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Building High Performing Teams

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Introduction

Building high performing teams

It's fair to say that high performing managers have a gifted ability to hire, lead and manage high performing teams. If that's someone you'd like to be, then find out how to do it by reading this eBook.

You'll learn how to:

- ✅ Hire the right team
- ✅ Lead by example
- ✅ Motivate staff
- ✅ Manage politics and conflict
- ✅ Reduce stress levels
- ✅ Run effective meetings.

Of course there's no silver bullet to managing projects. But if you can hire, lead and motivate a quality team to achieve the project goals then it's a great start! It all depends on you really. Don't get bogged down with the project at the micro level, instead step back and take a helicopter view. Hire the right people and trust them to do the job well. Lead and motivate these people, offering them help and support when they need it. Your job is to be the ship's captain: you set the course, motivate the team and keep the ship on track but you don't scrub the decks or hoist the rigging! With that in mind, here's how to build high performing teams.

What is a High Performing Team?

A high performing team is one that delivers what is asked for, when it is asked without you having to roll your sleeves up and get involved as the Project Manager on a daily basis.

You need a team of people with individual roles and responsibilities that are empowered to make operational decisions for the benefit of the project. Each team member is able to carry out daily tasks with guidance from the Project Manager, but without having to lean on him/her to do the work. In contrast, poor performing teams do not work well together to achieve the set goals. They lean on the Project Manager heavily to get work done and communication amongst team members is poor. The following tips will help you get started to build high performing teams.

Planning

Before you hire your first person, you need to document what it is that your team have to achieve and by when. You also need to create specific Job Descriptions that set out your expectations for each role and how you'll measure their performance.

Don't stop there. Think about the team culture you want to build, the dynamics of your team and how they should work together.

Only with a personal vision for how your team will perform, will you be able to meet that goal.

Hiring top candidates

Recruitment is harder than it looks. It's easy to recruit the wrong person, and it's even easier to build a team that doesn't perform well. Candidates should only be recruited if they fit the job description, align with your personal vision for how the team will work together and want to work in a culture that depicts your vision.

Take your time. Be swayed by your gut feel. Recruit "like-minded people". Introduce them to high performing staff you know of and get their feedback. Be choosy. Recruit the best. If you have to pay top dollar for top performers, it will often cost less in the long run than a cheap resource that doesn't perform.

Creating the culture

If you've hired like-minded people then they should gel which is a great start. Get them working together on tasks, and periodically change the people you pair up so that they get to know others in the team.

If your ideal culture is "performance through achievement" then shout out loud about each team success. And if you want "performance through happy customers" then strengthen the relationship between the team and your customers. Get them socializing or try team sports.

Self-motivation

A happy, motivated team will always out-perform an unhappy, unmotivated one. And it starts with you! Are you happy and motivated? Get on track personally by working out, relaxing after hours, de-stress and set personal goals. Your motivation will rub off on your team.

When you're ready, focus on motivating your team. Use team building and group rallying exercises to get them pumped. Tell them how proud you are to work with them. Help them understand why the goals are important and how every team member contributes to them.

Reward and recognition

People respond positively to positive behavior. By recognizing achievement when it's due, your team will be motivated to perform at a high level.

Tell the team about an individual's success. Make them feel proud, and don't focus on one team or person too frequently.

And reward them when it's due. Reward them unexpectedly as people will appreciate it all the more. Meals to restaurants, tickets to the super-bowl. These things mean a lot to staff when they're not expecting it!

The 5 Goals of a Project Manager

Before starting to build your high performing team, you need to be very clear as to what it is you want to achieve as a Project Manager. Typically, project managers have five goals to achieve. These goals are generic to all industries and all types of projects. Regardless of your level of experience in project management, set these 5 goals for every project you manage.

Goal 1: To finish on time

This is the oldest but trickiest goal in the book. It's the most difficult because requirements often change during the project and the schedule was probably optimistic in the first place.

To succeed, you need to manage your scope very carefully. Implement a change control process so that any changes to the scope are properly managed.

