

Whitepaper

High-Performing Teams: Strategies for Athletic Team Performance

From Agile to Athletic.
Don't leave performance up to chance!

Xebia Academy



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Introduction

Enter the Arena

There's something magical about a team experiencing a high-performance flow state. The divide is between those who have experienced it and those who have not.

The synergy of individuals coalescing to achieve something extraordinary is nothing short of mesmerizing. We've all been captivated, either firsthand or vicariously, by the sheer brilliance of high-performing teams. You may imagine a team engaged in emergency response, Formula 1, Michelin Restaurant, athletic sports, the Marines, music and film production, professional dancing, and space engineering. But you may also experience it more close to home.

It's no secret that high-performing teams propel business performance. However, the elusive formula for crafting and sustaining such teams remains less apparent.

Leaders often possess all the ingredients for success but struggle to cook a decent team. Throwing individuals in a bowl does not make a team. An oft-heard lament from these leaders is, 'They are not mature enough!' — prompting a counter-inquiry: 'Why then did you hire children?'

These collaborative interactions extend to team members hailing from diverse backgrounds. When inquired about the primary impediments hindering them from unlocking their full potential, they often externalize the problem: 'We lack the time.' You can provoke them by responding that 'Time is a constant resource. How is your potential wasted?'

Irrespective of the scale and nature of an enterprise, whether multinational corporations or medium to small-sized businesses, the challenges in establishing agile and high-performing teams exhibit underlying commonalities.

Conventional wisdom among leaders underscores the significance of cultivating positive team dynamics characterized by a harmonious blend of culture, skills, and personality alignment. Moreover, effective teams are identified by their shared accountability, well-defined goals and objectives, and a culture of acknowledging exemplary performance.

Yet, in this paper, you'll go beyond these widely acknowledged factors. Learn how psychological safety, professionalism, playfulness, and adherence to routine are intricately interwoven threads in the fabric of a high-performing team. These elements profoundly influence team dynamics, contributing significantly to their resilience, adaptability, and overall effectiveness.

High-performing teams are not arbitrary manifestations but deliberate outcomes shaped by leadership, strategy, and the interplay of individual talents.

In the subsequent sections, we delve into the nuanced interactions of these components.

My sincere aspiration is that the insights presented herein are instrumental in enhancing your ability to enable the intricate interplay required to achieve higher team performance — ultimately unlocking high-yield results.

Athletic (High-Performing) Teams

A. The Imperative for Athletic Teams

First, I'll ask you to appreciate the run-of-the-mill, average-performing teams that keep the lights on. While the spotlight often gravitates toward high and low-performing teams, acknowledging the significance of average-performing teams is crucial for a balanced perspective. Even low-performing teams may be one weave of the wand away from going down a path to excellence.

If a flower isn't thriving, it is likely because of poor soil and the wrong climate. So it is with teams. Even low-performing teams can exhibit adaptability and a willingness to learn when supported and encouraged. By recognizing their potential, organizations can nurture a culture of continuous improvement, transforming these teams into catalysts for positive change over time.

“Give a good idea to a mediocre team, and they'll find a way to screw it up. Give a mediocre idea to a good team, and they'll find a way to make it better. The goal needs to be to get the team right, get them moving in the right direction, and get them to see where they are making mistakes and where they are succeeding.”

— Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*

One factor that diminishes performance is whimsical agility. For many organizations, 'Agile' has become a way to find pathways with the least resistance to nowhere. Professional agility, however, should inspire a sense of bold commitment in working through tough challenges to unlock high-yield gains— a genuine sense of athleticism is posited in this paper as the key to attaining a competitive edge in the market. Therefore, this paper clearly distinguishes between 'Agile' and 'Athletic' teams.

Developing athletes goes beyond coaching agility. It's the integration of qualities such as self-determination, purpose, endurance, empowerment, accountability, proximity, momentum, and playfulness with respect for the game and other athletes. That means taking a complete look at the individual in relation to the team.

Similarly, with 'scrum', there are individuals or teams who claim to play it but are not truly in it. Many teams suffer from a sheer lack of respect for the game, or more fundamentally, they may not even be a team at all. They waste a whole lot of negative energy in getting nowhere. Genuine athleticism in the Scrum framework is discernible only within teams that truly embrace its ethos, not just its mechanics. They play Scrum marked by a capital 'S' in their approach.

So, what constitutes a team? As a working definition of a team, I use Katzenbach & Smith's definition: “A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”. [#]

B. Athleticism in Business

Indeed, if there is any one “secret” to an enduring great company, it is the ability to manage continuity and change—a discipline that must be consciously practiced, even by the most visionary of companies.

— James C. Collins, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*

Business is a different game than sports. That said, business is becoming increasingly more like sports. That is due to the increasing VUCA environment. VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. Athletic teams thrive in these conditions.

So, what can business teams learn from athletic sports teams?

An “athletic” business team inspired by the dynamics of sports teams like those in the NBA (National Basketball Association) brings a unique set of values and outcomes to the corporate arena.

Basketball is a complex dance that requires shifting from one objective to another at lightning speed.

— Sacred Hoops, Phil Jackson.

I know it's quite a leap to envision corporate office dwellers, whose best physical activity is the occasional speed walk to the coffee machine, to becoming something akin to an NBA team. Let's admit that convincing them to trade their cushioned desk chairs for a basketball court will require more than a miracle. Nonetheless, to attain high performance at work requires the belief that this is possible.

C. Dynamics of an Athletic Team

An athletic team operates within a highly dynamic and intricate ecosystem, showcasing a unique blend of individual talent, strategic teamwork, playfulness, psychological safety, and a commitment to learning.

