

HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS, TRIBES, AND COMMUNITIES

“Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision. The ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.”

— ANDREW CARNEGIE

“Finding good players is easy. Getting them to play as a team is another story.”

— CASEY STENGEL

We have spent a great deal of time focused on individual performers and the coaches who help them. We’ve shown some examples about how teams come together to help improve individual performance through managed competition and impactful coaching. While high-performance individuals may be the output that coaches seek, keep in mind that, in almost all cases, people depend on high-performing teams to unleash potential.

You will be hard pressed to find a single exception to this statement in ANY domain.

You may be an Olympic sprinter (a solo event), but you also have a training partner, and you may work with a coach who also manages three or four other athletes. You may have come from a university track team; perhaps you

hope to win a spot on Team USA and represent your country. Though your entire career may boil down to less than ten seconds on a track, that brief time is the culmination of years and years of team involvement and participation.

This same notion applies to members of a sales team, a group of software coders, or a collection of lawyers at a firm. If you are truly an independent, free agent with a dedicated coach and singular purpose, teams might not matter to you. However, that is a rare instance. Almost all of us belong to a tribe or a community, and we crave these connections to give achievements meaning. Human beings are social animals that need individual fulfillment in addition to the pleasure of communal contribution.

To be the best at what they do, individuals, teams, and organizations are often codependent. Individual excellence creates great potential for the organization; on the other hand, organizational and team dysfunction limits potential. Thus, whether individuals and coaches are members of a company, law firm, sports team, or orchestra, their ability to be the best will depend on those around them. Members of teams collaborate, challenge, and compete with each other. They push each other beyond self-imposed limits, which raises the team's performance and showcases individual members. Individual performance is maximized by preparing, planning, competing, and performing on a team. Why, then, do people insist on going it alone, when research and practical experience show the importance of teamwork in reaching potential?

In a landmark article published in *Harvard Business Review*, McKinsey & Company partners Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith argue that teams can be the most important performance unit inside companies and other organizations. They define teams in the following way:

“A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.”¹

The authors take great care to distinguish teams from working groups, which are mere collections of similar people working on a common task within a traditional vertical hierarchy. Teams differ from working groups in that they are a collection of people with different skill sets who work together in a largely self-managed style.

There is another major difference: Groups may produce a fine work product, but high-performing teams deliver great work AND develop great performers.

An ideal team consists of three to nine people. Such a small group rarely requires outside management and monitoring. Leadership roles are shared, team members depend on each other, and there is pressure to perform. The primary motivation—don't let your teammates down or hold the team back.

Does this sound familiar? Every single high performer in domains with terminal consequences develops mastery. Navy SEALs and sports stars train as a team. Corporations with breakthrough success and lasting market dominance utilize team training in aspects such as product development, key accounts, and software coding. These teams become tribes and communities, safe (and competitive) environments in which performers can thrive.

Human beings naturally seek out others like themselves. As social animals, we have an affinity for others and need to feel connected to them. Sometimes, these preferences are rational; sometimes, personal connections are irrational or even random. If you are a fan of a particular sports team, seeing that familiar jersey invokes an instant sense of connection to the stranger wearing it. Likewise, a rival team's jersey provokes an instant disdain.

During filming of *Planet of the Apes* (1968), this desire to form tribes and communities was surprisingly illustrated. The iconic movie is set in a futuristic world, where man has become enslaved and apes are the dominant species. Three types of apes form the new society: chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans. Live actors played these apes, and the make-up artistry involved to transform dozens and dozens of cast members into apes each day was

simply amazing. Once these actors were in costume, something curious happened. Every day at mealtime, the actors playing chimpanzees ate exclusively with other “chimpanzees.” The same curious behavior was repeated with gorillas and orangutans. Almost no mixing between groups occurred after the first few days of filming. The actors naturally bonded with their fellow “apes” even though their identities were no more defined than the costume and makeup they were wearing.²

The same type of behavior is found on football teams. Defensive players tend to associate with others who play defense. Linemen associate with linemen and not lanky wide receivers. The kickers are off by themselves doing whatever kickers do. All are on the same team, but each finds a tribe.

