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Nurturing High Performance Teams

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By Richard Smith

HR can play a more proactive and critical role in identifying high performance teams, and help accelerate their growth through specific actions, writes Richard R. Smith, Academic Director for Graduate Programmes in Human Capital at Singapore Management University

When was the last time that you received a call from a business leader who said: “Thank you for all the great organisation development support with our teams; we are exceeding our business results due to their high performance!”?

While some HR leaders may think that this type of call is a rare occurrence, it is exactly the type of feedback that many HR and organisation development (OD) professionals are receiving when they become active in the design and planning for business teams. So what is the role of HR in nurturing high performance teams in the organisation?

Situation

In most organisations today, working in teams is a common phenomenon and is rarely given much thought. Business leaders routinely set up taskforce teams, cross-functional teams, virtual teams, special review teams, project teams, cross-border teams, and the like. In most cases, little planning and architecture goes into the design and planning for each team.

While some proactive HR leaders may issue guidelines or try to help with all these teams, this orientation is generally not productive. Instead, HR must clearly understand which teams are critical for business impact and then dive into the role of nurturing these selected teams to high performance.

While it is hard to be selective and focused, this is a critical prerequisite. To understand how HR can help facilitate high performance teams, let's consider the potential for HR's role across Tuckman's commonly known axiom of team development that includes: “forming”, “storming”, “norming”, and “performing”.

Forming

Even before the team starts forming, HR has the opportunity to influence the team design, composition, and expectations. Strong HR leaders are able to influence and design these things before the team members even meet. In that first meeting or two as a team, HR can again make a significant contribution by helping to set the right tone and norms for the team.

Too often at this early stage of team development, people are on their best behaviour, avoiding conflict, and staying in individual comfort zones. As a result, it generally takes time for a team to ‘warm-up’ or start to be productive. HR can help accelerate this with team building activities that are targeted at specific areas that the team will need to tackle.

One HR leader at a large consumer products company remarked, “We really try to skip the forming stage of development and quickly get into the ‘storming’! While it seems unnatural that HR is creating team conflict, it is exactly the type of thing we need to jump-start teams into a high performance mode.”

Storming

At this stage, teams generally have multiple options and different perspectives on what should be done. While this can be healthy, it can also be detrimental to the team dynamics and results if not managed well. Here, HR can play a critical role in helping team members understand each other and proactively manage the team dynamics. By employing the use of a team-profiling tool, HR can quickly help spot potential conflict areas and facilitate active discussions with team members on areas such as decision-making, communication styles, and task-orientation.

An HR leader in a health-care organisation stated, “Talking about team dynamics and personal styles is difficult. Then when you put data in front of team members – the discussions and open conversations seem to happen without effort.” The use of a team profile should generally be coupled with active facilitation to help team members make the most of the instrument. It is important to remember that the goal is not to skip or shortcut the “storming” stage of team development, but rather to make it productive and impactful towards the team results.

Norming

During the ‘Norming’ stage of team development, many teams fall into common patterns or rhythms that are consistent with the culture and that generally minimise conflict. At this stage, people are familiar with each other and the team interactions can become routine. The danger is that the teams no longer push themselves or challenge the norms to drive to higher performance.

During this stage, HR can again play a critical role in helping to challenge the current thinking by working with line management to infuse new challenges into the team with such things as a change in team membership, adding new team components or constraints, setting new goals, or assigning new tasks.

As one HR leader in a financial services firm stated, “When our product teams fall into the ‘norming’ stage of complacency, we generally do something to shake them up – it is great to be able to bring new life into a team (even if it is not always immediately welcomed).”

Performing

At this stage, teams are generally quite functional in accomplishing their tasks and can be counted on to operate smoothly. While not all teams may reach this “performing” stage, those that do may occasionally revert back to prior stages as they change over time. While the teams at this stage are generally productive, HR can again play an important role in keeping the team performance high and encouraging even higher results.

One way of keeping the engagement level of the team high is by expanding its scope, influence or impact in the organisation. High performing teams will need new challenges and opportunities to fuel their interests and ambitions.

As one HR manager from a professional services firm remarked, “When we have a highly successful team, HR takes a special note to develop new ways of using this team for more impact. While it is tempting to spend time on the team that is struggling, we must always remind ourselves that the high performing teams will not be there for long without continued nurturing.”

While HR is busy with many other priorities it can be difficult to justify time on high performing teams. But it is sometimes these teams that can actually help leverage the work of HR. In fact, one organisation created team process ambassadors from high performance teams. In this role, team members spent time with other teams to share their successes, processes, and development.

As they become ambassadors, they teach others about what they have learned while also increasing their own learning on effective teaming. This can help spread the word and expectations for future high performance teams in the organisation.

Working in teams is a normal and sometimes routine part of the workplace today. Yet, research shows that we are not often that effective when working in teams for a variety of reasons. HR leaders can play a critical role in each stage of team development, by not only building the right teams, but accelerating the development process, creating team profiles for insight to dynamics, disrupting routines, and even stretching teams for organisational impact.

Building a high performing team is not only good for business; it is a great way to showcase the power of the HR team in leveraging human capital.

Table:

The role of HR in nurturing high performance teams

Start by being selective... only work with teams that are critical to business results!

Forming

- Building the optimal team design (structure, functions, competencies, etc.)
- Managing the team composition and selection with line management
- Facilitating the team expectation setting process with stakeholders
- Accelerating the forming process through targeted team building activities

Storming

- Completing a team assessment profile to proactively manage the natural team dynamics and differences
- Facilitating a team dynamics session to agree on decision-making, communication modes, and task-orientation can short-cut and diffuse potential conflict areas

Norming

- Challenging the norms and the routines of the team (changing team membership, adding new complexity, setting new goals, etc.)
- Creating a catalyst at the right time for signaling a change to help drive the team to new levels

Performing

- Changing the scope, influence, and impact can help the team expand to a new level of performance
- Creating team process ambassadors can help teach and mentor other teams to reach the goal of high performance

Finish by being effusive... showcase the results of the team and their work on the team processes!