

How to build a high performing team



The science of building high performing teams

Teams are the engine room for organisational life, the key catalyst for change and where we most often experience ourselves and others in work. How teams function can determine whether our work is frustrating or fulfilling, mind-numbing or meaningful, jarring or joyful, purposeless or productive.

And yet, we often set up, work in or lead teams without pausing to reflect on what the ingredients are for high performance. Why do some teams flourish while others flounder? In our experience, a genuinely high performing team rarely happens organically - it requires both (he)art and science to create the conditions to thrive.

So, drawing on academic research, industry best practice and more than seven years of experience in supporting teams to improve, we've identified eight characteristics that we know enable teams to do more of their best work - in any circumstances.

If you are setting up a new team, your team has experienced upheaval or change, or even if it just doesn't feel like you are all on the same page - developing these characteristics will help you to grow and achieve high performance together.



Our approach:

1. *Meets you where you are.* Our work is contextual, so we start with curiosity about and compassion for your unique circumstances. We build from there.
2. *Is owned by those who do the work.* Co-design is non-negotiable. If you and your team(s) don't feel this is owned by you/them, it won't stick. We guide, you lead.
3. *Is deliberate and planned.* We are rigorous and evidence based. Change is complex and a systematic approach means nothing is left to chance.
4. *Happens through real work.* We engage with real issues you need to work on and build capabilities for those - doing together and developing together is key.
5. *Prioritises progress today.* We focus on the possibility and power of achievable, measurable change today, not the myth of 'transformation tomorrow'.
6. *Requires curiosity, courage and accountability.* We bring high psychological safety, high challenge and high standards to our development partnership.

Eight characteristics of high performing teams



High-performing teams have a **clear, shared purpose**...

...with a focus on building the right **conditions**...

...and creating the **inclusive, developmental culture** to succeed.



Purpose with values

Meaning and impact

Structure and clarity

Capability

Dependability

Culture of continuous improvement

Psychological safety with accountability

Diversity, equity and inclusion

There is a clear, shared purpose and aligned set of values. How the team works is driven by these and supported by realistic but compelling goals.

Members believe their collective and individual work matters and has a positive effect. There is a commitment and means to demonstrate impact.

Members are clear on individual and collective priorities, roles, norms, values and ways of working. How decisions are made is clear.

Members are deliberately supported to have the 'Capability, Opportunity and Motivation' to do what they are expected to do to succeed and thrive.

Members pull in the same direction, able to count on one another to act in the team's best interests. They can rely on supporting systems and processes.

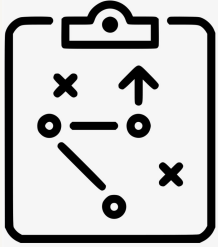
There is a culture of 'Continuous Quality Improvement' (CQI). Time is prioritised for this. Regular and skilled feedback is pervasive.

Members are not penalised or embarrassed for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. Standards and accountability are kept high.

Diversity (including neurodiversity) is sought, understood and celebrated. Members treat one another with respect. Everyone feels seen, heard and that they belong.



1. Purpose with values



There is a clear, shared purpose and aligned set of values. How the team works is driven by these and supported by realistic but compelling goals.

Why is this important?

- A common purpose distinguishes you from everyone else
- A compelling purpose and supporting values provide a reason to tackle the toughest challenges
- Clear purpose and aligned values provide a basis for making decisions on what to do and what not to do
- Both of these result in people reporting higher than average levels of pride, commitment, achievement and resilience at work and in life.

Indicators

- ✓ There is a clear, stretching (but realistic), compelling and worthwhile purpose
- ✓ Values are intentionally designed to enable purpose
- ✓ Purpose and values guide what matters, what work is done and how it is done
- ✓ Decisions are made with clear reference to purpose and values
- ✓ Members genuinely believe in the purpose and values.

Inspiration for action

- For [Buurtzorg](#), its purpose: “to help sick and elderly patients live a more autonomous and meaningful life”, is a global mission. So much so that Jos de Blok, its founder, published their revolutionary ways of operating, hoping others will imitate him.
- [Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust](#) have adopted a set of innovative ‘Even over values’ to help their people to make decisions and choices with integrity and confidence.



