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"Dispersed teams can actually outperform groups that are collocated if the right sort of collaboration is in place."

MIT Sloan



Article

Connective intelligence – High contributing teams

High-performing teams don't happen by accident. In times of uncertainty and disruptive change, the ability to create, develop, and empower high-performing teams will give organisations a lasting competitive edge.

Some leaders have the limiting and incorrect belief that a team with many individuals of high performance is a high-performing team.

The success of a business is dependent on good teamwork.

How people work together influences everything. In times of uncertainty and disruptive change, the ability to create, develop, and empower high-performing teams will give organisations a lasting competitive edge. This includes teams in one organisation, local teams for those that cross organisational and geographical boundaries as well as teams with clients, partners and suppliers.

There are many reasons why leaders should now prioritise developing their capability to build high-performing virtual teams. Firstly, fifty of the biggest UK employers questioned by the BBC have said they have no plans to return all staff to the office full-time in the near future. Secondly, many studies have shown that people would like to continue working remotely; Buffer found as many as 99% of employees responded that they would like to work remotely, at least part of the time, for the remainder of their careers.

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Thirdly, research shows people can be as productive or even more productive when working remotely; Bloom and Liang discovered workers were 13% more productive at home, and commentators such as Lynda Gratton at the London Business School describe how knowledge workers have found they are more effective outside the office. Fourthly, it is now evident that most managers have overcome previous fears about trust, impaired collaboration, and lower productivity among remote workers.

There is another dimension which sparks the requirement to build team working performance. Some people have and will return to offices for some of the time, while others are remote and this creates an imperative for leaders to lead hybrid teams. For many global organisations hybrid teams have existed for some time but combined with the current uncertain environment and the fact that with social distancing in our lives our work teams have become even more significant, team leadership will be more important than ever. In times of disruptive change, this ability to create, nurture and empower high-performing teams means leaders are going to have to work harder than ever before to guide, motivate and inspire their teams. My prediction is that there will be a substantial shift from individual to team coaching and from managing team members in silos to managing teams and the connections between team members.

Some leaders have the limiting and incorrect belief that a team with many individuals of high performance is a high-performing team.

A study from MIT Sloan has shown that *“Dispersed teams can actually outperform groups that are collocated, if the right sort of collaboration is in place.”* Chabris and Woolley found that collective intelligence can predict a group’s performance on a wide range of tasks. This is not IQ, motivation, personality or cohesion but performance correlated with the average social sensitivity of group members and the equity in distribution of conversational turn taking. MIT’s Peter Senge comments powerfully on this: *“It is amazing how often you come across teams with an average intelligence of over 120, but the team functions at a collective intelligence of about 60.”* The research and experience show there are some fundamental areas that help or hinder a team’s performance, and some are exacerbated in a virtual environment. Peter Hawkins, Professor of Leadership at Henley Business School, talks about the fact that we have shifted from focusing on IQ to EQ but now need to focus on EQ and CQ, collaborative intelligence.

Companies who understand the principles of social and relational capital will thrive

High-performing teams are groups of people who form social networks and who trust and assist each other to achieve a common objective. Social relationships provide access to resources, information, and emotional support. **Social capital** is an economic idea that refers to the relationships between people and entities, that can be economically valuable. It is developed by the interaction between people at work

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based on the type and frequency of those interactions. Generally, the more interactions, the greater the social capital and level of trust between them.

We have all become aware that social concerns are a primary motivator for human behaviour and humans have a fundamental need to belong. Deloitte research found that 79% of organisations say fostering a sense of belonging is important or very important for the success over the next 12 to 18 months and pre-Covid, only 13% said they were ready to address this trend. We all have our 'relationships capital' which is based on the efforts and value that we have invested through the breadth and depth of friendships and colleague relationships where we have developed trust and mutual support. In today's remote and hybrid teams, part face to face and part virtual, enabling people to develop social and relationship capital will be essential for organisational performance and people's individual success and wellbeing.

Leaders often say they lack the understanding of how to enable their teams to work collaboratively, preferring instead to lead their teams through silos

Some leaders believe teams are too much trouble or they fear the time and personal discomfort and risk that can happen, yet the potential performance of a team is much greater than for a collection of individuals. Even before there were more virtual teams, many leaders found this a challenge. Leading people who aren't in the same physical space has become a crucial skill. It's not about better performance of individuals but how they connect with each other that really matters. Leaders and coaches will coach more around relationships; one to one, between team members and even between teams and into stakeholders, partnerships and networks. Peter Hawkins, an experienced team coach, has described this as 'wide angled empathy.'

High-performing teams don't happen by accident

High-performing teams have a number of criteria in common. The experience of many leaders of virtual teams is that they must learn to inspire team members by leading more clearly and deliberately.

