

What Is a High Performing Team and What Does It Do Differently?

Bob Murray*

Having an organization that is full of HPTs is harder to achieve than having one full of high performing individuals. It's a common mistake to think that a team of high performers will automatically lead to a high performing team. To enable teams to be genuinely high performing, a lot of management theory has to be rethought; the Harvard School of Anthropology might be a better place to search for management advice in this respect, rather than the Harvard Business School.

"By 2012, this company must be seen as 'world class,'" John Major, the CEO of Enthuse Logistics Inc. (ELI) (obviously not its real name), thundered at the AGM to rapturous applause. "We will be a high performing corporation consisting of High Performing Teams (HPTs) in all areas of our business." As of writing this article, none of this has happened. ELI has slipped in the rankings of its peers, is losing its best people to rival organizations and its teams are not high performing in any of its business areas.

Major and his fellow executives made some fundamental mistakes which, in my experience, most leaders make when they set out to create and manage HPTs. What are these mistakes and how can they be avoided?

Let me begin by defining a 'high performing team.' An HPT is one that consistently meets or exceeds the expectations placed upon it. That's an important definition to bear in mind; it's the

consistent outcome that makes a group an HPT, not the excellence of the individuals within it.

A pack of wolves or hyenas is a very high performing team, so is a colony of ants or a pack of baboons. In fact, HPTs are everywhere you look in nature, not just in human corporations. In fact, human HPTs in modern organizations are comparatively rare. Are we humans, then, uniquely genetically predisposed to be underperforming? Is there something in the genome of the wolf, or the hyena, or the ant or the baboon that enables them to team up so easily to fulfill a task? Hardly.

I have witnessed many really highly performing human teams and I have come to a rather startling conclusion, which, as luck would have it, is backed up by a lot of current research: Group high performance is in our evolutionary makeup, it's natural to us, it's our default. HPTs are rare because management styles, together with aspects

* Bob Murray, MBA, PhD, is a founder of the management consultancy Fortinberry Murray (www.fortinberrymurray.com). He has been working with many of the top-ranking corporations and firms in Asia, Europe, the US and Australia for the last 20 years. With his co-Founder, Alicia Fortinberry, PhD, he is the author of a number of books, most recently *Creating Optimism* and *Raising an Optimistic Child*. The author can be reached at bob.murray@fortinberrymurray.com

of the society we have created within organizations and outside, make barriers which prevent teams operating at their best.

For a year, I lived with a band of San hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari Desert. It was then that I observed really high performing teams in action. Their teamwork in hunting or gathering, or indeed anything that they did jointly, was as superb as it was natural. Given the harsh, and often dangerous conditions they lived in working smoothly as a group was essential to their survival.

'Natural' is the key. The wolves, the hyenas, the baboons, the ants and the San people were simply doing what they did naturally—in line with their genetics and their evolution. We are naturally high performing when we are in teams that are structured to mimic as closely as possible that which is embedded in our genes and neurobiology.

What I want to do in this article is to tease out this concept and show how managers and corporate executives can use this knowledge to create and nurture high performing teams and, indeed, high performing organizations.

High Performing Individuals vs. High Performing Teams

Outside of calls of nature, humans are not designed to do very much alone. We are very much communal animals, perhaps the most communal of all the great apes. Our safety, our sense of importance, our emotional security and our sense of status and self-esteem all depend on our being surrounded by supportive people. So does our mental, emotional and physical health.

The reward system of our brain is most activated when we do things in the company of others (Grinde, 2002). When this system is activated—when we are enjoying what we do—we tend to perform at our best (Losada et al., 2005; and Robbins, 2005). If you put these two concepts together, you begin to get to the essence

of what HPTs are all about. A high performing team is therefore a group of people who enjoy what they do and who feel supported by other members of the group.

Hunter-gatherers certainly enjoy hunting and gathering; they don't see it as work. They see these activities as socially rewarding. This resonates with studies which indicate that one of the primary reasons people come to work is to relate to other people, to bond (Nohria et al., 2009).

Recent research at Carnegie Mellon University has shown conclusively that just putting a number of high-IQ people together does not make a HPT. Rather what makes a team high performing is the team's ability to form a mutually supportive social group. The group IQ, and its overall performance, rises in line with its sociability (Miller, 2010). We tend to work best with people that we enjoy working with; it's really as simple as that.