Always keep your plan up-to-date, recording actual vs. planned progress. Identify any deviations from plan and fix them quickly.

Goal 2: To finish under budget

To make sure that your project costs don't spiral, you need to set a project budget at the start. In this budget include all of the types of project costs that will accrue, whether they are to do with people, equipment, suppliers or materials. Then work out how much each task in your plan is going to cost to complete and track any deviations from this plan.

Make sure that if you over-spend on some tasks, that you under-spend on others. In this way, you can control your spend and deliver under budget.

Goal 3: To meet the requirements

The goal here is to meet the requirements that were set for the project at the start. Whether the requirements were to install a new IT system, build a bridge or implement new processes, your project needs to produce solutions which fully meet these requirements.

The trick is to make sure that you have a detailed set of requirements at the beginning. If they are ambiguous in any way, then what may have seemed like a small piece of work could become huge, taking up valuable time and resources to complete.

Goal 4: To keep customers happy

You could finish your project on time, under budget and have fully met all of the requirements but still have unhappy customers. This is usually because their expectations have changed since the project started and have not been properly managed.

To ensure that your project sponsor, customer and other stakeholders are happy at the end of your project, you need to manage their expectations carefully. Make sure you keep them regularly informed of progress and let them voice their concerns or ideas. Tell them upfront when you can't deliver on time, or when a change needs to be made. Openness and honesty is the best approach when setting customer expectations.

Goal 5: To ensure a happy team

If you can do all of this with a happy team, then you'll be more motivated to do it all again for the next project and that's how your staff will feel too. Staff satisfaction is critical to your project's success.

Keep your team happy by rewarding and recognizing them for their successes. Assign them work that complements their strengths and conduct team building exercises to boost morale. With a happy motivated team, you can achieve anything!

How to Hire the Right Staff

Now that you've set your five goals, you need to kick off building your high performing team by recruiting the right staff.

It's a well-known fact that great projects are run by great teams. But finding the right staff to help you build a great team is one of the greatest challenges you'll face as a Project Manager.

By defining the role properly, interviewing and testing your candidates efficiently, you can usually find the right people to help you deliver your project successfully. To hire the right staff for the right roles, take the following steps.

Define the role

Defining the role is the most important step to take when recruiting new project staff. You need to create a Job Description document that describes in depth the:

- Purpose of the role
- Responsibilities for every phase in the project
- Reporting and communication lines with other staff
- Skills, experience and qualifications required
- Team fit and performance criteria
- Salary, rate, commission and benefits
- Work environment and special conditions.

Find top candidates

Next, advertise the role both internally and externally. Make your adverts as specific as possible. List the key responsibilities and performance criteria. Explain the challenges and stresses that they will face. List any special requirements. Make it sound enticing, but don't oversell it. Remember, attracting the right candidates will improve your chances of recruiting the right people.

Hopefully, your specific adverts will have attracted the right type of candidates to the role. You now need to select 3 to 10 (maximum) people to interview.

Before you start the selection process, you should list all of the characteristics from the Job Description that are critical to the role. These characteristics will become your selection criteria. Rank your selection criteria in order of importance and if needed, assign a weighting.

Review all of the CVs and applications received against the specified criteria. While it's possible to complete this step scientifically, you should also follow your gut feel. If a candidate is an 80+% fit but just doesn't feel right, then you should consider this. However if they're not an 80%+ fit against your selection criteria, then the chances are that they might fit in well with the team but are not perfect for the role.

Interview candidates

Interview the selected candidates. Remember that your ability to critically analyze candidates in an interview situation will determine the success of the recruitment exercise.

Don't just wing it. For every interview, you should:

- Prepare a list of questions before you start
- Cover all areas of the Job Description during the interview
- Address any strengths and weaknesses from their CV
- Consider the quality of the questions they've posed to you
- Be specific, direct and to the point at all times.

Don't be afraid to take notes during the interview. If you're interviewing more than 3 candidates, you will rely on these notes more heavily when progressing to the next stage.

