

EBOOK

CROSSING THE WHITE LINE

THREE PHASES TO
LEADING HIGH
PERFORMANCE TEAMS

empath:c
CONSULTING

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The thin white line.

Standing on the sidelines, watching a group of players who collectively are paid over \$1.5m a week in wages, Pep Guardiola watches on calmly. He claps encouragement, cheering a quick sequence of passes.

Despite the intensity of the crowd, the quality of the opposition and the incredible amount of money on the line for a victory, he doesn't tell his players what to do. He isn't trying to command or instruct the next play.

He simply cheers on the team, encouraging more effort, demanding his players stick to the game plan and work for each other.

The result after 90 minutes on the field is the measure of success for a football team, so why does this Manager, leading one of the most expensive group of players on the planet, choose to cheer them on instead of screaming tactical changes or commands.

He is not alone either. Despite the moments of intensity, many of the world's top football managers are actually relatively calm towards their players. Contrast this with the parents marching up sidelines, yelling at kids who are full of adrenalin, brains buzzing with



the intensity of the game and feeling overwhelmed with a flurry of instructions. It is no wonder that kids sometimes want to quit football and prefer to watch cartoons instead.

Sadly, a very similar scenario is played out in teams outside of the sporting world. When I work with CEO's and their leadership teams,

I am often reminded of those passionate parents marching down the sideline. When things are intense at work, when the pressure

is on or an issue arises, their response is an outpouring of detailed instructions with complex implications at rapid speed. This too often leads to someone dropping the ball, so to speak, leading to more problems and more instructions. The downward spiral is fast, intense and sometimes never seems to end.

I've worked with many leadership teams in this heightened state of pressure.

Everyday is game day. Every hour mirrors the stress of needing a winning goal in injury time. The busy mornings become tiring afternoons that leak into restless nights and weekends of work. The cycle never seems to end. The match is never won and burnout is almost inevitable.

Three Phase Approach

Leaders who feel like this, who sometimes find themselves leading like those passionate parents, wanting so badly to see the victory that they can't control their passions. They barely can stop themselves from running on the field themselves.

What we know from a mountain of research into organisational performance is that leadership really matters. While understanding the detailed impact is difficult, researchers have suggested that between 20% and 80% of the performance of a team can come down to the effectiveness of Leadership.

So, here is a framework to lead with less stress, more commitment and higher performance. The Three Phase Approach to leadership is inspired by people like Pep Guardiola.

Researching the way these leaders direct some of the highest performing, and highest paid, teams on the planet, we've developed this simple framework enabling people managers to become higher performance leaders.



The three phases are Prepare, Action and Review.

Phase 1 - Prepare

For a football team, the majority of the week is spent on the training ground. Here is where the strategy is set, skills are sharpened and tactics are rehearsed.

The Prepare phase is critical to ensure everyone is on the same page. Here we need to develop clarity across the group as to their individual roles, the teams objectives and the behavioural expectations.

Clarity is king.

Your people must know the game plan, which means you must have done the work to develop, translate and communicate the strategy to the team. Each member needs to know what actions they need to perform.

They need to know how their activity impact on others inside and outside your organisation to deliver the desired outcome. They must be clear on their responsibilities and the behavioural expectations that uphold your culture and reputation.

If your people don't have the skills to perform at the level the team need



this is where you must support them to develop these skills. It is through preparation we build the capabilities of our people.

If your people are doing the wrong things, preparation time should be used to reiterate the strategy, values, processes and expectations to create clarity.

If you people have the skills and clarity but are not performing to your expectations, you might need to develop their level of conviction in the work you do, commitment to the team or trust in you as a leader.

Sometimes people are clear, capable and motivated, but their behaviours, the way they do the work, is not aligned with the values of the organisation.

This is where it is critical to ensure your Guiding Principles are clear.

Ask yourself and the team:

1. What do we stand for?
2. What values are most important to us?
3. What does that look like in my actions?
4. Am I completing my activities aligned to these values?

Too often, we see clients spend an incredible amount of time completing questions 1 and 2, but almost nothing on 3 & 4.

It is during preparation that we must be explicit in describing what our values look like in action.

