

High-performing teams take goal of group charge to new level.

By Winslow Swart

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The million dollar question we need to ask ourselves is, "Why do we want to settle for just becoming a 'team?' " Our competition is trying to do the same thing, become a team. Why not elevate our expectation and aim to becoming a "high- performing team?" We believe our employers, employees, customers, and more importantly, our families deserve this Herculean effort.

The constant pressures placed on us in the workplace to become more profitable and productive can be overwhelming. We are steadfastly searching for better strategies to handle an ever-changing work environment, addressing sophisticated and demanding customers, and balancing the competing priorities in our work and family life.

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith in their best-selling book, "The Wisdom of Teams," assert that team discipline requires peer- and self-reinforcement. They define a team as "a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and a common approach to operating, for which they hold themselves mutually accountable."

To increase the understanding of this definition of team and elevate these characteristics so that you can begin to develop that "high-performing team," we would like to share some real-life examples from a familiar source: professional boxing. This is an arena of practice where the success or failure of these principles become painfully evident.

San Antonio prize-fighter Jesse James Leija recently shared his insights and success strategies gained on the road to becoming two-time world champion. Combined with knowledge from other industry scholars, we offer the following suggestions for building high-performing teams.

Tips for teams

- A small number of people. Research suggests that groups operate more efficiently with less than 10 people. This doesn't suggest that there aren't any exceptions. Some groups operate efficiently at 15, 20, 25, etc. It just makes it more difficult to operate efficiently over a sustained period of time because of logistical issues, engaging in meaningful and lasting dialogue, and it makes focus cumbersome.

"When there were too many people on our team, everyone's role was spread out," Leija says. "Not everyone was 100 percent clear on their job and people were less accountable."

- Complementary skills. Most high-performing teams, when initially formed, don't have all the requisite knowledge, skills, abilities or motivation. Team members must learn and develop those required talents through the process of becoming a

high-performing team. Every team is formed for a specific purpose. It is essential to ensure you have the right skill mix to make that team purpose come to fruition.

- A "common purpose." Katzenbach and Smith suggest that the characteristic common purpose provides "the direction, meaning, and spirited energy that teams need to succeed. A clear sense of direction focuses the team on what to accomplish and how it fits within the organization's larger priorities."

Leija adds, "There is a goal in all of our minds, and that is to win. Depending on the upcoming opponent or 'project,' who takes a leading or a supporting role is determined by the task at hand. It doesn't matter who is in the driver's seat when we are all driving in the same direction. Even our families seem to work best when we are working towards shared goals and assume our appropriate roles."

Clarity as to the compelling purpose provides the direction, motivation, passion, and energy necessary for team members to maintain the required performance focus.

- A common working approach. This is the characteristic that outlines the specifics of how work within the team get accomplished. The team must decide how work is divided and integrated. It must determine acceptable and unacceptable work ethics, who does what, when, and where. It must define standards of work, choose how to constructively provide feedback and how to monitor team performance. Team members will have to grow in to this commitment to work together.
- "Mutually accountable." This critical factor will clearly separate a "team" from a "high-performing team. Katzenbach and Smith suggest that "teams cannot hold themselves accountable for collective performance unless they agree on goals and time frames." Mutual accountability means everybody makes an intellectual and emotional investment in the team, incorporating the following attitude: "We are all in this together. We hold ourselves jointly accountable for our achievements."

Referring to mutually accountability, Leija says, "When we win, we win as a team. When we lose, I take full responsibility."

Listening to the language of the team, high-performing teams demonstrate a language of "we," or "our," when making reference to the team instead of the terms "I" or "me." Developing a high-performing team facilitates better handling of an ever-changing work environment, driving increased levels of performance and business results while balancing the competing priorities in our work and family life.

Becoming a high-performing team is a discipline requiring considerable effort and commitment. We advocate a "best fit" approach to help your company succeed, not simply a one size fits all "best practice" that may or may not work for your particular team.

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