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Great Business Teams

Cracking the Code for Standout Performance

Howard M. Guttman • Wiley © 2008 • 256 pages

Leadership / Leading Teams

Take-Aways

- Great teams have great leaders who build on success rather than settling for luck.
- Most of all, team achievement depends on people succeeding together.
- To see clearly what you need to do as a team leader, just imagine that you are sitting on the board of directors.
- Manage your team so that members all view the team's goals as personal goals.
- Be an active coach to each person on your team.
- Great teams have defined procedures for timely, accountable decision making.
- Hold only the meetings you need and focus each one on specific activities.
- High-performing teams communicate openly with no desire to manipulate others.
- To transform the performance of your organization, focus on measurable results.
- Transformation requires support from top management.

Recommendation

Howard Guttman gives readers a sophisticated view of all the factors that go into creating high-performing, exceptionally successful teams. He doesn't pretend that a single magic bullet can transform your team; instead, he provides a well-organized guide that shows you how leaders contribute, what team members must bring, why management support is needed to transform a good team into a great one and how coaching can accelerate a team's transformation. The book provides a great discussion on how top teams make decisions, how they communicate, and how they decide which meetings to hold and how to hold them. The book is full of ideas and illustrative stories from Guttman's consultancy, but you never feel that he is selling his consulting services or holding back any information. *getAbstract* recommends this sensible and useful book to team managers and members.

Summary

Understanding High Performance

You know a high-performing team when you see one. When you get to work within one, life can become a type-A dream. Unfortunately, these special teams seem to last only for a brief time and then disappear, but you can replicate their qualities by nurturing five characteristics that high performance teams share:

1. **High-performing leaders** – Turn your company's challenges into a personal, living, burning force in the hearts and minds of your team members. Foster authentic relationships among members. Live the principles you preach and expect from them.
2. **Team-oriented action and leadership** – Great teams don't focus on individuals, no matter how talented. The leader must exemplify a total team orientation.
3. **Protocols and procedures** – Great teams avoid chance and randomness as much as possible. They do not rely on luck. They use standardized protocols and procedures, and constantly improve them as they learn from experience.
4. **Constant improvement** – Great teams are never complacent. They build on today's success as a foundation for tomorrow's accomplishments.
5. **Supportive management** – Too often management gets in the way of team success. Fix this by linking management compensation with team objectives.

Leading High-Performance Teams

Modern management requires aligning horizontally, not thinking or acting hierarchically. Coordinate processes smoothly between the company and its customers, and between it and its vendors. Your challenge as a team leader is to synchronize the following five aspects of your business:

1. **Your business strategy** – Decide what your business focuses on and how to implement your value proposition.
2. **Your deliverables** – Your value proposition implies certain goods and services. Identify them and ensure that your team delivers them with superb quality.

3. **Your business units and their functions** – Define their roles and responsibilities. Determine how each unit will contribute to organizational success.
4. **Decision-making rules and procedures** – Define the rules your teams and units will use for making decisions, and how they will resolve conflicts.
5. **Relationships among people and with other businesses** – Everything in business is based on people working together. Building solid working relationships goes hand in hand with leading successful teams. Focus on your people.

Being a Member of a High-Performing Team

Companies often define the attitudes, approaches and work habits they expect from team members. No matter what words they use, they usually include these four mental habits:

1. **Approach your job as if you sat on the board of directors** – Obviously, you can't just put in your time and get a great team. You also have to understand how your work contributes to your team, business unit and organization.
2. **Exceed your job to help the team succeed** – Don't let your job description limit you. Do all you can to help your team, even if it means moving outside your role.
3. **Accept and require personal accountability** – Beyond being accountable for your work, expect personal accountability from those you manage, work with and work for, and from your organization. Everyone should feel individually responsible at every level.
4. **See discomfort as the new, enjoyable norm** – Accept coaching, strive for growth, seek new skills, and positively influence others. Try to understand how your behavior affects the way you work with people and the goals you can achieve together.

Aligning the Elements of High Performance

Teams go through a four-stage process of development. The first two stages happen naturally, but you can manage them to make them shorter and less difficult. At first, team members will test their cohorts to get to know them, and to see if and how they can work together. At stage two, they will fight a bit and seek to assign blame. The members will feel a great deal of tension.

“The ability to consistently excel under pressure is not just the hallmark of great golfers; it also separates great business teams from the merely good ones.”

Stages three and four will require you to intervene as the leader and manage the development process. In stage three, clarify goals, help team members capture the skills they need, set policies and procedures, and help them share mutual feedback that focuses on issues and not individuals. In stage four, where great performance occurs, maintain every element of stage three while ensuring that the right people with the right talents are in the right positions. Be sure everyone hones in on team goals rather than individual benefits. Team members should be comfortable with self-assessment, and know the protocols they will use for managing conflicts and issues. With these tools, horizontal alignment in pivotal areas will be not only possible, but also easier.

“Great business teams only flourish when there are positive consequences for embracing team values and negative ones for flouting them.”

Continue to follow up on assignments, goals and contracts. Break down organizational barriers to let energy flow freely and eliminate wasted effort. Always seek skills your team could add to become more productive. Develop those skills within your team or bring them in from the outside. View yourself as a coach for each team member, as well as for the team as a whole. Rather than issuing commands, spend your time, energy and efforts enabling the team’s work. Keep members communicating within the team and with every stakeholder who is relevant to their goals. Affirm their good work while reassessing, redirecting and re-engaging in activities depending on whether they contribute to the team’s success.

