

The Culture of High Performing Teams

If you are not intentional about your business culture, you'll end up with a culture anyway, but probably not the one you want.

Companies, projects and causes shape the culture of their teams with their own specific missions and visions. High-performing teams then exhibit fundamental and specific cultural dynamics that transcend individual companies, projects, or causes.

So, what does it mean to be intentional about your team's culture? What are the key cultural dynamics that drive a team to do their very best? Every leader aspires to maximize their team's potential without pushing them to the brink of exhaustion. The adage "work smarter, not harder" is often cited, but practical implementation of this principle can be elusive. Consequently, many leaders fall back on managing rather than leading, hoping to improve results through sheer effort.

This is where culture becomes pivotal. By cultivating the right cultural dynamics, leaders can inspire their teams to achieve outstanding results with sustainable effort.

This paper delves into the deep insights and characteristics of high-performing teams, illustrating how intentional cultural dynamics enable leaders to lead effectively and teams to thrive.



High Performing Team Culture Dynamics

Visualize business as a set of continual commitments and conversations to design those commitments.

- Your team members commit to holding specific roles
- You promise to pay your employees
- Individuals discuss, design and choose actions, all making commitments to one another
- Department heads commit to outcomes to the leadership team
- The leadership team commits to giving employees a vision to accomplish
- Your team promises a quality product or outcome
- Your customers commit to pay you for goods and services they've received

To infuse conversations and commitments with the language of your culture is to shape your team's culture intentionally. Being aware of and acknowledging the cultural dynamics during the work increases the likelihood of developing a high-performing team. After years of working with such teams, we have identified some fundamental similarities in the business cultures that house them. High-performing teams emphasize self-accountability and the success of

everyone, while validating and trusting one another.

To imbue your team with these cultural dynamics, intentionality is crucial; this requires choosing a cultural model you can actively implement. In the following pages, we'll dive into the cultural dynamics of high-performing teams, define a way to look at culture, and explore actionable next steps.

Think of each team as a unique collection of individuals striving to make a difference; in essence, a business is a living and naturally evolving entity depending on who's on the team. You will start to recognize your own team's unique flavor and then perhaps some of the qualities for high performance that your team may already possess. A great base to build from!

Actionable Definition for Culture

There are a number of ways to define culture, and choosing a model that works for you is terribly important.

This is the one that we've found most actionable.

We define culture with two major components:

- **DRIVERS** - What do the people in your company CARE about? In essence, what is driving you and your team's actions and choices every day.
- **MOOD** - What are the qualities of interactions as your team works with one another and with your business stakeholders (customers, vendors, partners, investors ...)? The set of qualities is the mood of your team. It is described with a set of adjectives: Creative, Loud, Caring or any thousands of others.

There are several cultural models that also encompass business practices. Since business practices are driven by what we care about, in the model we use, these practices are meant to be utilized, modified, and designed by the team.

In every organization, two cultures are always present:

1. The actual culture (the one you have)
2. The aspirational culture (the one you want) and often the one you claim to have

Your actual culture includes both limiting and expansive qualities. Ideally, the expansive qualities of your actual culture align with your aspirational culture. A culture change strategy is essential to achieving this alignment and moving to your aspirational culture.

“Leadership gives each team member the tools and thinking that helps them to be self-accountable.”

With these foundational thoughts on creating a solid and actionable cultural distinction, the following are the cultural components

that high-performing teams share.

DRIVERS in High-Performing Teams | Self-Accountability & Conspiring for Success

Individuals are Self-Accountable

In high-performing teams, everyone is invested in and cares deeply about each member being self-accountable. Everyone wants to do their part and do it well. They want to be able to count on their teammates to do the same. Leadership provides team members with the tools and mindset needed for self-accountability.

Self-accountability involves individuals understanding their roles and responsibilities, knowing the metrics of success, and promptly communicating their status to their direct supervisors.

Accountability, on the other hand, is the responsibility of direct supervisors to track and communicate the levels of success to their direct reports, taking appropriate punitive or recognition actions based on performance.

If a team member is self-accountable, they know the roles they hold, the metrics that reveal their level of success and they are deeply plugged into the roles of their co-workers that connect with their own.

