



PANDEMIC EMERGENCE— WHAT YOU MUST DO TO REV UP HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS

A plan for a post-pandemic reassessment of your leadership team's capabilities with a focus on renewed growth

By Bruce Hodes

Like those old scary movies... creature from the black lagoon. Moonlight on the water, ripples small at first. Then you see a head, then neck, shoulders, a trunk emerges, all covered in black yucky goo, smelling putrid and sulfuric. The creature is covered in wretched mud, dripping stinky black slime, standing on the bank, gazing outward. That's how I feel. That's exactly how I think I look. Only I'm emerging from the pandemic.

Now imagine a group of creatures, dripping, stinking, and standing on the bank, male, female, big and small—about seven give or take and you have what company leadership groups look like as they emerge from the pandemic and take their first steps in dealing with the new reality.

It has been a tough 17 months for many organizational leadership teams. At the start of the pandemic, many companies experienced immediate slowdowns and uncertainty going from a growing company to a shrinking company. There was getting and managing personal protective equipment (PPE). This was harrowing and untested ground!

Slow business growth and emergence began in the early summer of 2020 and they continued throughout the year. We got used to working at home and working with COVID-19 protocols. This was spiced up by employees and leadership team members getting and dealing with COVID. Sometimes there were shutdowns, certainly there were quarantines and periodic, unexpected deaths. There was one challenge after another.

Today many leadership teams haven't been with each other physically for

more than a year. Vaccines are available—I got mine—but what does it really mean? Is everyone getting vaccinated? Can we mandate that all employees get vaccinated? Can we hire only vaccinated people? Can we come to work like normal? When do masks come off and under what circumstances?

The federal government is predicting 6.5% growth as early as this summer... Is that something you and your company are ready for? What planning do you need? Part of that question is answered by asking: Is your company's leadership team ready for the growth opportunity that is arising? Is your organization's leadership team ready to emerge from "We survived the pandemic" to having the organization positioned for growth and health in the new emerging world?

**TEAMS: MUTUAL
ACCOUNTABILITY
CRITICAL**

The answer lies in this question: Is your company's leadership team really a high-performance team and prepared to lead in this new era? Frankly, is the leadership even willing to contemplate that it's a new era? The answer to that question will determine the short-term success of your organization as we emerge. What follows are thoughts and ways to diagnose and improve your leadership team as you seek to win at this new game.

As a business coach, I have heard business leaders refer to many groups as "teams." I typically cringe, hyperventilate and get a rash when I hear the word because it is usually not an accurate description of the group. I have found it useful to distinguish leadership groups from leadership teams.

Team performance doesn't just happen. It's not a function of the right combination of personalities or luck; despite what conventional wisdom and typical business pop psychology might have you believe. The following are components that are critical to growing

and developing leadership groups into high-performance leadership teams. Much of my thinking here is influenced by the book, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith.

First, members of high-performance work teams have a common agenda that all members subscribe to and support. Typically, these are documented, and progress is reviewed and coached, usually at least once a week. For leadership teams that are emerging powerfully and entering the second quarter of 2021, this means they have a plan. No kidding! They are out to cause specific actionable results, and they have action plans to support their goals.

Second, teams do not just happen and appear. It is a focus on team performance and an agreed-upon appreciation of what this means that allows a leadership team to get results. The good communication and good relationships are an outcome and result of a team that's performance driven.

Third, high-performance leadership teams are "a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals and a working approach."

Real teams have members of the team who are mutually accountable for the results. This point of being mutually accountable for the results is critical to the success of the leadership team because it calls for mutual coaching and support between all members of the team. This is different from what happens in leadership groups where acceptance of mediocrity and avoiding conflict is rampant.

I see two things. Some leadership groups are feeling their way and seeing what occurs as the vaccine rolls out. The high-performance leadership teams aren't waiting. They're making the bet that health and growth are returning and running down that road with a focused agenda, ahead of the emerging reality.

