

## Strategies for Leading a High Performing Team

Matt sits in excruciating pain. The team meeting has just hit its 4<sup>th</sup> hour and in his view, the best part of the meeting was the coffee break 2 hours ago. What has happened to this vibrant group of talented individuals? It's like everyone has taken a stupid pill.

Sound familiar? If you're like us, then you too have been part of teams that have sucked the energy out of you, but it doesn't have to be that way. We've created a teamwork tool to help you re-engage your team and get back on track to high performance.

This tool is a deck of 52 cards that can be used in a variety of ways to improve teamwork. This short briefing paper introduces you to some ideas around high performing teams and a variety of games and activities you can play with the teamwork cards to inspire your team.



### What distinguishes high from low performing teams?

We do our best to pull together teams that we think are going to achieve results, but getting the “mix” of skills and characteristics of team members right can be challenging. For example, which of the following characteristics distinguish top performing teams from low performing teams?

- Professional Expertise
- Trust
- Project Leadership
- Market/client awareness
- Clarity of purpose
- Conflict Management

According to Marshall and Lowther's research on over 520 teams, 17 factors emerged as important in team performance. The surprising news might be the order of importance of those factors:

- Trust (1)
- Clarity of Purpose (3)
- Conflict Management (8)
- Project Leadership (11)
- Market/client awareness (16)
- Professional Expertise (17)

While we may spend significant time in interviews uncovering people's professional expertise, what we really need to tease out is how that person is able to build trust with

others. Similarly, we often promote really good technical people to leadership positions, but neglect to help them develop skills to actually create trust and common purpose with a team.

Patrick Lencioni's recent work on the Five Dysfunctions of a Team confirms the importance of trust. In his experience, teams must address the following 5 dysfunctions in order to become a high performing team:

- Absence of Trust
- Fear of Conflict
- Lack of Commitment
- Avoidance of Accountability
- Inattention to Results

### Strategies for Building a High Performance Team

We have developed a tool to help teams become high functioning and productive and address some of the important ideas around building trust and clarity of purpose.

To help you become familiar with the model, take a few minutes to complete this assessment. To do so, think about a team you currently work on (or have observed or heard about) and indicate with a yes or no which statements you are likely to hear from team members and/or notice about how the team operates.

Things you notice (or phrases you hear)	Yes	No
1. Our team is confused about who is responsible for what.		
2. Our team is so polite with each other that we don't ever surface differences of opinion.		
3. We make decisions at our meetings and then people forget them and do whatever they want.		
4. Our team seems to have lost its drive and motivation.		
5. Our team plays it so safe I'm not sure we are producing much of value anymore.		
6. Our team has gotten into a bad habit of escalating email wars.		
7. Every decision we make, minor or major, is debated at length and not made until everyone agrees.		
8. Our team hasn't laughed in a long time.		
9. We spend more time in meetings than we do working.		
10. We never hear from 2 members of our team at meetings while 1 other completely dominates the meetings.		
11. Our decisions as a team are often overturned by others in the organization.		
12. We have accomplished a lot as a team, but it seems it's still not good enough.		
13. We seem to put the wrong people in charge of important tasks.		
14. We have often made incorrect assumptions about each other.		
15. I wish our team leader would just make some decisions.		
16. We are so distracted as a team that we don't really listen to one another.		

Add together the number of “yes” scores using the following table:

	Questions	Number of Yes
Task ♠	1, 5, 9, 13	
Communication ♦	2, 6, 10, 14	
Decision Making ♣	3, 7, 11, 15	
Heart ♥	4, 8, 12, 16	

This quick assessment introduces you to the four pillars of teamwork in our tool. Two or more yes responses in a particular area suggest your team has work to do! Here are the hands that represent the team challenges in the self assessment:



Here are the four pillars of teamwork:

### ♠ Task

Completing tasks is the defining aspect of teamwork. There are many ways to approach the completion of tasks. Our cards provide 13 strategies for ensuring that your team pays attention to how it gets its work done.

### ♦ Communication

At the core of really effective teams is open, trusting and transparent communication. There are many techniques for ensuring effective communication. Our cards provide 13 strategies for developing open, transparent and effective communication.

### ♣ Decision Making

Teams often get into trouble when they rely on only one way of making decisions, rather than being deliberate about what type of decision making to use in situations. Our cards provide 13 tips for ensuring your team uses the right decision making strategy at the right time.

## ♥ Heart

Teams need to pay attention to the heart of the team, or its passion, commitment and motivation. One of the best ways to do this is to ensure a shared vision and values. Our cards provide 12 other tips for ensuring your team remains engaged, excited and motivated.

In our experience, no two teams are alike and therefore, we don't believe in a one size fits all approach. Our card deck of 52 strategies enables your team to develop your own "winning hand." The following games and activities will help you do just that!

