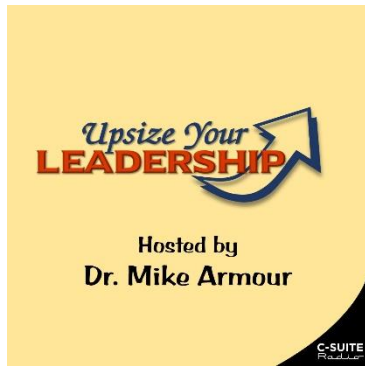


Defining High Performance for Your Team

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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Lately I've been thinking about teams and how to increase their effectiveness. I'm currently putting together an online course on how to develop a high-performing team. I hope to have it launched by early spring.

Over the next few minutes, I want to share a small portion of the introductory material from the course. For today's leaders, being a good team builder is not an optional commitment. It's an essential.

And making a telling mark calls for going beyond basic team-building. It calls for turning ordinary teams into high performing ones. Mastering the ability to do so is a powerful way to Upsize Your Leadership.

Few things which you do as a leader or manager will give you greater returns on your investment than the time which you spend developing a high-performing team. The legendary steel industry tycoon Andrew Carnegie once described teamwork as "the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results." If that's true of teamwork in general – which it is – it's doubly true of teams who settle for nothing less than performance of the highest order.

Notice that I'm repeatedly using the phrase "high-performing team." I'm not referring to a mere assortment of people who refer to themselves as a team simply because they all happen to report to the same manager or who all work together on a given project.

Nor am I talking about a team which is perhaps rather healthy and productive, but settles for less than stellar output. No, my focus in this episode is on teams which strive to be genuinely high-performing.

Now admittedly, building a high-performing team calls for a considerable investment of a manager's time and energy. With so many other things demanding their attention, why should managers make a priority out of developing a high-performing team?

The answer lies in the very reason that you are a manager in the first place. As a manager, you have been entrusted with responsibility for one of your organization's vital functions which is too big or too complex for one person alone to fulfill it. If you could fulfill your role by yourself, you would be an individual contributor, not a manager.

To carry out your responsibility, therefore, you must enlist, task, and motivate other people. And history has shown that the most effective way to meet this challenge is to build a strong, vibrant

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team. Team success becomes your success. In the truest sense of the word, success in today's management climate is a team sport.

History has also taught us another lesson. Unlike a by-gone era, when determined innovators could single-handedly change the world, today's complex realities pose challenges which demand team talents and solutions which only a team can deliver.

Every schoolchild learns that Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone. But who invented the iPhone? We know that the Wright brothers invented the airplane. But who invented the space shuttle? History credits Robert Fulton with inventing the steam ship. But who invented the aircraft carrier? Today's innovations, by and large, are the product of high-performing teams.

Gone are the days of the universal genius. That's a term used to describe people from a few generations back who had substantive command of every field of human knowledge. That is, they had expertise in mathematics, science, medicine, architecture, art, history, literature, economics, philosophy – you name it, these people knew all about it. Thomas Jefferson was one such person. Benjamin Franklin also bordered on being a universal genius.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, human knowledge was expanding so rapidly that one person could no longer be fully versed in every field of human endeavor. The era of subject matter experts had begun. And as knowledge continued to explode, expertise came to be more and more specialized, simply because no one could master all of the knowledge in his or her own field, much less several other fields.

Not coincidentally, the rising interest in team-building directly paralleled the growth in specialized expertise. A century ago, few books on management even spoke of team-building. Today it's a core topic anywhere management and leadership are discussed in depth.

Over that century, professions and vocations evolved from being generalized in nature to being highly specialized. The demand for specialists emerged in response to the ever-increasing complexity of what organizations and their management were trying to accomplish.

Teams bring together the requisite diversity and expertise to bring complex endeavors to fruition. And the magnitude of their success will largely be determined by whether their team is truly high-performing.

But I wonder, what exactly does the term "high performing" mean to you? When you hear the phrase "high-performing team," what picture came to mind? What are the hallmarks of such a team? What does it do that allows it to qualify as high-performing?

It's easy to assume that everyone has the same concept of what it means to be a "high-performing team." Experience has taught me otherwise. When I put this question to a room of twenty people in management training classes, I commonly get a dozen or more different answers. People have distinctly different concepts of what constitutes high performance for a team.

And the same is likely true among members of your team. If you ask them whether the group should strive to be high-performing, they would all probably nod to show their assent. At the same time, they will each form a mental picture of what such a team would look like. Odds are, these pictures will differ markedly from one another.

To demonstrate my point, first form your own distinct description of a high-performance team. Write it down and edit it until you're fully satisfied with it.

Once your description is finished, do a small research project with individual team members. (If you are not heading a team at present, use a few of colleagues for your research.) Your research consists of asking a single question, posed to people in a casual manner. Simply say, "I've been thinking lately about the phrase, 'high-performing team.' How would you describe a team which truly demonstrates high performance?"

As you listen to the responses, mentally compare what you are hearing with the description which you have already formed for yourself. Also, compare the individual responses with one another. Note the differences among them. You may find that some of these differences are quite pronounced. On occasions, I've even seen differences which were incongruent with one another.

Given these contrasting views, imagine what happens if your team agrees to hold itself to a standard of high performance. Since each team member has a unique personal picture of high performance, the team may consent to the standard verbally, yet have no unified sense of what that standard means. It's as though everyone is setting out on a thousand-mile journey, but before taking the first step, each one has a different destination in mind.

For example, in team trainings, when I ask participants to define high performance, these are some of the answers which I frequently hear:

- Operating with the greatest possible efficiency
- Hitting goals and targets as a matter of routine
- Completing essential operations rapidly
- Minimizing errors and wasted effort
- Consistently exceeding expectations
- Being a pace-maker in the organization or industry
- Maximizing profitability and cost-effectiveness
- Responding to opportunities decisively and without delay
- Producing services and/or products of exceptional quality
- Making continuous improvement
- Ensuring that every person contributes his or her best
- Having the resilience to bounce back quickly, no matter what happens

No two of these descriptions evoke the same mental picture of what a high-performing team will look like.

So, it turns out that there are a great many ways to describe a high-performing team, aren't there? But which of these descriptions, if any, is the correct one? And what about the responses from your survey? How many of them were right? How many wrong?

The fact is, no answer to our question is inherently right or inherently wrong. In the final analysis, high performance is what a team defines it as being. No definition of high performance

can be imposed on every situation. Each team must decide for itself what its standard for high performance should be.

And it should be a team decision. The standard cannot be dictated, either by you as the manager or by any individual on the team. For a team to perform at its greatest capability, everyone must be pursuing the same outcome.

Thus, the best description of high performance is the one which the entire team agrees to use as its benchmark for evaluating team performance. In other words, what the team chooses as its standard is far less important than the fact that the team reaches a choice collaboratively and that everyone on the team concurs with it.

Therefore, as you map your strategy for building a high-performing team, one of the first tasks is to secure two agreements from your team. The first is that they are ready to commit themselves to high-performance. And second is consensus on how they will measure that level of performance.

Reaching concurrence on these two items obviously calls for extensive conversation with the entire team present. If you're serious about building a high-performing team, I suggest that you take up this conversation with your team as soon as possible. Ideally, the discussion would occur in a team meeting devoted exclusively to this topic. It's also a tremendous subject for a team retreat.

However you choose to address this issue, reaching agreement on it is a necessary first step if you are to develop a high-performing team. Until your entire team has unity and clarity as to what high performance will mean for them, you have no foundation on which to build goals, create procedures, or implement changes to make your dream of a high-performing team a reality.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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