THE COVENANT
GROUP | *Redefining Performance*™

# A Guide to Building High Performing teams

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CONCEPT IN SHORT

Teams are at the heart of any high performing organization. How you nurture your team(s) is directly linked to performance. High performing organizations continuously work to foster team performance. In this paper you will learn how high performing teams manage team dynamics and redefine their performance.

Concept at Work
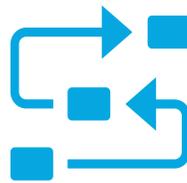
| INTENTION	PROCESS	MEASUREMENT
Taking the time to develop your team's performance can help your organization move from surviving to thriving. High performing teams are built, nurtured, and maintained through thoughtful consideration of the relationships and dynamics within teams. High performing teams are not accidental.	High performing teams make good *quality decisions*, achieve *Consensus with Qualification*, and ensure they maintain *Emotional Acceptance* across the team. Keeping these three things in balance will keep teams performing at their highest capability.	High performing teams rely on high quality data to inform decision making. Data can prevent teams from descending into messy cultures of blame and shame. Data and measurement help to depersonalize debate and conflict in teams. Good use of data can be the major competitive advantage of high performing teams.
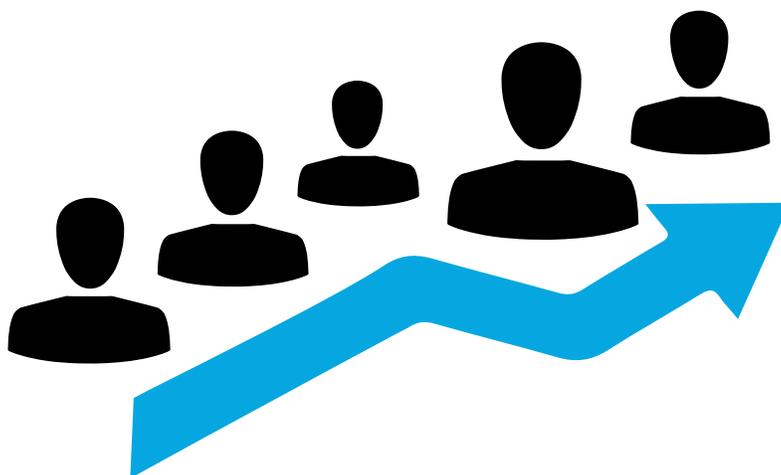
HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS

High performing teams are the life blood of any organization.

If teams are not nurtured, it can cause the demise of an organization. Teams can feel like traps or they can feel full of possibility. When a team finds its groove, it can convert an organization that is surviving into one that is thriving. Understanding how to make your team feel like it is bursting with possibility and potential is at the heart of *redefining performance*.

Wharton Professor, Adam Grant, argues that we become resilient by knowing other people are depending on us. The first thing to understand about teams is that they are dynamic, complex,

interdependent, social units that come together to implement a shared intention. No matter how senior you are, you are dependent on other team members to successfully complete your tasks. Team members rely on each other to succeed and are bound by a state of being simultaneously interdependent.

A key trait of any high performing team is that they have an elevated capacity for making quality decisions. Their capacity to make robust micro and macro decisions is fueled by these unique characteristics:

- *The ability to ask deep questions;*

- *Not being afraid to speak up;*

- *Having high levels of trust and respect for team members;*

- *Making more mistakes than low performing teams;*

- *Having a high capacity to engage in healthy conflict; and*

- *Using more, not less data to inform their decisions.*
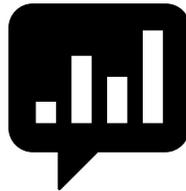
PARADOX OF HIGH PERFORMING TEAMS

Teams are incredibly complex social spaces full of inconsistencies and contradictions. High performing teams exist in a delicate balance defined by three paradoxical traits:

1. *Decision Quality*
2. *Consensus with Qualification*
3. *Emotional Acceptance*

High performing teams are always in flux and can break down very quickly if trust is broken or if members lose respect for each other. Research on high performing teams provides some 'non-traditional' perspectives on group dynamics. For example, encouraging conflict can seem counter intuitive, but it is the quality of the debate that determines the quality of the outcome. How teams handle conflict seems to be at the heart of the paradox of fostering high performing teams. The general idea is that decisions need to be implemented by a team and team members need to feel like they had influence over the decisions made. High quality decisions emerge when diverse teams can debate about their perspectives and arrive at a decision that synthesizes their different viewpoints.