High-performance leadership teams develop in stages. By teaching these stages, groups can be asked to identify which stage they're in. Once the team has aligned on where it is, have the group design the necessary steps for reaching the next stage. Again, this exercise is valuable for allowing the team to focus on growing, developing, and normalizing its struggles and challenges. The stages are as follows:

STAGE A. The exciting stage. This is the birth of the team that is still a group. There is typically excitement and anticipation about the team's potential and possibility. There is an uncertainty, but there is also optimism.

While a leadership team may have worked together for years, they may

find themselves at this stage post-pandemic. They were separated for a time, the rules of working have shifted, and they've focused on survival. Like the creatures at the beginning of the article, they are standing on the bank looking outward. There's optimism spiced with uncertainty as they look to the future.

STAGE B. The "poop hits the fan" stage is when reality sets in about the challenges facing the group and the organization. New group life can be hard and demanding. It is no longer fun, and there is finger pointing between leaders. Silos are rampant. Mutual accountability is seen as an empty concept. Team members look at whom to blame for their bad results.

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How do we bring the company back to our offices? If we have been open during COVID, what changes do we make and when regarding our COVID protocol? What is our policy regarding the vaccine? Do we make people get it or fire them?...What about our supply chain as our sales increase? How do we make sure we can be on time to our customers? What about hiring—are we facing a labor shortage and what do we do about it? Are there now key hires that we need to go after and how are we onboarding them into the culture? As you can see, there are some whopper challenges now facing leadership teams.

This “poop” stage is where most teams die. The leadership team needs to generate commitment to work through the inherent conflict surrounding these issues. This is also where the leader’s dedication to emerging powerfully from the pandemic is needed. Stage B is where focus and discipline are critical for success.

STAGE C. The “getting behind the game stage.” This is when everyone begins to align behind the company strategy and the leadership team performance in implementing the company strategy. Discipline and focus arise when the group follows the same ground rules and work approach. For the first time, real team performance results are seen.

A clear agenda post pandemic is required for the leadership team and company. This needs to be transparent and coherently communicated to the organization. What I see from the successful leadership team is that there can never be enough communication. Communicate and reward the right actions are the mantras of the successful high-performance leadership teams.

STAGE D. This is the high-performance stage, where the team is using its group structure to produce remarkable results. The team is enthused about the opportunity for growth. They are realizing the possibility before the organization.

It’s typical at this stage for the team to be recognized both internally by employees and externally by customers for the results they are producing. The teams that I see that are high performance are out and about and doing visits and surveys with their customers. Leadership team members feel connected to one another. The team is winning the business-growth and development game.

By going through the process above, the leadership team determines what stage they’re in. You can also use + or - to distinguish the stage you’re in. Brainstorming occurs on how the team can improve and move to the next stage. Teams need to align behind what actions they’re to take and determine accountability and follow-up efforts.

What follows is another approach in helping a group diagnose where they are in becoming a high-performance team. This is taken from an audit that appears in *The Wisdom of Teams*.

“Even though most of us are familiar with high-performance teams, we are imprecise in thinking about them. Imprecise thinking about high-performance teams, however, pales in comparison to the lack of discipline most of us bring to potential high-performance team situations. Leadership Teams can significantly enhance the team’s performance by focusing on performance—not chemistry or togetherness or good communications or good feelings.”

As a starting point, think about the six basic elements of a high-performance team to assess your current situation:

1. Are you small enough in number and do you have a methodology for meeting and communicating?
2. Do you have adequate complementary skills and skill potential in all three categories noted above that are necessary for team performance as you emerge into the new world?
3. Do you have a broader, meaningful purpose that all members aspire to?

4. Do you have a set of performance goals agreed on by all? Are there action plans and leaders accountable and acting on the goals.
5. Is the working approach clearly understood and agreed upon? Are the goals monitored and updated frequently and shared with the group?
6. Do you hold yourselves accountable for the team’s results?”

Answering these questions can establish the degree to which your leadership team functions as a real team as you emerge from the pandemic. Completing this audit will help you pinpoint how you can strengthen your efforts to increase performance. Have your leadership team pick two areas in which you think the team can improve and that can deliver maximum ROI.

