

SUSTAINING HIGH PERFORMANCE

Goals of Stage 4

As its name implies, the fourth, or work, stage of group development is a time of intense productivity and effectiveness. It is at this stage that a work group becomes a team. Having resolved most of the issues of the previous stages, the team can focus most of its energy on goal achievement and task accomplishment. Although work occurs at every developmental stage, the quality and quantity of work increase significantly during Stage 4.

The goals of Stage 4 include getting the work done well, making decisions, remaining cohesive while encouraging task-related conflicts, and maintaining high performance over the long haul.

Sadly, many people have never been members of a Stage 4 team. They don't know what it's like to work at high performance levels and to enjoy the experience. Some teams that make it to Stage 4 contain members for whom this is a new experience. They are excited by the ease with which work gets done. They are thrilled with the feelings of camaraderie and trust generated by the team. They are happy they are learning so much and are eager for this experience to continue for as long as possible. The problem is that unless members are careful, backsliding may occur.

Getting to Stage 4 is not easy. Many groups never do. Staying at Stage 4 isn't easy, either. Without constant vigilance, teams may regress to earlier stages of development. To maintain high levels of performance for an extended

Box 10.1 Pride Cometh . . .

Two groups were working on similar projects. They asked for feedback on how they were doing. I assessed both groups and gave them suggestions on how to improve. The Stage 3 group used the feedback and worked hard to improve. The Stage 4 team didn't. They felt they were doing great and would beat the other group easily. They did not.

period of time, team members need to learn some things and to do some things that will keep their effectiveness and performance at high levels. Some of the things that high performance teams do to remain effective are described next.

Getting the Work Done Well

The norms in high performance teams support not only getting the work done but also getting the work done well. Those norms include the following:

- Team norms encourage high performance and quality
- The team expects to be successful
- The team encourages innovation
- The team pays attention to the details of its work

Here is an example of how these norms are enacted in high performance teams:

Felice has just suggested a way to get things done faster by eliminating a few steps where quality checks are made. After all, there are other points in the process where the quality is checked. She believes this will save valuable time and some money as well. You aren't sure this is a good idea.

What You Can Do

One of the goals of a Stage 4 team is to get the work done well. Norms for quality and high performance have been established, and everyone wants to do the best job possible. You know that Felice does as well. She also wants

to save time and money, which isn't a bad idea if it can be done without compromising quality. Felice's idea will save money. There's no doubt of that. You're not sure how her plan will affect product quality, however.

Given that the goal is to get the work done well, you might say something like, "Felice, I think we should go over your plan very carefully. I'm as eager as you are to save money and time. I just want to make sure that product quality won't be affected."

The point of saying this is to remind everyone of the norm for quality as well as for high performance. As work intensifies and deadlines loom, it's easy to forget commitments to quality. Gentle reminders are very helpful.

Felice agrees with you that quality is important and describes her plan in more detail. She says there are enough checks at other points in the process to ensure that quality is not compromised. You and other team members are impressed with Felice's careful evaluation of the steps in the process. She really did her homework.

What You Can Do

Part of getting the job done well is to encourage team members to be innovative. Felice has come up with an innovative idea, and, after lengthy team discussion, members think her idea is a good one. You might say, "Felice, I didn't understand at first, but you've made a believer out of me. I say we go with your idea. What do the rest of you think?"

Here's another example:

Renaya is feeling overwhelmed by the team's current workload. She says, "I'm not sure we can do all this by the end of the month. It seems like too much for us to handle."

What You Can Do

Even members of Stage 4 teams can become anxious about team success. Teams can also set goals for themselves that are too ambitious. The feeling that the team will succeed is vital to high performance. If teams become uncertain about goal achievement, there will be negative repercussions. You want the team to maintain its expectation of success. You also want to address Renaya's

concern. You might say, “Renaya, I think we should review our plans for the month. Maybe they are too ambitious. Maybe we haven’t divided the workload evenly enough. It could be that you got more than your share. What do the rest of you think about this?”