Recently, I worked with a large multinational professional service firm headquartered in the USA. Because of the rapidly changing nature of the marketplace for the business, the firm was faced with the necessity of making some profound changes in the way that the firm's partners were remunerated and led. The partnership as a whole had agreed to the changes and the firm had a CEO who was determined to push the changes through.

The problem for the firm lay in the fact that the burden of executing the needed changes lay with a team of very Senior Partners (SPs) and their immediate reports. The SP team consisted of four very experienced, articulate and highly intelligent men, who had been recently appointed to their position by the CEO. In their meetings, they tended to debate issues at some length but rarely came to an agreement. There was little, if any, mutual praise or recognition among them. Although I was brought in, initially, to train them

in their new roles, I found that the main problem lay in the lack of camaraderie within the group and an absence of what the Carnegie Mellon researchers called 'social savvy.' They defined this as "the degree to which group members are attuned to social cues and their willingness to take turns speaking." In other words, good manners (Miller, 2010).

The first four sessions that I had with the SPs were devoted largely to teaching them how to dialog with each other so that they could actually listen to each other, without what MIT's William Isaacs calls 'reloading'—that is, thinking of what you're going to say while someone else is speaking and thus not really hearing what is said (Isaacs, 1999). The absence of good dialog skills is the most obvious impediment to working as an HPT.

The next step was to train them in giving their needs of each other. This is not always as easy as it seems. We tend to assume that we know what others need of us and that they know what we need of them. "It should be obvious," is what I often hear. Yet research has shown that most of these assumptions are, in fact, wrong (Blackmore, 2002). One of the really nasty assumptions that we often make is that it's wrong for us to actually give people our needs—that we'll be seen as 'needy' if we do so. Or that if we do we will somehow lose control. This would sound crazy to the San people. I can remember a very senior executive of a Chinese corporation once saying to me that if he were to give people his real needs of them, then they would cease working hard to try and please him.

The exchange of concrete, actionable needs is the very foundation of a good relationship.

Finally, at this preliminary stage of their training, the SPs were taught the use of praise and positive statements. Research by Marcial Losada and others has shown that in an HPT the ratio of positive statements to negative ones

is in excess of 5:1 (Losada, 2005). By improving their social skills in these ways, the SPs were able to begin to form a really functional and very high performing team.

The SPs had one great advantage in terms of being able to become an HPT. They had worked together in the past as fellow partners in the firm and were thoroughly familiar with each other, socially as well as professionally. If you think of a hunter-gatherer band, this aspect of HPTs is not altogether surprising. In such group, all the members of the team (whether hunters or gatherers) know each other well. They socialize with each other and communicate with great frequency. UNC Professor Bradley Staats, a leading researcher into what makes teams effective, cites this familiarity as one of the most important aspects of an HPT (Insights for Business, April 16, 2011).

Tip: Pick team members for their 'social savvy', not just their IQ.

Tip: Make sure team members really enjoy each other's company.

Tip: Pick people who have worked together previously.

High Performing Teams and High Performing Tribes

When John Major fronted his AGM, he made the link between high performing companies and high performing teams. It seems obvious that a well-functioning organization should be made up of a number of HPTs, and, in my experience, that's the case. But there's a lot more to it.

The San of modern-day Namibia are not tribal in the sense that we have come to understand the term. When we think of tribes, we imagine large numbers of people: the Comanche, the Aztecs, the Zulus, or the Hutus. However, for most of our history it wasn't like that. Up until recently, in human evolutionary

terms, we lived in small bands of between 40 and 50 individuals (Stevens and Price, 2000).

Over the millennia, this led to our brains being specialized in relating well to a limited number of individuals. According to Professor Robin Dunbar of Oxford University, the maximum number of people we can relate to at any one time is about 150 (and that includes all our Facebook 'friends') (Dunbar, 2010). Beyond that we become stressed and unable to function at our best (Stevens and Price, 2000).

Obviously, not all of these will be inside the organization that we work for. However, research has shown that the more good friends we have at work, the more productive we become (Gallup Management Journal, May 1999). This is one of the reasons that well-run companies emphasize social as well as work activities.