Title/Position vs. Role

Get clear that there is a difference between a title/position and a role. All too often, we jump to believing we know the roles we play just based on the title we are given. Without the clarity of roles in a position, we are likely performing a job that our stakeholders/bosses are not 100% aligned with.

A role is directly tied to the area responsibility held. In a small company most titles are associated with 1-5 roles. These roles generally fall into one of 4 basic levels:

- Director level - responsible throughout the organization
- Manager level - responsible for implementation of a vision or goal (sometimes with the resources of others)
- Individual contributor level - responsible for creating output in one area
- Support level - responsible for knowledge transfer in an area of expertise you hold or you have excess capacity when needed.

For instance, the title Director of Operations could

“In high performing teams, the whole team is actively conspiring for the success of others and the business as a whole.”

have multiple roles associated with it.

Example:

At ABC, Co. the DoO is responsible for: Project Management Support, Customer Relations Manager, HR Support, Financial Data Manager, and Operations Manager.

While at XYZ, Inc. the DoO is responsible for: Director of IT Infrastructure, Director of HR, Budget & Finance Manager and Safety and Quality Support

Statement of Role Responsibility

Clearly articulate the responsibilities of each role. Many people think of holding these roles as the “hats they wear”. Regardless of what you call it, this is a high level statement to get clarity on the broad area of responsibility (I am responsible for... in order to...).

Example: HR Support - responsible for implementing HR processes as they relate to hiring and onboarding to ensure the organization is in compliance and is maximizing new hire retention.

Note: This responsibility statement works if someone else in the company has responsibility for HR as a whole.

Metrics for Success

Set measurable metrics for success for each position (and its associated roles). Defining which measurements indicate success will allow both you and your employee to check in and adjust when goals for metrics are not being met.

Example: For the Operations Manager at ABC, Co., the metrics might include customer satisfaction ratings, financial reporting timeliness and accuracy

and employer satisfaction ratings.

Moving toward self accountability in your team can happen by getting true clarity around who's responsible for what and how to self-assess performance.

A Conspiracy for Success

In high performing teams, the whole team is actively conspiring for the success of others and the business as a whole. Individuals on these teams are dedicated to the mission and vision of the organization and curious about how people fit into the big picture. They are curious about what roadblocks their teammates are encountering on their road to success and they are willing to go above and beyond to help them, even if that means changing their own practices.

The appreciative approach has been validated in many thousands of studies. Speakers in this movement include Trabian Shorters (Asset Framing), David Cooperrider (Appreciative Inquiry), Juanita Brown (World Cafe), Edgar Schein (Humble Inquiry), Adam Kahane (Creating New Realities) and so many others.

Reclaim the word conspire; use it to counter the ever intrusive, invasive and insidious compulsion to gossip. When

gossiping is actively engaged in, it is counter-productive and often even toxic for the team. Gossip that degrades rapport, harms reputations and decreases cooperation is not good for any team. There's so much evidence that an appreciative approach is the most effective. So when you have the opportunity to, build a culture of positive transparent talk or "conspire for the success of everyone."

"...find the tools that validate others and yet still allow for differing opinions, thoughts and ideas."

The more we encourage conspiracy for success, the less likely the other kind of gossip will happen.

The MOOD of High-Performing Teams | Validation & Trust

There is a way, a manner, a mood about the team that supports high performing work. The mood of an organization is often spoken about as how it feels to be there, work there or the quality of the interactions as the work is done. This appears in companies as observations from customers, vendors and team members or anyone encountering the team:

- "Wow, everyone here is so friendly."
- "I know I'll get it straight as an arrow from your people. They are always focused on being clear, up front and truthful with me."
- "Have you noticed how our team really geeks out when they talk about our products? It's so fun to listen to."

A mood with validation and trust could be experienced as people feeling heard, the team asking for input because they respect one another, making commitments and keeping them, high

communication around delivery, setting and resetting expectations when there are roadblocks and solution development.

Validation

A critical mood component of high performing teams is one in which they **validate one another's thoughts and feelings** through deep listening and action.

