

Team Effectiveness

THE LEADER'S ROLE IN IMPROVING TEAM PERFORMANCE

BY JACQUELINE ACKERMAN, PH.D.

“Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and rare.”

This is how Patrick Lencioni began his book, [Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), in 2002. Years later, this is still a provocative statement worthy of more discussion. In over 45 years of consulting, we have found that high-performing teams are indeed rare. Many teams underperform or are average (at best), and while there are a myriad of reasons for this, the role of the team leader in creating high-performing teams is worth exploring.

Vantage's preliminary research conducted across fifty executive teams that have used our [High-Performance Team](#) survey suggest that team performance is highly correlated to leader performance, such that when team leaders are more effective, their teams are more effective.

The reality of team improvement, however, is not always that simple. Saying that team improvement comes about only because of the team leader's performance tempts an error of attribution. It is more likely that team improvement comes from an interaction of the team and leader, where each leverages the other. While both the team and its

leader combine to drive high-performance, the leader's influence on setting the tone for the team's interactions is such that we retain a focus on the leader as the catalyst for improvement.

What Leader Behaviors are Most Critical in Improving Team Performance?

Out of the five dimensions of High-Performing Teams (see model), Mutual Respect and Camaraderie is one of the most critical factors contributing to the leader's success, according to our research. Essentially, this dimension asks: does the team leader demonstrate respect and genuineness, and hold people accountable to a high level of collaboration?



Team leaders who score high on Mutual Respect and Camaraderie typically develop followership by building trust, respect, and loyalty. They allow for and promote having tough conversations and challenging debates on business matters; they say what they intend and act on their word. These leaders make conflict productive, and this positively impacts team behavior and collaboration. They take other's opinions into consideration and weigh what others say carefully.

Perhaps most importantly, they don't exercise positional authority – when a team and its leader are at their best, the leader becomes *part* of the team, and everyone's opinions are given a full hearing. In our experience, this isn't common, as it can be hard for leaders to give up control and see beyond themselves in this way. It may not be surprising then that Mutual Respect and Camaraderie is the most commonly reported developmental area for *team leaders*.

Taking it a step further, our research indicates that engaging in Transparent Communication is the most commonly reported developmental area for *team members*. This could reinforce the assertion that if the team leader does not establish an environment of trust, mutual respect, and camaraderie wherein members feel comfortable being candid and open with one another, the entire team feels the impact.

What the Best Teams Do

We have found that the best teams are continually being coached – by the leader and by each other. The leader engages the team, inspires them to action and holds them accountable to evolve, learn and grow. Scoring high on Mutual Respect and Camaraderie allows for this coaching to occur in a safe environment.

In [“Senior Leadership Teams: What it Takes to Make them Great”](#) (2008), Wageman et al. studied 120 executive teams and found that every CEO in a sample had a strong external focus, attending to matters in the broader environment. However, the leaders of *outstanding teams* had an equally strong internal focus on how the team coaches and develops itself.

In sum, we believe that one of the most critical elements of building a high-performing team is the interaction between the leader and team members, such that the leader becomes a facilitator for team development and not the sole driver of results – which leads to the team working together at a higher level.

As a result of our preliminary research, we’d be curious to know:

When there is a correlation between team and leader performance in your organization, what have been the trends?

What are you doing to create an environment of trust and collaboration in your teams?
What works, what doesn’t?

How do leaders build trust and establish a safe environment for transparent communication, in your experience?

What has been the biggest challenge(s) to building trust within your teams?

ABOUT JACQUELINE ACKERMAN

Jacki's career has been dedicated to helping leaders and management teams be more effective, primarily through assessment, coaching and leadership development. She is most passionate about supporting leaders in order to be at their best, realize their potential and have confidence in their choices. Jacki seeks to achieve mission-critical results by identifying setbacks at their root, encouraging individual initiative, and creating dynamic developmental plans. Regardless of the engagement, Jacki serves as an objective sounding board to create a safe environment for greater self-awareness, goal setting, and action planning, resulting in greater professional effectiveness for the individual and the teams they lead. She believes that the process begins first by listening and then providing the right balance of support and challenge. Jacki has coached a broad range of professionals from front-line leaders to executives, and she has a special focus on helping teams and team leaders become more effective within their organizations. She developed the High-Performance Team Solutions practice, which includes a team-360 assessment designed to develop the team, its members, and the team leader.