

5 THINGS HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS DO DIFFERENTLY

by Ron Friedman

When it comes to building extraordinary workplaces and high-performing teams, researchers have long appreciated that three psychological needs are essential: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Decades of research demonstrate that when people feel psychologically fulfilled, they tend to be healthier, happier, and more productive.

Of those three essential needs, relatedness, or the desire to feel connected to others, has always been the trickiest for organizations to cultivate. It's one thing to attract talented employees — but how exactly do you get them to like each other?

Covid has made fostering relatedness all the more difficult. While working from home has been a boon for autonomy, empowering many to decide when and where they work, a lack of physical proximity to colleagues has made it exponentially more challenging to create close personal bonds.

Yet new research suggests that the highest-performing teams have found subtle ways of leveraging social connections during the pandemic to fuel their success. The findings offer important clues on ways any organization can foster greater connectedness — even within a remote or hybrid work setting — to engineer higher-performing teams.

Over the summer, my team at ignite80 partnered with the communication software company Front to survey 1,106 U.S.-based office workers. Our goal was simple: to determine what high-performing teams do differently.

To identify members of high-performing teams, we had respondents (1) rate their team's effectiveness, and (2) compare their team's performance to other teams in their industry. Workers who scored their team a 10 out of 10 on both items were designated members of high-performing teams, allowing us to compare their behaviors against everyone else's.

So, what do high-performing teams do differently? Our study revealed five key differences, all of which

highlight the vital role of close connection among colleagues as a driver of team performance.

High-Performing Teams Are Not Afraid to Pick Up the Phone

While telephone calls are becoming increasingly less common in the workplace in general, that's not the case among high-performing teams. Our research found that they tend to communicate more frequently in general, and are significantly more likely to communicate with colleagues using the telephone than their less successful peers (10.1 vs. 6.1 calls per day on average).

This makes sense. Recent studies have found that while most people anticipate that phone calls will be awkward and uncomfortable, that's a misperception. Not only are phone calls no more awkward in practice, they also tend to strengthen relationships and prevent misunderstanding, contributing to more fruitful interactions among teammates.

High-Performing Teams Are More Strategic With Their Meetings

It's no secret that poorly run meetings contribute to employee dissatisfaction, drain cognitive bandwidth, and cost organizations billions.

Our findings indicate that high-performing teams avoid the common pitfalls of poorly run meetings by incorporating practices shown to foster more productive gatherings. Specifically, they are significantly more likely to require prework from participants (39% more likely), introduce an agenda (26% more likely), and begin with a check-in that keeps team members apprised of one another's progress (55% more likely).

By ensuring that time together is both efficient and collaborative, high-performing teams don't just make

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better use of their meetings — they also set the stage for more fruitful interactions, contributing to better relationships.

High-Performing Teams Invest Time Bonding Over Non-Work Topics

From a managerial standpoint, it's easy to frown upon workplace conversations that have nothing to do with work. After all, what good can come from employees spending valuable work time chatting about a major sporting event or blockbuster film?

However, research suggests that discussing non-work topics offers major advantages. That's because it's in personal conversations that we identify shared interests, which fosters deeper liking and authentic connections.

Within our study, we found that high-performing team members are significantly more likely to spend time at the office discussing non-work matters with their colleagues (25% more) — topics that may extend to sports, books, and family. They're also significantly more likely to have met their colleagues for coffee, tea, or an alcoholic beverage over the past six months.

In other words, the best teams aren't more effective because they work all the time. On the contrary: They invest time connecting in genuine ways, which yields closer friendships and better teamwork later on.

High-Performing Teams Give and Receive Appreciation More Frequently

A key reason the need for relatedness contributes to better performance at work is that it makes us feel valued, appreciated, and respected by those whose opinions we prize. It's why recognition is often a more powerful motivating force than monetary incentives.

Within our study, members of high-performing teams reported receiving more frequent appreciation at work — both from their colleagues (72% more) as well their managers (79% more). Critically, they also reported expressing appreciation to their colleagues more frequently (44% more), suggesting that within the best teams, appreciation doesn't flow from the top down. It's a cultural norm that's observable in peer-to-peer interactions.

High-Performing Teams Are More Authentic at Work

Within our study, members of high-performing teams were significantly more likely to express positive emotions with their colleagues. They reported being more likely to compliment, joke with, and tease their teammates. In emails, they were more likely to use exclamation points, emojis, and GIFs.

Interestingly, however, they were also more likely to express negative emotions at work. We found that they were more likely to curse, complain, and express sarcasm with their teammates.

Why would expressing negative emotions at work yield more positive performance? It's because the alternative to expressing negative emotions is suppressing them, and suppression is cognitively expensive. It involves expending valuable cognitive resources attempting to hide emotions from others, leaving less mental firepower for doing the work.

Previous studies have shown that authenticity contributes to workplace well-being and individual performance. Our research suggests it lifts team performance as well.

Needless to say, there are times when expressing negative emotions at the office isn't helpful or appropriate. What this finding suggests is that, to the extent that team members experience the psychological safety to express their full range of emotions with their colleagues, overall team performance tends to benefit.

In sum, our study's findings suggest that creating a high-performing workplace takes more than simply hiring the right people and arming them with the right tools to do their work. It requires creating opportunities for genuine, authentic relationships to develop.

Fostering close connections among teammates need not be expensive or time-consuming. By incorporating simple, evidence-based practices that yield better communication, more productive meetings, and deeper friendships, every workplace has the ability to fuel people's basic psychological need for relatedness and lift team performance.

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