

Team Coaching: Are We Aiming High Enough?

Harsha Perera

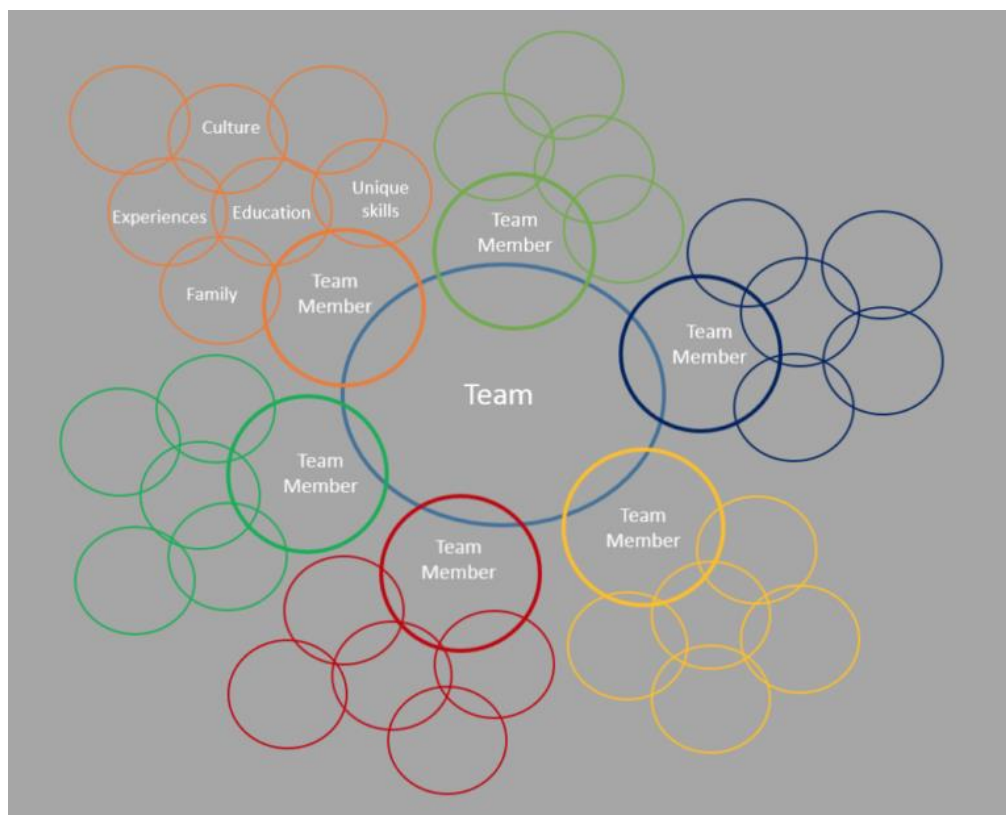
What makes high functioning teams? This a fundamental question when it comes to coaching teams. To answer this, we first need to recognize what we are dealing with at a very basic level: human beings who have come together from varied walks of life to form a relationship system. A system of interacting and interconnected experiences, families of origin, unique skills, hopes and dreams.

Significant inherent complexity is at play and all in one place—the team. It is no surprise then that high functioning teams tend to be the exception to the norm. So, what enables a high functioning team? That very much depends on what you are aiming for and the standards by which you judge it.