If we are a jeweller and we value 'Quality', what does this mean for the way we speak with clients? What would our shop look like? How do we deal with suppliers? How should we dress?

These might be obvious in your mind, but too often it is not clarified with our people. It is NOT about setting a long list of policies and rules, this destroys motivation and inhibits people from being responsive and adaptive to new situations.

It is about creating clarity so your people know what is important and are empowered to make decisions within these boundaries.

If your team don't know what is in your head, there is a good chance they won't meet your expectations. Don't leave this to chance. Speak constantly about them. Speak about what they mean in every situation you can imagine and never stop.



When do we Prepare?

You might be thinking: We don't have training grounds and days in between matches, we are always on!

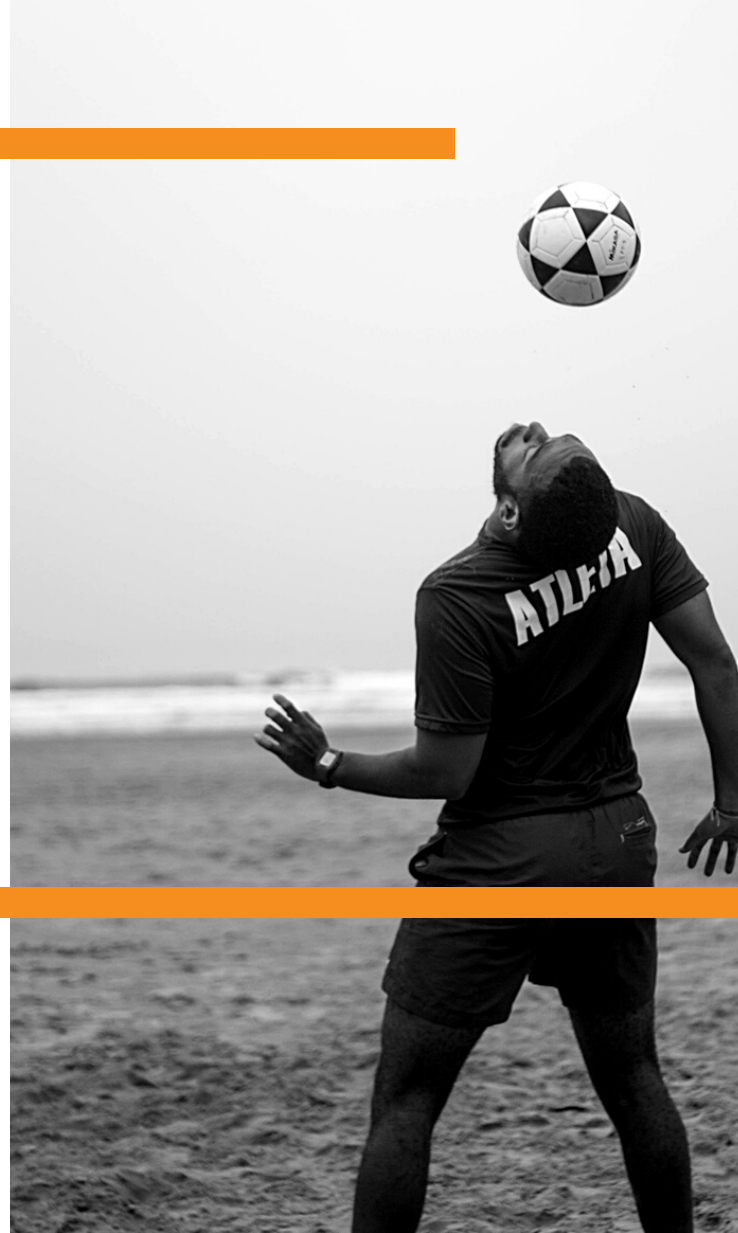
Unlike sporting teams, most organisations have a lot more pressure to deliver constantly. I'm not suggesting you change your working hours to be open for just 90 minutes a week so you can prepare the rest of the time, not at all.

However, if you don't have time dedicated to preparation, you can expect problems. Every leader of a team must create time for developing clarity, training people and fostering trust in the group.

This might be an hour a week, one day a month or a few days a year, this will depend on your team.