Several key elements characterize the dynamics of an athletic team:

- 1. Individual Skill Sets:** Each player on a team brings a distinct set of individual skills, honed through years of training and experience. The diverse talents of players contribute to the team's overall athleticism.
- 2. Team Flow:** While individual skills are crucial, the real magic happens when players seamlessly integrate their abilities within the team framework. Team chemistry is the alchemy that transforms individual brilliance into collective success. It involves an understanding of teammates' playing styles, and preferences, as part of the development of on-court communication. Snow introduced the term interpersonal flow in the work context as: “The state in which two people are mutually engaged in a shared activity such that both individuals would describe their the experience as (a) having their perspective broadened by the other person, (b) feeling a shared sense of identity, (c) not feeling self-conscious with each other, (d) not worrying about what outsiders think, (e) having total concentration on the shared activity, (f) feeling able to respond almost instantly to presenting situations as a pair, (g) time passing more quickly or slowly than usual, and (h) enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding.”

3. Strategic Coaching with a Tactical Playbook:

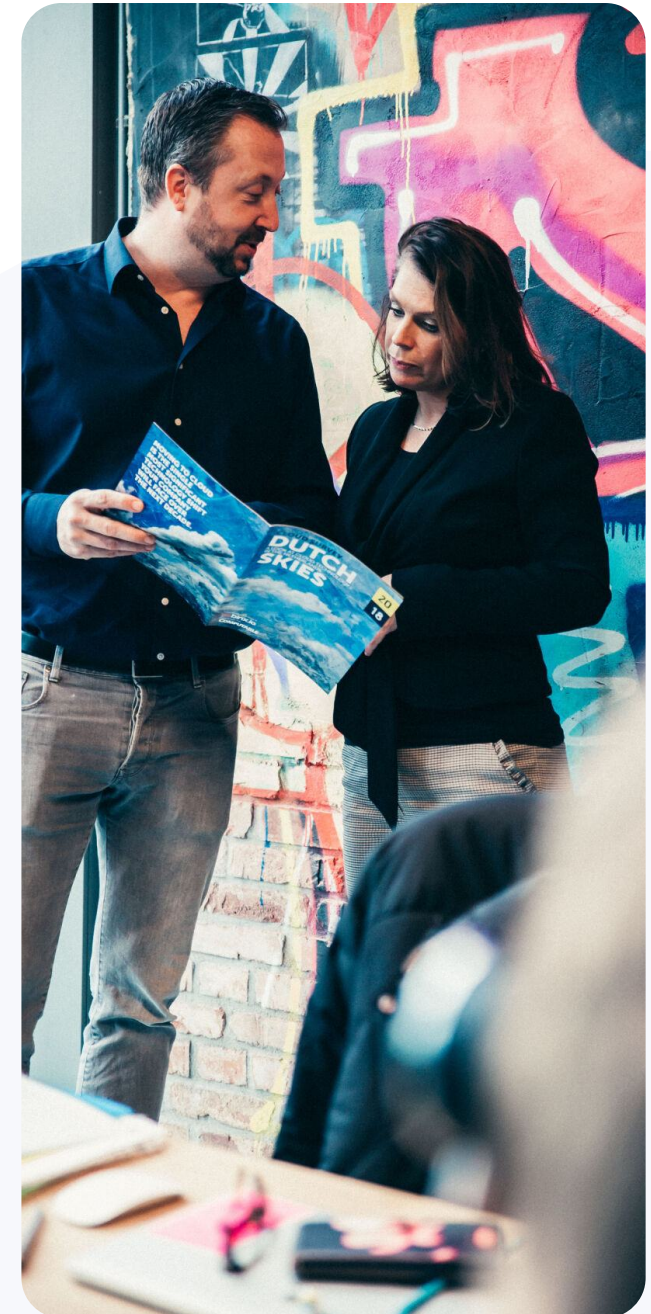
Coaches play a pivotal role in shaping athletic dynamics. They are responsible for fostering discipline and accountability while encouraging and enabling increased performance. Successful coaches leverage individual players' strengths to create a cohesive and competitive team. Athletic teams operate with a playbook that encompasses offensive and defensive strategies. Coaches design these playbooks to maximize individual players' strengths while making interplay flow naturally. Executing intricate plays efficiently requires a deep understanding of the game's nuances. It's a rigorous routine of play that breeds excellence.

4. Physical and Mental Conditioning:

Athleticism extends beyond skill to physical and mental conditioning. Players undergo rigorous training routines to enhance their strength, speed, agility, and endurance. The demands of the fast-paced game necessitate peak physical fitness, enabling players to perform at an optimal level throughout the season. They are also mentally conditioned— so that even big egos understand the benefits of meditation and mindfulness are key to greatness.

5. Agility: business is fluid, and teams must be adaptable to changing circumstances. Being adaptable means something other than being whimsical in the approach. The ability to make tactical real-time decisions while not abandoning focus and commitment— is a hallmark of an athletic team. Flexibility in playing styles and a willingness to innovate are crucial to success. Facing adversity, dealing with pressure situations, working through challenges, and maintaining focus during intense competition are aspects of the mental resilience required for sustained success.

6. Pressure as a Privilege: Pressure may feel like a weight, an unwelcome burden that threatens one's comfort zone. But business is a high-stakes competition. Pursuing a championship and winning the market requires moments of excellence. The phrase 'pressure is a privilege' has been embraced by professional sports teams who see adversity not as an obstacle but as an opportunity— even a reward. This should not be abused to put unhealthy pressure on people. You want people to tune in, not burn out. Embracing pressure is about acting calmly and responsibly when engaged in high-pressure situations and believing that you are supported when challenged to retain your professional and ethical standards without fearing repercussions. The goal is to foster a culture where individuals are attuned to the demands of high-pressure scenarios during which they can retain a calm and steady composure.



D. The Allure of Athleticism

How do you become a magnet for individuals seeking the thrill of challenging work, the rush to achieve real results, and the satisfaction of contributing to a winning team?

A world saturated with promises of comfort and indulgence leaves companies begging for motivated individuals who can thrive on a dynamic court.

Don't strive for comfort. You don't lure talent through promises of free office snacks, nap pods, massage chairs, 'unlimited' vacation days, and work-from-home-in-your-pajama policies— instead, rally those who want to be sweating it out on the corporate court. While some might mistake the office for a spa resort, our corporate court will be a playground for fast learning at high stakes. It's not about who has the comfiest chair; it's about making impactful moves together. You want team members who are hungry for success, not snacks. While others are busy turning their offices into relaxation resorts, you are gearing up to win the championship: a winning team mentality, taking pride in reaping high-yield results, with a drive to outcompete.

