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How Do Top-Performing Product Development Teams Rise Above Themselves?



*Pressure, compressed deadlines, inevitable conflict and unforeseeable turns of directions are typical challenges for product development teams. While most teams are highly skilled technically and scientifically, only the top-performing teams are able to navigate themselves through issues. Others struggle and get stuck in a loop of conflict, rework and firefighting. Why? In this short article, stars alumna Dr. **Marianne TRACY** explains which specific team behaviours, practices and external situational factors differentiate the highest-performing cross-functional teams from average-performing teams.*

First, to establish a high-performance team culture, all cross-functional teams must master the strategies and actions that facilitate teamwork and collaboration. This is the goal and three key factors help lead to success:

1. Team success requires partnership and accountability among the team, team leader and management.

Building a high-performance team culture requires the establishment of a strong partnership among the team, its team leader, and its key stakeholders, including senior management and governing bodies. High performing teams are clear about how each partner contributes to their success. To create a high-performance team culture all three partners must be accountable for their role. It is the responsibility of each member of the partnership to understand what he or she needs, and to seek it out if it is missing. The team leader must manage the boundary between the team and its sponsors. If resources are needed, the leader must speak up. If information and decisions are required, the leader must seek them. If requests are disruptive, the leader must negotiate a balance between meeting the needs of stakeholders and the needs of the team. Similarly, the team needs to move forward even if all the pieces aren't in place. Team members must work to understand the needs of their stakeholders and to be proactive and seek what

they require to fulfil those needs. Management and stakeholders must provide the team with timely actionable feedback and demonstrate alignment around priorities.

2. The best performing teams balance actions between task (what needs to be done) and people (team members and how they work together).

Teams must create a balance between their attention to the task and their attention to the people. High performance is caused by both actions and strategies that focus on task and those that focus on people. Research indicates that the predominant reason for team performance problems is a lack of attention to people issues. Team members are often task experts. They are rarely well-versed in the actions and strategies necessary for smooth team functioning.

3. Key drivers that increase trust, ownership, and high performance in cross-functional teams:

- **Diligent documentation of the team's work** affects performance. High-performing teams are meticulous about documenting the team's work and decisions. They continually update and review their plans while keeping their eye on their target goals. Average-performing teams are simply not as disciplined about the documentation process;
- **Proactively seeking feedback and information from stakeholders** affects performance. High-performing teams invest time in gaining a clear understanding of the concerns and needs of their key stakeholders and go after the input of these stakeholders. Average-performing teams more often do not fully understand stakeholder needs;
- **Leaders of top performing teams are directive and decisive** when necessary. High performing team leaders were able to provide clear direction for their team. When needed, they engaged in an authoritative or directive style of leadership that clarified expectations and helped to focus the team. Average performing leaders were often more tentative in their directives.

Based on this analysis we can identify **six drivers of high performance in cross-functional teams:**

Driver #1: Demonstrates Ongoing Attention to Goals and Plans

This driver reflects a relentless concern with aligning the team's goals and plans with the business, and maintaining a clear, specific, and detailed action plan for achieving the goals. This driver is evident when a team does the following:

- Regularly reviews and updates the project plan;
- Aligns the team's goals with functional and business goals;
- Develops a clear and specific action plan for achieving its goals;
- Understands and supports team goals;
- Appropriately focuses on both its strategic and operational tasks.

Driver #2: Diligently Documents Team's Work

This driver reveals a strong concern for clearly documented communication before and after meetings. This driver is evident when a team does the following:

- Is disciplined about accurate documentation of its work;
- Has a well-defined process for documenting and organizing its work;
- Circulates agendas prior to meetings to allow for input and preparation;
- Accurately documents and distributes minutes of meetings including decisions, conclusions, and action items to team members.

Driver #3: Commits to Improving the Team's Performance

This driver reveals a strong desire to improve the team and its processes and recognizes that learning and reflective discussions are necessary to facilitate improvement. This driver is evident when a team does the following:

- Finds new ways to do things better and/or faster;
- Conducts lessons learned reviews to assess performance;
- Examines how well members are working together as a team.

Driver #4: Seeks to Understand and Value Each Other

This driver reveals a strong value for understanding the views, attitudes, cultural differences, interests, concerns, strengths, hot buttons, and weaknesses of team members. This driver is evident when a team does the following:

- Understands one another's attitudes and views;
- Invests time in getting to know one another;
- Knows each other's style well enough to interact effectively;
- Accommodates each other's cultural differences;
- Openly discusses tensions and disappointments.

Driver #5: Meets Challenges Optimistically and Decisively

This driver reveals a strong bias toward addressing problems, obstacles, and conflicts in a productive and decisive manner. This driver is evident when a team does the following:

- Is optimistic about its ability to deal with challenges;
- Makes decisions in a timely manner;
- Quickly moves past non-productive discussion and finds ways to overcome obstacles;
- Acts decisively to address challenges.

Driver #6: Proactively Seeks Feedback and Information from Stakeholders

This driver reveals a desire among team members to address the needs and concerns of key stakeholders, and to seek their feedback and input when making important decisions. This driver is evident when a team does the following:

- Addresses the concerns and needs of stakeholders;
- Seeks input from stakeholders when appropriate and before implementing a decision;
- Elevates conflict to the appropriate level in the organization when it can't be resolved within the team.



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