If you are having a lot of small issues and stress is rising in the team, it might be an indication you need to pause the action on the field, take everyone back to the training ground and developing your clarity, capabilities, conviction and commitment to the plan.

Prioritising preparation is critical to high performance. Get your people together, give them clarity and get ready for action.



Phase 2 - Action

It's game day, time to deliver your best. As a coach, this is where the players step over a white line that you can't cross. This is where your people pick up their tools, answer the phones and get the work done.

When clarity, capability and commitment are high, work should flow. Your people know what to do and how to do it. The team performs, customers are delighted and success is inevitable. Sadly, the world is often far less simple.

Mike Tyson once said:

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth."

The modern business world is often described by the acronym VUCA. This stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

We live in a dynamic world that throws up new challenges and freakish problems all too often. In the blink of an eye, your brilliant strategy can become our coffin.

When you are busy executing your plans, the phones are ringing, emails flying and customers demanding, your best laid plans can go straight out the window.

This is where leadership is critical and where the biggest mistakes are made. Knowing that something is going wrong, most leaders will jump into action but what they do next is crucial.

Too many fall victim to the stress. Their emotions get the better of them and they rush to find perfect and immediate solutions. They provide people with detailed instructions, micromanaging their actions and behaviours. They try to pull all the strings.

It would be like the football manager, running onto the field, trying to score a goal themselves. They get louder and more direct, furiously yelling at each player to tell them exactly what to do. Trying to change the game plans on the fly.

This leads to frustrated players, a confused team and most often a loss on the scoreboard.

Instead, in the heat of battle, Leaders must remain calm. There



are three possible scenarios that can play out once the game is on, let's look at each of them.

Plan is working

When the plan works, performance flows. That blissful feeling when your strategies work perfectly, your team are in flow and it feels like nothing can stop you! These magical moments are amazing and there can be the temptation to sit back, relax and bask in your glory.

Don't do this! When times are good, your people are working hard and will tire over time. It is no time to put the feet up and relax on game day! Your team need you to be diligent, watching over what is happening and looking for anything unexpected you can flag.

They need you to be encouraging, recognising their performance and congratulating their mini-wins. Most of all they need you to be supportive, helping them to stay focused and clear on the plan and what they need to do. Be a leader your team want to have on the sideline, cheering them on.

Be a leader who the players run to in celebration when they score a goal. Be a leader they want to work harder for. This is your main job when the plan is working.



The other thing to do when the plan is working is a constant search for ways to improve the plan next time.

Many football Managers spend the game time taking notes, identifying small opportunities and ideas they can share with individuals or the entire team to get that next level of performance.

For you, it might be identifying a training program that would sharpen some skills, it might be a process that has unnecessary steps you could change or a new

technology you could implement that would increase the output of your team. No matter how good your plan is working today, it won't work for ever.

The world changes, competitors get faster, stronger and more skilled. As Jack Welch famously said:

"If the rate of change on the outside exceeds the rate of change on the inside, the end is near."

As a leader, you need to be relentlessly searching to improve the team. You need to be looking for ways to develop and

grow your people.

You need to be looking into the market, at your competitors and allies, suppliers and customers, searching for ways you can enhance the plan next time.

What can you start doing, stop doing or change that will increase the effectiveness and performance of the group.

Continuous improvement starts with leadership, make this your passion.



Caution

Just one cautionary note on continuous improvement. Not improving is not the only way we can fail our team.

You should absolutely be looking for things that can be improved, but where leaders sometimes fall down is that they try to implement these changes all at once, while the game is in play.

They start tinkering with things and giving new instructions mid-flight. They think there is no time to waste and we've all heard that alluring

idea that we need to rebuild the plane in mid-air, haven't we?

You need to be incredibly cautious of the implications of mid-flight changes. If you have spent time with your team on developing and honing a plan, you need to carefully analyse the side effects any change could have before you implement change.

Sure, changing the in-flight announcement might be an easy change.

Changing the meals might annoy some customers.

Changing the seating arrangement might really put people out.

Changing the engine or wings might cause a catastrophe.