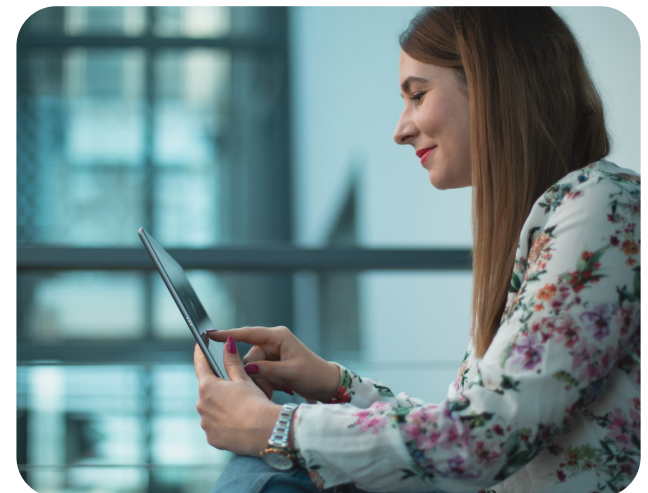
Following the Athletic Standards is extreme, or else they wouldn't be **Athletic**.

E. Olympians of Innovation

Innovation is the golden ticket to sustained success.

- 1. Aiming for the Gold Standard:** Silver and bronze are mere placeholders. An athletic team is conditioned to aim for the gold standard. Set a new record and redefine industry norms. A gold standard does not mean gold-plating or perfectionism. It is about stretching beyond current capabilities.
- 2. Striving for Breakthroughs, Not Just Improvements.** Small wins are great, as long as your team is in pursuit of breakthroughs. It's not just about improving what already exists; it's about pushing the boundaries beyond the expected.
- 3. Innovation as a routine.** You won't get there with the occasional innovation day or innovation sprint— every day should be an innovation day. As Olympians, make sure that the flame of innovation never falters.
- 4. Don't Increase Speed through Rushing.** Rushing work is the laziest way to speed up - and it will slow you down. It is unsustainable, and the rushed work will ultimately result in debt that will undermine your collective effort.
- 5. Precision in Performance:** Olympians execute small steps with high precision. Your team must learn to craft and execute steps cleanly, ensuring that each move contributes to the greater goal of transformative innovation. This is done through a passion for the craft, with great care and attention to detail.

- 6. Celebrating the Victory Lap:** Celebrate high-yield successes by adding a victory lap. Success is celebrated when a truly meaningful outcome is achieved. A celebratory victory lap will flood the team with happy brain chemicals such as oxytocin and dopamine— sending positive vibes that individuals will continue to strive for down the road. But don't engage in success theatre. Do not deflate the value of success by celebrating mediocre results.
- 7. The Podium of Market Leadership:** In the Olympics, the podium is the symbol of triumph. For your team, the podium is market leadership. Market leadership isn't about merely participating; it's about standing tall amidst competitors and earning the trust of stakeholders. While others may follow, a high-performing team leads. Your team's transparent practices, ethical conduct, and consistent delivery build a foundation of trust, creating a podium for a solid reputation.



F. The Torchbearer's Commitment

A torchbearer defines a team member who lights the way for others, setting a standard of excellence. A team can have multiple torchbearers. The more torchbearers, the brighter a team shines.

Leaders create leaders by passing on responsibility, creating ownership, accountability and trust.

— James Kerr, Legacy

Your team must have members who carry the flame of innovation, inspiring others to strive for better, sharing knowledge, and training others, thereby contributing to collective growth.

They set and raise the standard. Mentorship and knowledge-sharing are integral, creating a legacy where each team member believes in fueling the flame of excellence.

Multipliers aren't "feel-good" managers. They look into people and find capability, and they want to access all of it. They utilize people to their fullest. They see a lot, so they expect a lot.

— Liz Wiseman, Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter

Key Elements of The Torchbearer's Commitment:

- 1. Innovation and Inspiration:** Carrying the flame of innovation to illuminate the path to collective growth. A torchbearer helps foster an environment where team members feel secure in expressing diverse perspectives, ensuring a conducive atmosphere for optimal team performance.
- 2. Mentorship and Knowledge-sharing:** Support each team member by facilitating knowledge exchange and training each other. Make it everyone's duty to forward knowledge and skills to other team members.
- 3. Upholding Ethical Standards:** Actions illuminated by integrity ensure the flame shines brightly in both achievements and ethical conduct. Fostering a commitment to ethical standards is an integral part of The Torchbearer's accountability.
- 4. Grow Respect:** Encourage team members to speak up and do the right thing. It's a duty to support team members in becoming heard, seen, and respected members of the organization.
- 5. Resilience in the Face of Challenges:** Challenges can lead to behaviors that dim the flame, but the torchbearer's commitment is unwavering. Through positive encouragement, a torchbearer stimulates a course of action beyond what is currently deemed possible. It is about empowering others in creative problem-solving.





The primary focus of a competition is not about being better than others. The primary focus is improving our best together. It is about creating a shared space where individuals converge not at the expense of one another but to collectively elevate their standards of excellence.

The roots of the word “compete” are the Latin con petire, which meant “to seek together”.

— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

A team member’s mindset evolves from "Are others better than me?" to "How are we improving together?" It is a subtle yet profound shift in mindset that fosters collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and a commitment to mutual growth.

Most organizations are incompetent at facilitating knowledge exchange and competence development. It is often in brief moments where the light of innovation can shine. In athletic performance - that light may never go out!

Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.

— Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.

Strategies

By focusing on these elements, you can create a foundation for a high-performance team that is not only productive but also resilient, adaptable, and capable of achieving sustained success.

Some among you, particularly those in leadership roles, may be tempted to employ these strategies to establish a top-down approach to performance improvement within your organization. I urge you to resist this temptation vehemently. Work on these strategies together with teams. Guide them. Do not push them. This is not a suggestion; it is a firm warning.

