

Igniting Enduring Individual & Team Performance

A HOW-TO GUIDE FOR TAPPING INTO
THE POTENTIAL OF YOUR PEOPLE



OVERVIEW

As the pace of business life accelerates exponentially throughout our technologically interwoven, hyper-extended world, even the most insightful, dedicated leaders find themselves failing abysmally at the one vital responsibility they each share: leveraging talent in a way that is sustainable, profitable, and leaves a modicum of their sanity intact. The opportunities for reflection on what's causing employees to leave their commitment, energy, creativity, and attention at the door on the way to work dwindle by the day. And many fall subject to this ever-pervasive reality assuming it's the only option for coping. They are tragically missing what research is increasingly showing about human behavior and organizational performance. The following summary relates what to do if you're one of these leaders, starting with a pointblank truth:

There is a vast disconnect between what science demonstrates and how business operates.

No better is this illustrated than by Daniel Pink, bestselling author of *Drive* and *A Whole New Mind*. Pink claims "we're intrinsically motivated purpose maximizers, not only extrinsically motivated profit maximizers." Pink argues a distinct few businesses have caught onto the fact that intrinsic motivation, which is derived from an inward-out fashion based on the perceived value of the task, is a far better performance fuel than is extrinsic motivation, or that imposed on the individual from an external source in the form of reward or punishment. The key ingredients his research cites as being most critical to fostering the powers of intrinsic motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

Leaders with the insight into how to effectively motivate individual employees focus intently on building these elements into their unique leadership style. It varies from person to person, but the general approach is consistent. Allow employees to be self-directed, help them to be better at something that matters to them, and connect their efforts to the larger purpose to which it aligns. Let's break this down a bit further:

Autonomy

With regard to autonomy, employees inherently need one variable: choice. In particular, they need choice in four distinct domains: their *tasks*, their *time*, their *technique*, and their *team*. Help them accomplish what they do in a timeframe that works for them according to how they best see fit and in collaboration with those who share a common interest, and you'll see a stark improvement in individual performance. In fact, employees will be more likely to want to do the task and therefore demonstrate increased accountability and will be more likely to immerse themselves fully in it, leading to increased engagement.

Mastery

If you afford employees control over these choices that lead to greater autonomy, compliance increases in tandem. Increased levels of engagement drive employees to get better and better – a behavior that defines the essence of mastery. Only engagement can generate an impetus to achieve mastery; without it, mastery becomes unattainable. But the good news is once employees feel

engaged and committed to their work, it becomes almost a natural byproduct. They will want to keep excelling because it is in itself rewarding to do so.

Purpose

Those who have a sense of autonomy and mastery are masters at performing at high levels. They are motivated to achieve more and with better results. This stems from the fact that they attach their desires to a cause greater than themselves; they seek purpose in their activities. They hitch their efforts to the *why* of what they do. For them, performing fits in with a meaningful, broader picture. Highlight this picture for those who you've permitted to be at choice and to build upon their skill set, and you'll have an unparalleled performance force on your side.

The biggest mistake leaders make is to ask people to work harder without having created the conditions necessary for them to *want* to work harder.

Collectively, this tells us how to develop individual performance, but what about performance on a larger scale? This requires a shift in focus to establishing the right environment for performance to grow. On this matter, we turn to psychiatrist and Harvard Medical School instructor Edward Hallowell, author of *Shine: Using Brain Science to Get the Best from Your People*.

Hallowell explains there are two modern paradoxes that exist with regard to team performance:

1) We've grown superconnected electronically, yet have simultaneously grown wholly emotionally disconnected from one another.

2) People don't fail because they're not working hard; they're working too hard.

The implications these paradoxes pose are that leaders must contend with the rapid pace and information overload that the maelstrom of modern business life inflicts upon them while at the same time maintain some sense of control in what manifests itself as perpetual, and in some instances crazy, busyness. Their teams feel a visceral lack of connection that impacts their emotions and their work. And they do so at a pace that's nearly impossible to maintain without inflicting suffering. In most cases, this suffering takes the form of not only personal fatigue and malcontent, but a gross dip in productivity. Employees find themselves fearfully struggling to appear busy to mask the fact that they're exhausted.

Leaders can combat this context of frenzy and fear, which on a neurological basis actually disable the mind and negate the possibility of peak performance, by attending to four key environmental factors:

1) Foster emotional stability. Without a feeling of safety and security in the workplace, employees are rendered incapable of deep thought. Their

decisions are driven by fear and the mode of survival replaces the glimmer of hope for excellence. As Hallowell puts it, “Fear disables the mind just as surely as lack of oxygen.” It is one of the greatest obstacles to exceptional performance. If, however, leaders are able to build positive feelings toward employees and recognize good performance in candid and specific ways, they can in effect combat the potential for fear to arise – and ensure it does not engulf their employees’ energies and abilities.

- 2) **Build connection.** Employees need to know that what they exert their precious energy on means something. They need to interact with others in a way that underscores this meaning. Leaders who understand this and are able to create environments that allow for meaningful, interactive conversations among team members are more likely to reap the reward of enhanced performance.

