A Dale Carnegie White Paper

A Leadership Imperative:

Creating a Culture of High-Performing Teams

Dale Carnegie

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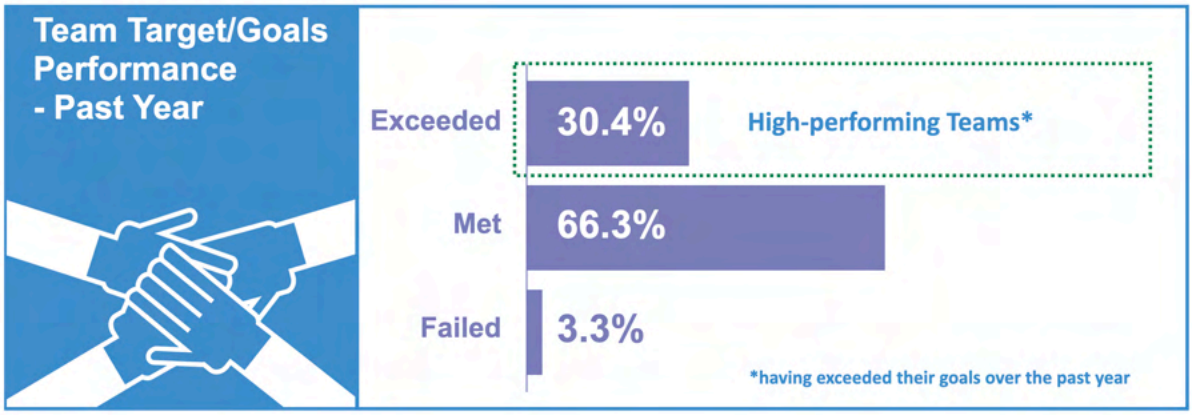
"How do teams become high-performing and maintain an elevated standard that promotes sustained business growth?" The answer to this question is one that every leader is faced with at one point or another. As leaders continue to play an indispensable role in their respective teams, ongoing efforts must consider the evolving needs of their employees. This effort includes understanding influences and perceptions of satisfaction with fellow team members and overall culture; areas which can drive productivity, growth, and innovation among others. With input from 2,650 global respondents as well as related insights from experts in the field, Dale Carnegie sought to better understand some of the drivers behind high-performing teams and what sets them apart in the workplace. In addition, we reflect on how considerations surrounding this strategic approach and cultural shift to the workplace impacts the quality of teamwork, satisfaction, and productivity.



Where do your teams stand in relation to performance goals or targets? As reflected in our research study, the reality is that while most teams (96%) acknowledged they at least met their performance goals, less than one-third of those (30%) are considered high-performers, having exceeded their goals over the past year. This discrepancy is not a product of remote technologies but instead is a reflection of an organization's teamwork processes and lived cultures. Organizations are managing a diversely mobilized workforce that faces new challenges and these challenges relate to how teams work together effectively in a flexible location model.



Inefficient organization and work processes reduce productivity, cause frustration, and contribute to poor communication and confusion. It's also true that leaders often have a significantly different (more favorable) outlook or perception than that of managers and team members regarding their team's culture or overall satisfaction of workplace aspects. The reflected disconnect between leaders and other stakeholder perspectives, expectations, and experiences are indicators of hindered performance and untapped opportunities within our organizations. Therefore, while it's a responsibility of leadership to prioritize a shared culture that drives employee satisfaction alongside positive emotional and behavioral change to achieve higher performance standards, the vast majority of teams are not exceeding their goals and setting themselves apart.