Formation begins with creating an environment where team members feel comfortable taking risks, expressing ideas, and admitting mistakes. If team members do not believe they can be their true selves and if they cannot be open about their capabilities, the team will not perform. If team members do not share mistakes, they are not learning. If they are not learning - they are not improving.

A. Psychological Safety

Research consistently shows that psychological safety is a cornerstone and reliable predictor for high performance in teams.

On teams with high levels of psychological safety, diversity is positively associated with higher levels of performance. Moreover, the more diverse a team is, the more satisfied the members of the team are

— Henrik Bresman and Amy C. Edmondson, Harvard Business Review, 2022 [#]

Psychological safety is the bedrock of a high-performing team. It ensures that team members feel secure in taking risks, sharing ideas, and expressing themselves without fear of judgment. Creating an environment where psychological safety thrives encourages open communication, enhances innovation, and builds a resilient team culture.

When people don't speak up, the organization's ability to grow and innovate is threatened.

— Amy Edmondson, The Fearless Organization.

Stage	Invite Participation	Respond Productively	Self-Assessment
Foster an environment where team members feel safe to express ideas, ask questions, and share concerns.	Encourage team members to contribute their thoughts without fear of reprisal.	Address any instances where psychological safety is compromised promptly. Appraise open communication and the sharing of diverse perspectives.	How do I actively promote an atmosphere where team members feel psychologically safe to voice their opinions and concerns?



Improving psychological safety has the potential to result in a 27% reduction in turnover, a 40% reduction in safety incidents, and a 12% increase in productivity. - Gallup, 2017 [#]

B. Self-Determination

This essence of self-determination is the innate drive within each of us to carve our own paths, pursue our dreams, and express our individuality. It's the voice inside us that whispers, "You have the power to shape your destiny."

Where self-determination is widely acknowledged as a fundamental trait for an athlete - it is less widely acknowledged in business. There is surprisingly little conclusive research on the impact of self-determination on exceptional performance in business. Perhaps this is because - at work - we are expected to fulfill the determination of not ourselves, but that of our employer. It is generally expected of employees to achieve the ambitions of the employer, not oneself. In my experience with high-performing teams however - I noticed that team members are strongly self-determined in what they do and what makes it so unique is that they do it all together while supporting one another. Perhaps this is what makes such teams so unique and rare. They often work on ambitions they themselves initiated or signed up for.

Self-determination enables team members to take ownership of their work, fostering a sense of responsibility and accountability. Team principles serve as a mirror that shows each player how well they're doing with respect to the team's mission with self-determination. When it is their own choice to be on the team and its purpose, they have a sense of true ownership, and will pro-actively align their skills, talents, and energy.

Indeed, the real question is not, "Why greatness?" but "What work makes you feel compelled to try to create greatness?" If you have to ask the question, "Why should we try to make it great? Isn't success enough?" then you're probably engaged in the wrong line of work.

— Jim Collins, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't.

Stage

Clearly communicate expectations and goals, involving team members in goal setting. Let them autonomously plan their work.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to propose their ideas for goals and decision-making processes.

Respond Productively

Acknowledge and celebrate instances where team members take initiative and demonstrate autonomy. Address any concerns or barriers inhibiting self-determination.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively involve team members in decision-making processes? How do I demonstrate that I respect their autonomy in the way they do their work?



C. Integration of Personal Ambition to a Shared Purpose

What gives a team its reason to exist? When individuals strongly believe that being on the team will help them achieve their own ambitions, a powerful synergy emerges. Aligning individual ambitions with the team's overarching mission promotes a collective sense of purpose. A shared purpose heightens group consciousness. There must be a bridge connecting personal ambition to the team's goal. With this bridge in place, teams are more likely to achieve a difficult goal.

The roots of interpersonal conflict are often an excessive concern for oneself, and an inability to pay attention to the needs of others. It is sad to see how often people ruin a relationship because they refuse to recognize that they could serve their own interests best by helping others achieve theirs.”

— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*.

D. Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is one manifestation of self-determination but they are not synonymous. Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal desire to engage in activities for their inherent rewards, while self-determination encompasses a broader framework of the psychological need to be in control of one's destiny.

Intrinsic motivation lies more in the path than the destination. “Does this path have heart?” One might ask. When team members are intrinsically motivated, they derive satisfaction from the value of their contributions.

If you are interested in something, you will focus on it, and if you focus attention on anything, it is likely that you will become interested in it. Many of the things we find interesting are not so by nature, but because we took the trouble of paying attention to them.

— Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement*

Stage

Facilitate discussions on individual career aspirations and link them to the broader team mission.

Invite Participation

Create forums for team members to share personal goals and discuss how they can support each other and align this to team objectives.

Stage

Empower teammembers to choose initiatives that are aligned with their interests and strengths.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to share their personal motivations and passions for their work.

Respond Productively

Acknowledge and highlight success stories where individual ambitions contributed to the team's success. Address any misalignments between personal goals and team objectives.

Self-Assessment

How do I know what motivates other team members? Do I consistently connect individual aspirations with the team's overarching purpose?

Respond Productively

Recognize and reward efforts that go beyond external motivations. Establish rapport with empathy by frequently showing curiosity toward what's meaningful to team members.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively seek to understand and support the intrinsic motivations of my team members?

Employee disengagement and attrition—more common among workers with lower well-being—could cost a median-size S&P company between \$228 million and \$355 million a year in lost productivity

— Jacqueline Brassey, Brad Herbig, Barbara Jeffery, and Drew Ungerman - Reframing employee health: Moving beyond burnout to holistic health (McKinsey Health Institute 2024)

E. Shared Accountability

When it is clear that all individuals on a team are collectively accountable for the results of the team they will promote open communication, knowledge sharing, and a willingness to support one another in overcoming challenges. Can team members care about the work of others as much as their own?

Although we maintain high standards, we do everything possible to prevent players from feeling personally responsible when the team loses

— Sacred Hoops, Phil Jackson.

Stage

Establish clear team goals and outcomes together, emphasizing collective responsibility.

Invite Participation

Encourage open communication channels for team members to discuss challenges and seek help.

