

Communications for High-Performance Teams

By Manya Arond-Thomas

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How many times have you been on a team where you felt that you weren't all on the same page, or that the team wasn't performing up to the level it could or should be, and yet....you know that your team members are bright and highly capable?

High-performance as the desired outcome forms the hub of the team wheel. Supporting the hub are four critical spokes, each of which must be built through explicit and clear communication. These four spokes represent phases of team development.

The first spoke is that of membership, in which people are asking questions related to membership and group identity issues : What can I contribute? What is expected of me? What values and assumptions are we working under? What are our individual roles and responsibilities? These questions must be answered for participants to feel that they belong to and are committed to the team.

The second spoke is that of team operating norms. Every group develops norms, either explicitly or tacitly. To be most effective, the team needs to create emotionally intelligent norms that intentionally support behaviors for building trust and group efficacy - both essential to a team's effectiveness. Norms may include whatever individual members believe is important and valuable for effective teamwork.

Norms that lead to high performance are numerous, but can and should include things like:

- Using good listening skills to build on the on-going discussion and offering summaries of issues being discussed to make sure we have a shared understanding.

- The willingness to explore and expose unhealthy work habits in order to build more effective group norms.
- Standards for how we're going to communicate in and outside meetings
- Keeping us on track if we get off
- Facilitating group members' input
- Permission for bringing feelings out in the open and dialoguing about how they affect the team's work

It's the leader's job to instill a sense of responsibility in individuals for the well-being of the team. In self-aware, self-managing teams, members hold each other accountable for sticking to norms.

The third spoke is comprised of communication on issues related to control, which range from resolving issues of leadership style, decision-making and conflict management processes, as well as agreement on operating practices that support development, production and/or implementation.

Lastly, to build the fourth spoke, the group must address and agree on the overarching team goals, addressing the questions of: "What do I want to see happen? What do we want to accomplish? And how will we know when we've accomplished it?"

These spokes comprise a series of developmental stages that high-performing teams negotiate effectively. Lack of team alignment and high performance indicate that the group has not adequately addressed and clarified questions in one or more of the stages of membership, control, or goals. If you find yourself on a team that's not delivering to its potential, it's time to do a team assessment to uncover and bring to light the unresolved issues. When you do that, assuming you have the right players, your team can go from good or even very good to GREAT.

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