When Teams Regress

Regeneration becomes the leader's job.

by Howard M. Guttman

HIGH-PERFORMING teams are not perpetually high-performing. Twists and turns can cause a fall from grace: a new team leader, churn in team membership, restructuring, a strategic shift, or an economic downturn. It's unrealistic to expect perpetual perfection from a team.

Well-led teams seem to make more mistakes than average teams because they report and discuss more errors—then learn from them and self-regenerate. Consider the top team of a large retailer whose performance over the past several years made it a Wall Street darling. As the market grew more competitive, and, in the face of gas-pump poverty, consumer spending tightened, the CEO realized that greater customer focus was needed. He and his top team created three business units, each led by a brand president. It was a radical change.

The disruption took its toll. Communication wasn't always clear. There was mounting anxiety about the implications of the changes. Resource allocation became a contentious issue, as did the assignment of top leadership positions. And conflict was headed underground, rather than being openly confronted.

The CEO sensed that his team and those reporting to it were veering from high-performance behavior and quickly brought in a third party to conduct confidential, one-on-one interviews of members of both teams, then probed further with an in-depth survey. These confirmed that the two top teams were backsliding.

The Leader's Role

The leader of a high-performing team plays a pivotal role in a team's revitalization. The CEO of the retail chain possessed finely tuned sonar that enabled him to go below the surface of day-to-day activities to detect trouble early. And he canvassed members of the two teams to see if his perceptions squared with everyone else's.

The leader's role in resuscitating team performance goes beyond spotting trouble and taking a reading of team members. In the retail example, the CEO was not content to let the team assessment become a vent-and-forget exercise. He called a two-day, off-site meeting of both teams to confront the situation. In one revealing exercise, the group was divided into sub-teams and asked to write a headline on the situation facing them. "Clarify Roles Or Move On," was one headline. "Too Busy For High-Performing Teams?" asked another.

The headline exercise was followed by the CEO opening up the discussion to a no-holds-barred Q&A session, putting himself in the hot seat to field questions: "How are resources going to be allocated to the three new business units?" "What's the timing of the restructuring?" "Who will be accountable for what?" The CEO's answers were honest and forthright. Where decisions were yet to be made or were too sensitive to be discussed, he said so.

You can move from breakdowns to breakthroughs when the team leader demonstrates openness to rigorous questioning and feedback. When the leader is open, team members follow.

"Us" Accountability

Accountability is another prerequisite for bringing a star team back to high performance. Dips in team performance are rarely the result of a single underperformer. In most cases, the enemy is "us." On high-performing teams, accountability goes beyond the individual's recognition that he or she is part of the problem and beyond holding peers on the team accountable for performance. It includes holding the team leader accountable as well.

That's what happened during the offsite. One segment of the two-day session was devoted to having each team member answer two questions—and note his or her responses on an easel: What do you want a team member to do differently? What do you want that team member to continue doing? This was accountability time! For example, on the "Discontinue" list, the COO was told to "stop moving slowly on weak staff talent." Other requests: "Stop being negative." And "Share concerns about a decision with the person involved before sharing it with others." One-on-one discussion followed between the individual providing feedback and the one receiving it. The group discussion was frank, tough, and focused on behavior and action.

The leader is often part of the problem. This makes self-regeneration dependent on a team's ability to self-assess. We recommend that high-performing teams go through a formal self-evaluation process every six months. The president of the Latin American division of a consumer products company blanched at this suggestion. But his reaction changed after the two-day reevaluation. "It ramped up performance and made me realize we should do this regularly."

Most high-performing teams do a quick reality check at the end of each meeting, asking: "How are we doing as a team? Are the ground rules we've established holding up? Are there any disconnects?"

Passion for Action

High-performing teams, especially in a regeneration mode, are relentlessly action oriented. They identify issues, set priorities, assemble the fewest number of people from the team needed for resolution, set decision-making guidelines, and move quickly to resolution.

The retail chain's top team and the team that reported to it began the issue-resolution process. Once issues were identified and sub-teams created, those teams were asked, in full group: "To resolve this issue, what do you need from each person and function you interact with? What behaviors do they need to exhibit to help you ratchet up your performance?" This made "just do it" a full-team accountability.

Regeneration is difficult to achieve when team members can't break away from old patterns and limitations. This is the time for training in conflict management, influencing, and leadership.

To regenerate a sluggish high-performing team, team members who were once at the top of their game need to be reminded of the basics to return to the previous level of play. **LE**

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