Decision Making in a High-Performing Team

Great teams consistently make productive decisions. They use processes designed and proven to result in timely, effective choices. While these methods and sequences vary from team to team, and company to company, they often have these steps in common:

- **“Set objectives and timelines”** – Everyone needs to know what you expect delivered and when, so assign objectives and timelines.
- **“Identify the decisions that need to be made”** – Don’t worry about who will make the decision or try to decide today on every detail that might face you. Select the crucial decisions that are tied to the team’s objectives.
- **“Identify decision subteams”** – Pick the fewest number of people you need to make a decision. Involving too many decision makers usually paralyzes decision making.
- **“Assign accountability”** – Give decision makers the authority to decide and to enact their decisions. Hold them accountable for both the decisions and the implementation.
- **“Select the decision-making mode”** – Which decisions will be made unilaterally? Which will be made after consulting with others? Which require consensus?
- **“Identify information sources”** – Which data resources will the team members deem authentic and reliable when they are gathering input for decision making.
- **“Determine the shelf-life of the decision”** – When will the team check to see if decisions need to be changed, modified or continued? Few decisions are permanent, even great ones.

How High-Performing Teams Hold Meetings

Just because teams have to meet does not require having wasteful meetings or wasting time within meetings. New teams are likely to need more meetings than those whose members have worked together for a while. Don’t continue regularly scheduled meetings that suited one phase of a project and are no longer required. Meet only when needed for the shortest time necessary.

“When an organization is properly aligned, its parts move in sync...a straight line of sight...goes from the organization’s strategy to its customers.”

Decide where to meet. The team members’ proximity will determine the amount of technology you must use. But don’t be afraid of scheduling virtual meetings or using collaborative tools that allow people to make and

read comments when it suits their schedules. Choose meeting leaders carefully, based on what needs to be accomplished in a meeting, not on using a standard rotation or having the same person beat the leadership drum each time.

“If the change to a high-performance, horizontal organization does not begin with the top leader and his or her leadership team, there is no point in continuing the process. Greatness is just not in the cards.”

Always create and use an agenda. Decide who will prepare it and who will ensure that the team stays on topic during the meeting. Move sidebar topics outside of the group meeting so that people don't waste time listening to discussions that don't concern them. Use each meeting to review the team's progress and its completion of tasks set in previous meetings. Create specific tasks and goals for the team to accomplish. Keep these objectives very visible between meetings. One source of meeting waste is setting objectives that no one even thinks about until the next meeting. Focus on active priorities.

Communicating within a High-Performing Team

Great teams put a lot of effort into using the 10 traits of “high-performance communication,” which are:

1. **“Clarity”** – Think of each person's precise meaning, rather than using vocal volume.
2. **“Authenticity”** – Emphasize straight talk. Don't play games or manipulate people.
3. **“Accuracy”** – State the facts. Require using them as a basis for decisions and actions.
4. **“Efficiency”** – Having your time and effort wasted is frustrating.
5. **“Completeness”** – Get and give the full story. Don't surmise or infer.
6. **“Timeliness”** – Delivering assignments on time is as important as their quality.
7. **“Focus”** – Don't get sidetracked from the team's core work.
8. **“Openness”** – Teams are no place for functional silos or private agendas.
9. **“Action-oriented”** – Good work now is better than perfect work later.
10. **“Depersonalization”** – Focus on issues and tasks; never make anything personal.

Great Teams and Great Organizations

Extending great performance from your team to your entire organization is a transformational task that varies from team development in a few important ways. Just as you want to break down hierarchies within your team, you want to transform your organization by using horizontal alignment, not hierarchical structures. However, organizational change must focus on business results, since you want to build an organization in a way that maximizes its performance. To make the biggest impact on your whole company, turn your attention to transforming every team into a high-performance team. Your transformation project must have five elements:

1. **Always keep everything simple** – Make K.I.S.S. (keep it simple, stupid) your guideline on every project.
2. **Require your leaders to lead** – Success starts at the top or not at all.
3. **Communicate your vision** – Talk about your purpose and mission constantly.
4. **Keep using the things that work** – Focus on actual achievements.

5. **Transform your culture and your team** – Share the values of success.

Further Challenges

When you face normal resistance to change, be reassuring rather than confrontational. Pace change so people don't run from it and show them how the changes you are proposing fit their self-interests. Successful teams are often anxious when their leadership changes. Be sure that you understand the sources of their success and help them reach higher levels rather than merely changing their team to prove that you are the boss. Bring new people on board in a way that assimilates them into your team's high-performance culture. Educate them about the team, stay close to them as they come up to speed, provide them with mentors from the team and be a role model.

“Companies stand or fall on what happens at the moment of customer interface: the five feet of space between them and their customers.”

Conflict is not inherently bad, but never let disagreements become personal. Keep everyone on the team focused on work. If people jostle each other just a bit in seeking the best way forward, you will all benefit. Leadership is important, but you cannot succeed without your team members, so care for them, nurture them and make all achievements their achievements. Develop the team's energy for its work and keep driving forward. Never sit back and relax on past accomplishments. Start meeting your goals today, not tomorrow. Figure out what success will look like, what you need to get there and how you can transform it into greatness. Then begin.

About the Author

Howard M. Guttman, also the author of *When Goliaths Crash*, consults on building high-performing teams, coaching executives and enhancing business performance. He has had many articles published in major industry journals.



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