Respond Productively

Acknowledge and celebrate instances of collaborative problem-solving and shared successes. Encourage team members to hold each other accountable with respect, but address any blame or finger-pointing behaviors promptly as unprofessional behavior that undermines respect.

Self-Assessment

How do I foster an environment where team members feel comfortable sharing both successes and challenges collectively?

F. Proximity

Proximity is Power.

— Tony Robbins.

Physical and virtual closeness enhances open communication, direct collaboration, and the development of interpersonal relationships, all of which are crucial for high team performance. It focuses energy that creates a state of team flow. Team members must be able to see each other frequently and interact on a personal level with a sense of proximity.

When all the team members are located in one large room, someone's information becomes yours, without even trying. You then start thinking in terms of what's best or second best for the group at large and not only about where you stand. If everyone understands the other person's position, then each of us is more willing to give in, or at least to try to talk to each other. Initiatives emerge as a result.

— Hirotaka Takeuchi and Ikujiro Nonaka - The New New Product Development Game

Personal story

In my earlier career at Bugaboo I was coached by leaders who originated at Nike. They told me the formula for exceptional performance was:

Peak Performance = motivated people+shared space+shared purpose+empower

Their way of operating was simple: get together at the same time and space and "Just Do It". At Bugaboo, "Just Do It" became "Go!"

A partnership between Bugaboo and (PRODUCT)RED (#) gave the stroller brand the opportunity to contribute to the fight against AIDS in Africa by donating a percentage of each product sold to the organization. Our campaign slogan was "Go and Good Things Happen". When you Go with Bugaboo, good things happen for others.

I remember our mission statement was:

Go and Good Things Happen

for women and children living with HIV in Africa

by partnering with (RED) and contributing 1% of all revenue across their entire product line to the Global Fund

to help eliminate AIDS in Africa.

During this time I learned that (given the high-yield nature of our work) the value to frequently collocate and collaborate in-person exceeded (the ease of) remaining distributed.

We often brought specialists from all over the world from ranging companies and backgrounds together in the same room called "The Arena". This is how we managed to get lead times down from many months to just a few days.

Reflecting back on whether the same outcomes would have been possible had we not co-located - I can confidently share that the commitment, focus with high energy, and deep bonding proved absolutely vital in working through various complex obstacles in a short amount of time.

Although modern virtual technologies offer alternatives to in-person collaboration - it is not by any means a viable replacement. Home offices are quickly becoming a post-modern variant of cubicles. Although working from home provides significant benefits of working more flexibly - there are also risk factors associated with social bonding and engagement.

When home becomes the primary workspace, employees can't keep the lines between their personal and professional lives from blurring. Moreover, it significantly deteriorates the trusting relationship between peers and managers.

Productivity paranoia risks making hybrid work unsustainable. There is a stark disconnect between the portion of leaders who say they have full confidence their team is productive (12%) and the portion of employees who report they are productive at work (87%).

— Hybrid Work Is Just Work. Are We Doing It Wrong? (Microsoft 2022) (#)

That does not mean working together in open office spaces all the time is the way to go. It is not. Being in open spaces for long periods of time is terribly distracting and nauseating. Employees working on complex problems often require extended time and private space for deep personal focus - as long as this is balanced with moments of team flow through direct in-person interplay.

Stage

Arrange regular team meetings, balancing in person with virtually, to facilitate open communication.

Respond Productively

Acknowledge and support team members in building strong interpersonal relationships.

Invite Participation

Encourage playful events for teammates to engage in collective problem-solving.

Self-Assessment

How do I address signs of isolation or withdrawal?

Socializing with colleagues and rebuilding team bonds are strong motivators for working onsite. Furthermore, the presence of direct team members and work friends increases willingness to go to the office. Especially younger generations value office interactions for establishing connections to build social capital.

49% of hybrid managers say they struggle to trust their employees to do their best work, and 54% say they have less visibility into the work their employees do.

— Hybrid Work Is Just Work. Are We Doing It Wrong? (Microsoft 2022) (#)

G. Frequency / Routine

Aristotle once said: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” It’s through routine that athletes become what they are. When teams start to work in cadence providence happens. The world around it starts responding to its drumbeat and energy will be gravitated towards it. To a team, this will feel like the universe is suddenly aligning itself - presenting them with opportunities and (what feels like) a bundle of luck.

Scrum, in essence, harnesses the power of frequency or resonance to focus energy and shape a product. In a Scrum team, the regular rhythm of sprints, reviews, and retrospectives creates a kind of resonance that helps to focus the team’s energy and efforts. This ‘resonance’ can help the team to overcome obstacles, adapt to changes, and shape the product in a way that would be difficult without this regular, synchronized rhythm.

— Jeff Sutherland, First Principles in Scrum

There is perhaps a fundamental truth to the power of meeting frequently and consistency - it is bundling energy into a shared wavelength. It made me realize it is a reflection of the mechanics of the universe itself.

Stage

Enable teams in creating a cadence with regular opportunities for inspecting and adapting their work and ensure that each event has a clear purpose and outcome.

Respond Productively

Steps in when the routine becomes challenged. Team members may be inclined to skip team events in order to do more work. This undermines the team. Help team members eliminate other meetings that are not part of the routine.

H. Authenticity

Encouraging authenticity involves embracing constructive conflict. Each team member must be able to live his or her values and express his or her identity with respect to his or her peers. Genuine openness promotes trust among team members. Lead with tolerance. Celebrate differences.

A 2022 Microsoft study [#] with over 20.000 employees showed how an authentic—open, honest, empathetic—manager impacts them the results are significant. Employees are more inclined to go into the office for 1:1s with them, and are more open to working and meeting in person. They are also more likely to discuss their well-being/mental health in their 1:1s.

The happiest people discover their own nature and match their life to it.

— Ray Dalio, Principles: Life and Work

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to experiment playfully in facilitating these events. This not only prevents a routine from become a bore, but empowers everyone in the team.

Self-Assessment

How do can I truly know if team members understand the purpose of the events and if these events result in valuable outcomes?
How do I empower the teams to take ownership of these events?