A hunter-gatherer band consists, essentially, of three teams—the hunters (generally, though not exclusively, males between 12 and about 35), gatherers (mostly the able-bodied women and children between 6 and 12) and the council of elders (men over 35 and older women). The adult-to-child under six ratio is normally about 1:1 (Stevens and Price, 2000), so the numbers in each of the teams, even in a large band of 50 people, is usually quite small.

Recent research has shown that HPTs also tend to be quite small. The best size seems to be between five and ten (Robbins, 2007). On this basis, the SP team was not far from the ideal. The more that we mimic how our ancestors worked, the more successful we are. If the hunter-gatherer HPTs worked well, then the community as a whole performed well, and it's very much the same in a modern corporation.

The hunter-gatherers have three core things to teach us about HPTs. Firstly, in a high performing team the role of the group is defined by the purpose of the team, but specific roles within a team are

highly flexible. The who-does-what in a hunting band is dictated by the circumstance of the hunt and the prey that they were after. Flexibility is built into human HPTs if only it is allowed for. I have watched in dismay as managers have tried to form HPTs of specialists in particular areas and expect that the sum of their specializations will somehow eventuate in high performing teams. It rarely happens. That is not to say that specialists shouldn't be included in teams. Modern industry is more complex than the situation facing the San. But a team which doesn't allow for internal role flexibility will not become an HPT.

Secondly, as with the San hunters and gatherers, there is no fixed leadership within a HPT, but rather it can vary from task to task and situation to situation (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Many managers are tempted to create what they think will be HPTs by laying down who does what, and appoint a leader. In HPTs, leaders emerge. In this way, humans are different from wolves. When the SPs began to form a really good team, the interesting thing to observe was that there was no obvious overall leader.

Thirdly, decisions are made by consensus. My own observations, and those of other researchers, confirm that this is the way hunter-gatherer HPTs operate and modern management studies have shown that HPTs in modern industry function in much the same way (Yeatts and Hyten, 1998). We have become mesmerized by the concept of a majority vote largely because that kind of democracy is probably the only possible way of making decisions in a mass society. But majority decisions, no matter how large the majority, can always lead to dissent and division. The ones holding the dissenting opinion are almost never fully reconciled to the outcome and will reduce the performance level of the group.

Managers often tell me that there isn't time for consensus decision making. In fact, it is almost

always better, in a team, to allow the members to reach unanimity no matter how long it takes. The commitment will be higher and the outcome almost certainly better. It will also be faster because of the improvement in the level of trust, respect and cooperation among the group.

Tip: Keep your teams small.

Tip: Don't impose leadership on HPTs, let leadership evolve to suit the particular task at hand.

Tip: Allow time for consensus decision making.

What Do HPTs Do Differently?

Essentially, what HPTs almost uniquely do is come up with new ideas, new ways of doing things and new ways of looking at existing problems.

In fact, high performing teams behave differently to other teams. I've already described a few of these behavioral differences—the way they come to decisions is one, the adoption of flexible ways of working is another and allowing fluidity of leadership. However there are other, just as vital but more subtle, differences in behavior.

One of the things that I noticed in my year in the Kalahari was that when the women were gathering, or when the men were out hunting, or when the council of elders was in session, there was a lot of singing, laughter and humor. Obviously, this stopped when the men were actually stalking a gnu or a wildebeest, but these high-tension times formed a very small part of the hunting process. I came to realize that the singing, the humor, the laughter were signs not only of enjoyment and bonding but also of high performance. When my team or I go into an organization for the first time, we can often tell immediately its overall level of performance and productivity just by standing and listening. All too often what we hear is silence. Everything is quiet. People sit in their booths or in their offices and communicate via e-mail or text with each

other. It's all so serious. We quickly realize that there's a lot of work for us to do. You don't generally get high performing teams in libraries or Internet cafes!

Not long ago I worked with the executive team of Quantum, a prominent and rapidly-growing firm of Sydney actuaries. What struck me most about the firm was their lack of seriousness—not about what they did, but about the way they related to each other. It was light-hearted, they obviously enjoyed being together. They laughed with each other (never at each other). I heard the sound of humans enjoyably interacting with each other, of high performance.

