

Building a Trust-Based High-Performance Team by Understanding and Overcoming the Dysfunction of Distrust

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Unquestionably, trust is the currency of the future.

As companies strive to align their leadership teams towards a goal of being high-performing collaborations, Fortune 500 CEOs are reporting that they feel like they are falling short of this goal. Why? Often high-performing teams are not high-performing teams at all, but rather high-performing individuals who may not in fact be very good team players.

Great teams historically have demonstrated a singular characteristic that defines their sustained success. That secret is a supreme level of trust based on their unchallengeable level of focus toward what we call ‘team ego.’

To be clear, teamwork and team ego are not the same.

Team ego recognizes and respects each team member’s individual ego and channels those egos toward a common purpose....winning. Bill Russell, voted by Sports Illustrated the greatest team player on the greatest team of the 20th century, once said, “*it never mattered whether there was a single fan in the arena, because we only played for each other because we had unconditional trust for each other.*”

So, how do we build a trust-based high-performance team by understanding and overcoming the crippling five dysfunctions?

Disfunction one...absence of trust

Trust lies at the heart of every functioning, cohesive and winning team, without it, high performers are just that, individual performers. In the context of building a trust-based high-performance team, trust is the glue. At the core, teammates must be completely vulnerable with each other and there must be a level of trust around every team member’s intention. Unquestionably it is hard achieving vulnerability-based trust because during one’s career, there is often a need to be competitive with one’s peers and be protective of one’s reputation. Many executives are hard-wired in this way and it’s a challenge to turn those instincts off for the good of the team, but that’s exactly what’s required. Simply stated, there is a high cost to low trust.

What does a low trust team look like?

- Executives conceal their weaknesses and mistakes from one another
- Executives hesitate to ask for help or provide constructive feedback
- Executives hesitate to help outside of their own areas of responsibility
- Executives treat knowledge, information and data as currency which they don’t share without some form of meaningful compensation

- Executives jump to conclusions about the intentions and aptitudes of others without attempting to clarify them
- Executives fail to recognize and tap into another's skills and experiences
- Executives waste time and energy managing their behaviors for effect
- Executives hold grudges
- Executives dread meetings and find reasons to avoid spending time together

So, how does a team go about building trust and becoming a trust-driven unit? It begins with two simple exercises.

1. Get to really know each other. Spend less than an hour (minimal time 30 minutes) going around the 'table' after handing each team member a short list of questions about themselves. It might simply include number of siblings, their hometown (with a description), unique challenges of their childhood, favorite hobbies, description of their first job and maybe, their worst job. Simply by describing these relatively innocuous attributes and experiences team members begin to relate to one another on a more personal basis and see one another as human beings with life stories and interesting backgrounds. This encourages greater empathy and understanding and begins to discourage unfair and inaccurate behavioral attributions.
2. Team effectiveness exercise. This exercise is more rigorous and has an element of risk. It requires each team member to identify the single most important contribution that each of their peers makes to the team, as well as the one area that they must either improve on or eliminate for the good of the team. The exercise should begin by focusing on the team leader.

There are other exercises including assessments like the Hogan Process, however, the two exercises described above can have an effective short-term benefit and begin opening the doors of collaborative trust.

The leader's role in all of this is essential, particularly in their ability to demonstrate vulnerability first. This requires the leader to lose face in front of the team to show their willingness to be vulnerable.

Vulnerability will allow high-performing teams to be comfortable affirmatively challenging each other about what they are doing, how they are spending their time, and how can the team ensure that progress is being made.

Trust is knowing that when a team member pushes you, they are doing it because they care about the team.