Characteristics of High-Performing Team Meetings

Performance Methodology by
Brian Bacon

Brian Bacon is the Chairman and Founder of Oxford Leadership™.

He is a special advisor to prime ministers, presidents and heads of state and a leading consultant to the CEOs and top management of numerous multinational corporations including Telefónica, O2, AkzoNobel, METRO AG, Ericsson, Coca-Cola, BP, NXP, Barclay's, Unilever, McDonald's, Sandvik, GE, Pharmacia, SAAB, British Aerospace and Volvo.

As a leading global business strategist, Brian Bacon has been involved in more than 30 successful corporate turnarounds and is the creator of one of the world's most successful leadership development programmes with over 300,000 alumni from 90 countries.

Until they find the right formula for how to behave and talk with each other in meetings, most leadership teams remain dysfunctional. According to Brian Bacon, Chairman and Founder of Oxford Leadership™, a defining characteristic of a high-performing team is how it behaves before, during and after meetings.

The success of a team is evidenced by how efficiently it manages meetings: in essence, a team's performance is determined by how well it prepares, conducts and follows through after its meetings. Other contributory factors to team performance include: how a team deals with critical issues; how it comes to conclusions and makes decisions; how work is assigned; how conflict is resolved and how members are held accountable. All of this is determined by how interaction occurs, i.e. how people communicate before, during and after meetings.

Having studied the interaction and behaviours of some of the world's best leadership teams over 20 years, Oxford Leadership has identified the defining norms of high-performing top management team meetings.

How a team talks together will determine how well it works. Trust, respect and communication are essential foundation stones of a high-performing team. A high-performing team is all about relationships that consistently produce breakthrough results. While it's nice if team members actually like each other, 'liking' is an option in a high-performing team; trusting, respecting and communicating well is not an option; it's a must. Sometimes team members WON'T like each other, but they can still work together.

If there is no respect, there will be no collaboration. If there is no communication, there will be no relationship. If there is no trust, there is simply no point in continuing.

Herein lays the challenge. If a team has been assembled correctly, it will have a high degree of diversity; not only gender and geographic diversity, but diversity of perspective. A high level of diversity is essential if a team is to tackle highly complex and nuanced challenges under pressure of time. The problem with a high level of diversity is the inevitable conflict that accompanies it. In a high-performing team, conflict is inevitable. So long as it isn't toxic, conflict can be beneficial in a team. Diverse perspectives produce friction that stimulates ideas and drives a team towards a more refined and rigorous result.

Provided there is trust, respect and communication, conflict and friction will lead to high performance. On the other hand, if there's little or no trust, respect and willingness to communicate, conflict and friction will become toxic and a team will struggle to perform.

To borrow and bend Dave Barry's witticism, "If you had to identify in one word the reason why most teams have not achieved, and never will achieve, their full potential, that word would be meetings". While this may be true for some teams, this is not the case with high-performing teams.

The best teams I've worked with have mastered the mystery of meetings and know how to use them to strengthen the bonds of trust and respect in the team and deliver breakthrough results. Every team is unique and their context is always different, but there are certain things high-performing teams do, before, during and after a meeting that lead to breakthrough performance.

