



BUILDING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last 30+ years, the global business environment has become extensively focused on teams and teamwork. Most deliverables are ultimately tied to one or two individuals, but a good deal of the pre-work, actual work, and even presentations comes from the work of teams.

As such, the ability to build high-performance teams is a competitive advantage in most verticals these days. This Ebook looks at the importance of high-performance teams and strategies for developing them, from recruitment models to training and communication approaches.

Some organizational experts and keynotes, such as Patrick Lencioni, have argued that the only competitive advantage across the next two decades of business is the ability to develop high-performing, autonomous teams. We hope this Ebook will offer you some contextual guidance in the same regard.



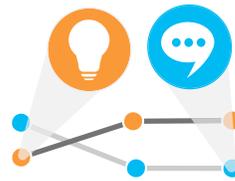
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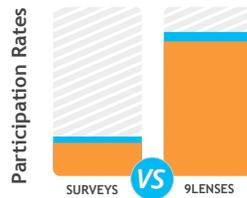
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INTRODUCTION

J. Richard Hackman, the Edgar Pierce Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at Harvard University, is considered by many to be a leading academic expert on the formation and ultimate effectiveness of teams. In his book “Leading Teams”, he opens with a pop-quiz:

If people work together to build a house, will the job probably:

- (a) get done faster*
- (b) take longer to finish*
- (c) not get done?*

The correct answer, of course, is “A.” But the context is what makes it interesting -- this question is actually [from a fourth-grade standardized test in Ohio](#).

The point? 10-year-olds (and kids even younger) are repeatedly taught about this idea that teams inherently are more effective than individuals are alone at achieving a goal. This narrative runs throughout high school and college -- where numerous deliverables are structured around teams as opposed to lone students -- and extends right into most jobs. A team-based model has been the norm in most American companies since about 1953 (far sooner if you consider Ford’s assembly line), yet the best practices around the topic vary fairly widely.

Consider the following: a simple Google search for “high-performing teams” yields 29.2 million results, while “building better teams” yields 24.8 million. These are topics many are interested in, but there is not necessarily singular clarity within the topic.

This Ebook will not necessarily provide that either -- and in fairness, would not be able to fully do so. Every organization is different, every individual is unique, and the needs of varied organizations are, by definition, varied. We may not be able to solve every problem you have around building high-performance teams (HPTs), but what we can provide is a framework for developing a competitive advantage by building HPTs.

IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

Some have argued that accelerated value creation -- you can think of that in terms of revenue, another ROI, or whatever ultimate metric you're chasing -- is exponentially proportional to the [development of HPTs](#). At 9Lenses, we did a simple exercise this summer to put this to the test. In coordination with the World Cup, we participated in an indoor soccer league, and even in that smaller example, the context of HPTs [was clearly relevant](#). It breaks down like this: if you're going to choose to organize a significant portion of your business around teams, then clearly having high-performing teams will make your overall organization better than having lower-performing teams.

Hopefully by now we've established:

(a) the context and (b) the importance of having HPTs.

Now begins the tougher part: How exactly does an organization build HPTs?

HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAM BUILDING STRATEGIES

Overall Approach:

First, let's provide a small amount of context on what 9Lenses does. Simply put, we're software platform for discovering, connecting, and analyzing organizational intelligence. Essentially, we offer pre-packaged and custom apps that enable leaders to act upon employee and customer insights to drive business strategy and optimize team performance. We do, in fact, have a High Performance Team App.

In our apps, we stress these principles (among others) as key: culture, employee characteristics, leadership, and organizational dynamics. When clients use 9Lenses, they are provided with a series of benchmark numbers related to sub-categories within each of these key principles, along with employee or customer comments received around these areas. We've worked with a wide variety of clients, each of which are unique. However, there are large-scale concerns that appear across multiple organizations and multiple verticals, and we'll address those throughout this section.