2. Meaning and impact



Members believe their collective and individual work matters and has a positive effect. There is a commitment and means to demonstrate impact.

Why is this important?

- Research by Gallup in the UK has found that when people find their work to be meaningful: their performance improves by 33 percent and they are 75 percent more committed to their organisation
- A survey of 12,000 professionals by The Energy Project and Harvard Business Review found that people who derive meaning from work were three times more likely to stay with their organisations, the highest impact of any variable examined.
- Despite its importance, a recent academic article found that only 50 percent of employees find meaning in their work.

Indicators

- ✓ Objectives and performance management processes are linked to organisational purpose and priorities
- ✓ The work of individuals and of the team matters to members - they report publicly that they are proud of the work and believe it is important, serving a clear purpose.
- ✓ The team routinely measures their impact on and meaning for internal and external stakeholders
- ✓ The team communicates and celebrates their individual and collective impact often.

Inspiration for action

- [A 'compact with physicians'](#) at **Virginia Mason Hospital** drives their work and is based on their understanding if people feel like they're part of something that matters, something bigger than themselves they will thrive and excel.
- **Google, LinkedIn, Huawei and Sears**, have successfully used [Objectives and Key Results \(OKRs\)](#) to successfully link every employee to organisational goals and in turn to measurable results. Everyone can see how they matter.



3. Structure and clarity



Members are clear on individual and collective priorities, roles, values and ways of working. How decisions are made is clear.

Why is this important?

- An individual's understanding of job expectations, the process for fulfilling these expectations, and the consequences of performance are key to team effectiveness
- An absence of clarity on individual and collective responsibilities, priorities and ways of working results in 'interpersonal mush', a phenomenon that accounts for most conflict in groups - with negative implications for performance
- People who strongly agree that their job description is clear and aligns with the work they do are 2.5 times more likely than other employees to be engaged.

Indicators

- ✓ There is a basic operating model or culture canvas that describes what the team does and how. This includes simple and clearly defined goals, roles, ways of working, making decisions and common, credible plans to do the work
- ✓ Every individual has a clear and aligned job description
- ✓ Individual and collective objectives and priorities are transparent and reviewed regularly
- ✓ Purpose and values are the anchor for how all this is defined.

Inspiration for action

- Success at **Danaher**, one of the world's largest safety critical organisations, doesn't happen by accident. Their [Danaher Business System \(DBS\)](#), drives every aspect of culture and performance. DBS guides what they do, measures how well they do it, and how to do it better.
- **Atlassian** went from an unknown Australian tech startup in 2002 to a \$50 billion business in 20 years. They continue to hold on to the powerful simplicity of their ['Culture Canvas'](#) to bring 'just enough' structure and clarity to their people so they can succeed.



4. Capability



Members are deliberately supported to have the capability, opportunity and motivation to do what they are expected to do to succeed and thrive.

Why is this important?

- The work of Professor Susan Michie, advisor to UK Government, confirms that the combination of skills and knowledge (capability), together with opportunity and motivation, are the three building blocks for optimal behaviour and continuous improvement in any task.
- According to [Gallup polling](#), globally, on 33 percent of employees strongly agree that they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day. Doubling that ratio could realise +6% in customer engagement scores, +11% in profitability, -30% in turnover and -36% in safety incidents.

Indicators

- ✓ Members feel confident that their skills and knowledge are matched to what they are being asked to do.
- ✓ The team creates the opportunity (including time) for members to effectively do what they are expected. Barriers are removed.
- ✓ Multiple ways are used to motivate employees to succeed in what they are asked to do. These co-designed with members drawing on their individual values.
- ✓ There is a clear investment in both individual team members and the environment in which they work.

Inspiration for action

- **Geisinger**, the leading health and care provider, invests in supporting [‘bilingual leadership’](#). This capability means being fluent in both management and clinical domains, so they are at home in the boardroom and the clinic so the voice of clinicians is heard at every level.
- **Barts Health NHS Trust** [successfully tackled backlogs in elective surgery](#), but not by focusing directly on increasing punctuality and efficiency. Instead, it prioritised understanding what conditions their people needed in place to succeed, then made those (simple) changes.