My advice would be, capture the notes on what could be improved, then sit tight and wait for the review period. Plan to start your continuous improvement conversations during the Review phase and implement the changes in the next Prepare phase where you can carefully assess the implications and make sure everyone is on the same page.

Remember, change is vital but it can lead to confusion, and confusion is a killer for cohesive teams.



Plan isn't working

You won't always come up with the perfect game plan. No matter the research you put in, the consultants you hire or the time you spend running SWOT analysis, you won't always make the right choice.

It is a VUCA world and the best laid plans will fail. If the game plan isn't working, it is not your players fault, it is just the wrong plan.

Don't get angry at your people, this won't help fix the problem and will

almost certainly erode long term team culture.

The first thing to do is encourage your people to look for solutions. They should be clear on your behavioural expectations, they should be clear on what is acceptable and not acceptable, so let them work it out.

They might not come up with a perfect

solution, but now is not the time to try to coordinate a new game plan on the fly. Just stop the bleeding, fix what you can and get you and your team through this tough period.

Once people have solved the problem as best as they can, capture the activities and outcomes for review.

It is not about finding fault or directing blame, we will use these insights to build an new strategy when the dust settles and we are back on the training grounds. If the plan failed, you should take accountability for all issues that followed.

This is your responsibility as a leader. The focus here is on helping the team through. Your encouragement and support give your people confidence and certainty during this time challenging time.

Your positive actions will build trust and commitment for the future and this is the most important outcome you can achieve at this time.

Plans will fail, but don't let that mean your team is a failure.



People aren't following the plan

Sometimes players don't follow the strategy. You see people doing things that you think weren't part of the training or in ways that are unacceptable for your team. This again can be an emotionally charged situation, but before yelling, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are they clear on the game plan?
- Are they clear on their role and activities?
- Are they skilled enough to perform?
- Are they clear on the behavioural expectations?

If you can't give a yes to all four, the problem isn't theirs, it is yours. Time to take notes and head back to the training ground to increase clarity.

You can try to support them in the moment, add some minor coaching options, but also be open to taking responsibility. You should tell the person that it is your fault and you will work with them to fix it.

If you have four yes's then it is time for a different path. Sometimes people just struggle with it all. Our people have lives outside of work and these things can

dramatically impact on performance.

They don't need to be yelled at, they don't need micromanaging, they need support. These are the times when leaders must wrap their arm around a person, rally the team to all pitch in and get them through this period of the game.

Sometimes however, it is not an isolated moment of weakness. Some people you lead will reach a point where they are unwilling to play their role. They might have lost



their passion for it, think it is below them or not feel up to it.

They really don't have conviction for the work or commitment to the team. They drag their heels, play sloppy or fail to put in the required effort. There can be a large range of reasons this happens for people and it may come out of the blue or after many attempts to increase their clarity, capabilities and commitment through your leadership support. When people reach this point, leadership action is vital to maintain the performance of the team.



In this situation, the ideal option is to remove the player from the field. In football, we would replace the player with someone from our bench. In your team.

That might not seem possible, but is there someone else who has the conviction and commitment who can step up? Are there members of the team who will go the extra mile and cover for them?

There are few more powerful symbols you can send to a team than to call out bad behaviour or bad team members and send them home for the day. You will have to have a more detailed conversation in review with this person, but letting them stay can undermine the team and hinder performance.



If you have spent time building clarity around your strategy, setting your expectations and developing your people to perform, allowing people to colour outside the lines can be devastating!

The impacts reach far beyond their individual dip in performance, it is a signal to the team that the strategy and expectations are optional. That you as a leader don't really have clarity on where we are going and

how we will get there. That you are happy for people to do whatever they want. You are not building a team, you are just paying for a group of mercenaries. Teams work together and leaders build teams.

Be diligent in capturing the details of the actions, behaviours and impacts this person has on the group. Be prepared to have a detailed discussion in the future, but in the moment be calm and direct. If it is possible, ask them to leave for the day.

If not, be sure to mention to them that their actions are not as expected and that you'll need to discuss further at a future time. Then focus on continued encouragement and attention to the rest of the team.

Too often one bad apple spoils the bunch because they are either ignored or become the focal point of the leaders work. Neither ignore nor fascinate. Your focus is on the team performance and your best players need you to be supporting them, especially when a team mate is letting the group down.