This synthesizing process allows team members to interact with the decision-making process and produces high quality decisions. The research suggests that synthesized decisions outperform individual choices and allow team members to feel like they have had influence over the choices made. When teams agree with or understand the rationale for the choices made, it can increase the *Emotional Acceptance* of decisions, even if they disagreed with the choice. When team members feel like they have been part of a consensus making process, they tend to have more ownership over the final decisions. If teams are not allowed to exercise voice, it can lead to cynicism or contempt for the top-level managers.
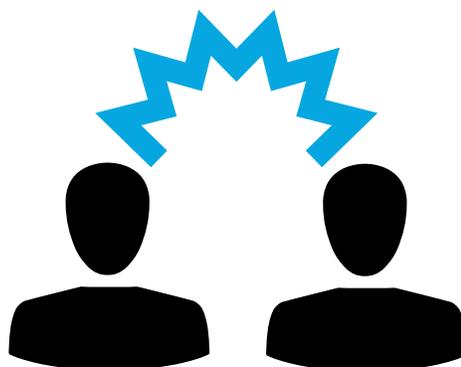
The paradox emerges because while conflict or debate improves the quality of decisions, it can also decrease consensus and *Emotional Acceptance*. If debates get personal, team members are likely to disengage, which lowers the quality of the decisions. Keeping these seemingly contradictory components in balance produces high performing teams.

High performing team's manage Decision Quality, Consensus with Qualification and Emotional Acceptance.

DECISION QUALITY

High performing teams differentiate themselves by the quality of their micro and macro decisions. A key characteristic of these teams is their ability to effectively debate or disagree. Members of high performing teams are not trying to win their debate; their goal is to learn. When members enter a debate with the intention to learn, it increases the team's capacity to make better decisions. Team members whose goal is to learn are more likely to genuinely try to understand the other person's perspective. As a result, they are listening very differently compared to someone who is trying to win. When teams debate about diverse perspectives and then synthesize these perspectives, it increases the quality of their decisions.

The challenge is that all debate or disagreement has the potential to get personal or emotional. Healthy conflict tends to be about data, an idea or an issue. Unhealthy conflict tends to be emotional and personal. If debates become personal or emotional, then they can undermine the potential benefits of healthy conflict. Unhealthy conflict can affect our ability to arrive at a consensus and our *Emotional Acceptance* of decisions. If debate decreases consensus and *Emotional Acceptance*, then the very tenants of what improves quality decisions puts team harmony at risk.
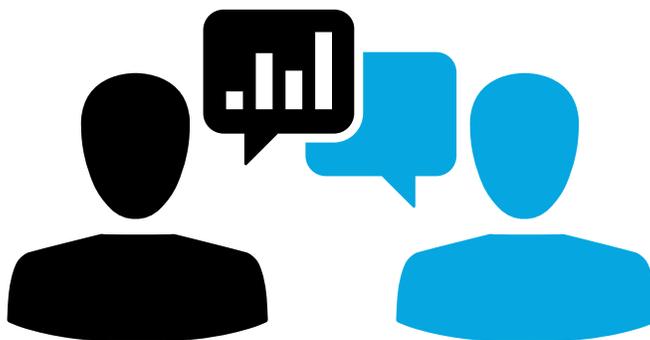
CONSENSUS WITH QUALIFICATION

When teams commit to arriving at consensus, it provides team members with a sense of ownership and participation in the decision making process. The more team members are able to debate about the choices being made, the more it increases their perceived influence over the decisions made. When team debates are cognitive and not emotional it allows teams to focus on building consensus. Teams that focus too much on consensus, often miss deadlines and drag decisions out longer than needed. High performing teams engage in *Consensus with Qualification*. *Consensus with Qualification* means that these teams use data or pre-established criteria to guide their decision making. When teams use data to inform their decisions, it depersonalizes the conversation. It allows team members to focus on the idea or issue and helps them stay away from debates that can become personal and emotional.

