

# High Performing Teams

By Peter Stoppelenburg

**"Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than in the one where they sprang up"**

**- Oliver Wendell Holmes, poet**

The importance of a team-oriented culture and well-functioning teams is key in a high Performance Organisation (HPO). In times where collaboration, co-creation and creativity determine the success of an organization, well-functioning teams are essentially important. Innovation is quicker when done in teams, employees more contented about their work, the work delivered of higher quality and generally people achieve more creative, better solutions and results. I, like most people, have been a member of many different teams during my career. Some teams were brief, put together for small projects, other teams were a long term collaboration, e.g. a management team to transform a business unit. My experience is that some teams ran smoothly from the outset, without too much difficulty, the members worked well together, trust was easily built up and issues were discussed openly and performance came effortlessly. On the other hand, there were also teams that just didn't get off the ground, not even after all team members had put a lot of time and effort into it. This was not reluctance, or bad intentions of team members; the members were all good people with many qualities, but it just didn't work. Why? Clearly, there are conditions that must be met before a team can function correctly. But before we examine the success factors of a team let's first look at the types of teams you can differentiate. The degree of collaboration and team spirit of a group of employees can, when it comes to functioning and performance, cover a spectrum of:

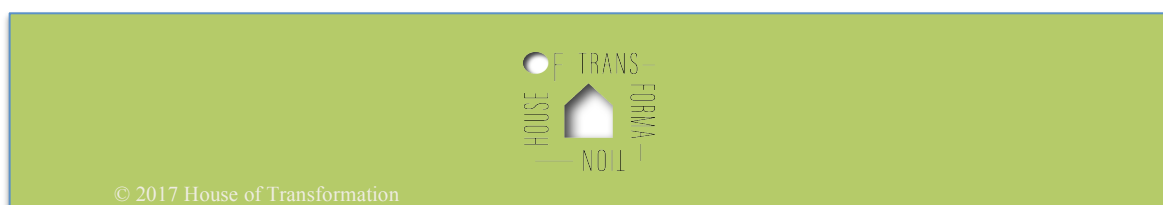
- A group of **separate individuals**: only trusts individual qualities. There are numerous one-on-one relationships and little mutual support. Everyone has his own area for attention and receives some feedback in his performance. The feedback often lies in the area of content and not behavior or leadership skills.



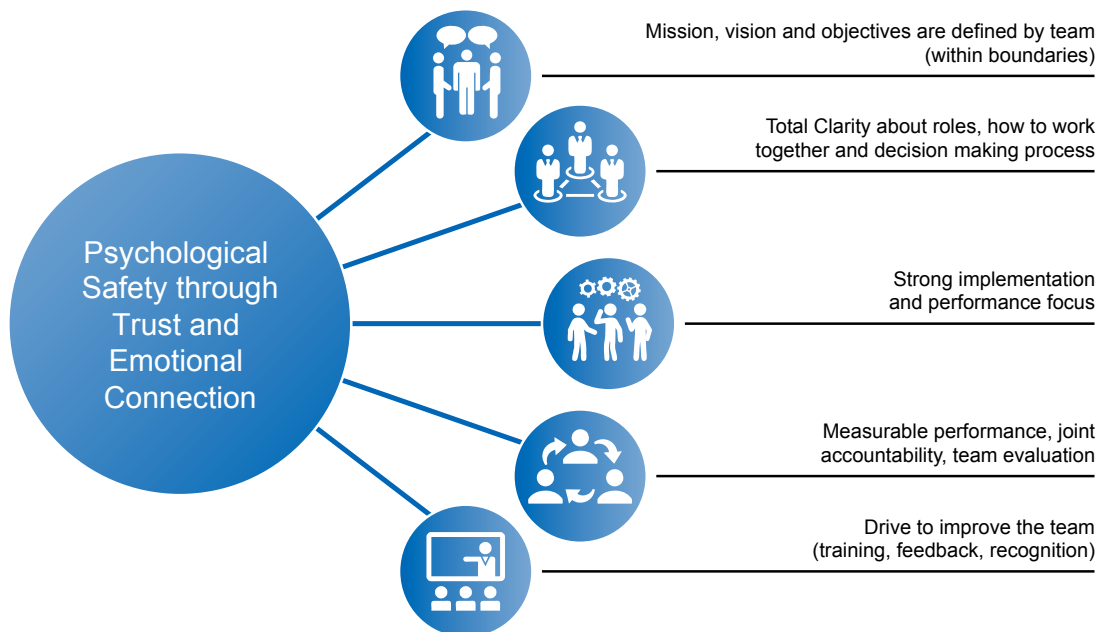
- An (incidental) **work group**: trusts individual contributions, where the members only feel responsible for their own contribution. The group does support each member in his/her functioning, with a focus on individual goals and responsibilities.
- A **real team**, where the members have complementary skills and work together on a collective goal, for which they also feel collectively responsible, and trust that together they can deliver more. There is a lot of interaction, people work together on activities and share the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’. Team members actively coach each other and people work well together.
- A **High Performance-team**, in addition to the elements of a **real team** the members feel strongly responsible for each other’s individual development and success: ‘I see my success as your success.’ The team is more important than the task and there is great trust in colleagues. These are often self-organizing teams with a high level of maturity.