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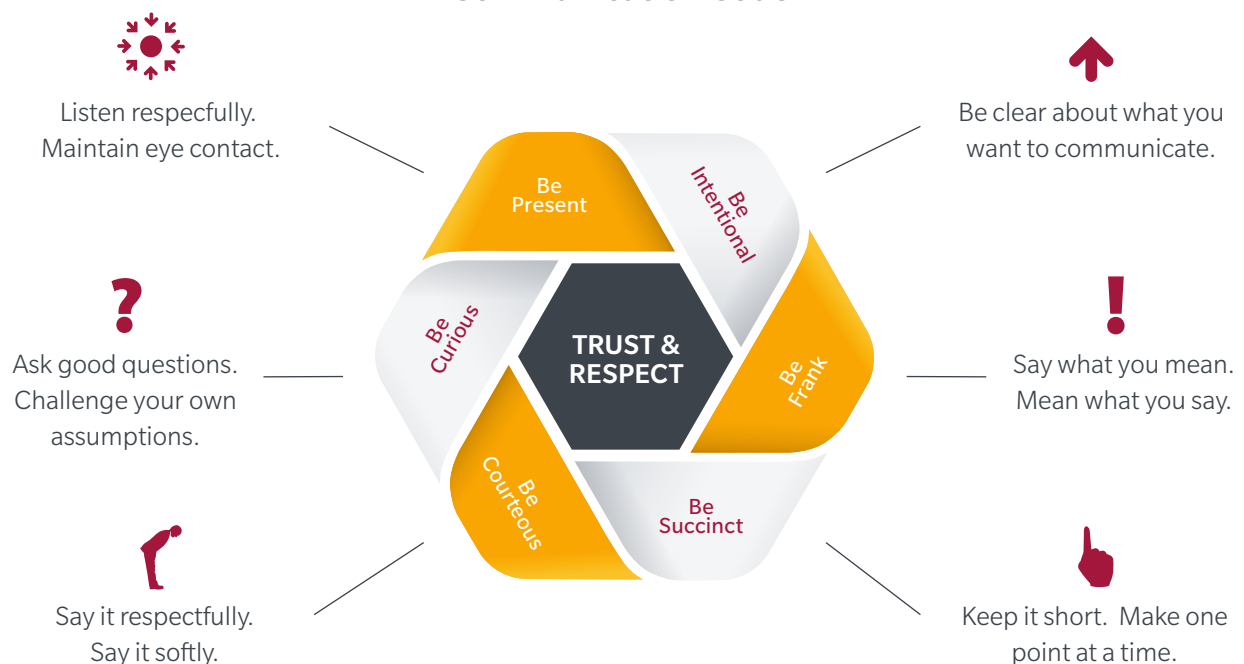
Dave Berry

Before the Meeting

Decide what kind of meeting you are going to have. Define the intention of the meeting, as well as the various topics on the agenda, for instance:

» Information sharing (What information and why?)

» Solution finding (What is the issue or problem that needs to be tackled?)

» Decision making (What is to be decided? Who is to decide? The leader? The team? What criteria will be used for making a decision?)

» Providing motivation - teambuilding (Why is this necessary now?)

Discover the question the team needs to answer. Albert Einstein once said, "If I had to solve a problem in one hour and my life depended on the solution, I would spend 55 minutes figuring out the right question. Once I've discovered the right question, I'll solve it in 5 minutes". Make sure you are asking the right question that can only be answered by the people you have invited to the meeting. Crafting the right question is the key to an effective meeting.

Invite the right people. Not everyone should be invited to every meeting. Ensuring relevance of each person to the topic is key to optimising the energy of the team. It's all about having the right people, properly prepared to answer the right question. Reduce the size of the meeting to include only those who absolutely need to be there.

OXFORD LEADERSHIP™
High-Performing Team Meeting Communication Code

Listen respecfully. Maintain eye contact.

Be clear about what you want to communicate.

Ask good questions. Challenge your own assumptions.

Say what you mean. Mean what you say.

Say it respectfully. Say it softly.

Keep it short. Make one point at a time.

Be Present · Be Intentional · Be Frank · Be Succinct · Be Courteous · Be Curious

TRUST & RESPECT

Prepare the critical facts, essential evidence and vital data points. Be sure to prepare the meeting with all the relevant facts assembled in order to understand the context as fully and comprehensively as possible.

Avoid context setting by anecdote and assumption.

Provide a clear agenda and pre-reads in plenty of time.

Make sure people know what to expect and are able to prepare themselves for full engagement, right from the start.

Determine the required roles and ask team members to accept them. The roles are usually:

» Leader (accountable for the preparation, outcome and follow-through)

» Facilitator (responsible for the dynamics and time-keeping of the process)

» Recorder (responsible for accurate capture and report out)

» Participant (responsible for content creation and contribution)

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Albert Eienstein
Theoretical Physicist

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During the Meeting

Trust and respect is either demonstrated or diminished by how team members communicate with each other throughout the meeting. High-performing teams are characterised by the following norms of communications conduct:

Be Present

Firstly, team memebrs show up! Meeting avoidance is considered highly disrespectful. High-performing team members are fully conscious, emotionally and intellectually present. They are fully engaged at every point throughout the meeting. They listen respectfully and maintain eye contact with whoever has the floor. They lean forward and take notes. They aren't checking their phones, staring out the window or preparing what they are going to say next. They listen for meaning and build on ideas that are already in play. When everyone is fully present in a conversation there is a real dialogue. When people aren't fully present, the conversation becomes an exercise in transactional ping pong and meaningless point scoring.

