Moments of Truth

Talk and walk performance.

by Howard M. Guttman

Do ORGANIZATIONS, leaders, and teams communicate in a way that marks them as high performers? Listen to this definition of a high-performance organization by Robert Gordon, CEO of Dairy Farmers of Australia: "It is a horizontal organization in which everyone operates by a clearly defined set of decision-making protocols; where people understand what they are accountable for and then own the results. It means moving to an action-and results-driven workforce—not one that waits for instructions or trips over functional boundaries."

Tucked away in this definition are some trigger words for high performance: "horizontal," "decision-making protocols," "accountable," "results-driven workforce," and no "functional boundaries." We would add two more key words: *alignment*—where an organization and its teams are in sync on everything from strategy to the way employees relate to each other—and *engaged*—where team members are fully committed to achieving team goals.

10 Common Elements

Over the past year, we interviewed 40 high-performing leaders and observed their team meetings. What is striking is the consistent pattern of communication of these leaders and teams. Here are 10 common elements:

1. Clarity. High-performing players demand clarity, not by shouting and screaming "we need greater clarity," but by closely questioning one another when an issue is discussed or they have differences of opinion. "Can you clarify that?" "What do you mean?" "Can you give us an example?" "What do you see as the consequence?" You hear many such clarifying questions.

2. Authenticity. High-performance language sidesteps game playing. You rarely hear team members asking "imposter questions"—those designed to poke holes for the sake of exposing a colleague's Achilles' heel—or making non-relevant statements. High-

performance discussion is straight talk. Concerns are put on the table.

3. Accuracy. Conversation is biased toward facts, data, and observable behavior. You'll hear: "It's my opinion that . . . "—signifying that the speaker wants listeners to know that he or she is about to enter a no-fact zone—or "On what do you base your judgment?" asking for factual back-up. When a problem is discussed, the first order of business is to get the facts: What is the problem? Where and when is it occurring? Who and how much is involved?

4. Efficiency. There's little beating around the bush and verbal foreplay among high performers. Rather than long preambles, you're apt to hear, "John, I have a concern about your behavior, and we need to talk." Excuse-

making is a great time waster, which is why the conversation turns away from "It's not my fault" or "If I only had more resources" kind of statements and more toward accepting responsibility and moving on to solutions.

5. Completeness. You're unlikely to hear half the story. Instead, you'll likely hear, "Let's discuss the pros and cons of the decision," or "Here are the risks with my proposal, and here's what we stand to gain." The aim is to inform, not to finesse.

6. Timeliness. There's a just-in-time feature to high-performing conversations. "Let's put the facts—all of them—on the table, now." One of the favorite questions you'll hear is, "By when?" There's also plenty of "If . . . then" language: "*If* Marketing executes it plan by June, *then* Sales will have plenty of time to generate business."

7. Focus. Conversation is typically strictly business, driven by the outcome required in a given situation. If

the discussion involves setting priorities, you don't hear anyone jumping into solution mode; if the conversation focuses on *identifying* the root causes of a problem, you're not likely to hear much about taking action to *correct* them. On some teams, there is banter, but people disagree without being disagreeable. One CEO asserted that on his team, "Insult is the language of affection." But often it is the source of affliction, which is why it's not part of high-performance conversations.

8. Openness. High-performance conversations "go there" as a function of high-performance features: no silos, accountability, decision-making protocols, and a focus on results. If a team member—or leader—is underperforming, or if a function is problematic, colleagues will "go there." Elephant heads—those touchy issues that most teams pretend don't exist—are an endangered species. High-performance teams make tough calls on new hires, after a frank, fact-based discussion.

9. Action oriented. At decision time, high-performing teams ask: What are the key objectives? Who needs to be involved? By when should the team review the decision? The words connote action. They also convey immediacy, as when teams talk about the "24-hour rule." This means getting back to a colleague with a response, if not a conclusion, within one business day.

10. Depersonalization. High-performing teams "go there," but they don't "go personal" or get defensive. Rather, they remind one another: "It's a business case: let's treat the discussion objectively." Also, there's little member-to-leader discussion, such as "over to you for the decision" or "I'm not sure, what do you think?"

Conversation is crucial during moments of truth: situations in which team members hold leaders accountable. One CEO was engaged in a small, pet-project acquisition that drained his attention during a downturn in sales, causing concern among team members. They called him on it, telling him that the acquisition had become a "blind spot" and distraction. The input was factual and dispassionate, causing the CEO to quickly offload the distraction.

To the extent that leaders walk the talk of high performance, others are likely to do the same. **LE**

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ACTION: Excel in the moments of truth.