Individuals on a high performing team get especially curious about what they don't know when someone disagrees with them or does something counter to what they expect. They are not afraid to disagree and to have difficult conversations, however they are deeply respectful of other people's opinions and thoughts and visibly demonstrate or actively communicate that they hear others' ideas.

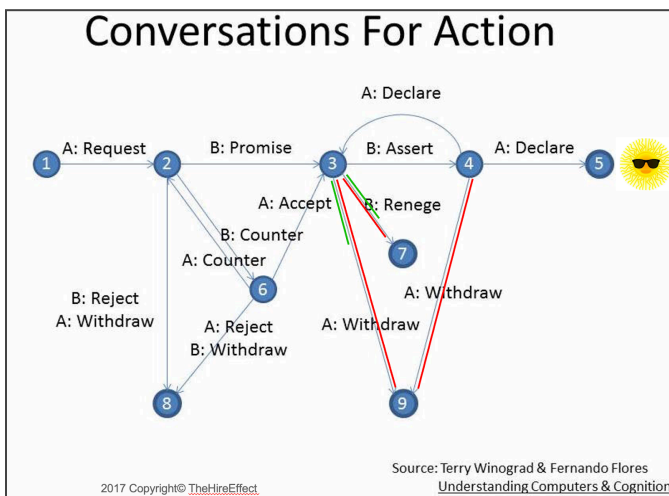
A few ways that it might look to have a mood of validation include individuals:

- Emanating a willingness to listen openly and without judgment to ideas and opinions that are not the same as their own.
- Being humble and thinking of others and ourselves equal in relevance and respectability.

Manipulative Argumentative Tools and are aimed at convincing others that their viewpoints are invalid. So find the tools that validate others and yet still allow for differing opinions, thoughts and ideas.

High Level of Trust

High performing teams also **operate with a high level of trust**. If someone commits to doing something, they do it or communicate quickly if their deliverables or deadlines need to be adjusted. They are intently focused on knowing how their every day journey of work is affecting the commitments they have made. It is a regular practice to throw yellow and red flags when it appears as though happenings may interfere with their delivery. This is an example of always ensuring that the expectations are clear, especially when expectations change.



Coordination of action is the same as effective management of commitments. The progress of work can be traced by watching “speech acts” in the communications of those coordinating. These are commitment loops.

Operating as if business is commitment loops (commitments to others) and knowing how trust works, we will have an operational model for measuring trust within the organization and within a team. When commitments are made, are they kept?

- Being intent on truly communicating our thoughts and responses in different ways each time rather than resorting to saying the same things over and over again.

It's the clear opposite of gas-lighting.

There are many ways to craft a mood of validation and oddly, it helps to work backward to acknowledge the behaviors that support validation. Gaslighting involves the use of many

The Conversations for Action diagram from Winograd and Flores is what some have referred to as the atom of trust. When someone asks for something to be done, it kicks off a series of interactions. Here's the flow:

1. A makes a request to B.
2. B commits by promising to do it.

Now, it's crucial that B keeps A informed:

- If B completes the task, they must inform A. Simply doing the task isn't enough; closing the loop with communication is essential.
- If B encounters issues, like forgetting or needing more time, they should promptly update A. Honesty in communication maintains trust.
- If A decides the task isn't needed anymore, they should clearly tell B to avoid unnecessary work.

At any stage, no matter the outcome, the key is to never leave the other person guessing. Always respond to the original request. A task done but not communicated is a loop left open, and in the dance of dialogue, an open loop can trip up the entire process. It's not just about completing tasks; it's about keeping each other in the know—because in the end, that's what teamwork and effective communication are all about.

Culture | Intentionality

Acting with culture can become intuitive and second nature. Knowing that every business is a

specific set of people doing the dance of making commitments to one another will help you to see the high level picture of your own business.

Work into your everyday process some of the questions from above and soon others will be driven by the same dynamics of self-accountability and conspiring for the success of one another and the company. Modeling the mood of validation and trust, constantly bringing others to treat one another in the same way will build the strength in the team to be high performing.

People are naturally driven to think if they've said something once (especially if it's an important thing), they've been heard and understood. This leads to unclear expectations which is the birthplace of drama. I know some of you are smiling right now because you've deeply experienced this.

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