



# weLEAD Online Magazine

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## High Performing Teams

By Paul Thornton



Leaders have great confidence in the power of teams. The fundamental belief is that 12 members of a high performing team will outperform 12 individuals by a wide margin. Think about sports. A team of “good players” who are working as a team will consistently outperform a team of “all-stars” playing as individuals.

Duke basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski said that a good leader looks beyond what his team is doing now and sees what they are capable of doing. Leaders help teams reach their potential.

### What is a Team

A team is a small number of people who are committed to working together to achieve desired results. Working together includes talking, sharing ideas, debating issues, establishing goals, making decisions, and dealing with changing priorities. With teams there is “interdependence between and among team members to achieve the desired goals.”

It's difficult for team members to consistently work together in a highly productive manner. Hidden agendas, hurt feelings, and interpersonal conflicts often develop. Some team members don't feel valued or don't feel their ideas are given full consideration. Teams can lose their focus and make little progress. But some teams find a way to overcome these issues and consistently perform at a high level.

### High Performing Teams

I have found high performing teams generally have the following characteristics.

- An effective leader
- Common goals
- Common strategy
- The right people
- Operating rules
- Common commitment

### Effective Team Leaders

The team leader plays a major role in helping team members work together and achieve the desired goals. Team leaders need task skills. This includes the ability to break down a large project into bite

size pieces, establish goals, develop plans, make decisions, assign tasks, and hold people accountable for the completion of their action items.

Team leaders also need “people skills.” A colleague states, “Soliciting their ideas, making people feel valued, involving all team members, smoothing out relationship issues are all part of the team leader’s job description.”

Leaders provide the missing ingredients to help team members get focused, aligned, and work together. They provide direction, instruction, and feedback to help both the team and individual team members.

Michael D. Niziolek, Vice President of Human Resources for Hasbro Games, states, “On cross-functional teams, the leader usually does not have actual authority and consequently needs strong interpersonal skills. The leader in this situation needs to be able to persuade and convince. On departmental teams, however, the leader often has actual authority, so it becomes easier to gain commitment from team members.”

David Cottrell is the founder and president of the CornerStone Leadership institute. He has led numerous teams and has conducted coaching and training sessions to help others be more effective team leaders. He believes there are five basic questions that a leader must address:

1. What is required? - crystal clear expectations
2. How am I doing? - consistent, honest feedback
3. Does anyone care? - recognition of performance
4. How is the team doing? - understanding of key measurement systems
5. Where do we fit in? - understanding of larger picture

If the leader will answer all five of those questions, the team will ask the sixth question – “How can we help?”

## **Common Goals**

Christopher M. Avery, Ph.D. states, “Get clear on the collective task. Teambuilding starts with clarifying your team’s purpose, not with getting your teammates to like each other. After all, the task itself – not the people performing the task – is the reason the team was created.” Generally the person or group that charters a team defines what the team must accomplish. However, sometimes the person chartering the team isn’t crystal clear in describing what needs to be accomplished.

If the team charter isn’t clear, the results will miss the mark. Even with a clear charter some teams lose their focus. One team leader I know starts each team meeting with an overhead slide that describes the team’s mission, key deliverables and due dates. He says this is a constant reminder of the task that needs to be completed.

With high performing teams, all team members are crystal clear on the goals. There is no confusion on the team’s mission and what needs to be accomplished.

***Joel B. Dearing, Women’s Volleyball Coach, Springfield College, states, “We do individual goal setting and team goal setting – the hidden challenge for this is that it takes a ton of time to do it correctly. You need goals to measure individual progress and team performance.”***

## **Common Strategy**

The goal is what you want to achieve; the strategy is the plan or approach you will use to achieve it. With high performing teams, all members are clear on the strategy as well as their roles and responsibilities. There is no chaos or confusion as to who is doing what tasks.

## **The Right People**

Who should be on the team? Most experts recommend the fewer people, the better – somewhere between five and nine is ideal. If you have 15 people on a team it can be difficult and time consuming to have all members discuss their ideas. The team should include:

- People with the right mix of knowledge, skills, and experiences needed for the assigned task. Most experts recommend a variety of skills such as strategic thinking, planning, problem solving, follow-up, facilitation, and detail orientation that are important for team success.
- For a problem that spans the total organization, a cross-functional team with members from departments such as marketing, finance, operations, human resources, and engineering.
- People who have enthusiasm, interest, and motivation.

Michael Niziolek states, “I have found some people who are skilled at being part of a team and work extremely well in that environment. On the other hand, there are individuals who prefer to work alone. Choosing the right kind of person for the team is critical.”

## **Operating Rules**

How will team members work together? How will tasks be assigned, decisions made, and progress evaluated? What are the rules? High performing teams develop a few rules they commit to follow. An experienced team leader says, “Develop the rules as a group, put them in writing, and distribute them to all team members.” Most of the time teams work together in meetings; the rules should include specific expectations for meeting behavior.

One of the teams I was on had the following rules:

- Start and end meetings on time
- Demonstrate respect for all team members
- Listen and fully consider all ideas
- Complete all assigned action items
- Don't hold back; if you have something on your mind, say it

Joel Dearing states, “As a coach I talk a lot about process – how we do things – the rules and routines we follow. We are building relationships, a group work ethic, and performance expectations every day. This builds our culture.”

Team leaders often use “process checks” to evaluate how well team members are working together. Process checks provide opportunities for each team member to comment on what's working and not working. To what extent are team members following their own rules?

## **Common Commitment**

Each team member is motivated and fully committed to do whatever it takes to achieve the desired results. When problems and setbacks occur some teams lose focus, get discouraged and start finger pointing. High performing teams have the determination and perseverance to work through obstacles, learn from mistakes, and help one another achieve success.

## **Summary**



More and more work is being done by teams. The ability to build effective teams is a critical leadership skill. Team leaders have to focus both on the task to be accomplished and how team members are working together. Team leaders must use the appropriate management style to help the team consistently achieve its best performance.

***About the author:***

***Paul B. Thornton is President, Be the Leader Associates and author of seven books on management and leadership. His latest book, Leadership-Best Advice I Ever Got, is available at WingSpan\_Press, amazon.com, and bn.com.***

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