High Functioning Teams Defined

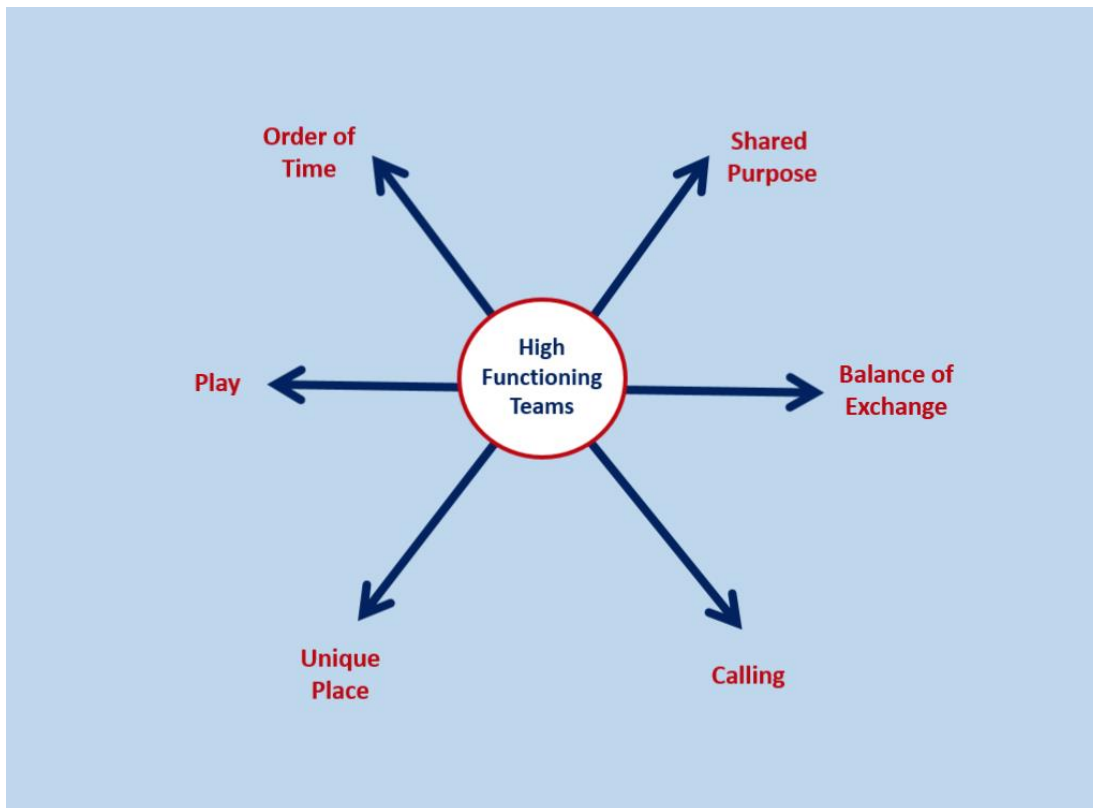
This article proposes that a high functioning team is one that allows its members to *connect with their calling* in working towards a common purpose. One that *embraces the inherent creativity* and uniqueness that defines what it means to be human. One that *acknowledges the complexity* that is created by different individuals coming together (and moving apart) over time.

Out of the above will naturally emerge all the things that are commonly desired in teams: collaboration, innovation, agility and performance.



A team is a complex relationship system

High functioning teams do not appear out of thin air, particularly in a culture that prioritizes the pursuit of singular linear targets such as growth, profit and scale to the exclusion of everything else. What enables a team to be high functioning is rather the embodiment of certain attributes at the individual level, which then ripple out to create a healthy systemic team dynamic.



A Model for Enabling High Functioning Teams

The model below identifies six interconnected attributes that work in concert together to create the essential conditions for high functioning teams to emerge. These attributes are intended to be **all simultaneously embodied** by every member of the team. The model brings together ideas from business, psychology, systemic constellations and the arts.

Order of Time

Teams typically involve roles being occupied by different individuals joining and leaving over time. The individual is transient and the role more permanent. This is particularly true in mature teams within larger organizations. Recognizing and honoring the time order of things and what came before is essential to supporting a healthy team dynamic. This also creates strong foundations for future members to build upon.

For example, a new CEO who is quick to dismiss the work of her predecessors is less likely to be able to effectively occupy her position and gain the support of the wider team. She is likely to alienate team members still secretly loyal to those departed, because the contributions of the departed have not been acknowledged and integrated.