"No matter how brilliant your mind or strategy, if you're playing a solo game, you'll always lose out to a team." - Reid Hoffman, Co-Founder of LinkedIn

"Teamwork begins by building trust. And the only way to do that is to overcome our need for invulnerability."

Patrick Lencioni

The things that keep CEOs up at night will be how the workforce will react to changes, how they can get their teams to work together and whether they have leaders that can effectively lead their people in the new environment.



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Here's the teamwork model that I use with the teams which is based on comprehensive research and experience of working with teams over the last 35 years.

The **TEAMWORK** © model of high performing teams:

Trust - mutual trust and psychological safety

Empathy - open and honest conversations, awareness of and respect for each other

Accountability – holding each other to account

Mission - why the team exists, its purpose, values and identity

Ways of working – systems, processes, behaviours, ways of connecting and communicating

Optimise – improving learning, team continuous improvement, innovating and supporting each other's development

Relationships - building strong relationships internally and with all stakeholders

KPIs – setting and monitoring against collective performance goals

Are you investing in team development to drive performance to the next level?



Trust and vulnerability were found to be the key components required to harness a team's strengths.

Microsoft's Art of Teamwork report

Do your leaders of change give real attention to the human dimension of understanding how people are thinking, feeling, and behaving?

Teamwork begins by building trust

Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor who coined the term psychological safety, describes a **psychologically safe workplace culture** as "one where people are not full of fear and not trying to cover their tracks to avoid being embarrassed or pushed." In other words, the act of speaking up and learning from mistakes is encouraged, even celebrated. *In a psychologically safe environment where our brains do not perceive a threat, a stress and fear response is avoided.* Neuroscience has now found that we perceive social threat as we would a physical threat and things such as criticism can reduce our ability to think and be creative. When working remotely, building trust and creating a safe environment is more important and can be harder: we are not having chance conversations by the desk or coffee machine to build or repair any reduction of trust. This means people's performance has the potential to be jeopardised and they may not be as motivated or fully engaged.

Patrick Lencioni, a well-known team coach, believes the only way to build trust is to overcome our need for invulnerability. In my experience, this is about always giving the benefit of the doubt. Trust is when you are giving other people the benefit of the doubt, when you're taking a risk. The feeling of psychological safety is when you are relying on the fact that the people you are making yourself vulnerable to, are offering the benefit of the doubt to you. This means creating an environment of trust where people feel they can be challenged and are not going to be ridiculed when they are different or disagree.

Team members also need to feel they are respected and valued for their strengths. Conflict must be embraced in the context of each person's psychological safety: there should be sufficient acknowledgement of insights and appreciation in the context of working through difficult team problems. In Microsoft's Art of Teamwork report, trust and vulnerability

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were found to be the key components required to harness a team's strengths. When there is trust, people feel they can be vulnerable by exposing their emotions when struggling with an issue and not get hurt. Its significance to business is that those teams who are in a psychologically safe space are braver and as such, can take bigger risks and accomplish potentially more ambitious goals.

A vital component of developing trust is having empathy with other team members.

We have heard the phrase, socially distance but don't be socially distant! As a psychologist I am always interested in what creates happiness and fulfilment and one of the most common findings is feeling accepted, appreciated, approved, liked, loved, and understood. When you experience being misunderstood, the connection between you and the other person is (however temporarily) severed. You're by yourself, disconnected, cut off. Having others see you as you want and need to be seen, validates your sense of self. It assures you that who you believe you are is understandable and justified. Feeling understood connects us to others and we can feel appreciated and a part of something larger: we feel our lives are more meaningful and purposeful.

Leaders are constantly needing to engage with others. *By exploring the basic underpinning skills like listening and reflecting and taking a genuine interest in team members, leaders should understand the meaning of what is going on for each member of their team.* This involves being genuinely present. In a virtual environment there is a need to find ways to build empathy over the phone or by video in more deliberate ways than in the office where connection is more easily built face to face. Asking more about their team members' lives, their goals and challenges so that more empathy and connection is built.

It is important to point out the common misunderstanding that building relationships is not about inauthentically supporting each other's ideas by being polite and kind. Kim Scott, author of *Radical Candor*, calls this "ruinous empathy." This type of behaviour, one that values politeness over progress, may make employees feel good in the short term, but it doesn't help anyone grow or improve. *In my experience the strongest relationships are often those from whom we have received honest feedback.* Many leaders are finding it is more valuable than ever to be vulnerable and open with their people; they will appreciate it far more now during these times of crisis and stress. *Demonstration of openness from senior leaders allows other team members to follow so that stronger, more intimate connections are made.* It demonstrates the humanity of team leaders which helps with building both empathy and trust for their people and other important connections such as with their clients and partners.