The team is planning a meeting with the production team to establish the time frame for launching a new product. Dan has been given the responsibility for working out the agenda with George, who heads the production team. Dan has just presented the agenda to the group. Jane says, “Dan, I think that the agenda includes most of what we need to clear up, but I’m a little concerned about coordinating marketing and production timelines. Shouldn’t marketing be included in that meeting?”

What You Can Do

Because paying attention to details is an important component of group success, you might say something like this: “I agree with Jane, Dan. Marketing should be represented at the meeting. I also think it would be a good idea to go over the agenda again to make doubly sure we’ve covered everything and have all the right players at the meeting.” If you are Dan, don’t get defensive. People aren’t trying to find fault with your work. In Stage 4 teams, everyone is committed to getting the work done well. Reviewing plans and checking things twice are expressions of that commitment.

Making Decisions

Decision making in high performance teams is a careful process that involves the following:

- The team spends time defining problems it must solve or decisions it must make
- The team spends time planning how it will solve problems and make decisions
- The team spends enough time discussing problems that must be solved and decisions that must be made
- The team uses participatory methods for decision making
- The team implements and evaluates its solutions and decisions

Following is an example of how a high performance team makes decisions and what you can do to help.

Kate says, "Can't we just change the schedule of the show so that it doesn't occur on the same weekend as the Motherwell exhibit at the museum? I don't want our artist to be overshadowed by anything." Mike says, "I agree with you, but I'm worried about what that will do to the whole schedule."

What You Can Do

The team is about to make a decision. You know that in order to make a good decision, the team needs to define the problem clearly. It may seem that the problem is clear: Another institution has scheduled an exhibit that may keep people from attending your institution's art exhibit. Before rearranging your schedule, however, it would make sense to make sure you have defined the problem correctly. You might say, "You might be right that the Motherwell show will compete with ours. I'd feel better, though, if we talked about that a little before we start thinking of solutions."

Lise has a different take on the situation. She thinks that the Motherwell show will attract different people. Midge disagrees. She says, "Motherwell has earned a place in art history. Even people who are not particularly attracted to his work will go to the exhibit because of his stature in contemporary art." Other group members begin to take sides with either Lise or Midge.

What You Can Do

Defining problems clearly often entails going beyond the team for information. You might say, "I think we're stuck. We have two different opinions about this. Maybe we should ask some other people for their thoughts on this. Who might know more about this kind of situation than we do?"

Lise and Midge contact three curators whose institutions had exhibits that were held at the same time as exhibits of well-known figures in the art world. All three said that attendance at their exhibits was higher than expected. People who came from out of town for the major exhibit made the rounds of other art exhibits and shows in the area. Kate remains unconvinced.

What You Can Do

You might say, “Kate, I think the team is ready to make a decision on this. We usually vote and go with the majority. Since this is really important to you, I think it would be best in this case to try to reach consensus on this decision. Let’s discuss all the options again and see if we can come up with a decision that everyone can live with. Is that okay with everybody?”

By suggesting a change in the decision-making process, you are making it clear to everyone that Kate’s position has to be taken seriously. You are also reminding Kate that the team cares about her and also must take action on this issue. In this team, consensus does not mean that everyone has to be enthusiastic about a decision. It simply means that everyone can live with the decision. After further discussion, Kate may still be skeptical, but she may be willing to go along with the emerging consensus. She may agree to go along this time as an experiment. It is unlikely that Kate will attempt to block the decision. This team has established a norm that encourages members to go along with decisions as long as the team has done its best to discuss the problem, to uncover relevant information, and to seek input from all members.

Cohesion and Conflict

Positive relationships are evident in high performance teams. Conflicts continue to occur as well. In high performance teams, the following characteristics are in evidence:

- The team is highly cohesive
- Interpersonal attraction among members is high
- Members are cooperative
- Periods of conflict are frequent but brief
- The team has effective conflict management strategies

Here is an example of how teams remain cohesive and deal with conflict:

The team has been thrown a curveball. The court date has been moved up because of political pressure, and this legal defense team must be prepared for trial much earlier than expected. Members of the team know there’s no chance of getting the date moved back. They’ll just have to be ready.

