TEAM LEADERSHIP

High Performance Teams: What It Takes to Make Them Work

Properly functioning and thriving teams can improve creativity and productivity, yet aren't called upon enough when it comes to improving organizational performance. Teamwork is essential in creating competitive advantage, improving innovation, and achieving goals in the most efficient and effective way possible. All too often, teams are formed to accomplish important tasks, but not always given the skills or proper training to reach peak performance.

In its Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte outlines that it found key trends—employee engagement, culture, time to market, innovation—were best addressed via a network of teams. The challenge that arises in this scenario is the proper management of teams and inter-team communication so that each is working in alignment on their respective projects.

Harvard Business Review reveals that three out of four teams are dysfunctional, all because the organization lacks a systematic approach for supporting them. And Blanchard research estimates that three out of five new teams fail to achieve their goals. Key reasons are inadequate planning, resources, shared leadership, and training.

Ken Blanchard COMPANIES

Teams are defined as any group of two or more people working toward a common goal. A high-performing team is any group that performs at levels that surpass the skills of any individual on the team. When team members are able to tap into and leverage each other's strengths, the momentum can be unstoppable.

As the nature of teamwork in today's organizations continues to evolve, new research was conducted by *Training* magazine and The Ken Blanchard Companies that found, in polling 1,300 employees and managers, that while people spend more than half of their time working in teams, significant gaps exist between what people want and what they are experiencing in terms of clarity, accountability, and leadership practices.

The survey identified a perceived lack of accountability among team members as the number one obstacle to team performance, and identified trust in other team members as the number one factor in determining the amount of effort the respondents put into a team.
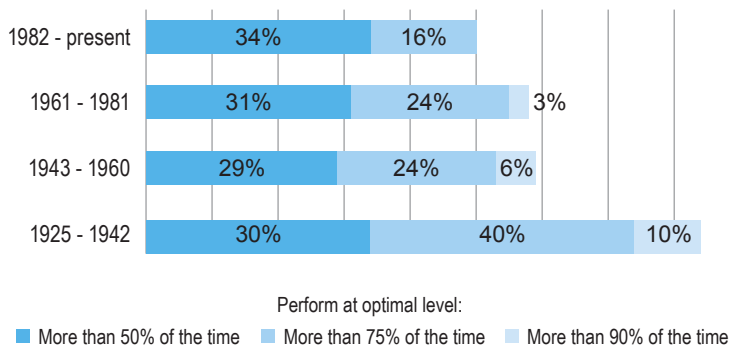
The survey found significant gaps between the amount of support high-performing teams receive and the support average-performing teams receive—at both an individual leader and organizational level. With today's accelerated pace, teams don't have as much time to form, experiment, and organically develop along the way. This leaves an opportunity for Training and Development professionals to review the state of teams in their organizations and take steps to close the gaps.

PERCEIVED LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE—SOME GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

As a part of the survey, respondents were asked how often teams perform at optimum levels in their organizations. Overall, only 27 percent of respondents said their teams perform at top levels a majority of the time, while 43 percent said their teams operate at optimum levels less than half the time. The survey uncovered some generational differences in perceptions, with team performance being rated higher by older respondents than by younger respondents. Respondents born in 1942 or earlier scored their team experiences the highest; all other generations (people born from 1943 to 1960, 1961 to 1981, or 1982 to present) evaluated their team performance at significantly lower levels.

Millennials (people born after 1982) experienced the largest gap between expected and actual team performance. Only 50 percent of millennials said their teams perform at an optimum level more than half of the time, and only 16 percent said their teams operate at optimum levels a majority of the time.

Approximately 60% of teams fail. A key reason is lack of training

—Blanchard research

Figure 1:
Perceptions of Team Performance
by Generations

Generation	More than 50% of the time	More than 75% of the time	More than 90% of the time
1982 - present	34%	16%	
1961 - 1981	31%	24%	3%
1943 - 1960	29%	24%	6%
1925 - 1942	30%	40%	10%

Perform at optimal level:
■ More than 50% of the time ■ More than 75% of the time ■ More than 90% of the time

PERSONAL EFFORT CONSIDERATIONS

Respondents were also asked to identify which conditions impact the level of effort they put in to the teams they work on. Eleven conditions were listed; respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:
My Personal Effort Depends On...

Percentage who said they Agree or Strongly Agree

Statement	Percentage
Whether I trust the other team members	~61%
The level of support I get from my team leader	~60%
Whether or not team members are allowed to share opposing opions	~60%
The level of support I get from my fellow team members	~50%
Whether everyone is treated equally	~48%
Other team members doing their part	~48%
Whether I agree with the stated values of the team	~48%
Whether or not my contribution to the team is openly acknowledged	~31%
Whether team success continues to my own goals	~28%
Whether I like my team members	~17%
Whether my compensation is affected by team performance	~16%

(0% – 60%)

When asked, "As a member of a team, the amount of effort I contribute to a team depends on …," the three statements respondents most agreed with were

- Whether I trust the other team members
- The level of support I get from my team leader
- Whether or not team members are allowed to share opposing opinions and disagree with each other