"If I have seen further than others, it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants -Isaac Newton

Calling

I believe that as human beings each one of us has a calling—something(s) that we are each uniquely attracted to and energized by. Whether it is architecture, music, chemistry or carpentry, we will all have something.

The more that team members occupy roles that connect to their calling, the more this will support a healthy team dynamic. Members involved in their calling will naturally be more enthusiastic, dedicated and loyal.

Team systems that do not embrace calling are likely to suffer from low energy, demotivation and rigidity. Enthusiasm and agility are replaced by the need for rules and bureaucracy in order to “control” unmotivated team members.

You will have noticed that skill/competence does not feature in the model. This is because skill is really the product of having a deep interest in a particular area that compels us to delve into it further and master it. High levels of skill are really the product of calling.

“Your skill is only as great as your passion”– Phil Best, virtuoso pianist

Play

Rigidity and dispassion in teams is also very much related to *how* team members engage in what they do. Is the approach to work characterized by achievement-centered earnestness or rather curiosity and interest—play?

Calling it a “biologically programmed need,” psychiatrist and clinical researcher Professor Stuart Brown coined the term “play” to describe the childlike curiosity and zest with which we could engage in everything we do. He identifies the “apparently purposeless” nature of play as one of its defining characteristics.

Our cultural bias towards measurable linear forms of success in the form of accolades, wealth and status make the notion of play as a basis for living and working almost unfathomable to many. Yet, it is what underpins real skill. Paradoxically, when we play, the results will flow.

Combined with *Calling*, play creates the basis for the development of significant skill within teams. Without play even those of us who have found our calling can be limited in our development, which then in turn limits the team. You are probably beginning to now see how the different attributes of the model work together.

“In the long run, work does not work without play” – Prof. Stuart Brown

Unique Place

This is about embracing two closely related points:

1. Each team member brings a unique perspective to the table by virtue of their unique life journey
2. All team members have an equal right to be part of the team—everyone has a right to have their voice heard and acknowledged

Secrets, marginalized team members and non-talked about ex-colleagues are common examples of not allowing everyone their unique place. Attempts to shut down people or forget difficult events can often lead to unresolved dynamics associated with these reappearing with greater force later.

“What you exclude, you attract” – John Whittington, systemic facilitator

Shared Purpose

No matter how dedicated and skilled team members might be, they still need a shared purpose to coalesce around. A team without a shared purpose is like a ship without a rudder. And, that shared purpose needs to be wholeheartedly embraced by everyone in the team.

Lack of clarity around why the team has come together can generate systemic confusion and conflict. Personal agendas may begin to masquerade as “shared purpose,” and this is almost certainly a path to dysfunctionality.

Balance of Exchange

Passionate, dedicated and curious individuals that have come together around a common purpose must still be mindful that there is balance in giving and taking within the team. For example, a tendency to give too much can often underlie employee burnout in organizational teams.

Balance of exchange is reinforced by *Play* and *Calling* in the model. You are far less likely to give too much if you deeply connect with your work and engage in it with playful curiosity rather than rigid striving.

Final Thoughts

This model for enabling high functioning teams involves interconnected attributes that work together and reinforce each other. They are attributes that must be *simultaneously embodied* by all members of the team for maximum effect. Ignoring any one of the attributes can affect both the health of the team and those within it.

The model takes courage to embody because it involves counter-cultural shifts in our approach to work. Some may view it as slightly idealistic or asking for too much. I would challenge that view and suggest that we need to aim higher if we are really serious about making the best of each other and our unique gifts as human beings.

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Harsha Perera is an executive coach based in London. His holistic approach to coaching draws inspiration from a range of different life experiences, including: a career in private equity investing, being a part-time musician, martial arts and mindfulness practice. Harsha believes in the inherent human potential that is in all of us and supports people to make the best of themselves. Harsha offers coaching to those who dare to look beneath the surface. For more information, visit <https://executivecoachinglondon.com/team-coaching/>.