The team needs to focus on a clear set of accountabilities which all members are committed to achieving

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We will increasingly need to recognise where the individual plays a more vital role and where teamwork plays a more vital role. For example, this might be a piece of detailed analysis when an individual will perform well or else a complex problem where a team will be better through diversity of thought and innovation. Often teams end up being a collection of individuals with individual accountability who meet with a leader to discuss and agree how their contributions are delivering on the team's goals. Such teams are not really teams at all and are certainly not high-performing ones. If it's really a team goal, everyone will feel equally responsible for its achievement. Effective leaders know that they need a culture of accountability in their teams that provide the inputs needed to achieve the expected team performance. With mutual accountability, members hold each other to account. *To be truly high performing, team members need to be clear on accountabilities, coordinate highly and collaborate readily.* With mutual accountability, there is still space for people to make their own distinctive contribution to the team. Mutual accountability tends to grow with the shared mission, performance goals and ways of working as the team strives for magnified impact compared to what its members could achieve individually.

A team needs a clear and compelling mission, a reason to work together and be part of something bigger

A mission statement is a short statement of why a team exists. What is its overall goal? High-performing teams will rally around a common purpose. It should be focused on what the team needs to achieve together that no individual or other team in the organisation could achieve. In today's business environment teams need to be purpose driven, not just profit driven. As a leader, this means being overt about what you need the team to do and why you need them to spend valuable time doing it. What is the underlying point? Why does it really matter? Many leaders are good at guiding a team of people in what to do and often the mission can be forgotten or ignored. *Typically, this is developed through conversations that would have been initiated in a face to face strategy offsite meeting but it is still essential to develop and reenergise teams around purpose even if it is not possible for all members of the team to be face to face.* High-performing teams put in an enormous effort exploring and agreeing the collective mission and translate them into actionable goals which become meaningful for its members. *A mission can also give the team an identity that provides a unifying point beyond the collection of individuals which helps them to stay motivated, connected and aligned in their work together.*

Teams without clear, explicit ways of working can be influenced by unaligned assumptions that hinder effectiveness

There are helpful operating principles that might include: a shared set of values, specific business processes integral to the work of the team, including facilitating processes such as managing knowledge and performance. Importantly, ways of working also include setting clear



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rules of behaviour for: feedback, constructive confrontation, confidentiality, communicating within and outside the team, solving problems, making decisions and resolving conflicts. In high-performing teams behavioural ways of working follow specific norms and often a team charter can make how the team agrees to work together more explicit. Many of these things happen naturally once agreed, nevertheless in a virtual environment the team needs to be more intentional to clarify what they are because they will be less visible to all involved. In my coaching of teams, *I have observed that expected team behaviours, which are also described in competency frameworks as "teamwork", usually refer to what an individual does within a team, not what a team does collectively together.*

Communication patterns are different at a distance or in a hybrid partially distributed team. Leaders with well-developed capability in team leadership will notice their team's interactions and patterns of behaviour and identify what is working well and what may be hindering team effectiveness. They will make time for virtual events and informal chat as well as celebrations. Ways of working for energising and supporting one another in tricky times should not be overlooked given they are essential to enable the success and wellbeing for team members and vital for the overall success of the team.

Most organisations are finding the importance of adaptability and agility to optimise success

A team leader's role is to facilitate the team to set improvement goals and collaborate to facilitate insights that create change, including new habits that help individuals and the team achieve their goals. Importantly, optimising the team will not purely focus on results but identify and work with the thinking, feeling and behaviour of team members. Research shows that teams that give positive feedback to each other for new habits and changes in behaviour are more likely to implement their new intentions.

An important part of developing a team is to enable insights. Decades of change management have shown that if people have their own ideas, they will not only own the actions but act on them. Where insight is generated in a team environment, team members are more likely to help each other. Team leaders should take the opportunity to facilitate their teams to flesh out ideas as they arise when motivation is high. *Leaders who facilitate conflict resolution through honest conversations, that help individual members grow and avoid any 'elephants in the room' which will help take a team's performance to the next level.*

When you promote learning and behaviour in a team and team members have confidence in each other's capabilities, behavioural change occurs more easily. This is supported in my view by the team's collective commitment to the change and the support that team members give each other. In my consulting career I have seen teams being the main lever for change. Teams can encourage and instil new behaviours and

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energise processes across organisational boundaries more successfully than individuals can achieve on their own.