Test candidates

Depending on the type of role for which you are recruiting, you may also want to formally test your candidates. Here are 10 ways that you can test candidates to determine their suitability against the Job Description:

1. Perform personality, competency & numerical testing.
2. Get them to send you samples of work completed in the past.
3. Ask them to perform specific project tasks. For instance, if hiring a software developer, get them to write you an example program.
4. Perform a second interview with management.
5. Get them to meet the team and allow the team to ask questions.
6. Take them for lunch with your team and see how they socialize.
7. Get them to do a formal presentation to your team.
8. Seek 3 professional references, all being past employers.
9. Ask them for 2 personal references, for character checking.
10. Speak to their prior customers to confirm their competency.

Select candidate

Based on the testing and interview results, the final step is to select your candidate.

By now, you want to have 2-3 strong contenders for the role. So what if their results are the same and you can't decide? In this case, you have 3 options available:

1. Hire neither and start again. It's difficult to do this as you've put in a lot of work to get to this point, but it's better to start again than hire a candidate who will not meet 95-100% of the needs of the role. You only have one shot of delivering this project on time and having the right person is critical to making it happen.

2. Hire both and deliver earlier. In some cases you can split a Job Description in two and allocate the responsibilities to more than one staff member. It's challenging and risky doing this, but in some cases you can deliver the project early and at the same cost by hiring two gifted candidates at the same time.

3. Select the best candidate. In most cases you're landed with this option. If both candidates are on an even par, don't pass the decision on to someone else, go with your gut feel. There are numerous statistical testing methods to help choose the right person, but at the end of the day they have to be able to do the job and fit in with your team. Only you will know which candidate is best to do this.

How to Lead Your Projects

It doesn't take a guru...

With a team in place, you can now focus on leading the team as opposed to managing the day-to-day operations.

Sure, project managers obviously have to manage projects but great project managers lead projects to success. They don't manage them at the micro level, instead they empower the team to make decisions, allowing them to stand back and take a leadership role within the project.

The main difference between a leader and a manager is that a leader is responsible for setting the goals and motivating the team to achieve them. Whereas a manager is responsible for co-ordinating the work to achieve the goals set.

Here are some tips to boost your leadership skills.

- **Set goals:** Start by setting clear project goals and timeframes for achieving them. Then create a crystal clear roadmap for your team so that every person in your team knows what has to be done and by when. Use a project methodology to help you do this.

- **Be passionate:** It's passion that will drive the project to success. If you are passionate about achieving the project goals, then your team will be as well.

- **Be focused:** If you want others to follow you, then you need to be incredibly focused on achieving your goals. You need to be the hardest worker and most highly driven person in the team, if you want to inspire others to follow you.

- **Identify values:** You need to think about the values you want to portray as a leader, and once you've identified them you need to stick to them. Good values to have as a leader include openness, honesty, trust and integrity. Remember, your values define who you are as a person. Strong values are critical to strong leadership.

- **Your leadership:** You need to think about your leadership style, and make sure you stick to it. How do you want others to perceive you? Do you want them to see you as hard or soft, formal or informal, strict or relaxed? Remember that your leadership style needs to fit in with your personal nature, and it also needs to fit with your team.

People will only follow your lead if you set a great example. They need to trust and believe in you as a person, not just because of the role you have. Here's how to earn people's trust and belief in you:

- ✅ **Secure commitment:** Start by meeting each team member individually and telling them how important their role is to the project. Make them feel valued and gain their commitment to achieving success.

- ✅ **Set achievable goals:** Set each person 3 goals to achieve within a reasonable timeframe. Involve them in the goal-setting exercise to secure their buy-in. Then review progress along the way.

- ✅ **Recognize great performance:** If they achieve their goals, let them know that they've done a great job and that you're proud of them. Then set more goals for the next stage ahead.

- ✅ **Get personal:** Get to know your team on a personal level. Learning more about what it is that motivates them will be invaluable to leading them towards the goals you've set.

- ✅ **Be supportive:** You need to be there for them when they need you. Whether personal or work-related, support them as much as you can.

- ✅ **Be positive:** Always try and be positive when dealing with them. Only by looking at the positive side of everything will you inspire people to achieve their best.