This sorting behavior occurs among the pilots on board an aircraft carrier. Fighter jocks make fun of bomber pilots. Helicopter pilots bind together instead of hanging out with the fixed wing aviators. And, the C2-A COD pilots who just visit the ship periodically for key supply deliveries? They may stay a night or two, but let’s just say it is best they head back to the other COD pilots as soon as possible. Their tribe is back on shore, and these pilots are in “unfriendly” territory while at sea.

Innovative corporations, where speed to market and momentum are critical, promote these tribes and communities. Software and social media giants use specific design teams that are attached to individual features to churn out new ideas; each team takes great pride in working on the next big thing, even when doing so requires extreme overtime. Automobile manufacturers employ teams that specialize in various aspects of new car design . . . and the workers that then build these new cars form teams . . . and then those workers responsible for producing a specific PART of the vehicle form teams.

In all of these examples, individuals on the same team share a common goal. Whether they are filming a movie, winning a championship, conducting flight operations, or building a great company, their ultimate success is measured as a group. However, individuals perform better as subsets of the

greater organization. These tribes and communities are self-governed, setting their own standards of performance, expectations, and work ethic. In addition to the team, specific coaches who specialize in the details and typical challenges and characteristics support performers in their role. These organizational communities have a sense of pride in what they do, which fosters healthy internal and external competition between groups. When managed properly, these high-performance teams accomplish exceptional things as an organization.

On the other hand, it is not hard to see how tribes could become detrimental. We do not have to think too hard to picture examples of how “those people over there aren’t like us” can have negative or even tragic consequences. In corporations, rivalries between sales, finance, or marketing are natural. In business, clannishness can quickly turn into a dysfunctional culture of finger pointing and blaming. Sales complains that marketing doesn’t provide enough leads; finance complains that sales discounts prices too much (and plays golf while they do the hard work); marketing never gets the budget they want, and sales blows the opportunities they are given. In professional service firms, practice groups may segregate themselves. At hospitals, doctors and nurses form tribes governed by their experiences and points of view. When subgroups cause rifts between practice areas, departments, and divisions, that dysfunction can lead to losses in profits, opportunities, and even lives (depending on the case and discipline). These are warning signs that teams and tribes are becoming toxic to the organization’s overall mission. In addition, such dysfunction may limit individual development; with no hope of progressing, employees develop a hunker-down mentality to preserve the status quo.

Performers need training, coaching, and leadership to succeed, and they need teams. Weaken any one part of that equation and the results are unacceptable. That is why the elite in any domain don’t go it alone. They get better as a member of a team. And it’s a leader’s role to make sure teams become the ultimate performance tool.

WORKING THE MOST DANGEROUS 4½ ACRES ON EARTH

The “business end” of a navy aircraft carrier is the most dangerous 4½ acres on earth. Made of HY 80/100-grade alloy steel and covered with a hard, non-skid coating, this is the flight deck, home to more than seventy-five combat aircraft capable of inflicting devastating damage to an enemy.

Four powerful steam and electromagnetic catapults are built into the deck, each one capable of accelerating a 60,000-pound jet fighter from zero to 160 mph in 2.5 seconds. Stretched across the aft part of the deck are four large steel cables (“arresting wires”) that bring these jets to a jolting stop within 150 feet of touchdown. Four huge elevators, each capable of lifting two fully loaded fighters, transfer aircraft between the flight deck and the hangar deck, where major maintenance work is done.

Also on deck: four ammunition elevators that bring bombs, bullets, rockets, torpedoes, and other ammunition to be loaded on aircraft from the ordnance magazines far below decks. Numerous high-speed fueling stations quickly deliver thousands of gallons of jet fuel to thirsty aircraft. Fire on any sea-based platform is the most dangerous hazard, so dozens of high-pressure nozzles able to dispense fire-retardant foam with the push of a button, are located on deck. However, this complex machinery and advanced technology is not what makes these 4½ acres work. It’s the people!

Flight operations on an aircraft carrier are a carefully managed execution of precise teamwork. The operational tempo is astounding. At the height of combat, two hundred or more daily aircraft sorties may be conducted, with about twenty-five aircraft launched and recovered every 105 minutes. After landing, each of the twenty-five has to be repositioned, refueled, re-armed, and resupplied within a thirty-minute period. There’s no time to spare; each of the 250 or so

people working on the flight deck must be at the exact right place, at the right time, with the right equipment to make it work. And the crew must do their work among turning jet engines, helicopter blades, and propellers!