Phase 3 - Review

Once the whistle blows, the game is complete. There is nothing more that can be done, but that doesn't mean we down tools and celebrate the win or forget about the loss.



The next vital step in developing a high-performance team is to review what happened and unpack the experiences of everyone so you can, as a team, build an improved plan for the next game.

This critical period of review and reflection too often, in my view, suffers from two very typical, yet terrible, strategies:

- The Rinse & Repeat Approach, or,
- The Dark Room Approach.

In the Rinse & Repeat, we ignore any feedback from our activity, we silence the voices of our people and reject any criticism.

Sometimes, we are so closed off to this feedback that we don't even notice it is there. Employees eventually give up trying to change anything and each game they are sent out with the same instructions they don't believe in and perform with the laboured gusto you would expect from the disengaged.



Leaders who expect the same old strategies will keep on working are doomed to failure. Even companies as large as Kodak and Nokia have been brought to their knees by a failure to adapt their strategies in a VUCA world.

This sometimes pushes Leaders into the second terrible strategy, the Dark Room Approach.

In this approach, Leaders gather some information from the performance and then hide in an office somewhere trawling over the data.

They sometimes hire in consultants to sit with them, to run the numbers and research the leading management theory of the time to develop a new strategy for their team to drive success.

While this approach is superior to the Rinse & Repeat, it is terrible in that it loses the best opportunity possible for you, as a leader, to capture the most critical performance indicators from the game. Namely, the experiences of your people.

As a leader, you can't be everywhere, see everything or

understand the complex nuances that arise during your work. In football, Managers will watch the replay of the game with their players, pausing to ask questions and have conversation about what had occurred and how they can improve in the future.

The open discussion involves the strategies, skills and relationships between players. In great teams, everyone is involved in the review and every voice counts.

Leaders who encourage an open, honest and critical view of their team's performance can expect to unearth a variety of things that were previously hidden from their view.

The Dark Room Approach tries to substitute experience inside your organisation with theory or experience outside your organisation.

Sure there can be wonderful insights a consultant with a fresh set of eyes can bring to your strategic thinking, but ignoring your people in favour of consultants is madness.

The Review Phase is the opportunity for some frank conversations. Questions to be asked and answers to be discovered together as a team.



Here a leader should look to cover these top 5 topics:

1. **Performance Review** - What results did we achieve? What was our target and how did we perform compared with our expectations?
2. **Strategy Review** - What went well? What successes did we achieve and what did we learn to replicate these outcomes? What didn't work? What strategies were executed well but still failed to deliver results? What can we do to improve these?
3. **Individuals Review** - Who felt great about their performance? Who delivered and what can we learn from these performances? Who didn't execute the strategy well? What stopped them and what can we do to improve?

4. **Operational Review** - How did we work together as a team? Did the work flow as intended from place to place? What were the blockages and how can we improve teamwork?
5. **Leadership Review** - How did the leadership perform to support the team? What helped and what held you back from performing? What more or less do the team need in the future?

In these reviews, the leader must be willing to call out all exceptional behaviour that was aligned to the strategy and expectations, praising the performance of individuals regardless of the results.

Similarly, if people delivered results but their behaviours were misaligned to the expectations and game plan, these must be called out in the Individuals review to ensure the whole team is clear on the importance of working together as a team on the strategy.

The leader must also create a trusting culture where this information can flow and be critical of the behaviours without being critical of the individuals.

This distinction is the most important nuance of high performance teams. We are open to criticising each other's ideas, behaviour and actions because they are not acceptable for the group to function well.

This doesn't mean the person is unacceptable nor that all their ideas, behaviours and actions are unacceptable. No, we are calling out specific things that need to be discussed but we maintain our full



commitment to developing and supporting each other.

It is not a small number of bad people that destroy team success, it is a large number of small issues that are not resolved that erode the team over time.

By being able to call out these issues when they are small, a team can constantly develop and become a team that is open to learning and growing.

This openness to criticism can't end with the team, it needs to end with you and your plan. If you are not open to the same criticism as your people, they will not trust you.