### Go FISH!!

**Purpose:** To familiarize your team with ideas about teamwork and have some fun.

**Supplies Needed:** One deck of Teamwork Cards for each 4-6 people

**Number of players:** Any number of teams of 4-6 people

**Time Needed:** 1 hour including debriefing

### Suggested Process:

1. Introduce the game by talking about its purpose. Divide people into teams of 4-6 people.
2. Using one deck of cards, deal 5 cards to each person, and place the remaining cards between players.
3. The player whose turn it is to play asks another player for their cards of a particular rank. For example, "Liz, do you have any threes?" A player may only ask for a rank of which they already hold at least one card. The recipient of the request must then hand over all cards of that rank.
4. If the call was successful, the same player has another turn.
5. If the player who was asked has no cards of that rank, they say "Go fish" (or simply "Fish"), and the asking player draws the top card from the pack. The turn then passes to the next player.
6. When one player has two of the same cards of a given rank, they form a pair, and the cards are placed face up on the table. This can only happen during the player's turn. Whenever someone lays down a pair, they choose ONE of the cards to read aloud.
7. If the player whose turn it is has no cards left in hand, the game is not over, but they simply draw the top card from the pack and the turn passes to the next player in the rotation.
8. When no cards are left, the player with the most pairs wins.

Follow up the game by choosing a second game/activity or simply pose these two questions for discussion:

1. What insights about teams did you gain from playing the game?
2. What is one action you will personally commit to in order to further enhance our team functioning?

## Four Corners

**Purpose:** To help your team explore teamwork and generate actions to improve its functioning.

**Supplies Needed:** One deck of Teamwork Cards

**Number of players:** 8 to 25

**Time Needed:** 1 hour

### Suggested Process:

1. Start the activity with an introduction to the purpose of the session.
2. Introduce the four suits of cards, using 1 or 2 examples to explain each suit.
3. Ask people to choose a suit they are most interested in exploring and have them self organize into the 4 corners of the room, each corner representing one suit.
4. Give each of the four corners the cards which correspond to their suit. Ask them to discuss the cards and identify one card they think the team most needs to pay attention to. Then, have each team identify one action they will each commit to in order to make sure that card is remembered in their teamwork.
5. Have each corner report out their cards and commitments.

## Team Check-In

**Purpose:** Icebreaker that helps a team hold themselves accountable for team functioning

**Supplies Needed:** One deck of Teamwork Cards for each 4-6 people

**Number of players:** Any number but activity will last longer if more than 6-8 people

**Time Needed:** 15 minutes to start the meeting and 5 minutes at the end

### Suggested Process:

1. Begin by stating the purpose of the activity.
2. Have people flip through the cards and choose one they feel will most help the team in its functioning for that meeting. Also have each person identify what action they will commit to in ensuring this card is followed.
3. Have each person identify their card and commitment.
4. Hold your meeting.
5. At the end of the meeting, take 5 minutes to ask people what they learned by paying attention to their particular card.

## Individual SOS (Strength, Opportunity, Stretch)

**Purpose:** To help individual team members develop their team skills or as an opening get to know you activity for a team that is just starting to work together for the first time.

**Supplies Needed:** One deck of Teamwork Cards for each person on the team

**Number of players:** Any number but activity will last longer if more than 6-8 people

**Time Needed:** 1 hour minimum (adjust if more than 6-8 people)

### Suggested Process:

1. Explain the purpose of the activity.
2. Have each person choose 3 cards from their decks – one to represent a strength they feel they have (S), one to represent how they may be an obstacle to the team (O), and one to represent something that is a stretch for them (S).
3. Have each person identify their 3 cards.
4. If this is a start up activity for a team, follow this with an activity on building a team vision or values or team charter.
5. If this is an activity with an already developed team, pose these two questions for discussion:
  - What did you learn about one another?
  - What is one action you will personally commit to in order to further enhance our team functioning?

## Team SOS

**Purpose:** To help your team explore teamwork and generate actions to improve its functioning.

**Supplies Needed:** One deck of Teamwork Cards for each person on the team

**Number of players:** Any number but activity will last longer if more than 6-8 people

**Time Needed:** 1 hour minimum (adjust if more than 6-8 people)

### Suggested Process:

1. Explain the purpose of the activity.
2. Have each person choose 3 cards from their decks – one to represent a strength they feel the team has (S), one to represent an obstacle the team has (O), and one to represent something that is a stretch for the team (S).
3. Have each person identify their 3 cards.
4. Pose these two questions for discussion:
  - What did you learn about the team?
  - What are 3 actions we can take as a team to capitalize on our strength, and address our obstacle and stretch?

## Winning Hand

**Purpose:** To help your team explore teamwork and generate an action plan or “winning hand” to improve and/or enhance its functioning.

**Supplies Needed:** 1 deck of team cards for each team member

**Number of players:** Any number but activity will last longer if more than 6-8 people

**Time Needed:** 1 to 1.5 hours

### Suggested Process:

1. Explain the purpose of the activity.
2. Have each person choose 5 cards from their decks that to them represent a “winning hand” to improve and/or enhance team functioning. These 5 cards can be any combination of any suit and are the cards that person thinks the team most needs to pay attention to.
3. Each person lays out their hands at the same time.
4. Each person then explains the reasons for their winning hand.
5. The team then chooses 5 cards from all the cards chosen. Suggestions for making this decision:
  - Identify any cards that have been chosen 2 or more times. Then, identify any remaining cards to complete the hand through a general discussion.
  - If your team has 5 or fewer players, have each person put forward their top card. Then, identify any remaining cards to complete the hand through a general discussion.
6. Once the 5 cards have been chosen, identify one action step per card to ensure the team puts the ideas into action.

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