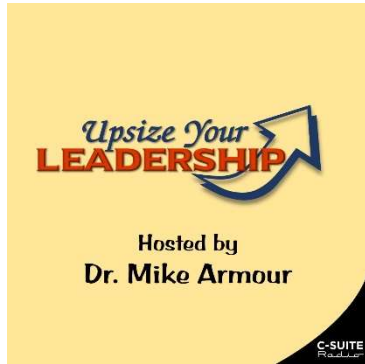


5 Essentials for Team Performance

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode 2002

Podcast Date: January 22, 2020



In my previous podcast I talked about defining what high performance means for the team which you lead. We discussed the importance of having every team member buy-in on two things. The first is the agreement to be a high-performing team. And the second is agreement on how to measure high performance.

In this episode, I'm talking about making high performance a reality. I lay out for you a five-element model which I share regularly with clients. I call it the High Performance Molecule. Think of it as a template to follow in putting together a high-performing team. Follow the principles behind this template and you are sure to Upsize Your Leadership.

There are no shortcuts to building a high-performing team. It requires sustained, purposeful effort on your part as the leader. Each team-member also plays a vital role, too, of course. But success in building a high-performing team eventually devolves on you as the leader. It's unlikely that your team's long-term performance will transcend your vision for the team.

To achieve your vision, you must optimize five qualities which collectively determine the performance potential of any team. These five are Capacity, Throughput, Efficiency, Reliability, and Team-Bonding. I usually refer to team-bonding as Trust.

The key to high-performance is to enhance each of these five qualities so that they become and remain strong and vibrant. You may be able to create a team which performs relatively well where one or more of these qualities is weak or ignored. But over the long-run, it will never be a high-performing team.

When I present these elements to clients in coaching or training, I usually depict them graphically to resemble the structure of a molecule. I call it the High Performance Molecule. To picture it in your mind's eye, envision a large circle with four smaller circles arranged along its circumference. The smaller circles are positioned respectively at the 12 o'clock, 3 o'clock, 6 o'clock, and 9 o'clock positions of the larger circle.

Each of these circles is labeled with one of the five essential elements. Thus, Capacity is at the 12 o'clock position, Throughput at 3 o'clock, Efficiency at 6 o'clock, and Reliability at 9 o'clock. The fifth element (trust) is positioned at the very heart of the entire structure, in the middle of the large circle.

With at least a general picture of this structure in mind, let's examine these elements one-by-one. With each one we will identify a specific stratagem which you should pursue as a leader in taking your team to high performance.

We begin with Capacity. Remember, we have positioned it at 12 o'clock on our graphic. To build a high-performing team, your first stratagem as a leader is to staff for capacity. By capacity I mean, how much you are able to handle. The greater the capacity of your team, the more it can handle by way of volume, workload, and the diversity of tasks which may be thrown at it. No team can outperform its inherent capacity to get things done.

Staffing for capacity implies that you, as the leader, have a clear sense of exactly what the team needs to accomplish. Hopefully, you do. If not, gaining that clarity is your first imperative. Until you can spell out precisely what the team needs to achieve in order to attain high performance, you have no sure guide for determining the skills and expertise required on your team.

Once you have outlined these requirements specifically and comprehensively, you are ready to tackle the staffing challenge. Staffing, while never a simple task, is far easier if you are building a team from scratch. You have the freedom to put it together in whatever arrangement seems best.

In most cases, however, managers are leading a pre-existing team. The team's capacity has already been determined by virtue of who is on the team. And the resulting capacity may not align well with what high performance demands.

In a situation like this, staffing is not only about adding new people. It's also about selectively replacing one or more current team members with someone who is a better fit. The opportunity to make such replacements usually occurs through some type of attrition: retirement, reassignments, resignations, or mandated reductions in force. Unfortunately, the opportunity for replacement is sometimes possible only through termination. That option may not be open to you legally speaking, however, without a justifiable cause for termination.

For that reason, staffing for capacity can be a protracted process. You usually cannot make staffing changes overnight. This alone means that you should not assume that it's a short-term undertaking to build a high-performing team. Time is required to put together the right team with the right balance of skills, abilities, and attitudes.

When adding to your team, the operative question in every hiring situation is, "Are this person's talents the ones which we need in order to create our desired capacity?" If the answer is "no," the person is not the best hire for your team, no matter how talented, knowledgeable, and personally impressive the candidate may be. Every hire must expand capacity.

Quite commonly, the need to replace a current team member is not because the person is incompetent, a weak performer, or an unpleasant person to work with. I've had to replace team members who were genuinely stellar. But the team already had an abundance of people with a similar skillset. Meanwhile, we were sorely deficient in other skills which were necessary to enlarge capacity. Deciding to replace such people is never an easy step for any manager, especially if the person has been loyal to you and supportive of your management role. Easy or not, it's a price you must be prepared to pay if your goal is maximized team performance.

So, our first essential for developing a high-performing team is to staff for capacity. The second is to organize for throughput. To borrow an analogy from computing, staff capacity determines your bandwidth. Throughput is a measure of how fully you utilize that bandwidth.

When I speak of organizing for throughput, I have much more in mind than the mere organizational structure of your team. Throughput can obviously be limited by poor or ill-defined organizational structure, to be sure. But no less limiting are such things as the organization of workflow, processes, reporting requirements, approval procedures, or even working spaces.

Whereas the staffing function, once accomplished, can be put on the back burner for a while, the organizing function must always be on front burner. In physics, one corollary of the Second Law of Thermodynamics is that for any system, there are far more potential states of disorder than of order. This makes it statistically inevitable that over time, any system will settle into a state of disorder. This principle is equally valid for human systems such as teams. Over time, they tend toward disarray.