It's all about Motivating Staff

To be a great leader, you need to consistently motivate your staff. Every person in the team will be driven by different factors. Some will be motivated by money, others by results. Some may simply be happy to have a full-time job, whereas others may want to get more out of a job by achieving personal objectives.

Projects can be tough; they involve stress, hard work and pressure. They are often delivered over a timeframe that is longer than expected so motivation levels can reduce over time. Here are some tips to ensure that your team is fully motivated throughout the project.

It's individual

The trick to motivating people is to identify what drives them. If they are results orientated, then set targets for them and reward them when they achieve them. If they are money driven, then structure the remuneration so that they receive a bonus when they meet the goals set. If they are technically motivated then give them a role which challenges their technical skill set. Understanding what it is that motivates each person in your team individually and then taking steps to ensure that those factors are met is critical to building a high performing team.

Make it fun

Projects are hard work but you can take time out after hours to have fun with your team. Organize a meal out, tenpin bowling or a fun excursion. It will help to build team morale and also reduce stress.

Temperatures can rise and personalities clash if it's all work and no play, especially when timeframes are tight and stress levels increase. By taking time out of the project and having fun, tension will be relieved and your team will be able to bond in a social environment.

Having a sense of humor is also beneficial. If something funny happens on the project, even though you're under pressure and stress, you need to laugh about it and share it with the team.

Don't burn-out

Some people are higher performers than others. They will naturally attract more work than those that underperform as the Project Manager is more likely to assign a task to someone that is high performing, as they will do a better job.

What typically happens is that the high performers quickly get burned out, while the underperformers cruise through. You need to recognize this early and make sure that you spread the work evenly, even if that means passing project critical work to those that underperform. When you do this, you simply need to support those people more than you do the high performers. By focusing your attention on supporting, training and heavily motivating the underperformers, you can turn them into high performers as well.

Regroup

A high performing team is one that meets the targets set for the project. However, this doesn't mean setting the targets upfront and then not talking about them again for the rest of the project life cycle.

You need to regroup by running a project status meeting every two weeks, whether it's in a meeting room at your office or online if you have a distributed project environment. In this meeting, reiterate the goals that were set at the start of the project and show the team all of the tasks, deliverables and milestones that have been met since your last meeting. Make it clear whether the project is on, behind or ahead of schedule.

A high performing team is like a well-oiled engine on a race track. It needs to know when to apply the gas and went to lighten off. By knowing the progress against schedule, the team will be motivated to work extra hard to achieve the targets set.

Reward and recognize

High performing teams have high motivation levels. Motivation is influenced by how you reward and recognize good performance. It doesn't cost a lot of money, time or effort to recognize performance but it can be critical to success.

If a team member performs at a higher level than expected, recognize this in front of the team. Everyone likes a manager who tells others about their successes. It makes them feel proud of what they have achieved and motivates them to continue performing well. It also motivates others to perform better. On the other hand, if someone is not performing well you need to address this not in front of the team but by meeting with them individually. You need to be frank and honest with them, telling them why they have not met the targets set and what you expect from them over the coming weeks.

Rewarding team members for great performance is important. Whether you give them vouchers for a meal out, a book token or a coffee voucher, it will certainly be appreciated. Only by recognizing and rewarding good performance can you motivate the team to continue performing at a high level.

How to Manage Project Politics

Every project has its fair share of politics. As Project Manager it's your job to cut through it if you want your team to perform at a high level.

What happens when your Project Sponsor wants a slightly different outcome for the project than your customer, management team and other stakeholders? The answer is that each party tries to influence the project to get what they want, and this is known as "Project Politics".

The result is that the team is constantly pushed in different directions, trying to keep everyone happy, but not really doing what they were originally tasked to do which was to deliver a single outcome for the project. The project team will become stressed, confused, demotivated and inefficient. It's your job as a Project Manager to ensure this doesn't happen. Here's how to prevent it.

Create a Project Board

Confident people look and feel great. The first step towards boosting confidence is to start with your physical and mental state. Try to eat healthy foods, reduce junk food and drink plenty of water during the day.