To safely and effectively pull this off, each person on the flight deck is assigned to a team, and each team is identified by its jersey color:

- Yellow: flight directors
- Red: ordnance handlers and crash responders
- Purple: fueling operators
- White: medical personnel and safety observers
- Green: equipment technicians
- Blue: aircraft movers
- Brown: plane captains

A quick look around reveals who's responsible for what and allows crews to coordinate their efforts accordingly.

Each team member puts in hours of required study and practice, followed by more hours of apprenticeship with an experienced flight deck operator. Dozens of drills test the mettle of each team, certifying their readiness to work well internally and with other flight deck teams wearing different jerseys. Storytelling also plays an important role in this teaching and learning process, when recounting the deadly deck fires on the USS *Forrestal* and USS *Enterprise* or accounts of aircraft crashes during landing.

To first time observers, flight deck operations look like total chaos. In reality, what they're seeing is an extraordinary display of efficiency and effectiveness made possible by high-performing teamwork and self-discipline.

Let's go deeper into life on an aircraft carrier's flight deck. Imagine a fueling operator (purple shirt) who we'll call Aviation Boatswain's Mate (Fuel), 3rd Class, Williams. Williams is highly proficient; he had great training and coaching to get him right where he is. Williams might be the absolute best at what he does on his particular fueling team. However, *all of his colleagues must be highly proficient*. All purple shirts must reach a certain level of competency or none of them can do their job.

Each purple shirt team must be highly proficient. When Williams's specific team leaves the deck, one that's just as good must take its place; otherwise, flight operations can't continue without readjustment. Don't forget the blue shirt team! They move the aircraft around. Are planes in the proper, safe position for refueling? Is each blue-shirted individual competent? If not, the purple shirts can't do their job and Williams, the best purple shirt in the fleet, can only relay frustrations to his superiors.

REVIEW OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS, TRIBES, AND COMMUNITIES

It is the natural state of things for people to form connections and rely on each other. It is completely artificial to make them work by themselves to better themselves or their condition. This is a fact that is hardwired into our DNA since the time we have been chasing mammoths for our next meal. The creation of cubicles and corner offices does not change this fact.

Teams are the ultimate performance tool. If you were to take nothing else from this book, using teams to develop high-performance individuals and amplify their results is the most important lesson. The simple act of placing individuals into three-person "performance pods" where they can collaborate, encourage, and compete with other will dramatically improve each of the individual skills in which they are being trained. Three-person teams are ideal for self-management and progress on basic tasks and activities. An

individual or two-person team can convince themselves to take a break or fight the system, but a three-person team always has someone keeping the team honest. Larger teams need guidance and logistical support, so they require more effort and management. Larger teams can handle more complex solutions as well as develop more performers at the same time. There are uses for both.

All well-defined teams have advantages for their members, but they do have to be monitored by leaders, coaches, and managers. A team can evolve into a tribe or community that is opposed to the overall strategic direction of an organization, and their collective power generates momentum that requires great force to stop. This is a testament to the power of great teams: They can work for you or against you. Exceptional organizations know that they must harness this power to continue to compete.

It is often said that people are an organization's most important asset. The individual performer is who makes things happen and achieves greatness through their personal effort. However, teams may be an organization's most UNIQUE asset. The blend of people, skills, situations, infrastructure, support, methodologies, and organizational strategy is a combination of variables that can never be truly duplicated. Even if a star performer leaves an organization or team, they will have completely different currents to navigate. They may be a star at their new home, but it will not be instantaneous or in the same way as before. Thus, the organization should take great care to build, leverage, and cultivate teams. Performers can leave, competitors can change, and approaches can be copied at a moment's notice. It is an organization's collection of high-performing teams that are their true differentiating factor.

As we defined earlier, teams are collections of performers with complementary skills, common purposes, goals, and approaches that hold each other accountable. They help each other be the best they can be. They depend on each other to be an expert in what they do, which allows them to be an expert

at what they themselves do. They also push each other to keep up through managed competition with each other.

There is a great pride and camaraderie in a well-run team. The incentive does not need to be in the form of monetary rewards or prizes. A high-performance team wins for the joy of winning and not letting each other down. It creates exceptional performers along the way.

Do not make your performers go it alone. The team is the **ULTIMATE** performance tool.