What You Can Do

You might say something like, “I was planning to go away for the weekend, but I’ll cancel that. That will give me time to work with Janice on preparing those motions. What do you say, Janice?”

Teams, at Stage 4, step up to challenges. The world is not predictable. What’s more, it is often stressful. In teams that are functioning well, people make the necessary adjustments to get the job done. A word of caution is in order here. If members find themselves in situations like this frequently, it may be a sign that they should review their operational procedures. Too many situations like this one may overload team members and cause burnout. This particular situation seems unavoidable. Others may be avoidable with some forethought, however.

Here’s another example:

Bob is getting hot under the collar. He strongly disagrees with Tom’s proposed changes in patient education procedures for the unit. “Sure, these changes will save time, but I will not compromise patient care for anybody.” Tom is hurt by this statement and says, “I’m not trying to do that. I’m just trying to standardize our approach to patient education. That is what will save the time.”

What You Can Do

You know that conflicts occur at every stage of group development. In fact, conflicts are good because they help provide clarity. You also know that the way conflicts are handled is critical. So you say, “This is a very important issue. I think we should take both these points of view very seriously and get other members’ opinions as well. In fact, it might be useful to see what other units like ours are doing about patient education. What do the rest of you think?”

As the conversation is redirected away from Bob and Tom and back to the team as a whole, tempers will undoubtedly cool. Both men’s concerns have been acknowledged and taken seriously. Other members will have the opportunity to weigh in on these issues, and the idea of seeking information from other hospitals will probably be received positively by team members. The trick in conflict situations is to intervene quickly and stay focused on the task.

Maintaining High Performance

High performance is maintained in Stage 4 in the following ways:

- The team gets, gives, and uses feedback about its effectiveness and productivity
- The team evaluates its performance on a regular basis
- The team takes steps to avoid routine and getting stuck in a rut

Examples of how teams maintain high performance and what you can do to help are provided next.

John is facilitating this meeting. The team rotates the job of meeting facilitator, which gives Joyce, the designated leader, the chance to participate more fully in discussions. Halfway through the meeting, John says, "It's time to do a process check."

What You Can Do

This is a simple one. Because you know it's important to evaluate team processes regularly, go along with John's suggestion. There are three ways to evaluate how a team is doing. The first way, which John has suggested, is to take five minutes in the middle of a meeting to answer the following questions:

- Are we on task and on schedule in terms of covering the agenda?
- Does everyone think that she or he has been heard?
- Does anything need clarification at this point?
- Is there anything we could do at this point to improve our process?

Taking the time to do a quick evaluation halfway through the meeting is called a process check. Process checks make it possible to correct things that are not going well during the meeting so that changes can be made right away. This prevents the team from spending time unproductively.

Bill, the group leader, says, "At the next meeting, we're scheduled to do a periodic review of how the team is doing. Take the next few minutes to fill out the checklist. Patrick has volunteered to summarize the results for us and to present the summary at the next meeting."

What You Can Do

This one is easy, too. Go along with Bill's suggestion. Respond to the checklist as honestly as possible. The second way to ensure continual evaluation is to do periodic reviews of team function as Bill has suggested. The length of time between reviews will vary for each team. In general, once every six to eight weeks seems reasonable. The idea is to avoid long periods of lowered productivity by making any necessary changes as soon as possible.

In Chapter 4, I introduced the Team Performance Checklist. Every six to eight weeks, all members and the leader should take a few minutes at the end of a meeting to complete the checklist. One member should be asked to organize the responses and present the results at the next meeting. The best way to organize the responses is to determine the average response to each question and the average total response.

Begin the next meeting by going over the responses. Look at items where the average response is high (3 or 4). These are things that the team is doing well. Keep doing those things. Next, look at items where the average response is low (1 or 2). Discuss strategies to improve the team's performance in those areas. Implement those strategies immediately. Don't forget to check up on yourselves. Do another evaluation about two months later. Repeat the process just described and make any necessary changes.