This is the primary reason that leadership is essential in human affairs. Leadership serves to counter the disarray, disorganization, and disorder to which human systems would otherwise succumb. The Second Law of Thermodynamics holds that, without intervention, the natural end state of any system is a state of entropy and inertia. Leadership provides the necessary intervention to keep that from happening to human systems.

As a consequence, those who lead teams can never afford a “once and done” approach to the organizational facet of team-building. Good team leaders continuously look for elements of the team’s life which may be needlessly sapping energy, time, morale, unity, effectiveness, or enthusiasm. They may find it in the way work is organized, in the way decision-making is organized, in the way procedures are organized. They may find it in obstacles to throughput which were once eliminated, but have managed to creep back in.

In short, leaders may find limits to throughput in any aspect of how the functions and duties of the team are organized. The job of the team leader is to ferret out these issues and implement appropriate corrective measures.

Yet, organizational effort can go only so far in optimizing throughput. To attain the highest potential throughput, innovation is also needed. The third element in building a high-performing team is thus to innovate for efficiency.

Managing innovation has proven a pitfall for many a leader. Some managers prefer the tried and proven and naturally shy away from new ways of doing things. Others are what I might refer to as innovation junkies. They latch onto innovations with immediate enthusiasm, not taking time to consider the ramifications of their decision adequately.

Building a high-performing team calls on leaders to stand somewhere between these two extremes. They should be open to innovation. But they should also be mindful that innovation always entails a degree of disruptive change – often a significant degree of disruption. This very disruption will inevitably curtail throughput during the implementation stage. The pivotal question is, will the innovation lead to an ultimate level of throughput which adequately offsets the amount of throughput which was sacrificed to implement the change? If so, the innovation is worthy of consideration. Otherwise, it is not.

When we speak of innovating for efficiency, it's somewhat natural to think immediately about innovations in technology. After all, over the past 30 years, technology has advanced productivity and efficiency far beyond anything which even the most visionary leaders could have foreseen 50 years ago. And there is no doubt that the greatest improvements in team efficiency are likely to come from tapping into some benefit of technology.

But efficiency-enhancing innovation can also come in arenas other than technology. It may come from innovative work schedules. It may come from more responsive feedback systems or more streamlined communication. The key is for leaders of teams to be open to innovation at all times, but only innovation which has the promise of accelerating efficiency.

To this point, then, we've looked at staffing for capacity, organizing for throughput, and innovating for efficiency. The next principle which we consider is to train for reliability. I'm using the word "reliability" quite broadly, to encompass every dimension of the team's enterprise. Is what the team produces reliable? Does the team meet deadlines reliably? Can team members rely on one another to fulfill their duties and to carry their share of the load? Are standards met reliably? Are work procedures followed reliably? Are policies enforced reliably?

Almost any topic for team training can be couched in the framework of maximizing reliability. Whether the subject is skills development, communication, planning, quality, scheduling, or process management, the end goal of every training exercise should be to increase reliability. Why? Because it's impossible to envision a high-performing team with anything less than thorough reliability.

The fifth and final element of our High Performance Molecule is team-bonding, which I equate with trust. Reliability is an inherent component of trust-building. Trust is complete confidence that an individual or group will consistently do what is right in every situation. A solid record of reliability paves the way for team members to have this kind of confidence in one another.

In my keynote presentations on Trust-Centered Leadership, I often describe trust as "glue-bricant," a word which I obviously made up. It seeks to capture a unique quality of trust. Namely, trust is the glue which holds organizations together in tough times. Yet is also the lubricant which allows things to run smoothly. I can think of nothing else which is both glue and lubricant. Thus the term "glue-bricant."

In my depiction of the High-Performance Molecule, I purposefully put Trust in the heart of the graphic. Building and maintaining trust must be the centerpiece of every team-building effort. That's my way of saying that high performing teams make trust a core concern. Without the bonding which trust provides, high performance is beyond reach for any team.

Trust is another element of the High Performance Molecule that cannot be treated in a "once and done" fashion. Distrust is always an insidious threat to any organization, ready to rear its head at a moment's notice. Those who succeed at building high-performing teams are forever vigilant for signs of distrust. And anytime they see it, they are prompt to attack it at its roots.

Since several of my recent podcasts have dealt with the topic of dealing with distrust, I won't elaborate on the subject here. Instead, let me merely iterate that to instill trust within their teams, leaders must first be trusted themselves. And to gain that trust, leaders must consistently act in ways which make them as trustworthy as possible. There is, after all, no reason to trust anyone who is untrustworthy. In trust-building, as in all aspects of team building, managers must lead by example.

There, then, is the High-Performance Molecule. Staff for capability, organize for throughput, innovate for efficiency, train for reliability, and make trust-building a core concern. How does your team measure up in these five arenas? Where do you have the most work to do? Which areas present you with the greatest challenges?

At the outset I described the High Performance Molecule as a template to follow in team-building. Let me encourage you to use it in just that fashion. I've never seen a high-performing team which was lacking in any of the qualities which comprise the molecule. It indeed takes time and determination to get all of these elements right. But the payoff is tremendous and well worth the effort.

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.

Upsize Your Leadership is a featured podcast on the C-Suite Radio Network (<https://c-suitenetwork.com/radio/shows/upsized-your-leadership/>). It can also be accessed on iTunes, Google Play/Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, iHeart Radio and many other platforms which distribute podcasts.

Scripts for all episodes can be downloaded at <https://www.leaderperfect.com/podcast/episodes>.

Notice: You are free to duplicate or redistribute this script so long as the authorship and copyright information are retained. This material is not in the public domain and is the intellectual property of the host.