This audit sets real standards. Answering the questions will reveal opportunities for improving your leadership team’s performance. Let the team think through action plans that will help them grow into a high-performance team in this new business world.

A year ago, my company’s clients and myself were in free fall as everything canceled and locked down. Fast forward a year. We and our leadership teams are standing on the bank. Stinky yes, gooey yes but on solid ground.

These ideas are aimed at helping you generate a high-performance leadership team. Apply this material so that you can emerge powerfully from COVID-19. Let us know how it goes. We’re eager to hear of your progress. **TS**

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WHERE HAVE ALL THE EMPLOYEES GONE?, CONT.

< *continued from page 29*

On-the-job employer-provided training is a tax-free hiring incentive as well as a valuable “perk” for current employees. Educational assistance and tuition reimbursement are also welcome fringe benefits.

A laundry operator with a formal educational-assistance plan isn’t required to immediately fund the plan, only to reimburse an employee’s educational expenses—up to \$5,250 per employee, per year and exempt from tax. Educational assistance doesn’t just include tuition assistance, but also payments for books, equipment and other expenses related to continuing education.

A related tactic that laundry operators can use to help fill the ranks is to target unconventional employee prospects. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) is a federal tax credit available to employers for hiring individuals from certain groups that traditionally have faced barriers to employment. That includes qualified veterans, ex-felons, summer-youth employees, long-term recipients of family assistance and long-term unemployment or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients, among others. The credit is equal to a percentage of the eligible employee’s wages—up to \$9,600, depending on the new hire’s WOTC target group. Of course, the employee must work at least 120 hours in order for the employer to receive the credit.

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

Common, tax-free employee fringe benefits include:

- **HEALTH BENEFITS.** Health benefits are by far the single-most important fringe benefit. Health benefits include providing employees with health, dental and vision insurance as well as paying health-related expenses.
- **LONG-TERM CARE INSURANCE.** These policies cover expenses such as the cost of nursing home care. While premiums are not taxable benefits, benefits received under the insurance may be partly taxable if they exceed certain limits.
- **GROUP TERM-LIFE INSURANCE.** A laundry operator can provide up to \$50,000 in group term life insurance to each employee tax-free.
- **DEPENDENT CARE.** Up to \$5,000 in dependent-care assistance can be provided to an employee tax-free. Of course, many working parents may qualify for a tax credit for child and dependent care.
- **WORKING CONDITION FRINGE BENEFITS.** Working-condition fringe benefits are anything provided or paid for by an employer to help someone do their job. Local and long-distance travel for business, business-related meals and entertainment, professional publications and company cars used for business driving are all good examples of tax-free working-condition fringe benefits.

CRAFTING CREATIVE STRATEGIES

One evolving method of dealing with today’s labor market involves automating their operations. Automation options, including robotic soil sorting and feeding solutions—are increasingly available from supplier partners.

The government, particularly U.S. tax laws, provide a significant helping hand with the cost of automating. Current tax laws offer a first-year expensing option that allows the amounts spent for new (or used) equipment to be entirely written-off or deducted immediately. So-called “bonus” depreciation is another option for an immediate deduction of 100% of expenditures.

Unfortunately, to deduct something, there must be income from which it can be deducted. That’s something that many laundry operators find in short supply amid COVID-related business losses. The alternative is the tried-and-true depreciation deduction. Depreciation creates a write-off for a portion of those costs annually—when the recovering business will, one hopes, have a more stable base of income.

Applying one or more of the tactics described above as part of a recruitment/retention strategy can help your company not only beat the labor shortage but meet the demands of a growing, post-COVID market. Offering higher wages, better benefits and other perks, including “quality of work life” improvements and training may not necessarily require a major investment. With professional guidance, most successful hiring options, including expanded use of incentives for employee referrals—could cost less than one might expect. Another option is to pursuing unconventional hires, including ex-offenders and people with physical or mental health challenges that qualify for government incentives. Refugee agencies also can place people in hard-to-fill jobs such as finishing and soil sort.

Whether you combine automation with one or more of the HR tactics described above, the sooner you rev up a hiring strategy for the post-COVID era, the better off you’ll be. **ITS**

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