In this spectrum the one form of collaboration in a team is not better than the other, so let’s not be judgmental. It is not necessary to become a high performance team for every job to be successful. To become a high performance team a lot of time and effort is required and it may not be worth it. Here too, it depends on the context. If there is a small project to be completed or a simple issue to handle, it is possible that a workgroup can do the job fine. However, the world we live and work in is becoming increasingly complex and if teams have to perform tasks for longer and in case of more significant issues, high performance teams are better able to think up and execute solutions. It is also essential to thoroughly understand the elements of a high performance team and to apply these to other and perhaps more short term ways of collaborating.

In addition to working in many teams myself, over the years I have also led several teams as team coach and helped them become more effective teams. After a while you begin to recognize patterns and using those to understand what switches you as a team can turn to achieve a better performance. Six elements can be distinguished which are decisive to the success of the team and determine whether you are a high performance team. These elements are summarized below in the High Performance Team Framework.



# High Performance Team Framework



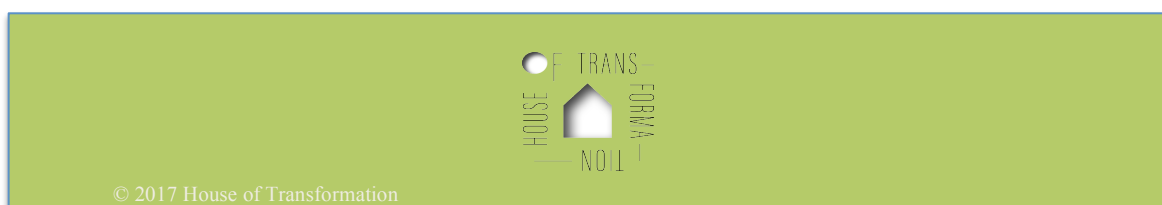
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**Psychological safety through trust and emotional connection:** High Performance teams reach superior levels of participation, collaboration and togetherness because the members enjoy what they do, share a strong sense of group identity, do not doubt their effectiveness as a team and trust each other. Trust in each other and trust in the team is the lubricating oil of a high performance team. Trust is not a goal in itself but the way in which people get along and work together, in other words, the outcome of how the elements of the team framework are established by the team. Trust is expressed in the form of collaboration by means of mutual respect and a high level of integrity. This leads to a psychologically safe environment. This is crucially important for how the team functions. A high performance team has a high level of psychological safety, which Amy Edmondson of Harvard defines as a: *“shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking”*. Psychological safety gives: *“a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up. This confidence stems from mutual respect and trust among team members.”* However, as was proved earlier, emotional connection is one of the most important factors for

having greater trust in each other. Members of high performance teams, generally have an above average social sensitivity compared to average teams. This can be seen in the fact that people really care about each other and show kindness. They talk about themselves, dare to open up and talk about personal issues and fears. But they feel very clearly how the others are feeling. According to Anita Woolley (2010) of Carnegie Mellon University, due to this above average sensitivity, a high performance team has a higher collective intelligence. Thus, a high level of social sensitivity ensures better team performance. Following from this social sensitivity, her research also shows that in high performance teams, members have and take roughly the same amount of speaking time. Woolley explains it as follows: *“As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well, but if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined.”*

In chapter 1 I talked about emotional intelligence as a distinctive characteristic for the effectiveness of an individual. The same is also true for teams. Teams can also utilize their emotional intelligence to improve the functioning and results of the team. It is therefore also important as a team to recognize the collective emotional intelligence of the team, to utilize it to achieve a better performance and to improve it. Vanessa Urch Druskat of the University of New Hampshire and Steven Wolff carried out research into emotional intelligence in teams and they discovered the emotional intelligence of the team is not simply a sum of the emotional intelligence of the individual members. You can increase the emotional intelligence of the team by developing standards for how people act with each other in the team or as they say: *"emotional intelligence comes from norms that support awareness and regulations of emotions"*. Therefore, the power of emotions in the team is used deliberately for both painful issues and conflicts as caring and compassion. These reinforce trust, group identity and effectiveness and are the basis for the collaboration.

**Clear mission, vision and objectives:** in a high performance team the mission (why), vision (how) en objectives (what) of the team are completely clear to every member of the team. They are also developed by the team within the framework of the general strategy of the organization and any further framing by management. Because the mission, vision and objectives are a product of co-creation there is a complete buy-in from every team member. They also embody the values and norms of the organization.



Also, there is easy access to higher management, other teams and information but this is then also one of the features of a high performance culture.

