THE ACADEMY OF HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

Three tips

To become a better team manager

1. Elevate the ordinary

When building a high-performing team, the interplay between consistency and intensity reveals a clear winner: consistency. While intensity provides the initial momentum to break free from the inertia of the status quo, it is the small, consistent actions that lead to meaningful, long-term transformation. The challenge lies not in the dramatic changes but in sustaining the seemingly small adjustments that collectively compound over time. In practical terms, this means selecting a few systems or habits, and committing to their consistent application in every interaction. For instance, consider the straightforward yet powerful practice of starting each significant team meeting with a check-in, ensuring all voices are acknowledged, and concluding with a live evaluation of the discussion's quality. These actions should not be reserved for when schedules permit or moods align. Instead, they must become non-negotiable fixtures of team culture. Their predictability creates a sense of collective accountability, aligning the group around shared expectations and standards.

Consistency, however mundane it may seem, carries profound implications. First, it conveys a critical principle to the team: that commitment to action is paramount. Doing what we say we will do, repeatedly and reliably, sets a standard for excellence. Second, this reliability establishes a rhythm of change. As habits solidify, they create a platform upon which additional behaviours can be introduced. The team begins to function like a well-tuned instrument, capable of adapting and evolving without losing its foundational harmony. By treating these rituals as sacred rather than incidental, you send a clear message: high performance is built on the disciplined execution of the basics. This approach not only strengthens team cohesion but also serves as a catalyst for sustainable growth. Through consistency, you lay the groundwork for a culture of trust, accountability and continual improvement.

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2. Boost psychological safety

In Chapter 6 of Are You A Team Or A Meeting on the inner game, I explored the critical role of psychological safety, the collective belief that team members can express concerns, admit mistakes and offer ideas without fear of punishment or retribution, whether direct or indirect. While many leaders believe their teams operate within a psychologically safe environment, this confidence is often misplaced. Leaders may conflate their own comfort in speaking out with the collective experience of the team, assuming that because they feel at ease, others must as well. This misjudgement creates a gap between perception and reality, leading to whispered corridor conversations replacing open dialogue, causing decisions to stall, and the emergence of a "slow yes" or "slow no" – where an outcome is decided tacitly, but a lack of clear, safe communication delays its articulation. To address this, leaders must start by decoupling their own feelings of candour and openness from what their team members might be experiencing. This shift in perspective is crucial for fostering genuine psychological safety. Once the importance of this is recognised, several strategies can help leaders actively cultivate this essential element in their teams.

If you want your team to exhibit a behaviour, they need to see it from you first. Vulnerability is a powerful way to demonstrate that it is safe to be open. Share your own struggles, whether it's a professional challenge, a piece of critical feedback that stung, or a project that didn't meet expectations despite your best efforts. Talk as openly about what hasn't worked as you do about what has succeeded. For instance, saying "I don't know yet, but let's work it out together" not only normalises uncertainty but also invites collaboration. Similarly, demonstrate and communicate a willingness to change your mind. These small but powerful actions create a culture where team members feel safe to take similar risks. For many leaders, embracing and displaying vulnerability can be deeply uncomfortable. There is often a fear that exposing weakness might undermine authority. However, the opposite is true: when leaders show their human side, it creates trust and connection. Teams are unlikely to trust or emulate a leader who projects perfection or appears untouchably superhuman.

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Not only does this create an unattainable standard, but it also alienates team members who may feel that their own imperfections disqualify them from contributing fully. Leaders should remind themselves that while personal vulnerability may feel excruciating at times, it is in these moments that trust deepens and meaningful connections are forged. Vulnerability is not weakness; it is the cornerstone of authenticity. It allows others to see you as you are, not as you want to be seen. When leaders embrace this, they invite their teams to do the same, creating a space where psychological safety flourishes.

Seek feedback regularly, both anonymously and in person, to uncover hidden concerns. Create structured opportunities for everyone to speak, ensuring that quieter voices are heard. Explicitly acknowledge and reward contributions that involve risk-taking, such as sharing an untested idea or admitting a mistake. Over time, these behaviours will become embedded in the team's culture, reducing the fear of failure or judgement. By modelling vulnerability and creating an environment where honesty and openness are celebrated, leaders lay the groundwork for a high-performing team. Psychological safety is not a passive state – it requires active, continuing effort. For example, encourage your team to critically assess one of your ideas, identifying its weaknesses and inconsistencies and exploring ways to bulletproof it. Demonstrating your willingness to subject your ideas to scrutiny sets an example, inspiring others to adopt the same openness.

3. Prioritse what matters most

Teams not only welcome decisive action but also expect it. One of the most powerful decisions you can make is to stop work that does not align with the team's purpose. By eliminating non-essential tasks, you signal a clear shift in priorities and create the space needed for the team to focus on what truly matters. This could involve halting activities that the team itself has initiated but that lack strategic alignment, or it may require navigating difficult conversations with key stakeholders. These discussions might include resetting expectations and explaining why certain work no longer serves the team's goals. Though potentially uncomfortable, these actions carry weight.

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Few gestures communicate as strongly that you value your team's time and energy as decisively stopping work that adds little value. The effects of these decisions can be transformative. For some teams, it may mean their workload becomes manageable for the first time, allowing tasks to be completed within a sustainable working week. For others, it might open up capacity for purpose-driven initiatives: work that aligns with the team's core mission and could lead to breakthrough results. Either way, these bold moves underscore that you are serious about prioritising what matters and ensuring that the team's efforts have impact. As already discussed, prioritisation frameworks such as impact vs effort or clarity vs confidence can help teams assess what to continue and what to stop. Additionally, using tools like the "to stop, stopping, stopped" method ensures a systematic approach to reviewing tasks.

However, if the team struggles to reach a consensus or hesitates to take action, the onus is on you to step in, make a decision and communicate it clearly. For most teams, the relief of a decision being made outweighs concerns about whether it is perfect. Importantly, decisive action does not mean infallibility. If you make a decision that later proves to be a mistake, acknowledge it openly and pivot. Your willingness to revisit and revise your choices demonstrates adaptability and reinforces trust within the team. Paradoxically, while such decisions may cause a temporary slowdown, they contribute to long-term gains by strengthening psychological safety and team cohesion. Ultimately, the act of freeing capacity through decisive leadership sends a lasting message: the team's wellbeing and effectiveness are paramount. By removing unnecessary burdens and focusing the team's energy on meaningful work, you empower them to achieve more

E. info@aohpt.com
T. 0203 475 9424
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