The State of Teamwork Today

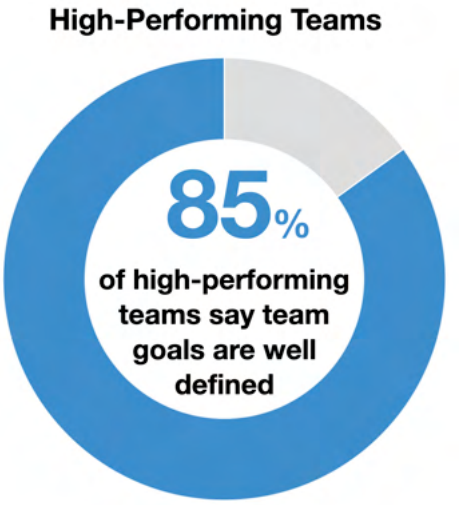
To build a top-performing team, we need to grasp how teams function and understand the factors that impact them, such as an organization's culture and brand identity. There is also overlap between the two as brand features such as professionalism or communication styles can affect culture; both are connected to the corporate ethos as a primary force behind collective employee and leadership behavior. These behaviors can be driven by a combination of factors which include emotional drivers, personal or organizational values, and the influences of others; factors that include rules, regulations, trends, and work process patterns that impact how teams engage with each other. Given the multiple influences on team performance and overall behavioral impacts within our organizations, implementing steps for realized improvement (such as efficient and friendly process patterns) amidst an evolving workplace in the context of internal and external change can be challenging to adapt and requires practice and training.

In the dynamic business environment where the increased speed of change is powered by technology, one area that cannot be forgotten or overlooked internally is that of “social capital;” the presence of networks, relationships, shared norms, and trust among individuals, teams, and leaders. This requires everyone in the organization, including senior leaders, human resources (HR) leaders, senior management, and employees, to not only understand collective organizational drivers, but to also understand each other’s roles, values, and perspectives to foster empathy, mutual accountability, and trust. Ultimately, business leaders need to acknowledge that norms affecting team performance will develop (and likely have) within your organization based on the lived experiences of those involved and that these norms are often not aligned with what leaders believe them to be. As such, without an internal understanding and commitment to team influences, expecting teams within our organizations to become high-performers passively, at best means that you can expect much of the same. Proactive organizations understand that improvement requires an active action plan for leaders and their teams to master a teamwork culture that fosters excellent performance through ongoing training and education.



How to Cultivate a Culture for High-Performing Teams

Consider that when teams are made up of quality talent with complementary skills, performance can still suffer without a culture where that talent works closely and effectively with one another. As high-performing teams offer a competitive advantage and less than one-third of teams are reported to function at this level, it’s clear that organizations are losing sight of how to implement best practices that create high-performers across a hybrid workforce. Even the most talented teams must ask: “What key steps do we need to focus on to propel performance and teamwork to the next level?” Driven by insights from our global research study, Dale Carnegie identified seven essential factors that organizations must address to raise their diverse teams to the next level.



1 “High-performance” starts with defining a clear purpose and vision.

For a team to feel effective and relevant, its members need to have well-defined goals. Providing a clear statement of the overall vision and mission is essential and within this, team members need to see how their individual skillsets and tasks contribute to the big picture.

What Can Leaders Do?

Once long-term team goals are established, breaking them down into a series of milestones allows the team to chart its progress (successes or failures), engage in targeted discussion, and make any necessary changes to improve performance. Creating smaller milestones or checkpoints also demands the creation of metrics and analysis for each, allowing team members to consider and measure their individual contribution in relation to the goals. Training and education on how to implement long-term goals and incorporate milestones, allow those priorities to be experienced by teams and their members through effective leadership examples.

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

In the absence of clearly defined goals, members lack a clear path for utilizing their talents and do not have boundaries for pooling those talents toward achieving a common result. An organization's purpose and vision can provide the overall framework for weighing options, making trade-offs, prioritizing, localized decision-making, and enhancing progress. In addition, when teams and individuals have a clear understanding of their progress and how it contributes to the big picture, they have more accountability, autonomy, and freedom toward innovative solutions.