5. Dependability



Members pull in the same direction, able to count on one another to act in the team's best interests. They can rely on supporting systems and processes.

Why is this important?

- As work is becoming more interconnected, interdependent and project-based, trusting that one's coworkers share a commitment to shared purpose and high quality is vital.
- When people have a deep sense of affiliation with their team members, they take positive actions that benefit the group, which they report they would not otherwise.
- Globally, only 1 in 3 people strongly agree that they have the materials and equipment they need to do their work right. By doubling that ratio, organisations could realise a 35% reduction in safety incidents and a 28% improvement in quality..

Indicators

- ✓ Members report high degrees of 'belonging' and 'shared purpose'.
- ✓ Individual and collective objectives and priorities are transparent and OKRs (or equivalent) are used to assure alignment.
- ✓ Members report they have systems and processes that enable not hinder their ability to do high-quality work, consistently.
- ✓ Tools like Radical Alignment All-In Method (AIM) are used deliberately to enable alignment both strategically and operationally.

Inspiration for action

- **Ritz-Carlton** aims to give a consistent standard of service for travellers across the world. The company has managed to lead their industry in consistently high customer service, building from [a set of standardised practices](#) including employment-selection and training.
- [The UK search and rescue helicopter service](#) has exceeded all Department for Transport requirements for dependability since its inception in 2015. They embody the research based characteristics of 'highly reliable teams' working in the context of complexity, safety and compressed time constraints.



6. Culture of continuous improvement



There is a culture of Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). Time is prioritised for this. Regular and skilled feedback is widespread.

Why is this important?

- The desire to learn and improve is a basic human need and required to maintain our motivation and survival.
- It's definitely less stressful and anxiety inducing than traditional 'change - even small changes can have a positive impact, especially if the change involves an action that is repeated often (NICE, 2007).
- Where people feel their opinions and ideas will genuinely contribute to improvement there are significant uplifts in reported levels of engagement, retention and productivity. And a potential 33% reduction in safety incidents.

Indicators

- ✓ Time is regularly set aside to explore how things can be better.
- ✓ Structured approaches are used to normalise team learning e.g. 'after action reviews' or 'pre mortems'
- ✓ Members are supported to develop 'the habits of an improver' (Health Foundation) and understand how CQI principles can be used daily.
- ✓ The team leads with questions.
- ✓ Processes exist to capture and act on team 360 degree feedback.
- ✓ Notable practice is captured, celebrated and shared rigorously.

Inspiration for action

- [Turn the Ship Around!](#) explains how the US submarine Santa Fe leapt from worst to first in the fleet by developing a 'front-line' led culture of CQI that upended navy culture. By engaging those who do the work in leading improvement, the impossible occurred.
- [Balfour Beatty's "My C" programme](#) encourages employees to share improvement ideas. In 5 years over 13,200 ideas and 3,000 solutions have resulted in ~£64 million of savings, £9 million cash and 464,000 hours of time.



7. Psychological safety with accountability



Members are not penalised or embarrassed for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. Standards and accountability are kept high.

Why is this important?

- Every person deserves to feel safe to express themselves as a basic human right
- The world's largest study of teams, Project Aristotle, found psychological safety was the top attribute of high-performing teams
- Where high psychological safety is combined with high standards evidence consistently shows improvements in group performance across innovation, collaboration, role satisfaction, learning, wellbeing, quality and productivity.
- Research by Wiley in 2023 found leaders can overestimate psychological safety on their teams compared to team members.

Indicators

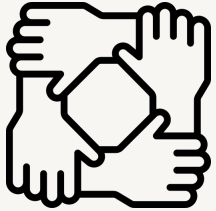
- ✓ All members report feeling safe taking interpersonal risks e.g. asking for help, sharing ideas, learning from mistakes and raising concerns
- ✓ Members express pride in setting and maintaining high standards
- ✓ Levels of psychological safety and accountability for standards are measured regularly and acted upon
- ✓ There is no differential in reported levels measured across career bands, gender or ethnicity
- ✓ Training is provided on maintaining high safety with high accountability.

Inspiration for action

- [Pixar Animation Studios](#) has produced over 20 films, all of which have been huge hits. This success is based on the company's 'Braintrust', a group that meets to provide candid feedback to each other to improve all proposed film ideas.
- **NHS England's** [Safety culture: learning from best practice](#) is a guide to psychological safety and safety culture in healthcare.
- **Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken (SEB)**, a 168-year-old Nordic bank exceeded revenue targets by 25% after [investing in psychological safety training](#).



8. Diversity, equity and inclusion



Diversity (including neurodiversity) is sought, understood and celebrated. Members treat one another with respect. Everyone feels seen, heard and that they belong.

Why is this important?

- Every person is worthy of respect and care, simply because of their personhood
- Beyond the moral argument, there is an overwhelming evidence base that shows more diverse, equitable and inclusive groups are higher performing across a number of dimensions e.g. multiple times more likely to be innovative; significantly more able to adapt; 36% more profitable and are much better at making decisions
- In health and care, research suggests that diversity of team members improves [patient experience and outcomes](#).

Indicators

- ✓ There are levels of difference in the team (incl neurodiversity) that are documented, understood by members and celebrated regularly.
- ✓ Time is deliberately and regularly set aside for continuous learning and unlearning on issues of cognitive diversity, power, privilege and oppression.
- ✓ Team members feel able to be, and valued as, their authentic self.
- ✓ There is a deliberate, codified approach to decision making that seeks out a diversity of perspectives.

Inspiration for action

- Every year, [NHS Employers highlight exemplars](#) in this characteristic.
- [Proctor and Gamble](#) make explicit links between diversity of their people and the success of their business.
- [Cigna, a US Healthcare provider](#) achieves near-parity in compensation for female and underrepresented minority employees. For transparency, they publicly share detailed workforce data by gender, race/ethnicity, and job category
- Tools like [Manual of Me](#) or [TRACOM's Social Styles model](#) help understand and support cognitive and social diversity.

Industry and academic research that inspires and informs us



- Patrick Lencioni on the 5 Dysfunctions of Teams
- Google's Project Aristotle
- Daniel Coyle's work on organisational culture
- Amy Edmondson on psychological safety
- Burke and Litwin's Organisational Performance Model of Transformation
- Ron Heifetz on Adaptive Organisations
- Susan Michie's COM-B model of behaviour change
- Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith on the 'Discipline of Teams'
- Tannenbaum and Salas' drivers of team effectiveness
- Edgar Schein's work on Organisational Performance and Change
- Dan Pink's work on motivation
- Marshall Ganz and Hahrie Han on Public Narrative leadership and social movements
- Bushe and Marshak's Dialogic OD approach
- Priya Parker on the 'Art of Gathering'
- Prof Mark Moore's Public Value Model for strategic organisational decision making and development
- Paul Bate and Trish Greenhalgh on the role of stories in shaping organisations
- Davies and Nutley; Senge on learning organisations
- Simon Sinek's 'Start with Why?'
- Ron Fisher's 'Transition Curve'
- High performing healthcare organisations e.g. Buurtzorg; Virginia Mason; Geisinger
- Professor Thomas Lee - workforce engagement
- Marshall Rosenberg - nonviolent communication
- The work of Fred Laloux, Aaron Dignam, Bruce Daisley, Adam Grant and Gary Hamel on human centred, models of strategy, organisational design, development, performance and leadership
- Brené Brown on trust vulnerability and belonging
- The work of bell hooks, Layla Saad, Reni Eddo-Lodge, June Sarpong on diversity, equity and inclusion

Our indicators of high performance

Long term performance on indicators such as quality, productivity and profitability

Consistently low avoidable safety incidents (industry specific)

High volume of individual reported quality or safety issues

Measurable levels of staff satisfaction and wellbeing

Consistently high levels of customer, patient and partner satisfaction

Industry and academic literature and evidence