

Recruiting Top Performing Teams: The Hidden Dangers in Looking for that Ideal “Team Player”

The “team player” is a standard attribute sought after in countless jobs, as businesses seek workers who will be able to find harmony with workplace cultures and teams. But keeping a team engaged so that the team performs at a level above the individuals within it is a desired outcome; the work in finding people who will improve team performance starts long before the applications start coming in.

Excellence in team performance is the result of the entire employment lifecycle—from knowing the current workforce’s strengths and weaknesses, to role identification through the hiring process, and building better teams through the performance management strategy—focussing on the team as a form of ‘organism’, where structures, policies, procedures, and individuals are all separate components, like a tapestry where the individual pieces comprise the full picture. It requires the structures in an organisation, as well as the people who work within those structures, to work harmoniously, and to find ways to enhance teams’ motivations.

One of the myths prevalent with employers and the general community is the concept of a single characteristic or attribute that can be labelled, “team player”. Indeed, examples of job advertisements with the expression “must be a good team player” continue to appear, with applications and interviews vetted according to the idea that performance in a team in one organisation will effortlessly translate into performance in an entirely different team in another organisation. However, the reality is that team performance is the result of a myriad of characteristics and attributes of the entire team, rather than on each individual being a “team performer”.

Improving team performance involves hiring and retaining workers who will fulfil various roles, rather than a one-size-fits-all “teamster” stereotype. There are three key factors to consider when assessing team performance, and finding more people to join a particular

team: first, current internal drivers such as strategic focus; second, current team structure; and third, the personality type of the potential new team member.

Utilising Complementary Skills in Teams - a Hypothetical Case Study

“A business needs to host a major event to launch an innovative new product into the market. Making a concept that will be memorable will take a big picture approach. Planning the event will need attention to detail. Contacting and hosting VIPs will require strong people skills. Keeping track of each step of the project, maintaining all the contracts and strict adherence to budgeting will require task-oriented attention to detail. It is envisaged that it will take five full-time equivalent staff to make the event happen by the deadline.”

Skills needed for this hypothetical include having a big-picture vision, the ability to be creative, being people-focussed with a pleasant light personality, and task-focussed with strong attention to detail. Many of these skills are contradictory and are unlikely to be present in the same people, but a team with complementary skills is more likely to succeed.

Human Resources Practitioners could approach teams as organisms that are constructed to achieve specific goals; where how they operate is the result of the components of their environment and individuals—indeed, an individual’s personality may be a poor fit for one team, yet may be ideal for another. For example, an individual who leads a team to explore ideas, consider various viewpoints, and select the best option in a collegiate style of leadership may be damaging to team survival in a field like the military or utility departments where trying to consider everyone’s opinion could lead to danger or losing a grasp on deadlines. An individual who is task-focussed and strong on attention to detail may provide a team lacking those skills with great success by maintaining the team’s records, checking contracts, keeping diaries and the like; yet in a team without a visionary, a

group of such individuals may end up in ‘analysis paralysis’, keeping scrupulous records of their inaction and potentially miss out on opportunities to innovate.

While there is no simple checklist of personal attributes that point to success in teams, there is a model that can help leaders reflect on what needs to be present in successful teams. The “Big Five” model of teamwork helps to illustrate the key components that result in a successful team structure: team leadership, orientation, mutual performance monitoring, behaviour, and adaptability (Salas et al, 2009). *Leadership* can be a mix of traditional forms of leadership and collective leadership, where various team members share the leadership function on aspects of the team’s goals. *Team orientation* is an individual’s tendency to orient their behaviours and thinking to better align with the team. *Mutual performance monitoring* points to keeping pace with the rest of the team so that work proceeds consistently. Complementary to mutual performance monitoring, *back-up behaviour* is where team members help each other when their own work is up-to-date, so they take the time to help others on their team achieve their work.

Teamwork is about balance: what can help a team perform and succeed can also lead to failure. The more spectacular examples of this include groupthink, where a group’s attitude and approach becomes so similar and conformist that members of the group are unwilling or even unable to identify and assess opportunities and threats effectively. Mutual performance monitoring can help keep various tasks aligned but can also result in work proceeding more slowly than is necessary as team members all slow down to the slowest member’s work pace. Teamwork should result in every individual’s strengths building upon others’ into a higher quality outcome, but can also result in a “committee job” where the outcome reflects the lowest level of capability of the team on each aspect of the work. Teamwork can be highly effective but is not a guarantee of quality or productivity.

Psychological assessment tools such as the [Team Builder](#) or [Team Contributor](#) are often sought to assist in finding good matches for teams or identify where and how people can improve. To build a team with the aid of assessment tools it can help to keep the following in mind: all current team members should undertake the same assessment to identify individual strengths and then compare them for insight into a ‘bigger picture’, and that

assessing under the assumption that there's a single type of "best" team player may only result in damage to your team development strategy.

If you are contemplating whether your team needs development, or would like to know more about the benefits of teamwork assessment, feel free to view our [Team Building and Team Contributor](#) solutions or get in touch with one of our psychologists.

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References

Salas, E., Rosen, M.A., Held, J.D., & Weissmuller, J.J. (2009). Performance Measurement in Simulation-Based Training. *Simulation & Gaming*, 40(3), 328-376.