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Teams: Are Yours Good or Great?

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The maxim *Good vs. Great* has become a common question in the HR community. In the book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't* (2001), Jim Collins is, of course, referring to great companies not specifically great teams. However, there is no reason why team leaders should not use the same question as a barometer for success at the team-level. After all, the differences between great and good teams can be striking. Let's take a look at this comparison.

Good teams finish a project on time and on budget.

Great teams finish a project on time and **under** budget.

Good teams finish a project, but miss the deadline due to spec changes.

Great teams can **meet** a deadline even though the project specs have changed considerably.

Good teams can become complacent and plateau on team objectives and past successes.

Great teams show a **consistent** upward trend in performance.

Furthermore, it *feels better* to be a team member or the leader of a great team, rather than a good team. It's engaging to work on a high-performing team because you have a common purpose or goal. On these teams, the members know that success can only be achieved by working together efficiently. For example, here are some team behaviors that produce efficiency—team members all pull their weight, are prepared and on time for meetings, communicate well and listen to each other, have high motivation and respect for each other. In fact, there is a distinct lack of egos in high-performing teams and higher levels of trust in high-performing teams vs. the good teams.

Have you taken a hard look at your work teams recently? At what level are they performing? Ask yourself, are they great or are they simply good? In today's business environment, teams are under pressure to be more than good—to produce more than just acceptable results. They need to create great results without putting undo strain on the individual team members and causing burn-out.

To make the leap from acceptable performance to high performance, teams begin by taking a thorough analysis of five positive practices. We call these practices the success factors (see figure 1). In the next section we will discuss each success factor and we will discuss the critical role of leaders in

creating and sustaining a high-performance team.



The leader's role is to diagnose the current level of team performance via the success factors, coach the team to higher levels of success, and be alert to reinforce the actions and conditions that support high performance.

Results

Have your team members ever disagreed on priorities or how to best utilize your team's precious resources? Which is more important to your team members, individual responsibilities or team responsibilities? Do members compete for recognition?

Through these questions, you may realize that your teams need a better focus on results. As the team leader, you may need to work with your team to develop or refine your purpose statement. Only through a clearly defined purpose will your team members gain an understanding of their reason for being assembled together. *With* a clear purpose your team can set and strive toward critical goals. *Without* a clear purpose statement, team members can lack an understanding of what they are supposed to do. Furthermore, a clear purpose statement helps illustrate how your team fits into the organizational business plan. This sense of association with the organization's big picture is motivating and engaging for team members.

Commitment

Are your team decisions supported by all members? Do members withhold feedback to fellow team members about mistakes or poor performance? Or, do they look to you, the team leader, to take corrective action? Are your decisions as team leader ever challenged? How much cooperation is present?

High-performance teams are fueled by each team member's full commitment to the team's purpose and goals. Team members show their full commitment by being willing to take risks and make the difficult decisions necessary to achieve high levels of performance. They work together to address problems and take action.

Leaders should help the team reach agreement on the types of behavior the team will require from each and every member. For example, the leader may lead a discussion to clarify the team's expectations around rewards and satisfaction they will gain from being part of the team. Furthermore, leaders of high-performing teams cultivate an environment where team members accept responsibility for giving and receiving feedback. It is through feedback—about their work and their contributions to the team—that team

members maintain commitment.

Process

Do your team members have an efficient method for reviewing the effectiveness of work and team processes? Are there understood and accepted ground rules for sharing information and knowledge? Are deadlines agreed-upon and accepted? Do you follow an effective process for making team decisions? Is an agenda created and followed?

Obviously without process, things do not get done. And, just as each team is a unique combination of the individual team members, the processes within each team are unique. Leaders should pay particular attention to the development of not only work processes (for how the tasks are performed), but also the team processes (for how the team works together). Both types of processes are best addressed upfront during a team chartering session. If your team is having process issues and you already have a charter, then maybe it's time to revisit it. Most likely, the rapid pace of work has made some of your original chartering statements obsolete. Or, maybe new member have joined the team. You may need to coach them on how your team works best together and the expectations for each team member.

Communication

Do team members withhold information in meetings? Do conflicts or disagreements go unresolved? Have team members complained that they feel neglected or that no one listens to them? Do your team members judge others ideas too quickly or worse, do a few team members dominate the meetings?

It sounds like you need some communication ground rules that will ensure effective communication. Good communication encourages cooperation and promotes continuous improvement. But, all of this cooperation is not without a bit of healthy conflict. Conflict is natural in high-performing teams. When team members are committed to meeting or exceeding goals, they become passionate in presenting their opinions. The leader's role is to help team members achieve healthy resolution of conflicts and be open to new ideas and opinions.

Trust

Are outcomes derailed because team member act on assumptions? Do team members refuse to admit mistakes or ask for help? Are individual needs or expectations disregarded? Do members ever break their promises?

The foundation of strong team performance is trust. When the teammates trust one another, they are willing to make sacrifices and put aside their self interests for the good of the team. They make suggestions and take on challenges without fear of looking foolish or worrying about what others might say.

Trust is built through familiarity, so team leaders should create opportunities for new teams to share information about themselves and to provide open, honest feedback to one another. Of course, building trust takes time and commitment. It will only happen through a focused effort on behalf of the leader. But, establishing or repairing trust among team members may be the most important roles of leaders today.

With attention to the five success factors, your teams can reduce redundancies and eliminate waste. These efforts will improve customer retention as service quality increases and the improved product outputs create more demand. So, an investment in great teams will help your organization make a leap from good to great.

For more information about the five success factors and DDI's new course on teams see—[Leading High-Performance Teams](#). Additionally, you may be interested in tools to build trust in your organization see—[Building an Environment of Trust](#).

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