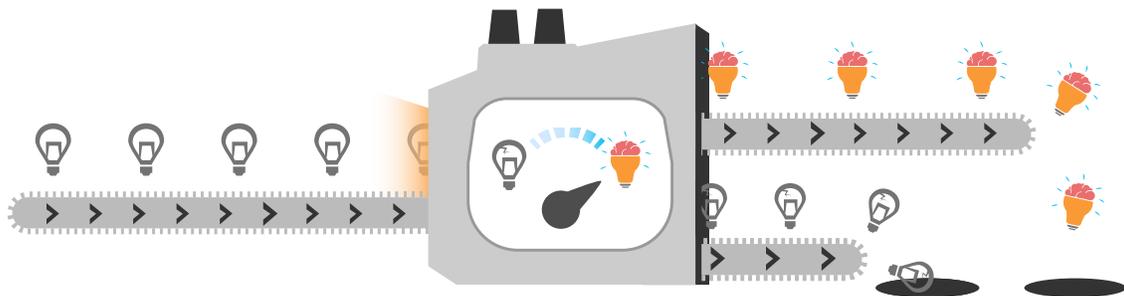
But again, the core tenets we tend to look at are: culture, employee characteristics, leadership and organizational dynamics. We believe these four aspects -- and related offshoots and sub-categories -- can best paint the picture of your organization's strengths and weaknesses around HPTs.

The Check-In:

One major concern we see frequently is the notion of “[death by meeting](#),” how key employees often can’t do their actual work because they spend too much time in meetings. While meetings can be a valuable conveyor of information, they can also fall prey to “information sampling bias.” That’s primarily an academic concept, but the central idea is that information is already centralized in one place -- in standard organizations, that’s often in senior leadership. Meetings should function as a way to take that centralized information and make it more universal, while instead they often function as the opposite, [muddling responsibilities and adding work to others](#).

“*The wise leader speaks rarely and briefly. After all, no other natural outpouring goes on and on. It rains and then it stops. It thunders and then it stops...The leader teaches more through being than through doing. The quality of one’s silence conveys more than long speeches.*”

One of the strategies we endorse when building HPTs is this idea of a “check-in” replacing a standard meeting. It begins with this idea: meetings are not optimal in many situations. The meeting format is best for getting smaller groups of diverse people together initially. Afterwards, the process of communicating can become more organic. It’s almost akin to the idea of communicating less as opposed to more, thus giving employees more time to focus on their actual deliverables and excelling there. The concept is actually [rooted in Chinese philosophy](#): Speak less, say more. Try check-ins and listening as opposed to meetings.



Knowledge Management Systems:

We are not explicitly a KMS provider, although, based on the work we do, we often touch that space. You can make a strong argument that knowledge management [is the future of business](#), especially in the context of Baby Boomers retiring en masse in the next 10-15 years - giving us a good deal of contextual knowledge that companies will be losing. You likely do need a system to capture the knowledge and insight within your organization and to present it in a way that’s actionable moving forward. There are quite literally thousands of these systems out in the world now. At 9Lenses, while we don’t have an explicit KMS, we have several suites of apps that can help power your knowledge transfer (and subsequently, reduce your knowledge loss).

Knowledge transfer is a cornerstone of modern-day high-performing teams. Classical management theory used to hold that it was better for leaders to insulate some or most of their team members from certain aspects of information; in the modern era, that idea has been turned on its

head. Consider the advice of Jason Stirman, an early adopter in Twitter who's now [helping to shape Medium as an organization](#).

Stirman hit another wall trying to shield his team from external drama and politics. 'Classic management advice, and all my mentors told me that insulating your team from things so they won't worry will make them more productive and happier,' he says. 'But they just got angry, and confused, and disconnected. I was constantly censoring all this information and they were way happier when they knew everything.'

KMS can help bring information to a more universal place; that, in turn, can relate back to more employees feeling connected to the brand/organization/company. This is something to consider.

Training:

We have an HR Suite of apps that involves recruiting, training, and on-boarding; we're not going to go that deeply into recruiting and on-boarding here, as those are two topics that deserve their own Ebooks. The basic point here is that you need to hire good people (recruiting) and you need to bring them into the organization in a way that fosters their commitment to the organization (on-boarding), but you also need to remember that people change and evolve every day, even if it seems like they're just sitting in a cubicle and typing away. Thus, you need to cater to that change actively encourage the employee's growth (training).

Here's a stunning stat: the central commonality of the "100 Best Places To Work" list, year-over-year, is [how much training those organizations offer](#). In one way, that might seem intuitive -- employees value organizations that are giving them opportunities to become better -- but for anyone who has worked in a mid-size to large organization, it may seem confusing. Often, in lean fiscal times, functions like training or other aspects of HR are the first to be scaled-back or eliminated; part of the issue here is that they don't directly face revenue, so it's harder to justify their ROI.



In fact, the companies that make "100 Best Places To Work" generally outperform the major stock indices by 300 percent. Simple equation, then: train more (and effectively) = happier, more engaged employees = stronger revenue growth. It doesn't work quite that directly, but that idea -- if embraced -- can help you.