In our offices, we have a number of HPTs and the thing that people always remark on when they come to visit us is the laughter and the banter. It's OK to have fun, to be happy with the people you work with and in the work that you do. That's the first rule, and in some ways the only rule, of Fortinberry Murray.

There has been so much research linking happiness and productivity that it amazes me that so few managers and corporate leaders have cottoned on.

A couple of years ago, my fellow founder of Fortinberry Murray, Dr. Alicia Fortinberry and I were working for Freehills, one of Australia's largest law firms on a business development initiative for their corporate partners. In particular, we were concerned with a pitch they had been asked to make for a major piece of work. After the meeting, in which they were successful, they checked back with the client to ask what had made the difference, since in terms of content all the rival pitches had been more or less the same. The client said that the deciding factor was the perception that the Freehills lawyers seemed to really enjoy working together and that they (the client) really wanted to be part of that. It was the Freehills' differentiator.

Another thing that the San people did was praise each other. Rarely, if ever, did I hear criticism or blame. If a fault was found or a mistake made then the emphasis was nearly always on what needed to be done differently going forward. There is a direct link between performance and praise, in fact the Gallup Organization has discovered that corporations which have a culture of praise are 20% more profitable than those that don't (Robison, 2006).

Praise and looking for what's right not just for what's wrong are natural to humans, but many of us have been trained not to use these valuable management tools. The neurochemistry of praise is such that the reward system that it activates not only makes people feel happier (this is true both of the giver and the receiver of praise), but also makes our brains work smarter, more flexibly and more efficiently (Rath and Clifton, 2004). Often, one of the first things that Fortinberry Murray does when we move into an organization is to train key people in the effective use of praise. The San would find it very funny indeed that you have to learn how to do one of the most natural things in the world.

When establishing a team, make sure that all the members are good at praise and don't stint on it.

HPTs are different behaviorally in another way. In the course of his research, Professor Otto Scharmer of MIT and his associates observed thousands of teams, both high and low performing, and they noticed a real distinction between the two in the way that they dialoged together (Scharmer, 2000).

Low performing teams were characterized by acquiescence (where people were reluctant to speak up for whatever reason) or advocacy (where they defend a position and don't really acknowledge other people's opinions). High

performing teams, on the other hand, are characterized by what he calls appreciative enquiry and generative dialog. Appreciative enquiry is where the people who are talking to each other are genuinely interested in what others have to say. They use good asking and listening skills to draw out the reasoning behind others points of view. They don't use phrases such as "We've tried that before," or "That's a stupid position to take," or "That'll never work." These are merely criticisms and reflect the speaker's insecurity.

Generative dialog is comparatively rare and happens when people, using real appreciative enquiry, begin to come up with new solutions and ideas. Sometimes, these are very different from where they started.

In Britain recently, I observed graphically how an organization can be destroyed by low performance dialog or can be transformed by the use of good dialog skills. I was working with a large construction company during the 2008-09 recession. It was a time of deep gloom in the real estate development business and there was a good chance that the overseas parent of this company would pull the plug on their operations, especially as the company was doing worse than many of its rivals. The CEO called his executive team and his top salespeople together for a conference in a large London hotel. My role was to observe and make recommendations concerning the level of dialog at the event.

At one point in the proceedings, he split the meeting into smaller groups, each was to discuss some aspect of the crisis and suggest possible solutions. I wandered from one group to the next and listened as they talked to each other. It quickly became obvious to me why they were in such a sad state. I heard lots of people making statements and defending positions; I hardly saw

any examples of good listening skills or heard many questions being asked. There were lots of negative remarks, almost no praise.

Needless to say, nothing new or helpful came out of the conference. Later, after the event was over, I spoke at length to the CEO and his executives. I told them how high performance teams dialog with each other and suggested that training would be helpful. Unfortunately, the parent company pulled the plug and that, so it seemed, was that. However, a few months later, I was contacted by the ex-CEO to say that he had led a successful buyout of the underlying assets of the company and now had new backers and a new team. Would I give them the training I had suggested? I did and helped form a number of HPTs at the new company. Thanks to the dialog skills that they acquired, they were able to come up with new and innovative solutions to the problems they were facing and thus to survive the downturn. As of the time of writing this article, they are flourishing.

