

The seven habits of winning teams

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When I ask executives to recall an experience when they and their management team were performing at their best, their answers often include the same themes: At the top of their game, the team worked intensely to achieve a shared, deeply meaningful business objective. Free of hierarchy, they enjoyed open communication, constructive debate and mutual support. It was "exhilarating" and "rewarding."

But when I ask them whether their teams perform at their best when the stakes are at their highest - for instance, during a major transaction - the answer is almost always, "No."

How can business leaders recreate that "winning team" experience? Research across hundreds of executive teams worldwide reveals that the best-performing teams share seven common characteristics that enable them to bring out the best in each other and their entire organization.

Winning teams focus on a few critical objectives. High-performing teams focus their efforts on the handful of fundamentals that make the biggest difference. For example, the management team at one of the best-performing utilities in North America focuses most of its collective efforts on regulatory strategy and business development. Operations are important but will not fundamentally shift the company's value, so the team dedicates less time to this. Often how the team functions, for example, in making critical strategic decisions, can be as important as setting strategic priorities, and consequently targeted investments in team effectiveness can move to the top of the agenda.

Winning teams have a flexible working style, within a clear set of operating norms. When faced with a new challenge, high-performing teams are able to transform themselves, adopting a style that the new situation demands. For instance, during times of organizational change or while executing an acquisition, teams need a much greater degree of collaboration and alignment than when they are simply running the day-to-day business. However, even in these exceptional circumstances the working style respects a few commonly understood norms such as how working sessions are conducted and how team members relate to each other.

Winning teams have a CEO who is "first among equals." Too many leaders tend either to step back and delegate decision making or to rule by decree. The best leaders have an impressive command of all aspects of their business and are able to get deep into the substance of an issue to help the team draw out new and unexpected insights. Rather than having the answer themselves, they build an environment for open dialogue free from the frictions of ego, thereby facilitating more rapid decision making.

Winning teams capitalize on their unique position as integrators. The best teams take on work that only the team can do as a collective, focusing on pivotal issues that cannot be pursued by individual executives alone. On such topics they break out of organizational silos to develop an integrated view of the business and discover new commercial opportunities or find better ways of running the business.

Winning teams create a "high challenge, high support" environment. The ideal environment is one that enables a constructive debate based on facts and free of anecdotes, emotions, and politics. Team members cannot achieve peak performance when they fear provoking disagreements or emotional debates, when they mistrust the motivations of colleagues, or when there is a history of hurt feelings. On the other hand, an absence of challenge leads to false consensus, needless grumbling, or worse.

Winning teams set far-sighted goals that are stretching on multiple dimensions. The best teams set high standards for both business results and team performance. While ensuring that financial results are on track, they maintain a relentless focus on long-term performance and health indicators, including quality of the

business portfolio, excellence in operational execution, relationships with external audiences such as customers, investments to broaden and deepen organizational capabilities, and the professional satisfaction of their most talented leaders.

Winning teams invest in building the team's effectiveness. Star-studded teams often fail when top performers dive into the business issues without recognizing that the team's performance is the real challenge. Instead, the best teams invest in the skills of individual members as well as the team itself.

Instilling these seven habits in a management team isn't easy - but it's critical to achieving a track record in developing and executing winning business strategies successfully over the long term.

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