To some readers, this may seem like a waste of time. It's not. The dynamics of groups and teams can shift quickly. Before you know it, regression to earlier stages can occur. Teams do not operate in a vacuum. Changes in the external environment can take their toll on the best teams. Budget cuts, downsizing, shifts in organizational priorities, and many other things can affect internal team functioning. Stage 4 teams are not immune to these things. They do have a better chance of surviving these pressures than groups at lower developmental levels, but only if they are vigilant.

Internal forces can also affect team dynamics. Work pressures, new members, conflicts that arise, and lots of other things can turn a silk purse into a sow's ear. Getting to the top of the development ladder is hard. Staying there is just as hard.

Oscar is worried that the team isn't getting enough feedback about its performance from others outside the team. He says, "I think we should try to figure out ways to get better and more regular feedback from others in the

organization. We get so caught up in doing the work that we don't take the time to find out what others think of the quality of that work. Can we make that an agenda item at our next meeting?"

What You Can Do

Support Oscar's effort to get the team to discuss ways to get feedback. The third way to evaluate team effectiveness and productivity requires feedback from sources outside the team. Some teams get constant feedback about their performance. Others get almost none. All teams need to figure out ways to determine whether they are meeting goals and whether others are satisfied with their progress and output. Without feedback, it's impossible to know how to improve.

The type of feedback and methods to get that feedback will vary from team to team. The ease or difficulty of devising methods to obtain that feedback will as well. If the team's goals are concrete, getting feedback will be easier. If goals are more abstract, it will be harder. For example, if the goal of the team is to increase the number of cars produced in a quarter, feedback is easy to obtain. On the other hand, if the task of the team is to improve the corporate climate, obtaining timely feedback will be more difficult. Whether it is difficult or hard to obtain, without feedback the team is flying blind. Figure out ways to obtain performance feedback on a regular basis.

By the way, although I included these evaluation strategies in a discussion of Stage 4 teams, assessing group progress and obtaining performance feedback are necessary at every stage of development. Do it early and often throughout the life of your group.

Jane says, "I've been feeling a little flat at meetings for the past month. Are we getting a little dull? We were such pistols for quite a while, but I think we're starting to bore each other a little. Is there something we can do to spice things up?"

What You Can Do

My colleagues and I have been doing research on work teams for years. One of the things we've noticed is that teams tend to experience process losses as they age. We've noticed that after about 18 to 24 months, teams that were working at high levels start to falter. Productivity and effectiveness begin to

decrease. No one is sure why this happens, but I think it may be the result of fatigue. Team members simply get tired of doing the same old things in the same old way even when those things have been effective. After all the work that goes into creating a high performance team, members tire of it. They want something new and different.

This is not surprising. Human beings tend to be a bit perverse in this regard. After spending years renovating a house, its occupants tire of the décor. After years of living somewhere, some people feel the urge to move. After months of eating a salad for lunch every day, the thought of another salad bores us to tears. We long for stability, and when we achieve it we want something different and challenging.

Teams are composed of humans, and so the urge for novelty and change influences team members. When things become too routine, most of us want change. Our attention goes to other things and away from maintaining high levels of performance.

Again, this is as natural as can be, but from a work perspective it may have negative consequences. If the work of the team is completed, it might be best to disband and to distribute the now-routine tasks to others. If the work is not complete, however, team members will need to think of ways to revitalize themselves. Some ways to do this follow:

- Add new goals and interesting tasks for the team to work on
- Hold a retreat focused on ways to revitalize team members
- Switch roles around so that members are doing new and different things
- Teach each other new aspects of the work
- Rotate some members off the team and add new members
- Change the way meetings are conducted
- Change the meeting time
- Do other creative things to energize the process

Stage 4 is the best of times. Do whatever it takes to ensure that “the best of times” doesn’t become “the good old days.”