When groups debate, there is the possibility that the conversation can spiral out of control. Focusing on the data or idea, allows team members to change their mind without losing face as new data and ideas are presented. Committing to *Consensus with Qualification* versus only striving for consensus allows team members to change their mind. Additionally, it allows for faster decision making.


Data

vs

Emotions

Consensus decision making can take a longtime and throughout the process many options might be presented. Using data or pre-established criteria provides team leads with the flexibility to make decisions that go against the views of members of the team without them taking it personally. What is most important is that team members know the procedure for how decisions will be made and that the procedure is followed. If the procedure is followed, and decisions are made that members do not agree with, then they are less likely to take it personally. When teams commit to procedural transparency, it avoids team members feeling like they have been slighted in the decision-making process.
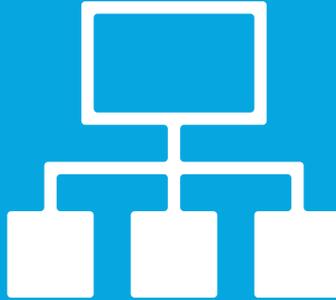
Clearly articulating who you are dependent on and who is dependent on you can redefine team performance
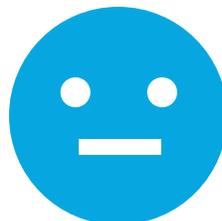
EMOTIONAL ACCEPTANCE
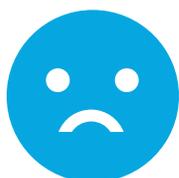
If a decision is made and the team takes the time to qualify their decisions, then members are more likely to feel engaged in the process. They are more likely to feel like their opinions matter. When this is violated, members can become disengaged. If team members feel that they have little or no influence over the decisions made by the team, then they are unlikely to take the time, energy, and creativity to debate about a topic or issue. If members feel like the decision is already made, then they will not engage in good rigorous debate. This will reduce the quality of decisions made by the team. These three components – *Decision Quality, Consensus with Qualification*, and *Emotional Acceptance* – support each other. When one falls apart, teams can quickly under perform.

When people join teams, they can have high emotional attachment to the outcome of the projects they are working on. It is very easy for team members to become disengaged or feel apathetic towards the shared intentions of the group. If the procedural process has been violated or teams feel like certain members are dominating or being manipulative, then this can reduce their *Emotional Acceptance*. Members of a team need to feel that the decisions made were fair and consistent with the procedure that has been established.
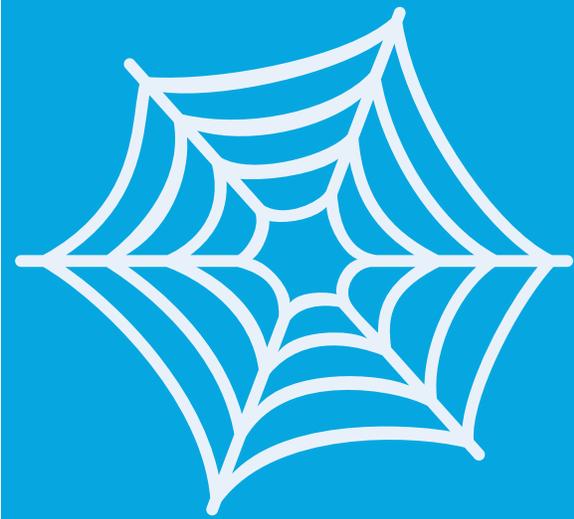
Four traps
teams must avoid

The previous section outlined how high performing teams balance *Decision Quality, Consensus with Qualification* and *Emotional Acceptance*. In this section, we will outline some of the common traps that prevent teams from achieving peak performance. Maintaining high performance is a work in progress.
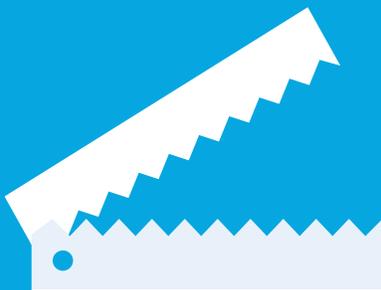
High performing teams avoid Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning

Confirmation bias, is a phenomenon that has been observed by cognitive scientists and social psychologists.