The three statements respondents deemed least important were

- Whether team success contributes to my own goals
- Whether I like my team members
- Whether my compensation is affected by team performance

97% of employees and executives believe lack of alignment within a team impacts the outcome of a task or project
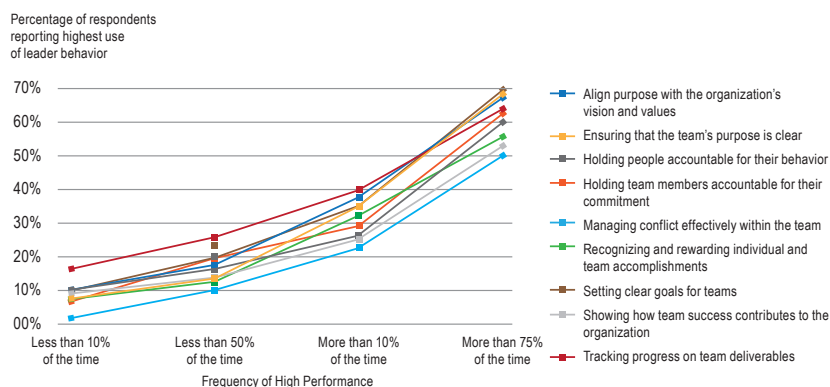
—ClearCompany

THE TEAM LEADER'S ROLE

An expanded analysis of the survey results correlated leadership behaviors with team performance. A total of nine key leadership behaviors were studied. Nearly 90 percent of respondents indicated that these leadership behaviors were critical or very important to how teams function:

- Aligning purpose with the organization's vision and values
- Ensuring that the team's purpose is clear
- Holding people accountable for their behavior
- Holding team members accountable for their commitment
- Managing conflict effectively within the team
- Recognizing and rewarding individual and team accomplishments
- Setting clear goals for teams
- Showing how team success contributes to the organization
- Tracking progress on team deliverables

The more that respondents observed positive leadership behaviors, the more likely the team was to be high performing.

Figure 3:
How Key Leadership Behaviors Impact Team Performance

A metanalysis of more than 50 studies and 8,500 participants reinforced the high value of training in all teams' effectiveness
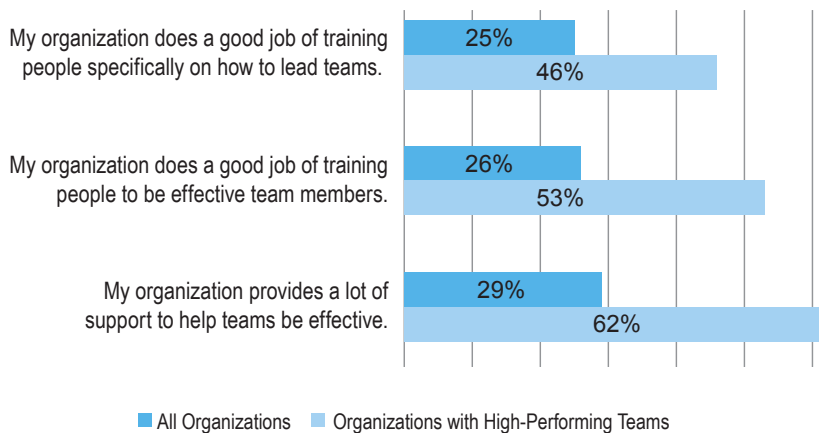
THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Taskwork training (which focuses on developing technical competencies) and teamwork training (which focuses on team coordination, leadership, adaptation, and feedback) have been shown to have a significant positive impact on team performance outcomes. In a metanalysis, researchers found significant support for the concept that teamwork training is an effective and successful way to foster and improve teamwork and team performance. In addition, the researchers found that approximately 70 percent of adverse events in medical settings are not due to individuals' technical errors, but are a result of breakdowns in teamwork, suggesting that teamwork training can indeed be a useful way of enhancing team effectiveness.

The metanalysis, which included more than 50 academic studies and more than 8,500 participants, concluded that there were ultimately beneficial and positive effects of teamwork interventions for improving team effectiveness, regardless of industry. It also concluded that the empirical evidence to date shows that teams can be improved via teamwork training.

In Blanchard's study, we looked to correlate perceived training and support with team performance. The survey found that the highest-performing teams enjoy greater levels of support in general as well as higher levels of training for team members and team leaders. For example, when asked to what degree their organization supported teams to help them be more effective, 62 percent of people in organizations with high-performing teams agreed or strongly agreed that their organization provides a lot of support—more than double the overall average of 29 percent.

When respondents were polled specifically about the level of training team members and team leaders receive, organizations with high-performing teams outpaced average-performing teams (53 percent to 26 percent) on doing a good job with team-member training. Organizations with high-performing teams outpaced average-performing teams (46 percent to 25 percent) on doing a good job training people specifically on how to lead teams (see Figure 4).

