

A CHAMPION TEAM WILL ALWAYS BEAT A TEAM OF CHAMPIONS

Paul Oliver

The quest to build high performing teams has for many years been the Holy Grail sought by organisations.

Managers often look to sport and the arts for inspiration. There are many exemplars and taking inspiration from a wide range of sources is always a good idea. However, there are some key differences that make the task of building high performing teams in organisations more difficult, in particular the increase in dispersed and mobile teams. These teams do not have the frequent and intimate contact of, say, football team training together or an orchestra rehearsing a piece of music. But there are some simple and pragmatic tips that can be used to help build a high performing team.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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People collaborating to achieve a common goal otherwise unachievable if working alone, must work cohesively and learn together. Those that do are characterised by open disclosure and feedback. Problems can arise when making decisions under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity creating dilemmas. If open feedback is absent or suppressed, dysfunctional behaviour emerges and issues remain unresolved, often being forced 'underground'. This results in impaired performance, which can be so frustrating for everyone in a team.

To make a quick assessment of whether your team has the basic building blocks of a high performing team look at the following:

- Create a distinctive team purpose and ethos
 - What does it produce that is uniquely distinctive and valuable?
 - How does it fit into both its external and internal environment?
 - What would high performance look like?
- Ruthlessly clarify roles and responsibilities
 - Is everyone clear about what they are responsible for?
 - Is everyone clear about how their role fits with others?
 - Does everyone work together to manage performance?
- Specifically agree how the team will work together
 - Do team members openly discuss issues and concerns
 - Are team members regularly providing and receiving feedback?
 - Does the team rely on objective performance and results to manage itself rather than allowing perceptions and relationships to colour their judgment?

When a team forms, the members are relatively uninformed. With experience team members become more informed, learning about the scale and nature of the task, especially the challenges they face. As they become more informed, optimism wanes - perhaps even turning into pessimism.

To avoid pessimism and to become optimistic on an informed basis, it is critical that the team work openly and collaboratively together to create solutions to the issues they must resolve to succeed. This will require the team to openly confront and deal with difficult and controversial issues. This is

the point where “shadow” issues can appear and become “undiscussable”. It is vital that all issues can be discussed in a free, open and forthright manner.

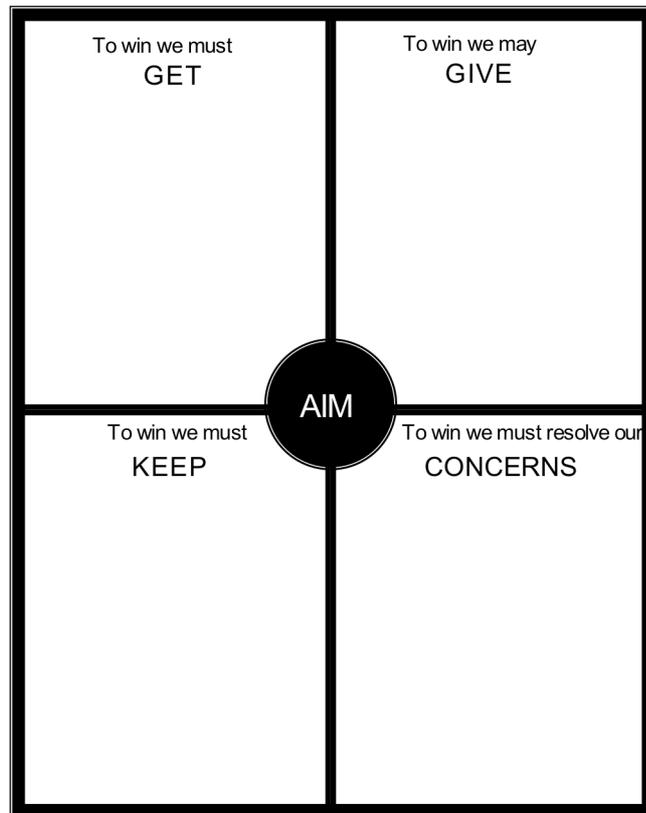
One way of doing this is to use the Team Commitment Matrix (TCM).
(Inset right.)

The process of completing the matrix allows the team to openly explore issues and make judgements about the trade-offs they are prepared to make to be successful.

The difficult conversations prompted by the TCM make challenging issues open for debate, which might otherwise be “undiscussable”. By making the tacit “shadow” issues explicit, open and discussable, builds more collaborative and trusting relationships in the team.

Regularly reviewing the TCM aids ongoing team development and helps to create a team ethos.

The TCM is a simple device to use. The team are asked to brainstorm the things they must “Get” if they are to win and achieve their goal.



However, to get something we may need to make concessions. For example to ‘Get’ to be a high performing team requires us to ‘Give’ time. So, the team brainstorm what they are prepared “Give” to be able to win.

Of course, there will always be things that cannot be conceded under any circumstances. These are the things we must “Keep”.

The most important part of the matrix is the “Concerns”. Top teams “play for each other”. They are both aware of and respond to each other’s needs. The TCM encourages team members to openly share their issues and concerns. The team can then decide to own the issues as a team, if they are widely shared, or adopt “minders” for individual concerns in a network of peer support. With skilful leadership and facilitation, the TCM can become a critical part of the way a team manages its performance. It is a tool that helps teams create the high performance habits and behaviours that elite sports teams or orchestras seem to have instinctively.