Given the current crisis we are in, the relationships aspect of team cohesion is vital

We all know that high-performing teams have strong interpersonal relationships. People can be themselves because they genuinely respect each other and will do what they can to look out for and support their teammates. In addition to respect between team members, creating a sense of 'one of us', being part of the in-group rather than the out-group is important for teamwork because we are more likely to empathise with and relate to people we consider to be like us. Collaborating with out-group members feels more like a threat. We are cautious, and we don't trust them as much. Unfortunately, it seems, the human brain is built to default to out-group, until proven otherwise. This is obviously a problem for diverse teams, which as we know are necessary for high performance, therefore more effort is required to build strong relationships between team members. Top-down hierarchy might still be successful, but leaders will have to work harder to keep people connected. At a distance people need persistence to build relationships through empathy, communication and building mutual trust so that strong relationships are established and nurtured between team members.

Quality conversations are at the heart of great relationships. One of the biggest reasons why distributed teams fail is because they don't compensate for the fact that team members are not bumping into each other; they do not communicate or collaborate as much as they need to. In a distributed environment, leaders need to create opportunities for team members to just "chat" both formally and informally. Strong relationships have a social component so we can't ignore the social elements that come naturally in a face to face setting. Consequently, this means that you need to over-communicate and create opportunities such as regular meetings for everyone to chat.

Key performance indicators are the primary objective of the team, not teamwork for teamwork's sake

Whether it's performance results, progress on key initiatives or even behaviours expected of each other, effective teams monitor those things that are most important to their success and take action when things are not meeting expectations. Specific KPIs or performance goals help the team understand their collective results and they can progress and hold each other to account. The team itself is the means not the end. This means having shared performance goals aimed at the mission of the team and the stakeholders the team is servicing whether it is customers, employees or shareholders. The KPIs should be about joint accountability even though individual members will have different roles in contributing to the team's overall performance.

knowledge and performance. Importantly, ways of working also include setting clear rules of behaviour for: feedback, constructive confrontation, confidentiality, communicating within and outside the team, solving problems, making decisions and resolving conflicts.

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Teams are not contrary to individual performance, but leaders should find a way for everyone to contribute and distinguish themselves as individuals contributing to the team's performance. There are both similarities and significant differences between performance management processes for individuals and teams. Team performance management in essence involves establishing KPIs but also behavioural goals linked to ways of working and to identify the gap between the current and desired performance and focus the team on jointly planning, implementing and monitoring changes to close that gap.

Many team leaders are still learning the skills to manage high-performing teams

In organisations today we need leaders who are adept at navigating the challenges and opportunities of distributed teams. *In the non-virtual world, my team development work included a blend of organisation consulting, organisation development, group facilitation and individual and team development. In the current environment similar capabilities are required but with more deliberate emphasis on building capability in the specific areas above to enable collaboration and collective performance.* A skilled facilitator can help teams to be vulnerable and brave enough to have the quality dialogues that can move performance forward. It is imperative any facilitation focuses on the real work of the team and is flexible to the emerging needs of the team and the changing team dynamics. Leaders wanting to optimise their team performance will need to think carefully about the missing attributes that put their team's performance at risk.

The TEAMWORK© model presented earlier provides a framework for the agendas and processes to be agreed with the team and to enable the team to have the robust, quality conversations that focus on the things that will enhance their overall collective performance.

My prediction is that people will be hungry to work with teams whose vision becomes entwined with a nurturing and relationship-based strong team culture.

Did you know in most teams there is the potential to increase performance by at least 30 percent? As a change leader how confident are you that you have built trust in your teams?



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Questions

1. *Are you investing in team development to drive performance to the next level?*

2. *Have you upskilled your teams to optimise their performance in a virtual environment? And it's largely not about the technology ...*

3. *Do you want to create an agile high-performance team?*

4. *Do you wish to invigorate your team's purpose, strategy and motivation?*

5. *Do you want to optimise your teams' commitment to shared accountability?*

6. *Are your teams highly collaborative and do they take ownership of collective results?*

7. *Are you catalysing your team's skills, personalities and strengths to achieve the combined team potential?*

8. *As a change leader how confident are you that you have built trust in your teams?*



About the author

Sue Conder is a former Deloitte Partner and business leader, with 25 years + in organisational change consulting and leadership development and as a business psychologist, supporting executives and their teams to embrace the people dimension of success in life and in business. She delivers webinars, masterclasses, workshops and coaching for executives and for leaders and their teams.

She is the founder of Conder & Company who believe in the power of 'company' and bring together a large network of accomplished professionals. What unites Sue and those with whom she works in partnership, is a shared philosophy on the importance of wellbeing and how individual success contributes to organisational success.

They come with years of practical business experience and with evidence-based frameworks and tools, which take into account both the complexities of business and importantly an understanding of working with people's mindsets, emotions, behaviours and motivations. This enables individuals to gain personal success and wellbeing so that they can also perform at the highest levels.

To find out more about their ethos and approach, get in touch with Sue Conder on letstalk@conder.co or visit www.conder.co