A key reason for the need for training: only 27% of people surveyed felt their teams were high performing

—Blanchard research

Figure 4:
Agree or Strongly Agree

My organization does a good job of training people specifically on how to lead teams. 25% / 46%

My organization does a good job of training people to be effective team members. 26% / 53%

My organization provides a lot of support to help teams be effective. 29% / 62%

■ All Organizations ■ Organizations with High-Performing Teams

THE ROLE OF THE TEAM LEADER

For organizations looking to improve team training to meet increasing needs, it's important for leaders to begin with a seven-point checklist to identify areas where teams might not be performing at optimal levels.

In the absence of data, there is a tendency for leaders to overestimate the effectiveness of their teams. It's especially important for senior-level leaders to first get an accurate picture of what is happening in their organizations. For example, the *Training* magazine/Blanchard survey identified a 15 percent gap in how executive-level leaders and individual contributors see team

performance levels. For executive leaders, 35 percent say high performance is more frequent, while only 20 percent of individual contributors see the same frequency of high performance. Teams go through four predictable stages; these stages are defined by the team's current levels of productivity and morale, and each requires different behaviors from the leader to keep the team focused and moving forward. Team leaders can influence the team's productivity and morale by staying in tune with their team members and managing the situation accordingly.

THE ROLE OF THE LEADER IN EACH STAGE OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Stage 1 – Structuring and Orientation

In this stage the team is just starting up. Members may or may not know each other or why they've been convened as a team. Most likely the team members will have questions about their roles and the team's purpose. In this stage, leaders should

- Set the context for the team's work
- Help team members get to know each other
- Develop a team charter to guide behavior and performance
- Establish boundaries

Stage 2 – Dissatisfaction

In this stage team morale and performance can drop for many reasons. Perhaps the work is harder than initially imagined, or team members begin to have unresolved differences of opinion on how to proceed. In this stage, leaders should

- Address and invite discussion about conflict
- Encourage honest and curious communication
- Provide feedback on progress
- Ensure that everyone's voice is heard

Stage 3 – Integration

In this stage morale and performance begin to climb. Generally, problem solving and communication are improving along with collaboration and competence. In this stage, leaders should

- Encourage participation and inclusion
- Cultivate trust
- Recognize contributions
- Foster accountability

Stage 4 – Production

In this phase the team has reached a high level of performance. Morale and productivity are high, and performance and communication are flourishing. In this stage, leaders should

- Encourage creativity, agility, and risk taking
- Recognize and celebrate the team
- Relinquish control
- Help the team apply lessons learned to new challenges

SEVEN KEY AREAS LEADERS SHOULD EXPLORE

1. **Purpose and values**. Does the team have a strong sense of purpose and a common set of values? Does the team have an agreed-upon compelling vision? All good team performance starts with having clear goals.

2. **Empowerment.** Do team members have the authority to act and make decisions? Does the team have clear guidelines about what is and isn't out of bounds?

3. **Relationships and communication.** Is the team committed to open communication? Do people feel they can take risks and share their thoughts, opinions, and feelings without fear? It is critical that team members communicate openly and honestly and demonstrate respect for others.

4. **Flexibility and adaptability.** Do team members feel a shared responsibility for team performance, development, and leadership? How does the team adapt to changing conditions? Do the team's leader and members hold each other accountable?

5. **Optimal performance goals and productivity.** Is the team committed to high standards and quality? Do team members hold each other accountable for their respective goals and strive for continual improvement?

6. **Recognition and appreciation.** Do team members provide each other with positive feedback and recognition? Recognition reinforces behavior, builds esteem, and enhances a feeling of value and accomplishment.

7. **Morale.** Are team members enthusiastic about their work? Are they proud of their results and of belonging to the team?

MODEL THE BEHAVIOR

For organizations ready to begin improving their teams, it's important that Training and Development professionals be proactive and model an inclusive learning attitude. Involving others in crafting a clear purpose, values, and goals for your teams is one way. And having leaders follow through by reinforcing what was agreed upon, demonstrating supportive behaviors, and walking the talk builds trust between leaders and their direct reports.

Talking openly and creating an environment of safety and trust makes people comfortable about speaking out regarding improving team performance without worrying about upsetting the status quo.

Sometimes it's important for leaders to learn how to let go in order to build collaboration. That way everyone can take responsibility for creating a collaborative environment. When people are busy, it's normal to want to focus on getting individual work done but it's important to remember: If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. Knowing the characteristics and needs of a high-performing team is critical.

The results of the *Training* magazine/Blanchard survey provide a snapshot into today's teams. The survey results give Training and Development professionals a target to shoot for and recommended first steps as they look to create or enhance team training programs in their organizations. Consider how these results and findings can help begin a dialogue about team performance in your organization.

Article Authors

Jim Diehl is a research analyst for The Ken Blanchard Companies and a core member of Blanchard's research and development team.

David Witt is a program director and researcher for the Office of the Future, The Ken Blanchard Companies' think tank and research and development division.

Dobie Houson is Director of Marketing Research for The Ken Blanchard Companies and is responsible for thought leadership, customer loyalty, and market intelligence.

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