance of their liaison role. Their team members also rated them as not very effective at representing their interests to stakeholders.

THE ROLE OF MANAGEMENT (Including Governing Bodies)

Members of the high-performing teams indicated that the following two management actions were available to them, and that they made a difference in their performance. The average teams did not discuss these supports. These actions are
not labeled drivers because we did not survey or interview management in this study. They are based on team-member perceptions.

Management Focus on Task

1. Management Communicates Clear Direction and Expectations to its Teams.

Members from both the high-performing and the average-performing teams discussed the difficulty of the changing environment and discussed the difficulties they experienced when their sponsors changed directives in mid-stream. They discussed this as "living in a cloud of uncertainty about if and when changes would be handed down from up above".

This management action can profoundly influence both average and high- performing teams. When management "leaves teams in the dark," they set the stage for teams to struggle and lose focus. The high-performing teams in this study rated themselves as interacting more frequently with governing bodies that knew their role, communicated that role, and lived by it. Our findings clearly link high-performing teams to management preparedness for review meetings, and direction and decisions communicated in a timely manner.

As noted earlier, the higher-performing teams and their leaders are more proactive in getting what they need from sponsors; however, the degree to which management communicates decisions helps that process.

Management Focus on People

**2. Management Recognizes and Values Team Contributions.
Management ensures team members have the backing, support, and encouragement they need to succeed.**

The teams and team leaders we spoke to wanted nothing more than acknowledgment and recognition from upper management for their hard work. Research shows that employees withstand greater amounts of change and stress and better sustain their

motivation during challenging times if they know that the organization values them and their work [9].

Our study reveals that when management provides recognition and quick feedback to teams, it has a positive impact on team performance. High-performing teams frequently discussed receiving timely feedback and formal recognition from the organization. Average-performing teams and their leaders sometimes felt invisible to the organization and their sponsors.

5 References

1. Thompson, L.L., Making the team: A guide for managers. 2nd ed. 2004, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

2. Campion, M.A., E.M. Papper, and G.J. Medsker, Relations between work team characteristics and effectiveness: A replication and extension. Personnel Psychology, 1996. 49: 429-452.

3. Neider, L.L. and C.A. Schriesheim, Understanding Teams. 2005, Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

4. Druskat, V.U. and S.B. Wolff, Building the emotional intelligence of groups. Harvard Business Review, 2001. 79(3): 81-90.

5. Thompson, L.L., Making the team: A guide for managers. 2nd ed. 2004, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

6. Goleman, D., R.E. Boyatzis, and A. McKee, Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence. 2002, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

7. Fredrickson, B., What good are positive emotions? Review of General Psychology, 1998. 2: 300-319.

8. Druskat, V.U. and J.V. Wheeler, Managing from the boundary: The effective leadership of self-managing work teams. Academy of Management Journal, 2003. 46(4).

9. Pierce, J.L., T. Kostova, and D.T. Dirks, Towards a theory of psychological ownership in organizations. Academy of Management Review, 2001. 26: