What gives teams the edge

Investigating the core ingredients of high performing teams

EY Lane4
Workforce Transformation

About EY Lane4

The combination of EY and Lane4 focusses on harnessing the power of people.

Powered by technology, EY puts humans at the centre of business transformation. Lane4 takes people beyond performance, giving them the skills and mindset to achieve things they never thought were possible.

We've come together to deliver on our purpose – to build a better working world.

We believe that organisations need to put people at the heart of their decision-making. Not only will this create long-term value for stakeholders inside and outside the business, but it will help ensure success across large-scale business transformations. At EY Lane4, we bring together some of the biggest and influential leaders around the world, drawing on their insight to shape how we support our clients with their people and transformation challenges.

Understanding the psychology of learning and knowledge retention is at the heart of our approach. Our people also bring a wealth of experience from performing at the highest level such as in Olympic sport, the military, the arts and business. This unique combination allows us to walk alongside leaders, acting as trusted advisors to challenge and support them throughout their transformation journeys.

However, at EY Lane4 it isn't just about senior leaders. We believe that everyone deserves access to world-class learning and development. Our global reach, digital learning solutions and innovative service delivery allows for consistent development across multiple levels of the organisation.

This means people can develop behaviours that will not only help them to perform at work, but in all parts of their life. It gives people the confidence and belief to try new things and truly thrive.

All this combined allows us to build a better working world.

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Introduction

What drives performance? Teamwork or top talent? Having top talent is important in any business, but talent alone is not enough. Sustained success needs teamwork.

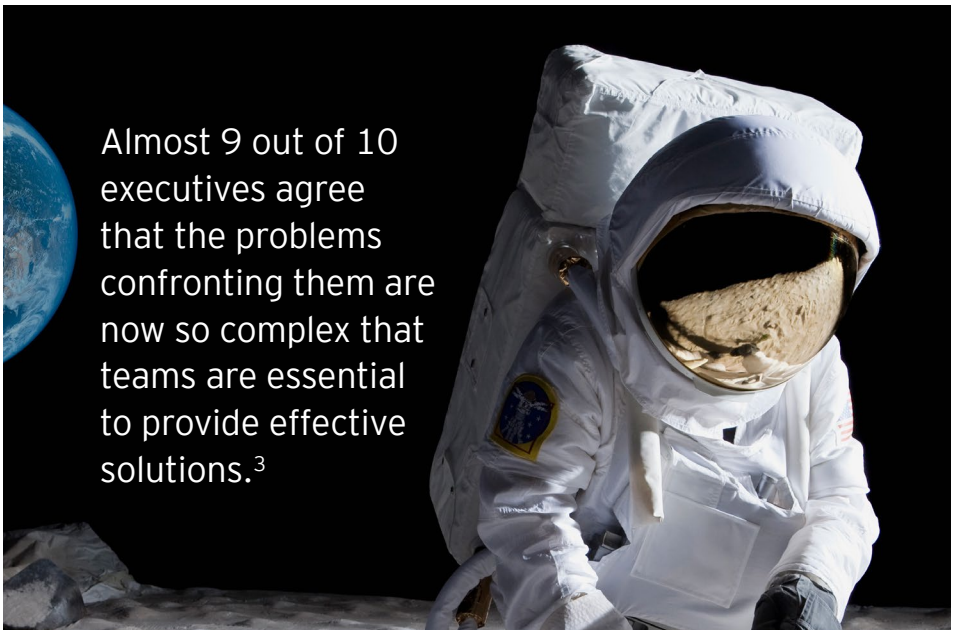
Whilst top talent may be contributing a disproportionate amount to certain performance metrics, this output would be impossible to achieve and sustain over the long term without the wider team. In NASA, for example, there are a few highly talented and trained astronauts. But space travel would be impossible without the thousands of teams surrounding them; the equally talented and highly trained pilots, mathematicians, engineers, technicians, designers, technical communicators, administrative personnel, radio operators, quality control inspectors and social scientists (to name a few).

Even where a business has a few star performers, empirical studies have also proven that even these star performers need their teams. Networks are a key part of top performer success.[1] Equity analysts, for example, unlike astronauts have some of the most portable expertise around; all they need is their contact list and files. However, research shows that star analysts who moved between two firms with equivalent capabilities exhibited a two-year drop in performance, unless they moved with other team members. When both the high-performing analyst and their team moved together, performance in the short-term or long-term was sustained.[2]

As Michael Jordan put it, "talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships." And, this has never been more the case than in today's complex and volatile business environment.

There's too much information, too much uncertainty, too much expertise needed and not enough time for organisations to rely on 'the critical few'. To stay competitive, businesses must rely on world-class teamwork from 'the many'.

Consequently, whilst it may be tempting in these challenging and uncertain times for leaders to just focus on filling their company with star performers, the message from the research is clear: it's not that talent doesn't matter, it's that talent alone is not enough. Businesses must also cultivate high-performing teams.[4]

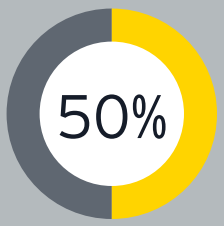


Is your team ...

- Not actually a team
- An effective team or
- A high-performing team

According to Katzenbach and Smith (1993), "a team is a small group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."[5]

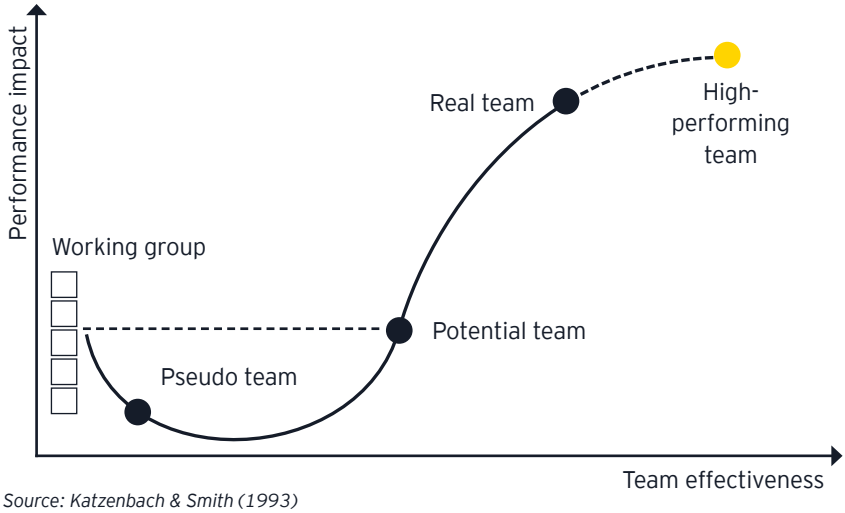
However, while the term 'team' is widely used, Katzenbach and Smith further noted how only 'real teams' and 'high-performing teams' fit the definition of what a team is (see Figure 1). Working groups, pseudo teams, and potential teams are not technically teams, and by using the term too broadly, we may be deceiving ourselves and underestimating the meaning of true teamwork.



of organisations are operating with either working groups, pseudo teams, potential teams or real teams. A risk for businesses operating in such a volatile age.

Figure 1

The Team Performance Curve



Source: Katzenbach & Smith (1993)

The first four types identified by Katzenbach and Smith, can be defined as follows:

A working group: a collection of individuals who share information and best practice, who work alone, with no common purpose, approach or sense of mutual accountability for a goal, and whose output is not business critical.

Pseudo team: this is a group who may call itself 'a team' but there's no focus on collective performance, no common purpose or performance goals, leading the team to have very little performance impact. In these teams, the sum of the whole is less than the potential of the individual parts.

Potential team: in this group, members are working towards a common goal but team effectiveness is low. Often there is lack of clarity around roles, responsibilities and how to co-ordinate their efforts.

Real team: real teams contain individuals with complementary skills who are all committed to a common purpose and have shared goals for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. Roles are clear and they are much more effective than potential teams.

However, in an intensely volatile business climate, where technological, political and environmental disruption is everywhere, we suggest 'effective' or 'real teams' are no longer enough to stay competitive.[6] To stay competitive, businesses must develop and sustain high-performing teams. **According to research, these high-performing teams:**[7,8,9]

- Consistently satisfy the needs of customers, employees, investors and others in their area of influence
- Frequently outperform other teams producing similar products and services under similar conditions
- Produce the most effective outcome with the greatest efficiency
- Take full advantage of all the task-related expertise within the team

Statistics suggest only 50% of leaders believe their team exceeds organisational expectations.[10] This means 50% of organisations are operating with either working groups, pseudo teams, potential teams or real teams. A risk for businesses operating in such a volatile age.

Would you class your team as high-performing? If not, keep reading to find out more about the core ingredients which distinguish teams that are effective from those that are truly world-class.

Specifically in this white paper we focus on one of these core ingredients; Team Edge.

The core ingredients of a high-performing team

Traditionally, academic research into teams has focused on the factors which allow teams to function effectively, rather than those which make a team high-performing.[11]

Whilst, there has been a shift towards investigating the characteristics of high-performing or 'expert' teams, researchers have tended to explore what teams think, feel and do in isolation. Consequently, knowledge around high-performing teams is fragmented, with no clear insight into what leaders should focus on or do differently to develop their teams to this level.

It was clear a framework was needed which takes a holistic approach and includes all the identified predictors of high performance in teams. And, for this reason, we carried out an extensive piece of research and developed the EY Lane4 High-Performing Teams (HPT) Framework.

Our framework provides an evidence-based approach to developing high performance teamwork and is based on the latest research on teams from a diverse range of performance domains, including: aviation, business, sport, medicine and the military. Specifically, the framework is comprised of a number of factors that have been shown to distinguish teams that simply function from those that are high-performing, including a shared approach to reading new situations and applying knowledge, really understanding how team members feel about each other, ways of working which allow the team to perform at a high level and the team as a whole, and having a formal and informal leadership capability in the team.

Market disruption and Team Edge

Today's market place is fast paced and increasingly complex, many organisations are finding they simply can't keep up. Reports predict about half of S&P 500 companies will be replaced over the next ten years, with the average company life expectancy, at 24 years in 2016, forecast to shrink to just 12 years by 2027.[12]

Start-ups, which used to be no real threat to established businesses, are springing up from unexpected directions and disrupting entire industries. Although these disruptive forces appear to have hit retailers hardest, there are strong signs of similar restructuring hitting the financial services, healthcare, energy, travel, and real estate sectors.

Competitive advantage is mostly temporary. And, businesses need teams who can adapt nimbly to change, perform in the face of adversity and sustain energy to drive innovation and improvement. In other words, businesses need Team Edge.

In the rest of the white paper we'll explore the two sub-components of Team Edge: resilience and momentum.

Average company life expectancy[12]

Defining Team Edge

Team Edge refers to a team's ability to perform under pressure, create and build on positive momentum, or change the direction of momentum when the team is in a downward spiral. Sir Alex Ferguson's Manchester United are a great example of a team who had this 'Edge'. His teams were notorious for winning in the last minutes of matches when under the most pressure to score. They were also able to overcome the adversity of not winning the Premier League title three years in a row, turning their game around to win the next three titles in succession. Furthermore, his team were famous for putting together long winning streaks at the end of seasons to overtake their rivals.

Team resilience

While uncertainty and disruption are sparking the need for more resilient teams in many sectors, all teams face pressures, stressors and obstacles that they need to withstand and overcome; it doesn't matter whether your team is responsible for leading a mission to Mars, enforcing the law, carrying out military operations, winning a gold medal or selling the latest products. All teams face adversity, but, only resilient teams come out the other side in the same or a better place.

Team resilience is defined as the team's ability to absorb, cope with and recover from pressures, challenges or adversity.[13] These resilient teams outperform those who are not because of their ability to both handle and thrive on pressure.[14]

In many ways this resilience acts like a shield, protecting the team from the potential negative effects of shared stressors and disruptions the team may face. It enables them to improvise, adapt and recover in challenging times.[15] But, team resilience is much more than weathering or surviving a storm and coming out all battered, bruised and broken. Any team can do that. To be a truly resilient high-performing team, they must sustain their performance and come out the other side shining brightly with their cohesion, health and resources intact.

Chronic and acute team challenges

At work, there are countless challenges that put a team under stress and test their shield of resilience. The challenges teams face can generally be split into two types: chronic or acute.[13]

Chronic challenges

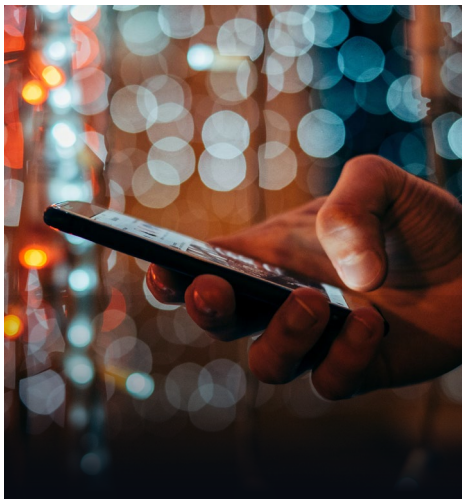
Chronic challenges refer to low level stressors or pressures that last for long periods of time. Chronic challenges may include; a lack of physical working space, interpersonal conflict left unaddressed or unclear team roles. The impact of these types of challenges builds over time, often because they go unnoticed or teams don't think they are worth resolving.[13] But, chronic challenges that are left unresolved sap energy out of the team, reducing its ability to engage in high-performing teamwork and stripping it of the tools needed to overcome future challenges.

The lingering outcome of chronic challenges is a culture that accepts lower levels of performance; it gives team members an excuse to be lazy, look after number one or not bother to strive for excellence. Meaning the team won't be able to reach its potential.

Also, at some point a disruptive event may occur, that may only seem minor, but will significantly reduce team performance because of the build-up of the other stressors over time.

For example, flight crews are constantly faced with chronic stressors such as, dealing with difficult customers, enduring long travel and exhausting schedules.[13] While these chronic challenges are nowhere near as stressful for crews as an engine failure, the effects can build up.

One veteran JetBlue flight attendant, for example, famously abandoned his flight crew team by swearing at passengers on an intercom, grabbing two beers and safely exiting the plane via an escape chute after an argument with a passenger about their luggage. A small incident, triggered by a build up of chronic stress, resulting in risk to passenger safety, abandonment of fellow flight crew members and significant cost to the airline.



Within weeks of launching the phone, Samsung's value had dropped by $26 billion in the stock market.[16]

Acute challenges

Acute challenges, in contrast, are those that happen suddenly; they're short-lived but tend to be much more intense compared to chronic challenges. Acute challenges may include an unforeseen time pressure to complete a complex piece of work, a sudden lack of resources, e.g. 50% of the team members going down with an illness, or a major change in workload.

A shocking example of an acute stressor was when Samsung had to respond to their new Note 7 smartphone catching fire and, in some cases, exploding. Within weeks of launching the phone, Samsung's value had dropped by $26 billion in the stock market.[16]

Samsung had teams working round the clock to find out what was causing the problem, how to prepare for legal action, how to safely retrieve the phones, whilst at the same time making sure rivals such as Apple and Google couldn't take advantage of their crisis.

Research has shown that when these types of challenges arise, 'brittle' teams (teams that easily buckle under the pressure) can become more individualistic and self-focused.[13] When this happens, teamwork, co-ordination and decision making can go out the window and consequently, team performance will suffer.

Characteristics of brittle teams[13]

- Ignore challenges
- Delay their response to challenges
- Only partially respond to issues
- The wellbeing, co-ordination and cohesion of the team will suffer following pressure or challenges
- Their social and emotional resources will deplete considerably when under pressure or when faced with a challenge
- Because of the above their ability to perform consistently and successfully will be diminished

How to build team resilience

Having a group of resilient individuals doesn't necessarily make a resilient team.[17] Under pressure, the team could still suffer from breakdowns in communication, be unable to manage conflict effectively, lack insight into how the team works together best in tough conditions, fail to hold one another accountable or support each other when necessary.

When the pressure is on, all these factors assumed to be in place can unravel a team at an alarming pace. Team resilience therefore can't be left to chance, it needs to be consciously developed and worked on by the team, so it can thrive in the face of both chronic and acute adversity.

Specifically, our research has found three key strategies teams should employ to build its resilience:

- Preparing for future challenges
- Responding to pressure and adversity
- Debriefing once the dust has settled

Preparing for future challenges

High-performing resilient teams start by preparing for harsher times ahead, to be specific they create and reinforce an inspiring purpose and actively align team members' thinking.

Create and reinforce an inspiring purpose

Creating a team's 'why' involves connecting to people's purpose, cause or belief that inspires them to do the work they do.[18] A clear and meaningful purpose then drives and guides the way team members think, act and communicate.

When a team is clear on its purpose and inspired by why it exists, they can make better decisions under conditions of time pressure, information overload and ambiguity. Specifically, resilient teams put adversity into a wider perspective and engage in what researchers have termed 'perceptual filtering'.[19] Perceptual filtering refers to the process of making sense of and interpreting information in a way that is influenced by prior experience. In relation to resilience, this involves a team filtering out and interpreting key information that is valuable for achieving the team's 'why'.

Top tip: get clear on your team's 'why'

Is your team clear on what gets its members out of bed in the morning to come to work? Do you have a purpose that people deeply believe in, agree on, and are personally motivated by? If not, sit down and have that conversation. Co-create a purpose that helps the company achieve its strategic aims, and, more importantly, means something to the people contributing to it at a personal level. Having this clarity will inspire the team to push on in darker moments and help them deal better with setbacks.

Purpose in action: 'leave the jersey in a better place'

In 2004, only a year after Graham Henry took charge of the New Zealand rugby team, the famous All Blacks had lost their way. Results were on the decline, players were threatening to quit the team and they had just finished bottom of the Tri Nations Series. To turn their fortunes around, the management team recognised that they needed the team to connect to an inspirational meaning and purpose for playing.[20]

Working together with the rest of the team, they came up with the purpose 'to add to the legacy' (of the New Zealand rugby team) or 'leave the jersey in a better place.' Establishing their 'why' helped the team to overcome poor performances and conflict because they now had more to play for. It provided the foundation for future success and when Graham Henry left his position as coach in 2011, the team had a record of 88 wins from 103 games.

Actively align team members' thinking

In high-performing teams, members know how their team members work together best, and can therefore adapt their behaviour according to the demands placed on them. This common knowledge about what the team does and how members work together best helps the team to have a 'shared mental model'. Teams with shared mental models interpret situations in a similar manner, anticipate and predict the needs of other teammates, make shared decisions, implicitly coordinate their actions and as a result, have overall improved performance.[21,22]

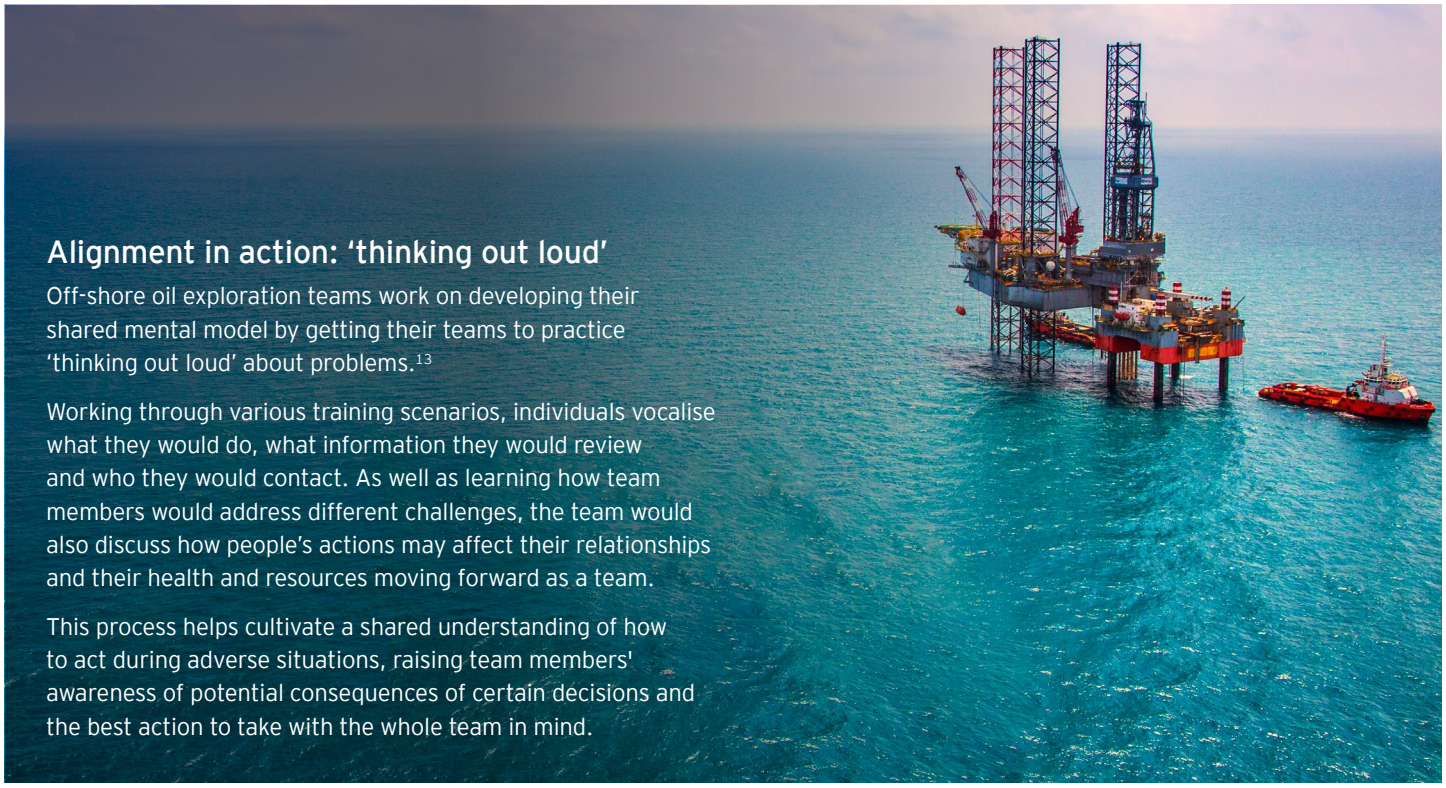
As research has demonstrated, teams with this aligned thinking are more resilient.[23]

Whether there is a change in the team, or in a task the team is performing, resilient teams are able to make appropriate adjustments with minimal disruption.

Developing shared mental models and a common knowledge about team members helps teams to prepare for both routine and non-routine stressors because team members are able to accurately predict the needs of their teammates, make shared decisions and implicitly coordinate their actions. A shared mental model helps to build the team's confidence so they can adapt and overcome adversity because they know what to do and can accurately predict what their teammates will do when stressful situations arise.

Top tip: pressure test your team's alignment

The best way to prepare for challenging situations is to rehearse them. Come up with a range of testing scenarios your team could face, or has faced in the past, and put it out to the group. Get team members discussing how they would respond to the pressured scenario, what decisions they'd make and what impact this may have on others. Furthermore, get some ideas flowing about the strategies the team can put in place to support one another when under strain.



Alignment in action: 'thinking out loud'

Off-shore oil exploration teams work on developing their shared mental model by getting their teams to practice 'thinking out loud' about problems.[13]

Working through various training scenarios, individuals vocalise what they would do, what information they would review and who they would contact. As well as learning how team members would address different challenges, the team would also discuss how people's actions may affect their relationships and their health and resources moving forward as a team.

This process helps cultivate a shared understanding of how to act during adverse situations, raising team members' awareness of potential consequences of certain decisions and the best action to take with the whole team in mind.

Responding to pressure and adversity

With all the best preparations in place, any team can find themselves in the middle of an unexpected storm. Research suggests in these moments high-performing teams provide back-up (offering and seeking support when needed), whilst maintaining the ability to laugh in the face of adversity.

Provide back-up

When under pressure, back-up from team members and the team leader are key for the performance of the team.[23]

Backing-up involves recognising the signs that a team member is stretched and offering support with their work. Hospital staff working in accident and emergency departments have indicated that simple gestures of support from more senior staff can help the team cope with increased demands. For example, doctors pushing trolleys and nurses transporting blood samples.[24] These gestures not only helped team members who were struggling but also contributed to making the team more efficient.

It is also important for a team to know who to seek support from. Obtaining high quality information or advice is vital when a team is in crisis. For teams to get the best information and make the most appropriate decisions, it is vital that the team reaches out to experts, rather than deferring to seniority.

Some leaders may be reluctant to seek help from those less senior because they feel they are publicly admitting that they don't know something. But, this is detrimental to the team's performance.

A research study at an accounting firm compared customer satisfaction scores of different teams when under pressure. They found that teams who asked for help from people who were most senior in the business produced lower customer satisfaction scores compared to teams who sought help from people who actually had the skills and knowledge to help solve their problem.[13]

As the above study showed, team leadership does not need to come solely from the team's designated leader. In the most resilient teams, leaders transfer responsibility between team members in order to take advantage of individual strengths, such as knowledge, skills, contacts, and resources. Shared leadership also provides the team with the freedom to adapt to challenges without needing to wait for a green light from the team's leader.[9]

Top tip: role model and celebrate 'back-up' behaviours and empower expertise

For starters, create a culture where offering support is valued and asking for support is OK to do (not a sign of weakness or incompetence). Celebrate acts of support in team meetings. Or as a leader, role model the actions you want to see. For example, offering support to one of your team members when you can see they are stretched and show humility by going to other members of the team when you yourself need their expertise.

Furthermore, to help dispel the traditional hierarchy of support between manager and employee. Ensure team members are aware of who the knowledge experts are within (or outside) the team, and, that they feel empowered to go straight to them as and when they need. Create a resource document for your team, capturing their knowledge and expertise, so if an acute challenge ever arises, the team will know who to go to and for what.

Laughing in the face of adversity

Teams that are enthusiastic, optimistic, satisfied, comfortable and relaxed have been found to be more resilient.[25] As previously mentioned, a team isn't necessarily resilient just because it is made up of resilient individuals, and the same applies with positivity. Teams that collectively, not just individually, experience positive feelings together are increasingly motivated to deal with adversity.[26] Staying positive together helps teams to believe that they have the ability to cope with any challenges they may face.

Experiencing positive emotions as a group is also a great way to release tension and can bring team members closer together during tough times. As research has shown, humour is an effective coping strategy and can reduce the impact of stress.[27,28] Military teams in the US army use humour to help manage challenging moments and restore their psychological resources.[29] Being funny, making jokes about regulations and laughing about collective suffering, for example, around not being able to bath for a month helped teams of soldiers to handle the stress of their jobs.

So, just because the team, or a team member, makes a joke doesn't mean they are not taking the situation seriously. It's often just a natural and effective coping strategy when under stress.

Top tip: blend humour and history

Where possible, leaders should role model and encourage their team to have a laugh and see the humour in situations; this will help relieve tension and put challenges into perspective. In addition, although the team may be making jokes, below this façade even the most resilient individuals need reassuring during difficult times.[30] One way to do this is by subtly blending humour with some confidence building history; celebrate and encourage members to laugh about a time in the recent past when the team faced adversity and came through it.

Debriefing once the dust has settled

The most resilient teams view disruptive or challenging events as opportunities for learning, and, failures as a chance to review team process.[31,32,33]

Interpreting negative events as a learning opportunity in this way, allows teams to 'confront their failures head-on' because they know that the knowledge they'll gain from the experience will be valuable for success in the future.[34]

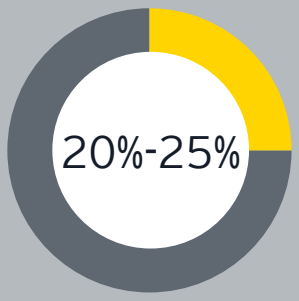
Research examining London Underground control rooms, for example, found that supporting teams to learn through exploration and reflect on what they do is particularly valuable for building team resilience.[35]

Resilient teams always debrief after they have made it through the storm. And, teams that debrief outperform those who don't by 20%-25%.[13] Debriefs (or after-action reviews) have been successfully used by the US military for the last 30 years.[13] During debriefs, US military teams will reflect and discuss; what went well, what went wrong, what lessons did people learn? And they always end by creating an action plan for future missions. Debriefing is crucial because it provides a platform where key information about team relationships or processes which may be lost, can be uncovered. Moreover, constant debriefing helps the team to build a shared mental model. Team members can use this information to better predict how their team mates will respond and what they'll need support-wise next time a challenging situation crops up.

Top tip: make the debrief part of the routine

Make team learning part of your team's routine. Regularly facilitate team meetings that require team members to reflect on what went well and what didn't, what new knowledge was learnt or what benefits were gained from the adversity. But, remember, just like the US army, takeaway actions are key to ensuring this new learning is not wasted. Drill down into how this information will be used and actioned in the future.

Teams that debrief outperform those who don't by



Team momentum

Another factor alongside team resilience that gives high-performing teams their 'edge' over teams that are simply effective is their ability to utilise psychological momentum.

Few teams are able to achieve optimal performance but there are even fewer who are able to maintain it once they have it. True high-performing teams, however, avoid becoming 'one-off champions' and 'one-hit wonders' by riding the wave of momentum and sustaining their performance over time.

Psychological momentum is a phenomenon that is often heard in many different walks of life. From presidential candidates gaining momentum with their campaigns, celebrities gaining momentum with their careers, to sports teams increasing their momentum after a goal or stocks building momentum after being heavily traded. But, what is this thing we so often refer to as 'momentum'?

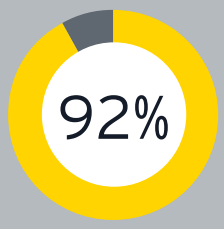
Defining psychological momentum

Psychological momentum refers to the psychological sensation performers and teams experience when they feel like things are going unstoppably in their way.[36] People feel like they are performing with the wind behind their sails, that they are invincible, and it is only a matter of time before they succeed. Teams with psychological momentum are able to perform at a level not normally possible because this 'psychological power' heightens their sense of confidence, control, competence and importantly their belief that they can succeed.[35] For example, studies in the context of sport show how teams which report more psychological momentum were more cohesive than teams that did not and report lower levels of anxiety.[37,38]

This sensation is therefore something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, increasing the likelihood of success because teams and individuals will often increase their concentration and physical effort on the task;[36] 92% of sports coaches and 90% of sports fans believe that performance is decided by momentum.[39,40] Moreover, coaches regularly acknowledge that they change their team selection or tactics based on the momentum they see in their athletes.[41]

What's even more interesting is that athletes believe it affects their performance too, 76% of NBA basketball players believe that momentum determines their performance and even one successful basket is enough to increase the chances an NBA player will take the next throw for their team.[13,42]

Crucially, this shows how to experience psychological momentum. An initial



92% of sports coaches and 90% of sports fans believe that performance is decided by momentum.[38,39]

success must lead a team to believe that they are not only capable of success but that success is also likely. If previous success doesn't lead to this belief, they will not experience psychological momentum.[43]

Interestingly, psychological momentum has been used by researchers to explain how underdogs are able to beat more skillful opponents. For example, an unseeded tennis player, Roberta Vinci, who had lost all previous meetings with Serena Williams prior to their US Open semi-final match was able to beat her because she was able to build psychological momentum from point to point and game to game throughout the match despite her lower level of skill. After the match Williams commented: "she played out of her mind". [36]

Top tip: generate a quick win and make sure it's put down to team performance (not luck or good fortune)

To trigger a sense of momentum, be sure to capture and celebrate a quick win early on. Anything that signals an early success or that the project is going successfully in the direction planned will do. Furthermore, make sure this success is attributed to the team, not luck or good fortune; discuss explicitly how members of your team personally contributed to the achievement.

Psychological momentum is not just seen in sport

Although most research investigating psychological momentum has focused on sports, it can be experienced in many different settings.

For example, people have reported it when making financial decisions,[44] when gambling,[45] building a computer program, writing, or cleaning.[40] A team can similarly experience psychological momentum when working on a project together. For example, after submitting a proposal to a potential client, the team may gain confidence that they can win the subsequent piece of work, thinking "we're on a roll, we did so well to submit that proposal on time and with so much detail, we definitely have it in us to pitch for the work successfully and win the contract."

Researchers have suggested that psychological momentum is key for performance because the longer it can be maintained, the more likely future success will come.[46] For teams, being able to generate and capitalise on moments when they are 'on a roll' is vital for sustaining but also facilitating even higher levels of performance. Consequently, there are two questions teams need to be able to answer before they can sustain optimal performance:

- How can they kick-start psychological momentum?
- How do they sustain momentum and optimal performance once they have it?

Let's take a look at the first question ...

How can teams kick-start psychological momentum?

Celebrate an early win and take credit for your successes

Initial success is the most critical element of psychological momentum because without it, it won't ever take off.[43] In football, a successful event such as scoring a goal is a key trigger for psychological momentum.[47] But, while initial success is a key component for generating psychological momentum, it doesn't necessarily mean that psychological momentum will be triggered.

Following success, it is normal for people to look for explanations or causes. When people do this, they either internally attribute, they give reasons for good performance that are related to internal factors, such as their own ability or effort, e.g. 'I'm good at resolving conflict', or 'my report was impactful because of the time I spent writing it'. Or they externally attribute, they give reasons that are related to external factors, such as luck or the environment, e.g. 'We only won the sales pitch because our manager was friends with the supplier', or 'we delivered a great presentation because the audience went easy on us with questions'.

To kick-start psychological momentum, success must lead to a change in a team's belief about their chances of future success. But, to believe they can succeed, teams must internally attribute or recognise that they were the cause of the success.[43]

How can teams sustain momentum and optimal performance?

Maintain future-focused goals

Following successful, optimal performance teams are prone to becoming complacent and lacking the motivation to succeed yet again.[48] Successful performance is also often accompanied with an added pressure to maintain or surpass previous levels of performance.[48] If a leader is not able to help their team overcome these challenges and handle these pressures, the team won't be able to maintain or repeat their successful performance.

The team's mindset or approach to future performance, following a success is therefore key for sustaining momentum. In sport, a common mistake teams make is to go into the following season with the mindset of defending their title. But, the very nature of defending (protecting, guarding or trying to preserve success) can increase pressure and anxiety. With this approach, the team becomes fearful of what may happen if they aren't able to maintain their success. This can cause the team to implode and choke, losing all the momentum they had previously gained.[48]

The first step towards sustaining performance requires teams to flip this mindset around. The head coach of a Division One NCAA Volleyball team in the USA, who won four successive championships in a row, revealed that one of the key factors that helped sustain their performance was that they never played to defend a title but instead always focused on pursuing and directing all of their effort towards winning a new title.[49]

When moving towards a goal people feel more motivated, in control, optimistic, confident, and less anxious.[41,38,50,51]

A study that simulated a bicycle race found that people who 'caught up' with their opponent reported increases in psychological momentum whereas those who felt they were being chased and had to defend their lead reported decreases in momentum when they were finally caught up.[41]

Top tip: sustain success by chasing the next goal

When attempting to sustain performance the natural instinct is to want to keep or protect your achievements. But, to sustain high-performing teamwork and momentum, it is important your team stays focused, or refocuses on, new, inspirational challenges.[49] After a success, pay close attention to your team's mindset; are goals focused on defending what you've already won? Has complacency set in? Or, is discussion around how you're going to strive for better performance and future success?

Create conditions that enable team flow

Flow, a concept closely linked to psychological momentum, can help teams to maintain their performance. Flow is a state that people experience when they feel effortless concentration, enjoyment and motivation to perform.[52] The metaphor of flow is one that many people have used to describe the sense of effortless action they feel in moments that stand out as the best in their lives. Athletes refer to it as 'being in the zone', religious mystics as being in 'divine presence', artists and musicians as 'aesthetic rapture'. People can become so absorbed with the task at hand that they lose sense of the passing of time.[52,53] Similar to psychological momentum, people in flow feel in control, that they can deal with anything thrown at them and they have no fear of failure.[54]

Whilst the majority of research investigating flow has looked at individual experiences and effects, in recent years research has also looked at team flow experiences. Team flow refers to the shared experience of flow between team members, where everyone is in flow when working interdependently to contribute positively to the performance of the team.[55] Experiencing team flow can feel like being part of something beautiful, as this surgeon explains:[56]

Teams in a flow state will experience a sense of unity, a collective feeling of achievement, mutual trust and a collective focus on the task at hand.[55] Research also shows that teams in flow can achieve increases in performance.[57] People who experience flow are more likely to be satisfied with their job, intrinsically motivated as well as being more energetic, enthusiastic and effortful.[55] Moreover, work produced by people in a flow state has been found to be more creative and of higher quality.[54]

Entering a state of flow means that teams will be able to sustain optimal performance for longer and reach their maximum potential more often. Also, team flow experiences have a positive effect on the conditions or resources that are put in place to produce flow, fueling a cycle of ever-optimal performance.[58]

Top tip: find the balance between challenge and skill

One of the conditions research has identified that can create team flow is a balance between challenge and skill. To enter a state of flow, people's skills must match the challenges they face. This acts as a magnet for learning new skills and increasing goals or challenges. To create a team flow experience, every team member must have a personal challenge that matches their level of skill. Do you or your team know every team member's strengths, interests and skills? How do they complement one another? Do your team goals match the skills in your team? Or support the co-ordination of skills?

> “It's very satisfying and if it is somewhat difficult it is also exciting. It's very nice to make things work again, to put things in their right place so that they look as they should and fit neatly. This is very pleasant, particularly when the group works together in a smooth and efficient manner: then the aesthetics of the whole situation can be appreciated.

Conclusion

Several disruptive forces are currently hitting the business environment, making it a highly complex and volatile place to be. Competitive advantage is hard to hold onto, and now more than ever, companies need teams that are high-performing in the truest sense of the word. Above all, teams must have what we term 'edge' – an ability to adapt nimbly to change, perform in the face of adversity and sustain energy to drive innovation and improvement.

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