Be Intentional

Top team members are clear about what they want to say before they even open their mouths to speak. Every spoken contribution is deliberate and has conscious intent. They aren't figuring what they want to say as they go along and they don't say things simply for effect, or to be seen as witty or clever. They are conscious of how they make a contribution and why they do so. This builds respect and earns trust in their contribution. If a comment is controversial, it's always intended to be so. Top team members accept responsibility for the effect of their words.

Before challenging their colleague's assumptions, they challenge their own assumptions. This demonstrates respect and leads to discovery.

Be Courteous

Courtesy is a critical factor in a high-performing team. A tough message is most effectively communicated in a soft voice and courteous tone. Brain science shows that positive or negative, the way in which a message is spoken determines its effectiveness. If you make a positive comment in the wrong way, that message can create a neural downer. At the University of Wisconsin, neuroscientist Richard Davidson has found that when we're upbeat, our brains turn up the activity in an area on the left side, just behind the forehead. That's the brain state where we are at our best. But when we're feeling attacked or anxious, our brain turns up the volume on the right side. This causes us to shut down. An aggressive tone puts this downer brain area on overdrive. The tone of voice can trigger one or another brain area. In one study, when people received positive feedback that was delivered in a negative, critical tone of voice, they came out of the session feeling down - despite the good news. Yet, when negative feedback came in a warm, positive tone of voice, they felt upbeat and energised. Say it respectfully. Say it softly. You don't have to shout to be heard.

Be Curious

Top teams assume positive intentions and intelligence in their colleagues. When something sounds wrong or contradictory, a team member will assume that 'he/she must know something or see something that I don't know or see, so let me find out what it is'. They express curiosity instead of being judgmental. Instead of making a retaliatory remark, they will ask questions and explore what their colleague sees or knows that they themselves don't.

Before challenging their colleague's assumptions, they challenge their own assumptions. This demonstrates respect and leads to discovery. Members of high-performing teams have refined the art of developing collaborative action, based on collective wisdom.

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Be Frank

Top team members say exactly what they mean and mean exactly what they say. They 'cut to the chase', offering facts or perspectives that build and contribute meaningfully to the dialogue without going through a kabuki dance. While this direct approach of saying exactly what is meant may sometimes startle, surprise, or discomfit others, people prefer to know clearly what is meant rather than having to interpret, often incorrectly. Being direct doesn't need to be insulting or blunt, and, if done respectfully, can build a foundation of trust, which can transform a crucial conversation and move things forward in a positive way.

Be Succinct

Top team members respect their colleague's time and intellectual capacity to grasp a point that is made clearly and succinctly. They don't take a moment longer than is necessary to make a contribution to the dialogue. There is no place in top team meetings for long-winded digressions. Every team member accepts personal responsibility to keep things moving forward and staying on point. Keep it short, make one point at a time and don't repeat the point with different variations. If unsure whether or not a point has been understood, ask for feedback.

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After the Meeting

A team meeting is only a means to an end; it is never an end in itself. The success and effectiveness of any meeting is evident only in what happens as a result. How decisions are executed and followed up, and the results they yield, is the only relevant evidence of a successful meeting. Evaluations which show how much people liked the meeting are meaningless. What happened as result is the only measure of importance to a high-performing team.

Two things are consistently present in high-performing:

Decisiveness in Doing

At every point in the agenda, a high-performing team comes to a conclusion.

They don't leave things dangling: decision points are conclusive.

Commitments and accountabilities also get clarified, accepted and followed through in a prescribed timescale.

Top team members not only say what they mean; they always do what they say.

Absolute Personal Responsibility

High-performing teams are characterised by relentless follow-up.

Decisions are meaningless unless there is clarity of accountability and commitment to execute what is agreed.

High-performance team meetings end with fierce resolve by team members to make things happen by following through on their commitments.

High-performing teams are a no-excuse zone.

They accept absolute personal responsibility to deliver results, not excuses.

The success of a team is evidenced by how efficiently it manages meetings: in essence, a team's performance is determined by how well it prepares, conducts and follows through after its meetings.

About Oxford Leadership

Oxford Leadership™ is a global leadership consultancy that aligns people with strategy to drive transformation in big business and high-level organisations. Our global network includes 215 partners, consultants, and coaches in 28 countries throughout Europe, the United States, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. We transform leaders, align teams and create fierce resolve and passion to win. Typical interventions are to accelerate performance, execute strategy and embed capability and change. Our leadership development programmes have over 300,000 executive alumni, and programmes are part of the core curriculum in many of the world's most prestigious corporate universities. Methodologies based and on more than 100 corporate turnarounds and performance acceleration assignments in FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 companies

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