Research suggests that, as humans, we look for evidence that supports our existing beliefs and ignore evidence that contradicts our beliefs. This is a very common, but dangerous phenomenon which can prevent teams from making quality decisions.

One way to understand why we might be prone to confirmation bias can be explained by another phenomenon known as motivated reasoning. Individuals and teams can be highly motivated to ignore inconvenient evidence or data that suggests that an individual or team is heading in the wrong direction. Inconvenient evidence implies that the team may now need to make a radical change in direction or rethink their existing ways of working. Accepting this need to rethink and change existing ways of working is very inconvenient and often result in teams and individuals ignoring contradicting evidence.

High performing teams avoid confirmation bias and motivated reasoning by focusing on data and ensuring that decisions are based on strong evidence. High performing teams use data to question their existing assumptions and are willing to course correct when needed.

High performing teams avoid group polarity

When people come together for a shared purpose, it is only natural that they might have different perspectives, motivations, and agendas.

Similarly, when teams get together, they may have varied opinions on the next course of action. Group polarization occurs when sub groups emerge within a larger team. There can be two sub-groups or there can be many, but when these groups do not agree on the future direction, it can bring team performance to a standstill. If groups begin to blame each other for problems that may arise, sub-groups can be very toxic. There is no formula for avoiding group polarization, but there are some things you can do that help reduce the chances of group polarization in your teams. While healthy conflict is good for teams, it needs to be interest or task based disagreement, not personal or emotional.

One way of avoiding group polarization is by ensuring that team members are making decisions based on interest and not positions. Interest refers to the larger shared purpose. Ask team members what is your interest in being part of this team? What are you hoping to accomplish?

Most often polarization occurs because group members have taken a position. They have decided, this is my position with respect to the topic under discussion. Unless subgroups can shift each other's positions, groups remain polarized. Reminding groups to focus on interests or the overarching purpose, can remind members of why they came together as a team. This reframing can often help to unstick polarized teams.

Another way we can avoid group polarization is by offering more than two options. Two options create the natural conditions for group polarization. Providing more than three options helps to strengthen the debate, especially when participants are asked to develop criteria for their choices. It also allows team members to change their minds based on new evidence presented. High performing teams make quality decisions. When we have multiple options, it is easier for team members to change their opinion without losing face. This means that we need to foster a culture where someone who changes their mind is not interpreted as unreliable. We need to ensure that decisions are made by using data and build a culture of *Consensus with Qualification* Under these conditions, decision making becomes depersonalized and transparent. Teams are better able to see perspectives of other members, analyze a situation, and decide which course of action they should take.
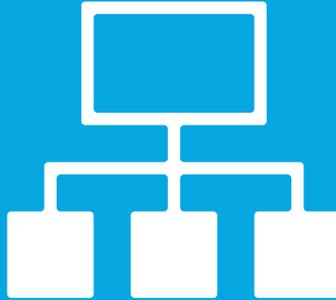
*Conflict in teams can be very productive if members do not resort to emotional and personal attacks.*

3

TEAM MEMBERS FEEL
THEIR VOICE MATTER

A common, but deadly dynamic that occurs in teams is referred to as the "illusion of agreement."

Illusion of agreement occurs when members of a team falsely say that they agree with a decision or direction the team is heading towards, but they actually disagree with the decision made. The most common reason for "illusion of agreement" is that team members think they have little or no influence on the decision. Earlier we referred to this as Emotional Acceptance. Team members need to feel like they can have an influence on the outcome of decisions before they will be willing to invest in healthy debate. People do not want to invest their time and energy if they feel that their efforts will not be taken into consideration.

