People Make The Difference whitepaper

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By Craig Tegel

Want high performing teams? Start with trust.

In a previous article, I wrote of the three major challenges for most teams that prevent them from achieving high performance. In Patrick Lencioni's 'The Five Dysfunctions of a Team' he describes the five dysfunctions of a team and uses a pyramid to show the levels:

- Absence of Trust
- Fear of Conflict
- Lack of Commitment
- Avoidance of Accountability
- Inattention to Results

If you alter the pyramid to show the critical components of a highly functional team, trust is at the bottom: the most important, foundational piece.

For Lencioni—and for me— a lack of trust prevents a team from true commitment, accountability, and results.

But what is trust within a team? And how do you encourage, grow and strengthen it?

First, you are likely to have Common Trust: the confidence / belief that a co-worker or team member won't break generally accepted laws, policies, etc. It's the type of trust we extend to each other when we driving. We 'trust' that others will follow the road rules, stop at red lights, stay on the correct side of the road etc. Without common trust it can be difficult to operate an effective company (or society). It's the common trust that is typically granted simply by being part of a company team: that you won't steal the computers if left alone in the office.

Then there is vulnerability-based trust: the belief that you can do things like take risks, ask for help, admit mistakes, or confront and hold others accountable without fear of retaliation, humiliation, or resentment.

This type of trust has to be earned and given. Strong, high-performing teams base their entire foundation on vulnerability-based trust. Common trust simply isn't enough.

Yet vulnerability-based trust is not a trait that comes easily to most. To exhibit that level of vulnerability requires a strong sense of self-worth and self-identity that goes beyond ego. The realisation you are not defined by your successes or mistakes, and you can turn up for work 'as yourself' – without any of the masks we often adopt.

In her book Daring Greatly: How The Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live Parent and Lead,' Dr. Brene Brown challenges the cultural myth that vulnerability is weakness and argues that it is, in truth, our most accurate measure of courage.

Brown explains how vulnerability is both the core of difficult emotions like fear, grief and disappointment, and the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, innovation, and creativity. She writes, "When we shut ourselves off from vulnerability, we distance ourselves from the experiences that bring purpose and meaning to our lives and our work."

So what does being vulnerability look like? For me, over my years of leadership, it has been about:

- accomplishing more and doing better work by getting feedback and being open to receive and act on it
- growing and learning more about myself by being 'open'
- teaching and serving more: focusing my attention on others
- caring and empathising more because I don't have to worry about protecting myself

By doing so I have been able to grow the amount of vulnerability-based trust in the teams I have led, simply by:

1) Going first: As a leader, it was up to me to model the behaviour. The same applies to any leader seeking to grow a high performance team. You need vulnerability-based trust to achieve high performance. So it is imperative you model it.

2) Seeking first to understand, then to be understood: From The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People this encourages you to listen with the intent to understand rather than with the intent to reply.

It's not a competition; you have to be willing to stop thinking about winning and open up to considering someone else's idea.

3) Creating a Circle of Safety: People must feel cared for and safe to trust. This is not a new idea – children require the same circle – but often we forget its importance in the workplace. Treat your people like people, not resources!

4) Walking the talk: as well as 'going first' with vulnerability, there are other behaviours a leader must model and encourage to achieve high trust, including honesty, straight talking; an immediate approach to righting wrongs and keeping commitments – doing what you say you are going to.

5) Committing to open, honest, robust and transparent communication: High performing teams increase trust by building a culture of partnership and shared values. This starts with open and honest communication. When honesty and transparency are lacking there can be no trust. Without trust teams fail to solve problems or make decisions. Without trust, teams are crippled by conflict.

6) Sharing an experience together: Any time you actually get to practice being a successful team, you re-enforce the trust and strengthen the foundation.

Whichever method you choose, it's important to understand that building trust is not a destination. It's ongoing. The question you always ought to be asking yourself is if you are building trust up or tearing it down.

To find out how you can build a high performing team, or work on developing vulnerability-based trust in your organisation, contact People Make The Difference. We can help you with our training workshops, one-on-one coaching and Coach On Call services. To find out more, call us on 0412 333 415 or visit peoplemakethedifference.com.au