Do a little exercise every day. It'll work wonders. Go to the gym or take up a sport. Get a new haircut, buy some new clothes and shout yourself a gift that you'll value. If you look and feel

fantastic, then you'll start each day feeling wonderful.

Build relationships

Having a Project Board, doesn't mean there are no politics. It just makes it easier to manage. As a Project Manager, you still need to reduce the politics within the board by building close relationships with each board member. Meet with each of them regularly to find out what they need from the project, by when and why. This will help you steer them in the right direction when they meet as a group. By listening to their needs, you're securing their buy-in and you may be able to save heated board meetings by presenting them with solutions instead of problems.

Manage change

The biggest risk to a project is that the goal posts keep moving, causing continuous change to the project scope.

This is a breeding ground for project politics, because every stakeholder will have their own wants and needs, and they may not be consistent with one another.

You need to manage change carefully by putting in place a formal process for managing it. Your change process should involve documenting each Change Request, why it's needed and the impact to the project in implementing it. The Change Request should then be presented to the Project Board for review and approval. Make sure that when it's approved the board also approve the extra time, money and people needed to implement it.

Helping your Team to Manage Project Stress

All projects involve an element of stress but how you manage stress will influence your team.

We all know what stress does. It makes your hair turn grey and makes you frown more often than smile. It is natural that projects incur a lot of stress, as you have a fixed set of deliverables to produce in a fixed timeframe and with fixed resources – and all while your Project Sponsor is breathing down your neck!

Positive stress can be generated in an environment which boosts productivity and focuses your team on the end goal. Negative stress, on the other hand, can demoralize staff, reduce efficiency and de-focus your team. In this type of environment, you need to turn negative stress into positive stress, and to do that, here are some tips and hints to help:

Time-out

Positive stress can only be generated when people within teams have positive relationships. The best way to encourage these relationships is through socializing.

Whether it is taking the team out for regular lunches, drinks after work or a sporting activity, getting the team together so they can get to know one another outside of the project environment is critical to dumping negative stress.

Rallying

Now that your team members have built positive relationships through taking time out to socialize together it's time to rally your team around a cause – your project goal.

Schedule monthly get-togethers to reaffirm the project goals, congratulate the team on their successes to date and boost their confidence in doing what it takes to complete the project successfully. Make sure that each person leaves the meeting energized and passionate about finishing the remainder of the project.

Boosting

Rallying works fine for teams, but it is not enough for individuals. You need to boost every team member by making them feel good about themselves and allowing them to gain confidence in completing the tasks assigned. You can do this by:

- Recognizing great performance when you see it
- Conducting staff reviews and providing positive feedback
- Offering bonuses for outstanding performance
- Reviewing salaries when applicable
- Introducing team awards and prizes.

Pin-pointing

Stressed teams often have an "instigator", this is a person (or people) who generates a lot of negativity and who influences the performance of others. You need to address the problem with these people directly and agree on an action plan to improve the situation. This can be done during staff performance reviews or at special meeting. Pin-pointing "stress points" or "weak points" in a team is critical to ensuring project success.

Self-administering

To resolve team stress effectively, you need to be in the right frame of mind yourself. If you are negatively stressed, then those around you are likely to be.

You need to practice what you preach by feeling up-beat and positive about the team. You need to feel fit and healthy, focused, and inspirational. If you can do this, then you can turn negative stress into positive stress and give your team a real chance at succeeding.

How to Resolve Project Conflict

Project environments are typically high stress. You have more work to do than hours available, the customer may change their requirements and unforeseen issues, changes and risks crop up which jeopardise delivery date even further. This can lead to conflict between yourself and the team, or between team members as you apply more pressure to try and meet the delivery dates set.

You need to deal with this conflict directly so that it does not distract the project team from what it set out to achieve and in turn reduce the team's performance.

Face it...

You need to face conflict and not ignore it, as it won't usually go away. Ignoring it only makes it worse. The earlier you face it, the easier it will be to resolve. When conflict occurs, take these steps:

- **Time out:** If someone is getting heated, tell them you need five minutes to collect your thoughts. Make a coffee or go for a walk. This will help you to calm down and reflect on what has happened, and hopefully give them time to calm down.