It is the praise, the laughter and the use of good dialog skills that enable HPTs to come up with new solutions and fresh ideas.

Tip: Allow for humor and laughter.

Tip: Encourage a culture of praise.

Tip: Train your teams in good dialog skills.

Diversity in HPTs

Most of the research compiled over the past few years into the workings of HPTs has emphasized the role of diversity in high performing teams. Diversity of gender is important but also diversity of outlook and opinion. Many studies have shown that having women on a team increases the team's performance (Chong, 2007). This is probably because women are somewhat better at relationship forming and consensus building than men and these are key determinants of HPTs.

An equally important element in HPTs is diversity of experience and opinion. Too many teams that I have observed have been made up of specialists who all, more or less, think the same way. Often in such teams nothing new emerges from their meetings. According to Professor Staat and his colleagues, HPTs are largely made up of generalists rather than specialists and people of varying outlook (Insights for Business, April 16, 2011).

The commonality that overcomes the dangers of diversity and forges them into a workable group comes from their knowing and liking of each other, the task that they have been given and the values that they share. Come to think of it, that is exactly what motivates a band of hunters or gatherers.

Tip: Make sure that teams are not made up of specialists.

Tip: Encourage diversity of thought and outlook.

Tip: Make sure there is diversity of gender on your teams.

Conclusion

Having an organization that is full of HPTs is harder to achieve than having one full of high performing individuals. It's a common mistake to think that a team of high performers will automatically lead to a high performing team. To enable teams to be genuinely high performing, a lot of management theory has to be rethought; the Harvard School of Anthropology might be a better place to search for management advice in this respect, rather than the Harvard Business School.

Above all, HPTs need a leadership that is prepared to pass control to the team so they write the rules of how it will operate, how the members will relate to one another and bond with each other. It's a case of allowing humans to do what they naturally do best. Members of the council of elders of a hunter-gatherer band don't go out on the hunt or join the gatherers.

They're there with advice if required and, more often, with questions. They use, as a matter of course, what modern business gurus call 'transformational leadership.' They successfully led their bands for tens of thousands of years and only now are we rediscovering their wisdom, in the concept of 'high performing teams.'

References

1. Blackmore S (2002), "The Grand Illusion", *New Scientist*, Vol. 174, No. 2348.
2. Chong E (2007), "Role Balance and Team Development: A Study of Team Role Characteristics Underlying High and Low Performing Teams", *Journal of Behavioural and Applied Management*, May 1.
3. Dunbar R (2010), *How Many Friends Does One Person Need?* Harvard University Press.
4. Grinde B (2002), *Darwinian Happiness*, Darwin Press.
5. Isaacs W (1999), *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*, Crown Business.
6. "Item 10: I Have a Best Friend at Work", *Gallup Management Journal*, May 1999.
7. Losada M et al. (2005), "Positive Effect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 60, No. 7.
8. Miller G (2010), "Social Savvy Boosts Collective Intelligence of Groups", *Science*, Vol. 330, No. 6000.
9. Nohria Net al. (2009), "Employee Motivation: A Powerful New Model", *Harvard Business Review*, July 7.
10. Pearce C and Conger J (2003), *Shared Leadership*, Sage Publications.
11. Rath T and Clifton D (2004), *How Full is Your Bucket?* Gallup Press.
12. Robbins S (2007), *Truth About Managing People*, FT Press.
13. Robbins T (2005), "Chemistry of the Mind: Neurochemical Modulation of Prefrontal Cortical Function", *Journal of Comparative Neurology*, Vol. 493, No. 1.
14. Robison J (2006), "In Praise of Praising Your Employees", *Gallup Management Journal*, November 9.
15. Scharmer C O (2000), "Organizing Around Not-Yet-Embodied Knowledge" in Von Krogh et al., *Knowledge Creation*, Palgrave Macmillan.
16. Stevens A and Price J (2000), *Evolutionary Psychiatry*, Routledge.
17. "The Science Behind Building a High Performance Team", *Insights for Business*, April 16, 2011, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School.
18. Yeatts D and Hyten C (1998), *High Performing Self-Managed Work Teams: A Comparison of Theory and Practice*, Sage Publications.

Reference # 03M-2012-06-04-01