Stage

Foster an environment where diverse opinions and constructive conflict are welcomed.

Respond Productively

Encourage team members to express their authentic selves and opinions - even if this can result in minor conflicts.

Invite Participation

Do not interfere with low-level conflict. Hold team members accountable for resolving low-level interpersonal conflict respectfully.

Self-Assessment

How do I know I am approachable and open to diverse perspectives and opinions within the team?
How do I respond to low-level conflict?

I. Sense of Belonging

Individuals perform better when they feel valued and connected fostering a sense of belonging, which is essential for team cohesion. "I am Okay. We Are Okay." acknowledges both individual and collective well-being and a healthy team dynamic with resilience in the face of challenges.

The number-one job is to take care of each other. I didn't always know that, but I know it now

— Daniel Coyle, *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*

Stage

Consistently communicate that facing challenges and failures is a natural part of the team's journey.

Respond Productively

Respond to setbacks with vulnerability by admitting personal mistakes and sharing personal challenges.

When team members do not have a strong feeling that they belong, there is little chance that such a team will exceed average performance levels.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to use positive affirmations during challenging periods.

Self-Assessment

How do I act when challenged? How do I act when others are challenged?

High belonging was linked to a whopping 56% increase in job performance, a 50% drop in turnover risk, and a 75% reduction in sick days. For a 10,000-person company, this would result in annual savings of more than \$52M

— The Value of Belonging at Work HBR 2019 (#)

J. Validation

Acknowledging and recognizing individual and team achievements boosts morale and reinforces the value of contributions, enhancing overall team performance. When you validate positive behavior, you will see more of it. Validation can also be offered in addressing behaviors that require change as long as it is offered as a genuine gift aimed to level someone up, not as a means to put them down.

A lot of coaches can yell or be nice, but what Pop [Gregg Popovich] does is different, he delivers two things over and over: He'll tell you the truth, with no bullshit, and then he'll love you to death

— Chip Engelland (#)

Stage

Establish ways for recognizing and celebrating individual and team achievements.

Invite Participation

Encouraging team members to acknowledge and appreciate each other's contributions.

Respond Productively

Personally affirm contributions and publicly acknowledge achievements. Address any lack of recognition promptly.

Self-Assessment

How do I consistently recognize and appreciate the efforts and accomplishments of my team members?

K. Integration of Skills and Sharing of Knowledge

Having a diverse skill set within the team ensures a broad range of expertise, promoting innovation and adaptability to different challenges. The magic lies in integrating these skills, which can be accomplished by team members of varying backgrounds routinely pairing up. This creates transparency

High skill integration acts as a prerequisite for team flow and is characterized by: (a) team members knowing each other's strengths, interests, and skills; (b) team-level goals that necessitate high-level use of team members' complementary skills, (c) matching the challenge assigned to each team member to his/her abilities, and (d) coordinated action.

— Jeff van den Hout, *The Conceptualization of Team Flow* (2018).

High-performing teams have members who genuinely care about their peers and are able to support them, regardless of their background and skillset. The integration of skills involves the subtle interweaving of players' actions to the point where they are thinking and moving as one.

High-performing teams also stand out for their proactive sharing of information. Conversely, withholding information often hints at deeper issues like lack of psychological safety or power struggles, known as "knowledge hiding" out of perhaps a misguided belief this 'holding knowledge as a hostage' strategy provides job security or financial leverage. The best teams prioritize releasing their hostages and take responsibility by sharing.

Stage

Create a platform for sharing skills and expertise within the team.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to seek mentorship and support from colleagues with complementary skills. Encourage pairing and mobbing.

Respond Productively

Celebrate instances where team members collaborate effectively by leveraging diverse skills. Address any instances of siloed knowledge.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively promote knowledge sharing and collaboration among team members with diverse skills?



L. Clear and Simple Boundaries

The inability to accept basic constraints, paradoxically blocks the gateway to autonomy and freedom. Have a team agree on as few rules as possible and commit to upholding them by holding each other accountable as professionals. The more rules or agreements a team has, the less members think creatively for themselves.

It may be a good idea to establish these boundaries to fundamental principles.

Principles are fundamental truths that serve as the foundations for behavior that gets you what you want out of life. They can be applied again and again in similar situations to help you achieve your goals.

— Ray Dalio, Principles: Life and Work

Stage

Facilitate a team discussion to establish a minimum set of clear principles for collaboration.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to voice concerns or suggest improvements to existing boundaries. Ask team members how they would like to work.

Respond Productively

Positively affirm adherence to agreed-upon rules. Constructively address instances where team members deviate from established boundaries. This is best done with respect for the individual and tolerance to unique circumstances without undermining the commitment to the principles.

Self-Assessment

How do I regularly assess if and how team members are respecting the established boundaries and adjusting them as needed? How do I assess my own behavior in respecting the established boundaries? How do I struggle in living the shared principles?

M. Respecting Each Other as Capable Individuals

Increase transparency by aligning the de-facto accountabilities to what is defined on paper. Recognizing and appreciating the unique strengths and abilities of each team member promotes mutual respect and collaboration. High-performing team members do not undermine each other; they help each other level up. This often happens with a dose of humor.

Two people can see the same thing, disagree, and yet both be right. It's not logical; it's psychological.

— Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

Stage

Foster a culture of appreciation for individual strengths and contributions.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to actively seek help and support from colleagues.

Respond Productively

Address any instances of undermining behavior promptly. Verbally acknowledge instances of collaboration and mutual support.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively promote and model a culture of respect for individual capabilities within the team?

N. Economic Empowerment

In terms of time, budget, or technology, the team must be able to utilize the preferred resources effectively to achieve its objectives. When specialists and craftsmen are not empowered to use their preferred means, it diminishes their sense of ownership and accountability over the results of their work. The freedom to use resources creatively to work in unison with others is key to enabling self-management.

Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.

— The Agile Manifesto: Principles

Even more fundamental, the best currency an organization has is employee health.

Healthy organizations are 2.2x more likely to surpass financial targets, 2.8x more likely to embrace change, and 3.2x more likely to retain employees, as well as experience drastic drops in absenteeism.