- **A pacifier:** Restart the conversation with "I know that you're under pressure because of ... and that you need...and I'm willing to help you." This should pacify them a little and make the atmosphere more positive.

- **Problem solving:** Agree that a problem exists and that you both need to work together to resolve it constructively. Discuss the various solutions to the problem and try to agree on the pros and cons of each before deciding on the best course of action.

- **Body language:** While all this is happening, you need to focus on your body language. Use open stances. Take your hands out of your pockets and never fold your arms. Try and use slow hand movements. Use a passive voice and don't show emotion. Face them at 45 degrees, not front on. Maintain good eye contact. Listen carefully and watch their body language as well.

- **A mediator:** If the above steps are going poorly, then you need to get someone else involved who can help mediate informally. Tell the person you'd like to include a colleague in the conversation as they will also have ideas for a solution. Invite someone who is level-headed and a good problem solver, whom you trust.

- **Giving feedback:** When their body language becomes more relaxed and open, it's time to give them some constructive feedback. Let them know how they have come across and how you would like them to deal with you should a similar issue come up in the future. Only by giving positive constructive feedback, can you change their behaviour.

Tips for Running Project Meetings

High performing teams exhibit certain traits. Team members have fantastic time management skills, always working smart with their time to achieve more than what was expected upfront. They also have high motivation levels and are incredibly competent at doing their job.

However, get them in a meeting and this can all turn to custard. Why? Meetings have a tendency to drag on for ages, with no structure and no solid outcomes. Here are some tips to help you structure and run project meetings efficiently to keep your team performing at a high level throughout each working week.

Plan wisely

Make sure you get the most out of your meetings by planning them wisely and setting an agenda. Prior to each meeting, write down 3 goals that you want from the meeting and how you're going to achieve them. The goals might be:

- To let the team know the project is on track
- To raise any issues or risks
- To ensure the team feel valued and are motivated.

Open and close carefully

As in theatre, people tend to remember the opening and closing scenes the most. So open and close your meetings carefully. When you open the meeting, tell them what the purpose of the meeting is, what you want to get out of it and why it's important. This gets their attention and sets the scene. When you close the meeting, tell them what has been agreed or achieved in the meeting and the next steps going forward.

Control the conversation

You need to be in complete control of the meeting at all times to ensure that:

- ✓ The meeting follows the agenda
- ✓ You don't get stuck on one single issue
- ✓ One person doesn't dominate the meeting
- ✓ Everyone has their say.

Start by standing or sitting in a prominent place in the room. Raise your voice a little to add presence. Jump in frequently when people talk too long. Be polite but strong. Control the meeting as a coach would control a football team, by constantly watching, listening and directing the team. If possible, ask someone else to record the minutes. This gives you the time needed to control the conversation so that the agenda and your 3 goals are met.

Park it and move on

Often in meetings, a single issue can consume the majority of the meeting time. If the issue is not related to your specific meeting goals, then tell the team to "park it and move on".

Record the issue on a whiteboard or paper and address it with the relevant team members separately after the meeting. This keeps your meetings short and focused.

Keep it action orientated

Projects are all about getting things done. Make sure that where possible, every discussion results in an action to be completed. Focusing on the actions that are needed is a great way of reducing the length of meetings.

And there you have it!

By following the steps outlined in this eBook, hopefully you have learnt what it takes to recruit, lead, manage and motivate a high performing team.

It's a great challenge to take on board. It's one thing to manage the project team and deliver a result with moderate motivation levels and everyone being burnt out by the end. But it's a truly gifted Project Manager who can lead the team to success and deliver one project after another consistently while keeping motivation and energy levels high. If you can do that, then you stand apart from other project managers in the market. You will also gain the trust and respect from the team that you rightly deserve.

Of course every high performing manager needs a high performing toolset at their fingertips. So take a free trial of ProjectManager.com and see why it's the best way to manage your projects.