Taking ownership and accountability for the successes must be balanced with ownership and accountability for the failures. Be open to sharing your failings, but do not let this stop you from hearing from your team.

Ask them directly for feedback. Shut up and listen to it. Thank them, even if you don't agree with it. Reflect on all the feedback you receive and show the person who gave it to you that you have heard and understand their point of view.

This might sound strange for some people leaders, but until you create an



environment where you can gracefully accept criticism, how can you expect your people to do the same?

From the review, create a short, consolidated list of learnings from the game.

For you, this might look like a daily huddle for 10 min to capture a few points on a white board. It might be a weekly review with the team where you share an hour to reflect and you write up some notes to look on Monday.

You might review monthly, having a

longer session to really dive into the details of the last 4 or 5 weeks and unpacking all that happened.

If you are leaving it longer than a month, you will struggle to have the depth of conversation that you probably need. What ever it looks like for you, cherish this time to reflect, review and let everyone share their thoughts.

This Review will form the most

critical information for the first phase to start again. We can now start to prepare for the next match.

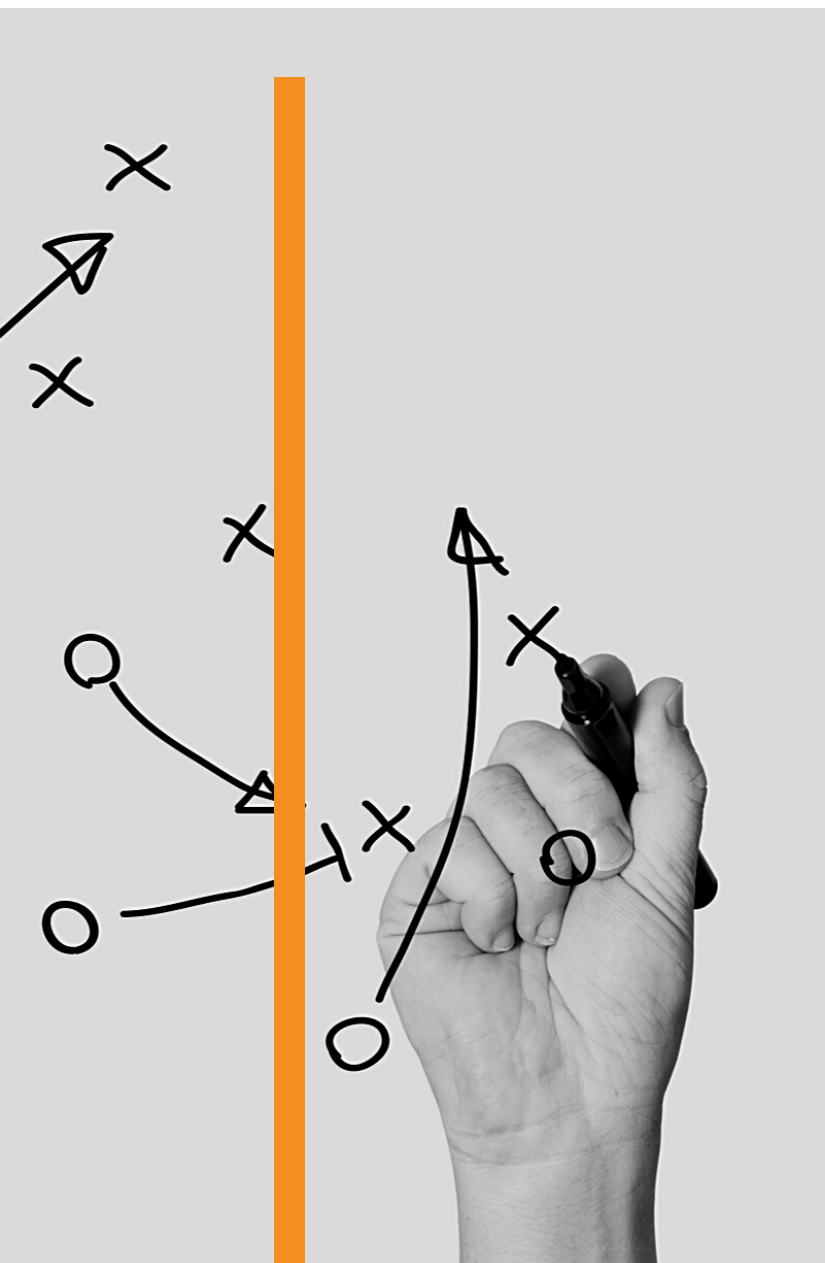
You might now have a list of skills that the team need to develop, processes that need enhancing, technology that should be implemented or leadership techniques that you will need to employ.