— Josh Bersin, Companies Focusing on Holistic Organizational Health Outperform Their Peers (2021) (#)

In giving teams the environment and support they need, their health should be of primary concern.

Stage

Involve the team in the allocation of means and consider the preferences and needs of individual team members in context to their well-being.

Invite Participation

Let team members and propose how they want to use the available means to achieve objectives - and - how they can use these means to improve their well-being.

Respond Productively

Address any signs of dissatisfaction or inefficiency related to the allocation of means or personal well-being by enhancing transparency over the constraints.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively involve team members in decisions related to the allocation of available means? How do I involve and empower teams to improve on their well-being?

O. Professional Playfulness

Playfulness is a state of mind where we experience being absorbed in the moment, a collective flow during which we are focused, curious, spontaneous, engaged, and open to learning. It is deeply connected to the team-flow state. Therefore, playing is a serious business and we can also trust the neuroscience on this. Playing relieves stress, improves brain function, boosts energy and creativity, increases and improves connections with others, and heals emotional wounds.

Reconsider any preconceived notions that label play as childish, for it transcends age and occupation. It is especially those epitomizing strength and discipline, such as hardcore marines and commando units, that routinely engage in play. However, the nature of their play may not align with conventional expectations. Instead, it manifests in the rigorous training drills, tactical simulations, and strategic maneuvers essential to their profession.

Play becomes a vital tool for honing skills, fostering camaraderie, and preparing for the most challenging of circumstances. It's a reminder that play is not solely frivolous; rather, it creates character, serving purposes far beyond mere amusement. So, the next time you encounter someone dismissing play as trivial, remind them of what marines do.

Professional playfulness injects energy and creativity into a team, fostering an atmosphere where innovative ideas flourish. A playful approach to problem-solving and collaboration enhances team dynamics but also contributes to a positive and vibrant workplace culture.

— “Play is our brain's favorite way of learning.” - Diane Ackerman, Deep Play.

Stage

Integrate dynamic, interactive, and engaging elements with creativity into team activities.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to bring a sense of playfulness to their work. Enable them to create a space for play.

Respond Productively

Address any signs of resistance to playfulness with respect for one another. Celebrate instances where a playful approach enhanced creativity and problem-solving.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively cultivate a work environment where professional playfulness is embraced in a professional manner?

Play increases mental health - and therefore mental performance. It elevates the sense of psychological safety and increases the sense of meaningfulness to work.

Aspects of work that provide positive energy such as meaningful work and psychological safety—explain the most variance in holistic health. Those who find meaning in their work and feel they can raise new ideas or objections with their coworkers are more likely to feel they are in better health

— Jacqueline Brassey, Brad Herbig, Barbara Jeffery, and Drew Ungerman - Reframing employee health: Moving beyond burnout to holistic health (McKinsey Health Institute 2024)

P. Road To Mastery

Mastery and craftsmanship are cornerstones of a high-performing team. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and skill development, leaders empower their team members to reach new heights of excellence. Striving for mastery not only enhances individual capabilities but also elevates the collective performance of the team.

Although the pursuit of mastery is one that requires a great deal of effort and thus energy - not tapping into potential may lead to performing current capabilities with increasingly more misery.

We can either make ourselves miserable, or we make ourselves strong.

— George Mumford, *The Mindful Athlete: Secrets to Pure Performance*

Mastery means going beyond current capability. To do so, individuals must abandon their comfort zone. What helps them do so is to do it together.

The sign of a great player is not how much he scores, but how he lifts his teammate's performance.

— Red Holzman.

Stage

Facilitate ongoing opportunities for skill development and mastery within the team.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to set personal goals for professional growth and craftsmanship.

Respond Productively

Acknowledge and celebrate instances where team members demonstrate new levels of mastery. Address any barriers to skill development promptly.

Self-Assessment

How do I actively support and provide ongoing means for the continuous mastery and craftsmanship of my team members?

Q. Autonomy Accountability Alignment

Some coaches feel threatened when players assert their independence. "There is no 'I' in team" is often expressed to emphasize the importance of collaboration, teamwork, and putting the collective goals above individual interests. However, there is no team without the individual. Autonomy is another key to unlocking the full potential of individuals within a team.

Granting team members the freedom to perform the work their way stimulates a sense of ownership and accountability. An autonomous team is not only more adaptable but also capable of achieving higher levels of innovation and productivity. Autonomy only works with authenticity. Consider, as a team, to occasionally allow individual needs to ebb and flow over the collective. Serving personal needs doesn't diminish the strength of the team; instead, it fortifies it.

All companies have a culture, some companies have discipline, but few companies have a culture of discipline. When you have disciplined people, you don't need hierarchy. When you have disciplined thought, you don't need bureaucracy. When you have disciplined action, you don't need excessive controls. When you combine a culture of discipline with an ethic of entrepreneurship, you get the magical alchemy of great performance.

— James C. Collins, Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don't

Stage

Involve the team in serving the individual needs of team members - even if they are at times incongruent with the shared objective.

Invite Participation

Encourage team members to be open to trying ways of other team members over their own preferred ways.

Respond Productively

When a team member does not align with the will of the majority, allow them to momentarily break away, respecting their individual autonomy. Be curious about their individual motivations and aspirations, their values and principles. A resolution may not be immediately apparent, but allow it to emerge. Value the relationship over a principle difference.

Self-Assessment

How do I promote and support team members in expressing their identity and fulfilling their individual aspirations?

Closing notes

The journey from an average team to an athletic (high-performing) team can be a deliberate process that involves strategic leadership, intentional team dynamics, and a commitment to fostering a culture of continuous improvement. In this whitepaper I unraveled the complexities surrounding team performance and provided practical strategies for leaders and team members alike to elevate their collective capabilities.

A. Conclusive Summary

We explored the concept of athleticism in business, drawing parallels between the dynamics of athletic sports teams and the corporate arena. The emphasis on agility, strategic coaching, physical and mental conditioning, and a willingness to embrace pressure as a privilege are key takeaways that can transform teams into champions within their respective markets.

