

How Leaders Get Their Teams To 'Click'

By Philip J. Harkins



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Well-integrated, high-performing teams – those that ‘click’ – never lose sight of their goals and are largely self-sustaining. In fact, they seem to take on a life of their own. And it’s all down to leadership.

In every case that has been studied at the Europe-based Centre for Organisational Research, teams that ‘click’ always have a leader who creates the environment and establishes the operating principles and values that are conducive to high performance. The evidence for this is clearly seen in organizations where a manager who creates high performance moves to another part of the organization, or a different organization, and within 18 months they once again establish a high performing team.

We believe these leaders operate in an organized, systematic way to build successful teams, and that the formula not only involves what leaders should say and do, but also what they should not say and do. It also involves working backwards – leaders should envisage the future before dealing with the present.

The four most significant behaviors consistently demonstrated by high-impact leaders are:

- ◆ defining clear goals or a vision of the future in accordance with overall organizational aims (the ‘big picture’)
- ◆ creating blueprints for action to achieve those goals
- ◆ using language to build trust, encourage forward thinking and create energy within the team (‘powerful conversations’)
- ◆ getting the right people involved (‘passionate champions’)

Imparting a clear vision of where the team should be headed, and inspiring its members to make it a reality, is fundamental to team success. The great American tennis player Arthur Ashe had a wonderful phrase: “I never worried about winning or losing. I just went for it every time.” Leaders who get teams to click consistently have their members tied together and “going for it”.

This takes considerable effort on the part of a leader, so it’s useful to reflect on why it’s worthwhile. As the English manager in a large aerospace company explained to me, “It’s a lot of work to get a team to click. It’s a lot more work to live with a team that isn’t clicking.” It’s as if successful team leaders calculate the up-front investment and then adopt a process to get the team to pull together to maximize the return on that investment.

Here is what high-impact leaders do. They create a clear vision and describe it in simple language. They take the time to get people to subscribe, or buy in, to that vision. Next, they assess the current situation, then work through the courses of action which are likely to yield results. It is the up-front work in getting to a clear end state that makes the process work.

This foundation-laying aspect of leadership is a determining factor in why some teams seem to grasp and then do their utmost to achieve organizational goals. It’s all about how the leader continually visualizes a positive end result. So, when things get tough for the team (as they always do), these extraordinary leaders reintroduce the big picture with phrases like: “Remember our objectives,” and “Let’s keep our eye on the ball”. This consistent single strategy of starting with the future and then moving back to the present allows

leaders to make the tough decisions which enable the team to recognize and articulate problems (“What’s really up?” or, “What’s really so?”), sort through possible solutions, and then take action.

Teams that consistently don’t ‘get it together’ over a long period of time can put up tough opposition for leaders who want to move forward. We like to say that such teams get ‘caught in the swamp’. Unfortunately, what they also do is pull others into the swamp with them.

From extensive research, we conclude that extraordinary leaders employ distinctive forms of verbal communication. It is what these leaders say and what they don’t say that gives them an advantage in getting teams to high-performance levels. These leaders truly mean what they say. They don’t mix their messages, fudge meanings or use ambiguous words. Their conversations are always candid, clear, and followed by committed action.

We call them ‘powerful conversations’, because they make blueprints come alive and create positive attitudes and energy on the part of team members. They also encourage mutual understanding between team members and the leader; use language to make a vision seem real and worth attaining. A ‘powerful conversation’ typically progresses in four stages.

Stage 1: Before getting into the specific details of goals and objectives, high-impact leaders spend all the time that’s needed on forming a clear vision (e.g., the general shape of a desired outcome or future state) which makes possible complete, undisputed acceptance of its attainability.

Stage 2: This entails a very candid and clear discussion of what people are thinking and feeling. The high impact leader makes sure that everyone’s agenda is heard and explored. He or she carefully asks questions to make sure there is a genuine expression of beliefs, expectations and even fears, while also patiently ensuring that the conversation remains relevant to the big picture. This keeps all those involved out of the swamp, and enables them to set up a useful and realistic agenda. Once this is done, the high-impact leader assesses the agenda.

Stage 3: The high-impact leader now skillfully discusses with team members the issues enmeshed in their proposed agenda. In this way, the leader can deepen his or her understanding of the team’s goals and bring to the surface any hidden agendas. The high-impact leader describes scenarios linking future outcomes with the current situation, then proceeds to refine them. He or she continues to keep the process focused on the target future state, and helps the team to see how far it has moved and what progress it has made.

Stage 4: The leader makes sure participants know exactly what steps need to be taken next, and that they are open about what they will do to turn their commitments into reality – making the team ‘alive’. The closing of a powerful conversation is also the time when a leader makes sure there is absolute buy-in, or belief in what the team is setting out to do, that team members’ commitments are clear and accepted, that all action steps are well-defined and understood. In this way, the high-impact leader ensures that the powerful conversation will produce results.