What ever the output of the Review is, it must be used to refresh the plan. I would highly recommend a planning meeting on the same cadence as your Review.

If you meet each afternoon to review, meet each morning to ensure everyone is on the same page. If you meet Friday's to reflect, meet on Monday morning's to make sure you are all aligned for the week ahead.

You should rarely need to completely throw away your old strategies and start fresh, most often it will be small enhancements, people changes, skills development.

Reviewing and adjusting your strategy often is the rhythm leaders need to maintain to ensure their team is high performing.



Summing it all up

Whether you are leading a front line call centre in a large company or are the CEO of your own business, leaders must enhance their ability to:

- Prepare your team,
- Support them through Action, and,
- Review the performance to adapt

These three phases are the blueprint, simple as it may seem, for delivering high performance. Mastering all three will be the difference between inconsistent results and long term performance.

In this VUCA world, it is easy to forget. It is easy to be overwhelmed with emails, distracted by phone calls and bombarded by constant demands on your time.

A dog chasing its own tail both gets tired and looks stupid, don't fall into this trap. Instead, remember which phase you are in and act accordingly.

In the Prepare phase, be the leader who creates deep clarity through explanations, diagrams, graphs, charts, process maps and as many other tools as you can employ. Also, be explicit on the behavioural expectations and role model these constantly.

If you do it, they will do it, good or bad.



In the Action phase, observe closely how people and the plan are performing. Encourage good behaviour and call out bad. Even bench people who are not committed to the team.

You are the custodian of success.

In the Review phase, be open and honest. Listen with humility to your own feedback. Praise and criticise with affection for the person. This is the time we build trust.

Good review becomes the next great plan and that plan will determine your next success.





ALIGNED LEADERSHIP

BUILDING YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Our program is designed to be delivered across 6 months to embed the skills, systems and processes that will build a high performance leadership team..

We will engage your people to implement core skills, management systems and an operating rhythm to lock in long term success. These include:

1. Leading with Empathy

Exploring the shortcuts used by the brain, we identify how assumptions and mental models shape our perceptions. We then explore the power of empathy and perspective taking through simple, practical processes.

2. Crucial Conversations

We build the tools to support leaders with strategies to be more engaged listeners. We then develop skills to respond, not react in conflict situations and tools to provide powerful, thoughtful feedback.

5. Embedding Operational Rituals

Actions shape reality. This focus provides leaders with the critical skills to identify misalignment as individuals, a team and an organisation. It helps embed individual commitments and shared accountability for outcomes.

3. Curious Leadership

To succeed in a complex world, modern leaders need to explore with curiosity. We focus on improving the ability for open challenge and exploration of business drivers and cultural influences on performance.

4. High Performance Culture

Leaders are the custodians of the values in action. Our focus here is to break down and embed the key elements of high performing teams. Fostering the trust, understanding and curiosity required to develop a high performance culture.

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"Thought inspiring, provoking and interesting. Took you through the emotional journey of using empathy in your business"

- Robbie Cooke, CEO, Tyro Payments

"Fantastic both in content and delivery. I was looking for someone to open up other ways of approaching leadership and looking at our business environment and they delivered!- Michaela Flanagan, Head of Branch Operations, Swiss Re

"I can honestly say it was one of the best sessions I have been a part of. The content was unique & very interactive. I highly recommend Empathic Consulting to build empathy & understanding to drive performance."

- Daniel Markovski, Group Sales Manager, Nova

"They engaged people who I didn't think would ever respond, let alone take away actions. Post this session, I observed genuine behaviour changes . This was one of the best things I have done for the team."

- Rochelle Eldridge, Executive Manager, CBA

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