**Complete clarity of roles, way of collaborating and decision making:** High performance teams are characterized by complete clarity and transparency. High performance teams are often characterized by a large degree of diversity of team members with different and complementary competences. The benefit of this is that issues are approached from different points of view. However, this can only work properly if everyone's role in the team is absolutely clear. It should be made clear that the team members are empowered in this role in the sense that they have a role where they flourish best. One pitfall is that an expert is deployed for every role, but a group of experts is not necessarily a high performance team; that requires more, so it is also possible to put someone in a role to learn new skills and thus create a dynamic, learning environment in the team.

Furthermore, it is extremely important that teams agree on how they collaborate. Here the standards for collaboration are established. As mentioned in the previous paragraph these social norms form the basis of the psychological safety that to a large extent determines the effectiveness and performance of the team. This is, as it were, the 'team contract'.

Unfortunately, in my own experience not enough attention is given to this. Each member implicitly makes his own individual assumptions about how the team will collaborate and no explicit standards, to which the individual team members will comply or be held accountable, are set collectively. My experience has taught me that also in organization cultures where team work is the standard, a 'team contract' is quite easy to realize because the norms and values of the organization already include collaboration. In organization culture that is more focused on the individual, this is much more difficult to realize and it takes a lot of effort to find a good method of collaboration.

In a high performance team the decision making process is also clear and transparent. In this context it is important that, where necessary, team members are part of that decision making process. But let's be clear, that this does not always need to be the case because a decision, for instance, lies within the area of expertise of one of the team members. Not everyone needs to be heard as long as the agreements on this are clear for everyone and the decision process is fast.

**Strong implementation and performance focus:** nowadays it is important that matters are dealt with fast. The time between an issue occurring and an idea for a solution being generated is becoming increasingly shorter. That is why it is important that teams 'act decisively' and are strongly focused on implementation and execution of solutions. Of course these must be high quality and adequate for the issue. Only then can you, as a team, deliver the right performance. There is then a strong focus on performance and delivery and that which is delivered complies with or even exceeds expectation.

**Joint accountability:** in line with the previous point, performance is measured and evaluated in a transparent manner. The performance measures are developed jointly by the team and are available to everyone. Everyone's contribution is clear and fully transparent. But this is not used to judge each other. Team members are not afraid to fail, because trial and error are the norm in a learning environment. If a member is unable to deliver, he is open and transparent about it and instead of becoming bogged down in excuses, everyone looks for a joint solution. In this case, asking for help is a sign of self-awareness and strength. Although it is clear what each team member contributes, ultimately the team is jointly accountable for the performance vs objectives.

**Drive to improve the team:** The team works under the assumption that today's knowledge and skills will not be sufficient for tomorrow's challenges. There is a strong drive to continuously improve the team and its performance. Members continuously work on improving skills, supporting each other, and there is a genuine interest in each other's personal development. Feedback is given continuously in a respectful, honest manner. Also, issues are discussed openly and there are no hidden agendas. In many teams and organizations there are so-called 'undiscussables' or 'elephants in the room'. Everyone knows they are there, everyone sees them, but no one talks about them. Sometimes if I am working with a team to help them become a high performance team, with the best of intentions one of the team members may whisper in my ear that it's better if I do not mention some issues. Then I know enough, in a high performance team there are no 'undiscussables'. These are precisely the biggest obstacles that get in the way of the team's growth. These are often also the deeper

emotionally highly charged themes that people take a wide berth to avoid and that are silently ignored. It is precisely these issues that should not lie dormant, but should be discussed openly and resolved; only then can the team move on. It works the other way too, in the sense that emotional questions that might support the team's progress should be made visible. Evaluation and learning also means time for reflection and realizing what has been achieved. Successes are celebrated and credits are given freely. This can come in any shape or form, but a pat on the back, a handwritten note or just a friendly compliment work wonders and is often more appreciated than monetary reward. There is a positive culture in the team, one where recognition is the norm.

Teams can rise to great heights if they develop according to the elements of the high performance team framework. This often begins simply by taking the time to get to know each other on a business but also on a personal front and clearly agreeing how you intend to collaborate and meet the social norms. My experience is that very few teams give themselves enough time for this because they live in the assumption that you have to deliver immediately and should get into action mode. As a new team, take at least a half day or day for this an invest in the psychological safety that is the basis for the team success. This investment pays itself back twofold in how the team functions and in the future collaboration. There is also often the assumption that if you put all excellent employees together in a team it will all go well. I hope it is clear from the descriptions above that this certainly not a recipe for success. If the excellent employees do not develop as a team according to the elements of a high performance team, then this team is guaranteed to display underperformance. On the other hand, if a team of average employees does concentrate on developing according to the high performance elements, it can lead to extremely high level performances. In that case the sum will be greater than its parts. In short, the effectiveness of the team depends more on how the team collaborates than who is in it.

***"Talent wins games, but teams and intelligence win championships"***

***- Michael Jordan***

