

## An Exploration of High-Performing Teams

To better understand current opportunities and challenges facing leaders and their teams, a diverse mix of 17 mid to senior-level leaders in corporate, public, and not-for-profit organizations were interviewed about their perspectives regarding high-performing teams. The objective was to help leaders of teams to better understand current opportunities and challenges facing leaders and their teams so they could be most impactful and perform at the highest level possible. Below are the key points generated from the interviews.

### What makes a team “high-performing”

There are many key distinctions that I took away from my interviews on what leaders believe contribute to a team being high performing:

- 1. Team members co-own the overall performance of the team.** This is not just focusing on financial goals and objectives but also regarding culture (engagement) and people development. Everyone is clear and has a common understanding regarding the focus of the team as well as the goals for each area within. And everyone has accountability to ensure the overall goals are achieved. They own their respective domains, and at the same time, they co-own the overall enterprise and have skin in the game for the success of each other as well - “We lose or we win together.” This requires sufficient cross-functional acumen to be able to add value across the enterprise beyond their functional or geographic role.
- 2. Team members recognize the need also to develop their own teams.** In addition to being committed to developing the team they are part of, members are focused on developing and empowering the teams that they lead. They recognize the need to develop and empower their teams to support them in owning the success of their collective domains. As their own teams show up as capable leadership teams in their area, the leaders have more capacity to elevate and focus on the team they are all part of and maximize their contribution and impact.
- 3. Giving and receiving feedback is a core competency.** Giving and receiving honest and robust feedback to one another is a critical success factor in becoming a high-performing team. This is a demonstration of being at stake for everyone to be successful. While it is critical to be honest and demanding, it is also important to be supportive and kind.
- 4. Healthy conflict becomes the norm.** Members need to face into and work through the hard conversations to welcome conflicting ideas rather than insisting upon homogenous thinking. Members need the courage to take risks and have breakdowns be okay, to proactively call out breakdowns when they occur, and to fully learn from them without choosing to make any of it personal.
- 5. The leader moves to the back.** The leader’s role needs to become less dominant as the team becomes high-performing. As the team becomes increasingly proficient, the leader’s role becomes one that is supportive, empowering, and challenging, and they

shift their focus to influencing up and out. They move from being the decision maker to being the one who ensures the team makes good decisions, to supporting the team to making increasingly effective and impactful decisions.

6. **Trust is crucial.** Regarding relationships across the team, many cite trust as a crucial element. This is driven by the work of getting to know each other and identifying the common ground, the shared values across the team and establishing a strong sense of comradery across the team. Members trust one another to enable each other to bring their best version of themselves to the team, to the work and, as part of that, to assume positive intent across the team.

### Some of the critical success factors in developing a High Performing Team

In gathering the research, critical success factors emerged that were necessary in order for a team to be successful on their journey to High Performance. If any of these factors are missing, additional work may need to be done or some changes to the team must be made for the team to reach the highest levels of success.

1. The leader is committed to the journey, assembles the right people, and develops the team to be strong without generating dependency on the leader.
2. The team is clear on the “why” of being a team as well as the “what”, the key focus areas the team co-owns that are distinct from what they each own locally.
3. The team members have the capacity to learn and grow, the emotional intelligence needed, and the commitment to becoming a high-performing team.
4. They establish solid ways of working, including being transparent, providing peer feedback in the moment, and being receptive to input, which act as guardrails on the team’s journey.
5. The work of becoming a high-performing team is viewed as a must-have rather than as a nice-to-have if time allows.
6. There is a commitment to build and sustain strong relationships across the entire team.

### The impact of teams becoming high-performing

One of the critical pieces to remember is the significant return on the investment of becoming a high-performing team, that it is very much worth the effort. In some ways, it is much easier to just continue as is. The journey to high performance takes intention, dedication, and engagement from all involved. When teams do embark on the journey to be high-performing, they begin to leverage the synergy that exists within, are significantly more resilient in the face of change, and are more able to innovate and overcome obstacles that arise. Below are additional benefits that leaders have shared.

1. **High commitment leads to strong results.** There is significantly greater engagement and fulfillment across the team. The team becomes increasingly energized, thriving during challenge and difficulty- “We became an alternative energy source.” Members enjoy the journey, rely on one another more and more, and want to be with each other. A few mentioned that they very much started to look forward to their team meetings. They generate strong relationships that often become life-long friendships. Some also notice that the team moves from “we can’t do this,” getting caught up in constraint to “how can we do it,” exploring what’s possible.
2. **The success rate increases dramatically.** They accomplish and achieve so much more in a high-performing team than when working independently of one another. They consistently deliver results and even begin to over-achieve targets, exceeding expectations- their own as well as those of others. They dramatically turn around the organization’s performance in a short amount of time. Some indicated that their teams played a critical role in transforming their broader organizations.
3. **Difficult conversations are handled effectively.** Many shared that they deal with conflict much more effectively. They learn to face into conflicts directly and honestly and successfully resolve them rather than going underground and allowing conflicts to linger and worsen. Members effectively work through differences and issues increasingly efficiently without personalizing any of them.
4. **High-performing teams make better decisions.** Decisions are more comprehensive, and teams make decisions much more efficiently. Different perspectives are voiced, heard, and considered. The right individuals, sub-teams, or teams then make the decision. Local decisions are directed to those who are most impacted by those decisions. The team gets clear as to what decisions they own and what decisions are owned by the next level(s).

