

Why your high-performing team isn't high performing

Written by Marcus Crow



The talent acquisition team have done their work. You have curated the top tiers of available people and assembled the most able team of professionals to take on the challenges your organisation confronts. Super-smart, blue-chip CV's, and executively coached to within an inch of their life – they've been 360'd several times. They've even been blessed with a hit of off-shore executive education from one of the sexier institutions for which they will happily block out a week of their diary in order to get the stamp in their executive education passport. And still these leaders are getting stuck, not performing well together. In need of something – but what exactly?

The failure is often due to abstract individual development away from the action. This pull-the-car-into-pit-lane logic of senior executive development is considered a premium approach for such senior folks, affording them the rich luxury of individual attention away from the action. Here, alone with an executive coach (and scarily Australia is believed to have the highest per-capita number of executive coaches) they conduct a dialogue on the history of the managers interactions with their colleagues and make plans for upcoming future interactions. The coach will seed the discussion with tools and frameworks from the vintage Johari window, some NLP focused strategies through to whatever 3rd party 360 degree feedback tool the coach spent 2-days and a few thousand dollars on to be "licensed" to use.

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This fantastical approach – and it relies heavily on fantasy – is one that naively suggests that somehow there is a place a manager can stand outside of the thing of which they are a member in order to make plans and strategies for what they want to do to “it”. This focus on past events selectively re-told by only one of the actors involved, together with hoped-for futures shaped by that same person without the input of the myriad other actors involved is bound to crash into someone else's plans and ambitions once that senior executive drives out of coaching pit lane and back into speeding traffic on the organisational racetrack.

So then what are we do to? Perhaps we can learn from other domains of skill acquisition in complex dynamic environments. If we want to improve the team of high performers then perhaps we should consider developing them as a team, not as a series of individuals? Ahh, you mean team-building?

I hear you think. Perhaps some paint-ball, a cooking class, tall-ship sailing, or recording a rock-song together? These are possibly good fun (although often agony for a few in your team) but suffer the same problem as the coach 'em one by one approach described above. It is away from context. Paint-ball is not running a bank. Shaping ravioli is not running a sales organisation. And recording a rock-song is not attending a tribunal to front the regulator.

A high-performing leadership team more likely happens when that collection of people can call attention in the moment to the way they are working while they are working. Work on themselves as a team while they work on their work. This means they can talk about how they are talking, or who's not talking, or perhaps who is talking too much. ☐☐

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This is not a tool. This is a practice.

It doesn't mean your leadership dialogue won't go off track ever again, or single individuals won't grandstand, dominate or attempt to disappear in a group discussion. It does mean when that happens the group can detect it faster. This agility – and everyone is talking agile yet this is a way to actually do it – means the group is less likely to get stuck. Or if the group does get stuck it knows in the moment that that is what it is choosing to do. Being conscious, being collectively aware, and being fit enough to raise challenging ideas – I think we are arrogant when we talk about the ambitions of the regulator – is what high performance looks like these days.

If you have aggregated a group of high performers and are waiting for them to high-perform together, conditioning them in a group as a group might be a way to build the necessary interpersonal muscle they need. When you have achieved the all-of-group fitness to variously wrestle, argue, debate, conflict and decide what to do together when the issues are unclear, ill-defined, complex and uncertain you might allow the group to finally see its high performance.

About Marcus Crow

Marcus has more than 10,000 hours of experience as a specialist in executive education, group facilitation and keynote speaking. He has been practicing in his profession for more than 20 years. He holds a Bachelor of Business from UTS, is a practicing member of the Australian Society of Group Psychotherapists, and is a long time member of Australian Mensa. He has a career background as an auditor with Price Waterhouse, a sales and marketing professional with Colgate-Palmolive and Mitsubishi Electric. Marcus understands the sales and marketing front end of business as much as the operational middle and back end of service delivery. In 1999, he co-founded, built, grew, then sold Phuel (formerly Oxygen Learning) Australia's then leading experiential learning and development practice, to John Singleton's STW Group (now WPP AUNZ).