- 3) **Promote creativity.** When employees are able to bring their imagination to their work it creates ideal conditions for attaining peak performance. Let people play in a way that activates their creative spirit. Although for some leaders the word play conjures images of nails on a chalkboard, to the wise leader it appears as an opportunity to let people open up. In fact, according to Hallowell, play “constitutes the most advanced, productive activity the human brain can engage in.” He notes, “People at play produce creative results and leap from the humdrum to the exceptional.” Taken conclusively, creativity

drives profits. Look for ways to channel positive energy through right-brained thinking. The results are likely to be transformative both for your climate and your bottom line.

4) Demonstrate progress. This one is absolutely critical. Progress, more than any other factor in one's work environment, is essential to maintaining momentum. Tangible progress toward a collective goal creates a clear linkage that the efforts employees expend on their work actually pays off. Progress is rewarding in and of itself mainly because it links back to what Pink identified as being a crucial component of individual performance: mastery. Employees who understand they're advancing grow more confident. The reward isn't only the employees'; it becomes highly rewarding for the organization to build talent that is focused on attaining mastery. Bottom line: show everyone in your group how they're making progress toward an ultimate goal.

Moving beyond environmental work elements: Extending one's view

Leaders capable of building environments that reinforce these factors often find themselves, however, beginning to shift their focus toward the horizon. Their question becomes, 'How do I keep us moving ahead at this pace over time?'. The question is a valid one. Failing to attune to the long-term impact of one's leadership strategies is likely to bring about results incapable of lasting for the long haul. Nothing can kill success quicker than myopia. Knowing this, the smartest leaders play off of their ability to share knowledge on how to work smarter, not harder.

Working smart, as Tony Schwartz, energy guru and founder and president of The Energy Project, a renowned consultancy that partners with organizations to build high energy, engagement, and productivity, and author of *The Way We're Working Isn't Working* is a combination of two distinct variables: staying focused and creating positive mental states. Years of research into what makes top performance taught Tony and his colleagues that performing at one's best requires attention to one's energy at all times. This stems mainly from the fact that our bodies are not meant to operate like computers – overextended at full capacity for long periods of time. Somehow business has not caught up with this fact. Employees are expected to work long, grueling hours and are deemed lazy if they're observed taking a break to recoup.

What's most interesting (and troubling) about this dynamic is that the more people overextend themselves without renewing their energy, the greater their performance dips. Schwartz attributes this to the norms of corporate cultures. Many develop a relentless urgency that in turn undermines creativity, quality, and overall performance. The furious activity that takes place in modern organizations takes an enormous silent toll: less capacity for focused attention, reduced time dedicated to any particular task, and less opportunity to reflect on long-term goals.

Schwartz's overarching advice to leaders who seek to surmount this self-perpetuating cycle:

Stay Focused. Help employees to understand they are responsible for monitoring their awareness of how they are feeling at any given moment. More

than anything, make it safe to do so. Find ways to change the cultural norm on your team around the perception of appearing busy versus admitting we're all ultimately human and are susceptible to fatigue. This will pay big dividends for you over time in that once your team members can effectively observe their feelings around their energy, they increase their ability to choose how to respond to it. Higher attunement to feelings around flagging energy allows employees to bolster their attention. This attention is the one thing that matters more than anything in terms of maintaining long-term performance; given the nature of life, it's a wholly irreplaceable resource.

Regularly Renew. Openly ask employees how they can intentionally break from their tasks in a pulsing way. Schwartz's research reveals our bodies actually pulse energetically on a 90-minute ultradian rhythm. Look for opportunities to put your team on the same schedule and witness what happens with their performance. The first observation you're likely to make is to see an increase in positive emotions. These are essential for maintaining peak performance over time. In fact, it's impossible to perform at our best when we're not in the ideal performance zone – or any time we're not feeling optimistic, focused, engaged, and committed. Any time we find ourselves in a state that doesn't tap into these elements, we're suboptimal.

Overcoming high demands and uncertainty through focusing on the future

A common theme recurrent in these notable authors' arguments is that greatness and nearsightedness are discordant. This is a principle byproduct of the fact that business has not yet integrated the insights research has taught us; modern organizations fixate on the immediacy of employees' efforts without giving sufficient credence to the cost at which such a mentality comes. Those wise to the hidden cost of a narrow view constrained further by rapidity are more apt to find themselves in agreement with the sage advice presented by Schwartz: "When we focus too narrowly on our short-term satisfaction, we're contributing to our long-term demise" and Pink, "Meaningful achievement depends on lifting one's sights and pushing toward the horizon." In short, savvy leaders with the ability to build autonomous, masterful, purposeful teams within an environment that's conducive to long-term engagement and creativity are best served by setting their gaze on the future and making intentional connections between the day-to-day toils of their team to an unwavering, impassioned vision of success.

If you're looking for a partner to help you put principles like these in place and bring your team's performance to a higher level.

Look no further.

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