Our apps can help on the training side, at least in terms of rolling out programs and determining their effectiveness. Ultimately, there will be a good deal of **on-the-job training** involved. We've **discussed this before too**; the central idea is that the possibility of more training can't be considered an "HR Rollout" or "corporate fad." Rather, it needs to be shown to be tied to (a) new knowledge and (b) down the road, new opportunities stemming from that new knowledge.

Nugget Markets is a grocery chain, predominantly in California, that does extensive training and **nearly 100 percent of their promotions are internal hires**. You can make an argument that is bad, for sure -- lack of new perspective -- but if you work there and know that opportunities consistently exist, chances are you're more engaged in what you're doing presently. That benefits the organization.

Manager Training:

This is a bit of a different animal than simple "training," because management training involves more soft skills and context.

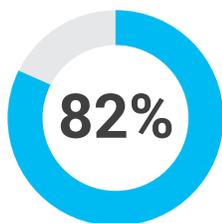
“ We also can check additional devices up to *150 times per day*, and each time we do can require as many as *23 minutes* of getting back on task with the original project.”



23 MINUTES

First, a stunning statistic: 82 percent of managerial hires in the U.S. are ultimately thought to be **the wrong hire for the position**. Phrased another way, over 3 in every 4 managers hired eventually cause the person that hired them to question that move. That's a remarkable amount.

Part of this is because of the basic nature of most American organizations: people are typically advanced off the ability to manage processes, not people. As they become more senior, they need to manage the people, and that's not something they're as comfortable with. As a result, managerial training tends to revolve around more "soft skills" such as **humility** and **"how to get people to listen to you."** If you're a very Type-A, straight-ahead business person, those types of trainings can seem



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like a waste of time to you. You become disengaged, and then the trainings aren't as effective. As a result, managerial training programs need to make a clear, direct link between "skills essential for managers" and "bottom-line effectiveness" (as the latter is often how managers will ultimately be judged). There does need to be discussion of more "soft skills" -- as those are often the defining traits that separate good managers from poor managers in the eyes of employees -- but they need to be explicitly connected to how this benefits the organization. Often

that's done through explaining the cost of turnover -- the central reason employees leave any job, via almost any survey you'll ever read, is "relationship with manager." Furthermore, the higher you go up in pay grade, the more and more a search process will cost -- but there are other ways to explain the need to be a better manager as well.

The quality of a manager obviously contributes to HPT development, perhaps as much as anything else above. It's nearly impossible for a team to be effective if the manager over the team isn't effective in their role.

Communication:

On virtually every employee engagement survey you'll ever encounter, "communication" typically ranks as one of the lower positive aspects within the organization. This speaks directly to the idea of silos, [which are seemingly unavoidable](#). Silos can prevent effective communication between areas, which can lead to overlapping work and redundant responsibilities.

There are some of the same issues in this space as in managerial training, though. Often, you'll hear employees say things like "Well, that's the way it is!" with regard to ineffective communication (resigning themselves to it) or you'll hear the idea discussed as a soft skill that presenters come in to discuss rather than something that needs to be worked on day-to-day.

In fact, [it does need to be practiced every day](#).

Some of this goes back to the above idea of "organic communications" -- that is, replacing the formal process of attending meetings, debriefing the meeting, (etc...) with quicker check-ins. Some organizations have done stand-up meetings, which sometimes are found to have 34 percent more effectiveness, while other organizations do five-minute meetings, where the meeting has to end at five minutes, regardless of where the information flow is. There are different approaches, but the idea is ultimately [better communication](#).

Oftentimes, organizations will try to foster employee communication with newsletters or things of that sort. For a whole host of reasons, [those ideas don't really work](#). We're not necessarily very good at focusing at work (humans, that is): by some estimates, [we only focus six hours per week](#) (yes, that's per week). We also can check additional devices up to 150 times per day, and each time we do can require as many as 23 minutes of getting back on task with the original project. An employee newsletter or e-mail recaps of meetings or anything else designed to bolster communication by giving us something else to look at is probably not going to be very effective.

All of this said, communication has been a challenge of organizations since prehistoric times. One of the best ways to approach the whole thing is to try and apply actionable analytics to it -- namely, what do your employees prefer, and where do they think things could be better? We can do that for you via the HPT app and many of our others.