These are the four most significant behaviors consistently demonstrated by high-impact leaders. But they are not the only such behaviors. What follows is a less detailed but fuller list of what leaders should do to get people to work together to attain organizational goals.

Top Ten Leadership Techniques for Building High-Performing Teams

- 1. Define a very clear picture of the future—a vision for the team.** This is crucial, because teams search desperately for specific targets. Consider the old expression: “If you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there.” Journeys without a clear destination leave groups feeling flat and lost. Keeping teams informed on where they’re headed and how best to get there means leaders must be prepared to acknowledge and adapt to changes in operational conditions and even objectives. Leaders cannot sit back and watch, but instead must create and recreate the vision and team spirit that stops people losing heart and becoming lost.
- 2. Be genuine, even if it means lowering your guard.** Leaders who create ‘click’ have an uncanny sense about how and when to express their inner selves. They will even reveal their own vulnerabilities at the right time to gain the respect of those around them. They are not so concerned about projecting a perfect image: they know that high-impact leaders get results by laughing at their own flaws. They don’t play make-believe, knowing it’s more important ‘to be’ than to ‘seem to be’.
- 3. Ask good questions.** They use enquiry and advocacy in such a way as to keep them abreast of what is really going on. They seem to use a simple formula of the 70-20-10 rule in conversations: 70 per cent listening, 20 per cent enquiring with just the right amount of advocacy, and 10 per cent tracking (i.e., summarizing and synthesizing information, and providing possible courses of action).
- 4. Talk about things—even the hard things.** A leader who gets their team to click is not afraid to talk about the tough stuff. They find ways to have the difficult conversations in the knowledge that burying problems doesn’t make them go away. They also know that if they, as leader, don’t talk about things, no one will and, pretty soon, a culture will develop in which too many things are left unsaid. (I can always tell when teams are dysfunctional by measuring the amount of stuff not talked about, or what I call the “let’s not go there” issues.)
- 5 Follow through on commitments.** Leaders of high-performing teams find ways to build trust and maintain it, especially by making teams hold to their commitments and keeping the team’s view of its goals clear. However, they also know how to distinguish professional trust from blind loyalty.
- 6. Let others speak first.** In high-performing teams, members see themselves as equal in terms of communication. Leaders should therefore encourage this by putting the other person’s need to express their agenda ahead of their own.
- 7. Listen.** High-performing teams comprise people who have mastered the art of listening without fear, of allowing others to speak without reacting strongly or negatively to what is being said, or what they anticipate will be said. The leader fosters and honors this attribute within the team by quickly putting a stop to bad conversational behavior that cuts other people off and implies that their ideas are not valued. The leader knows that achieving higher levels of innovation requires team members to be unafraid to express unusual ideas and advocate experimental processes. They emphasize this by publicly thanking those who take risks – and by making sure that sharpshooters put their guns away.

8. Face up to non-performing players. This brings us to a very important characteristic of high-performing teams, which is that their leaders do not tolerate players who pull the team apart. Interestingly, experienced leaders frequently maintain unity and discipline through third parties in the form of people we call 'passionate champions'. A leader may surround his or herself with several passionate champions, who have established an understanding and close working relationship with one another, and who are totally focused on, and committed to, the team's objectives. They are capable of getting the job done – and not afraid to remove people who are failing to help them do so.

9. Have fun, but never at others' expense. High-impact leaders steer clear of sarcasm: they always take the high road. If they do make fun of someone, it's usually themselves. They have learned the lesson that reckless humor can be misinterpreted and backfire. They know that critics of the organization can turn inappropriate remarks back on a leader who makes them.

10. Be confident and dependable. Somehow, over and above the daily struggle, leaders who get teams to click project confidence. They do this by preparing their conversations and not backing away from, or skimming over, real issues and problems, even difficult or confronting ones. They always address 'What's up?' and 'What's so?' in the organization. They don't try to be spin doctors because they know that, ultimately, this doesn't work. Rather, they are known as straight shooters – people who play hard, fight fair, and never, never give up. At the end of the day, team members know that, whatever happens, their leader will be left standing. This gives them confidence that they will be standing, too. They also know that, should things get really bad, their leader will not desert them or try to shift the blame, but seek to protect them, even if it means standing in the line of fire.

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Linkage is a global organizational development company that specializes in leadership development. We provide clients around the globe with integrated solutions that include strategic consulting services, customized leadership development and training experiences, tailored assessment services, and benchmark research. Linkage's mission is to connect high-performing leaders and organizations to the futures they want to create.

With a relentless commitment to learning, Linkage also offers conferences, institutes, summits, open-enrollment workshops, and distance learning programs on leading-edge topics in leadership, management, human resources, and organizational development. More than 200,000 leaders and managers have attended Linkage programs since 1988.

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