We introduced the concept of a Torchbearer, signifying individuals who illuminate the path to innovation and excellence, inspire others, and contribute to collective growth. This commitment to innovation, mentorship, ethical standards, and resilience is crucial for sustained success.

The strategies outlined in the paper, ranging from self-determination and intrinsic motivation to psychological safety and professional playfulness, provide comprehensive strategies for leaders to foster high-performance in teams.

The integration of personal ambition into a shared purpose, the importance of clear boundaries, and the promotion of autonomy were highlighted as essential components for creating a foundation of excellence. Additionally, the significance of validating achievements, fostering a sense of belonging, and respecting each other as capable individuals were underscored to enhance overall team dynamics.

As organizations navigate the VUCA environment, the insights I shared in this whitepaper aim to equip leaders and teams with the mindset needed to not just survive but thrive.

B. Meet the Expert

Sjoerd Nijland is a courseware creator and trainer at Xebia Academy. He is also the founder of Serious Scrum and Road to Mastery. Sjoerd directed and coached various jaw-dropping productions for various brands. Sjoerd's contribution has been instrumental in the growth and success of Bugaboo.

Sjoerd has achieved various acclaimed milestones, including Webby Awards nomination, Innovation Award (Transport), Red Dot Awards including the most prestigious **Best of the Best** in both E-Commerce and Retail. He is also a winner of an Artificial Intelligence hackathon.

Another notable engagement includes the facilitation of the merger of the Grolsch, Peroni, and Meantime into Asahi Europe. Asahi faced the complex challenge of facilitating a merger with ±2.000 employees in a fun, interactive way, while also creating harmony and excitement to combat anxiety and stress.

The campaign applied multiple channels in multiple languages and required coordination from multiple countries in a three-month time span. 178 cross-brand teams (4-6 employees per team) participated.

Sjoerd also led the transformation of two digital agencies into an empirical way of working through professional Scrum. With one of these agencies he also coached the development of the first e-commerce platform for Stella E-Bikes.

What drives him? He loves helping specialists work and play together, engaging in complex challenges creatively. Sjoerd identifies himself as a guide taking groups on a learning journey. This is also how he trains: he applies neuroscientific principles of effective learning where he takes specialists on extensive learning journeys where individuals learn from each other by sharing experiences while engaging in creative plays from his extensive playbook.

I always had an adventurous spirit. My mission is to 'Explore better ways together'. I like to share and learn from the experiences of others. That means I often venture off the beaten tracks. I experiment and play around. I much rather work with a good backpack than a fixed roadmap. It is through diligent research and practical experimentation that I developed a playbook and learning journey for what I call Athletic team development.

— Sjoerd Nijland

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XEBIA

Xebia Academy

To create high-performing teams, Xebia Academy offers several learning solutions that tailor to your need.

>The Road to Mastery – Upskill Program

The Road to Mastery offers you an extensive curriculum of learning modules. The program goes beyond theory, offering practical, hands-on training for your team(s).

It provides a premium suite of (agile) facilitation patterns, techniques, and plays to supercharge teamwork and liberate your organization from stale, non-productive meeting rituals. With the Road to Mastery, you will create a training ground that covers a broad terrain, including important team topics like Psychological Safety, Coaching, Facilitation, and Self-Management.

[Learn more](#)

> Psychological Safety – Upskill Program

The Psychological Safety program is a comprehensive program that empowers you with the knowledge and skills needed to cultivate environments of trust, open communication, and collaboration within your organization.

Through interactive assignments that include research and use cases, your team will acquire a profound understanding of mental health, trust, high-performance dynamics, playfulness, and the art of effective feedback. Your team will receive a comprehensive leadership toolkit that helps you foster and assess Psychological Safety within your organization.

[Learn more](#)

>The Road to Mastery – Training Course

The Road to Mastery training course is a learning journey that goes beyond certification and guides you in putting knowledge into practice as a Scrum Master, Agile Professional, and (Agile) Coach. Focus on improving your personal agile leadership, coaching, and facilitation skills.

The training course empowers you to make a significant impact within agile organizations. Throughout the program, you'll gain access to training, facilitation, and coaching materials and guides you in fostering a psychologically safe climate to create high-performing teams.

[Learn more](#)

Sjoerd Nijland

Sjoerd is the founder of Serious Scrum and Road to Mastery. Sjoerd is a distinguished Scrum Master and author of The Scrum Master Playbook.

Having directed and coached many digital implementations for various brands, such as Bugaboo, Sjoerd has achieved various acclaimed milestones, including Webby Awards nomination, Innovation Award (Transport), Red Dot Awards, including Best of the Best in both E-Commerce and Retail, and Winner of the 2016 Hackathon: Artificial Intelligence. Sjoerd developed himself in Brand Positioning, Authentic Leadership, NLP, Community Management, Online Activation Strategy, Coactive Coaching, Creative Advertisement, Lean UX, Service Design, Professional Scrum & UX.

What drives him? He loves helping specialists play together, engaging complex challenges creatively. Sjoerd identifies himself as a guide taking groups on a learning journey. This is also how he trains: he takes specialists on extensive learning journeys where individuals learn from each other by sharing experiences while engaging in creative plays from his extensive playbook.

To me, being a Scrum Master is about guiding others on their journey. Scrum is a team game; it can only be mastered together. I always had an adventurous spirit. ‘Exploring better ways together’ is what drives me. I like to share and learn from the experiences of others. That means I often venture off the beaten tracks. I experiment and play around. I much rather work with a good backpack than a fixed roadmap.



About Xebia Academy

Xebia Academy is the training arm of Xebia, an IT Consultancy and Software Development Company that has been creating digital leaders across the globe since 2001. With offices on every continent, Xebia helps the top 250 companies worldwide embrace innovation, adopt the latest technologies, and implement the most successful business models. In support of Xebia Group's services, Xebia Academy offers individual training and company-wide upskill programs and learning solutions in Agile/Scrum, Cloud, Data and AI, DevOps, Intelligent Automation, Leadership, Microsoft, Product Management, Security and Software Development.

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