Employee Engagement:

Are you surprised we got this far and only now gave this its own heading? In a way, we are too; “employee engagement” is perhaps the business catchphrase of the past five years. It all rolls up with several things we’ve discussed above: namely, you need employees to be engaged because they’ll likely perform better (revenue!) and won’t leave (revenue loss!), but also because it can foster a positive workplace, which employees obviously prefer. There are millions of stats out there about employee engagement -- perhaps the most notable are Gallup’s findings that only about 13 percent of people are actually engaged at their job and that this disengagement causes [\\$450 billion in lost profits in the U.S. annually](#) -- but it comes back to this: if you want high-performing teams, you do need some strategy around employee engagement. A team of predominantly disengaged people likely won’t be high-performing. Your options include:

- More training (see above)
- Employee perks such as free food, gym memberships, food trucks, etc.
- “Starting with why” -- A Simon Sinek concept whereby you contextualize the reason for things before they happen; this often helps employees feel more connected to the organization
- Different office design (more open, etc.)
- Happy hours/gatherings
- Improved compensation models
- Etc...

There are dozens of ways to think about increasing employee engagement, all of which have their own pros and cons. If you want HPTs, though, at least some of the members of a given team need to feel engaged with the project -- so whatever works in the context of your company in terms of fostering engagement, you do need to pursue.

FIVE INITIAL STEPS

We've provided a bunch of different ideas and contexts above; now the question is -- what should you do right now? What are five things you can start with in terms of building HPTs? We're glad you asked. These are not necessarily in order of how you should do them, but all five should be addressed.

1. Get top-down buy-in: We can spend time debating the merits of holacracy -- it's mentioned in that article about Medium we discussed above -- but regardless, holacracy is still a niche area in terms of organizational development. Most organizations are structured top-down, and for any idea to truly gain traction, the initial buy-in needs to come from the top and be filtered down (there's a caveat around that, though: the things coming from the top can't change every week, or else an organization enters into a 'Boy Who Cried Wolf' situation). If truly high-performing, high-functioning, deliverable-centric teams are your goal, that needs to have buy-in from the C-Suite and senior level before it can resonate.

2. Reconsider your training modules: What types of training are you offering? What types are employees clamoring for? How are you measuring whether the current trainings are successful? Do you have knowledge within the organization that could be used to train others? Who should "own" training -- HR or someone else, or a mix of HR and someone else? What would an ideal training environment look like for your organization?

3. Look at managerial skills: Start thinking about and brainstorming what you want in a manager. Consider previous exit interviews -- what frustrated employees about managers -- and talk to a mix of managers, independent contractors, and non-managers. Utilize any and all 9Lenses actionable data (hey, we're good for you!). Consider what skills managers need right now, but also consider what skills they might need in 2-3 years. Start to sketch out managerial trainings around these core skills.

4. Define culture: Objectives ultimately flow from culture, and how quickly objectives can be achieved often correlates with culture as well. If you've never tried to define your culture / mission statement / values, make sure you do that as well -- and include aspects around collaboration and shared missions. This will empower the development of HPTs.

5. Communication Models: How do people like to receive information in your organization, and what does research about communication and information-processing during a workday tell you? How should teams share info, and how could teams best share info? These are important processes to consider in HPTs -- a team can have six individually-excellent members, but if they don't know how to communicate their ideas and accomplishments to each other, the team itself will not be high-performing.

ASSESSMENT

Data is everywhere these days; by some measure, 90 percent of the world's data was [generated in the past two years](#). That's a lot of what powers 9Lenses: data becoming actionable insight for your organization and your customers. But beyond how it helps us, this is how it helps you: the generation of "gut calls" can end. People can still have gut reactions to ideas or how things should be done, and you have the essential ability to test them, record the results, and see if the process should move forward.

Whenever you do anything around HPTs, though, remember this: people are unique. They come to teams with different strengths and weaknesses, and they come to teams with competing priorities from other aspects of their role in the organization. They take vacations, and holidays occur. In short, a team might take a little while to ramp up and become a good team; it might take months to a year for it to become a HPT. You do need to assess, but you need to do so within contextual reason -- great teams, just like great cities or great individual leaders, aren't developed overnight. It takes time. Gather data -- but give it time to develop. But as you do so, collect that information to make sure things are developing properly. [We can help you with this.](#)



Connect With 9Lenses

We empower business leaders to use this data as a road map to drive improvements and help employees acquire the knowledge and skills to make business excellence sustainable. Whether you want to take your business to the next level or grow sales and customers, the Lenses provide the focus.

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