**Clear commitment and ownership.** Members of high-performing teams generate clear commitment and ownership for the enterprise that travels beyond their functional or geographic domain of leadership. They are clearly at stake in wanting the organization to succeed. They typically encourage people deeper in the organization to follow suit and develop ownership and accountability for the enterprise as well.

5.

Some of the biggest challenges in developing or sustaining high-performing teams

High Performance doesn't come easily, and in today's world, the challenges to developing or sustaining a high-performing team are more substantial than ever.

1. **The team is not a priority.** Members can choose consciously or not to make the development of the team a priority and not make the time to do the work of becoming a high-performing team. There's always something more urgent and pressing clamoring for attention in the moment, and the return on the investment in becoming a team is often not immediate.
2. **Constant change in membership.** If people are constantly coming and going, with no periods of stability, it can be difficult to generate momentum as a team, especially if the leadership continues to change. If the team doesn't have a robust onboarding process, getting new members up to speed can take a long time, which also slows the team down.
3. **The leader is not committed.** Problems can arise if the leader is not committed to the journey or leadership does not see the importance of collaboration. If they do not see the need to develop a team, they won't provide the investment- support, space, time and/or other resources- needed to develop the team.
4. **Teams become complacent.** They can sit back, get good enough, begin to plateau, and let the foot off the gas pedal. They can become complacent about how the team operates and the mindsets needed to remain high-performing. They can begin to let things slip, and the team will slide back if they are not attentive. It's important to remember that teams don't stay static- they either move ahead or slip back.
5. **Some may not be willing to do the work.** Becoming a high-performing team is hard. A member may not be okay with stepping out of their comfort zone. They may not perceive the need to be vulnerable, to be at stake for others and for the team.
6. **A culture of silos.** The culture of the organization is steeped in tribalism. People are divided by function, division, region, etc., inhabiting silos, and the culture fosters separation and rivalry.

### The one piece of advice you'd offer someone who is embarking on the journey of developing a team

In each of my interviews, I asked for one piece of advice they would give to someone embarking on the journey of developing a high-performing team. Here is a summary of the brilliant responses from my interviewees:

1. **Have a strong intention and vision.** Be super intentional in putting the team together: why a team? What do you want? What are you trying to achieve? Does it require a team? Know that building a high-performing team is work, that it will require a significant investment of time and energy to do so, and it's not something you do incidentally as you go about your business

2. **Vulnerability is key.** As the leader, demonstrate vulnerability and be accessible. Be true and revealing of who you are, what you want to be, and enable your team to be safe to share that as well. Take the lead to build a sense of community and connection,
3. **Know that the results are worth the hard work.** To really do it right at the beginning, know it will be draining. Know that it will be hard, and be ready and committed. The rewards will come, and breakthroughs will occur. Read the room- it's so personal at the beginning; everyone else is going through the same thing, and pay attention to what others are experiencing along the way. The leader needs to be fully present and keep at it.
4. **Prepare to be surprised and non-attached.** What the team creates may be very different from what the leader might generate individually. Listen to the quietest voices in the room, encouraging them to come to the fore- you may hear what is unexpected or different.
5. **Trust people.** Give them the tools and development they need to succeed, and trust them to deliver the results they're asked to deliver. Let people learn through their own experience, their successes, and their failures. And enable the team not to need you as soon as you can.

## Conclusion

Becoming a high-performing team is a difficult endeavor. Some potential clients perceive the move to high performance as a light switch, a rapid change in who they are, how they operate and what they achieve. However, as indicated in this paper, becoming a high-performing team is a journey, one that requires ongoing attention, commitment, and the space to grow. From the evidence shared in this paper, the journey is more than worth the effort, with payback regarding results, relationships, and the individual evolution that carries into the world outside of work.

As stated up front, I had set out to test my long-standing assertions and assessments about high performing teams through the interviewing of several leaders from different contexts and backgrounds. It turns out that the findings from the interviews were consistent with the perspectives I've been running with for the past few years. What was a bit new was the emphasis many put on commitment- to the journey, to the team, and to each other as teammates. There was also confirmation of the importance of investing in the development of trust across the team.

The interviews occurred in the early phase of COVID. Since then, how teams interact and get things done has shifted significantly, with work becoming more virtual. The need for strong, trusting relationship development has become even more critical and foundational in effectively bridging distances and maintaining connections that were so much easier to develop and sustain if team members were co-located. We now know how to deal with shutdowns, and there may be more in the future. The work of developing resilience and elasticity in

working together is actually a critical investment for not only today but quite possibly for tomorrow.

If you need and desire to become a high-performing team, I encourage you to hire a team coach to aid you in the journey. This will enable you to be fully present in the work and not have one foot out and one foot in. You will also be able to leverage and benefit from the experience of the guide, avoiding the obstacles one who has not been on this journey might encounter and providing the perspective, tools, guidance, and partnership that comes with a seasoned and competent guide or team coach.



***Pete Elder** brings over 20 years of experience and has a solid track record of working with leadership teams and individual leaders worldwide who have achieved unprecedented levels of impact in their organizations and businesses.*

*Clients repeatedly observe that Pete combines rigorous honesty and accountability with kindness and support, deep listening, and high energy.*

*He lives his life to working with teams due to his belief in the vast potential of collaboration, of people working together, combining their efforts to amplify their impact and their voice. He prioritizes collaboration and community in his professional life as well as in his personal life. His commitment is to leave the world a bit cleaner, wiser, and saner than how he found it.*