Illusion of agreement is a compounding problem. For example, the presenting problem is often described as a lack of engagement and is usually a sign that you have a problem with illusion of agreement. In this scenario, team members may have disengaged because they do not think their contributions will be respected. In high performing teams, members feel like their voice and contributions matter and they have a high stake in the outcome of the project. Consequently, high performing teams also have high engagement because team members feel like they own the problem the team is trying to address.

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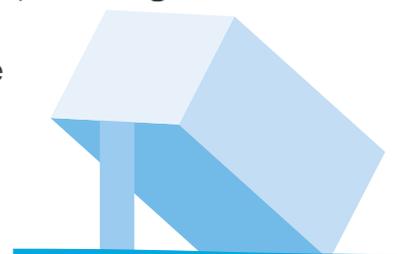
High performing teams foster accountability

It is very easy to blame or tell others what to do. It is even easier to conclude that because someone disagrees with us, they are somehow closed minded, ignorant, or stupid.

Cognitive science has taught us that we all think we see and understand the world in a rational way. When others disagree with us, we tend to assume they are being irrational and we are of course being rational. Cognitive scientists call this *naïve realism.* Naïve realism occurs when we overestimate the extent to which others share our perspective.

Similarly, when mistakes happen or things do not go as planned, we tend to blame people rather than the situation. Conversely, when we make mistakes we tend to attribute blame to the context or situation. This is also known as the fundamental attribution error – the universal tendency to overlook situational circumstances and to blame the individuals' ability or personality.
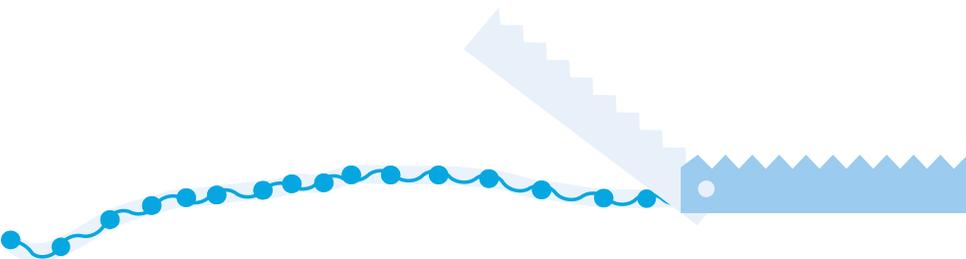
Accountability

Healthy conflict can be very productive in teams if the conflict is task or issue oriented and not personal or emotional. High performing teams manage conflict well, and tend to focus on accountability over blame. These teams clarify roles and responsibilities and ensure that they have strong systems and communication.

Blame
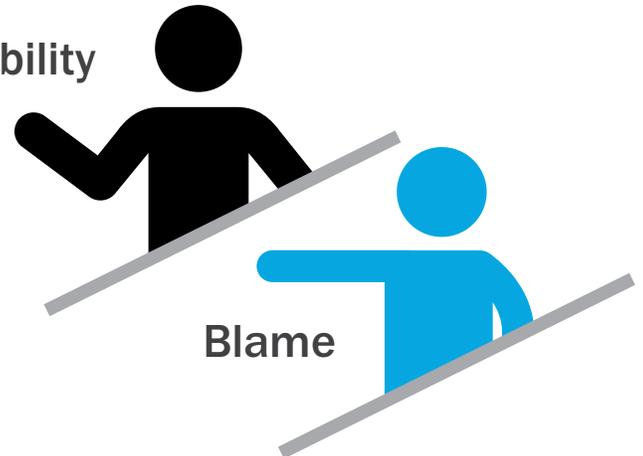
High performing teams are defined by how they manage *Decision Quality, Consensus with Qualification* and *Emotional Acceptance*. Teams are fragile and missteps can change the dynamics within teams forever. When we work and learn together, we can do so much more, so much better, and build resilient teams that help our organizations thrive.

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We Create Outcomes

Our programs are designed to help our clients:

- **Develop** *and implement a strategy to build a business that is right for them;*

- **Implement** *a marketing system to attract the right clients;*

- **Create** *more sales to clients and prospective clients;*

- **Generate** *new leads; and*

- **Build** *an organization to create more free time and professional satisfaction.*

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