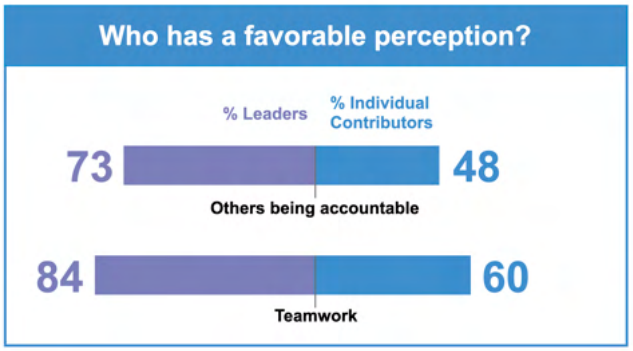
2 Focus on closing perception gaps regarding productivity, satisfaction, and culture between leaders and employees.

A Microsoft Work Trend Index report revealed that while 87 percent of remote and in-person employees feel productive at work, few CEOs (12 percent) believe this to be true.[1] Dale Carnegie's research supports the perception gap as leaders are significantly more likely to respond favorably to questions surrounding team culture than managers and team members.

What Can Leaders Do?

Closing perception gaps by understanding how individual contributors experience your organization is crucial for successful teamwork. Without a shared perception across the organization, leaders and employees start from very different viewpoints, have varying or opposing priorities, and eventually lose trust and respect for one another. In lieu of assumptions, before acting, leaders must strive to understand the perspectives of their employees as a cultural benchmark to establish what behaviors and emotions are already present among their teams.

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

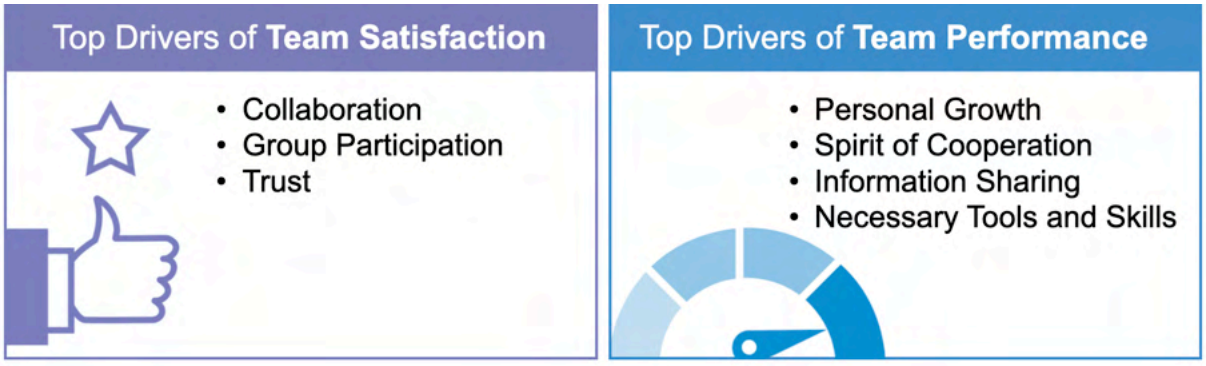


Perception gaps inevitably lead to problems as individuals engage with very different understandings of shared experiences. For example, the Dale Carnegie study reflected that while leaders felt their culture was very good or better with regards to others being accountable as well as teamwork (73 percent and 84 percent respectively), team member responses were significantly different at only 48 percent and 60 percent. This gap can be an issue as leaders, reflecting a more favorable view in many areas impactful to team outcomes, can overlook valuable opportunities for improvement and neglect the true needs of the team.

3 Successfully cultivating high-performing teams includes understanding what makes a team satisfied.

Successfully cultivating high-performing teams includes understanding what makes a team satisfied. Employee satisfaction and performance are not synonymous, but most leaders today understand these factors are linked. The aspects that reflect team satisfaction are distinct from what makes a high-performing team, but high-performing teams often include the drivers of satisfaction. According to Dale Carnegie's primary research, 89 percent of high-performing teams are very or extremely satisfied with their team versus 65 percent of non-high-performers. When asked about their top drivers for overall team satisfaction, employees named the ability to collaborate, group participation, and trust, while the biggest differences separating high-performing teams from others on overall team performance include opportunities for personal growth, a spirit of cooperation, and the ability to share ideas.

[1] Microsoft WorkLab, "Hybrid Work Is Just Work. Are We Doing It Wrong?" accessed September 21, 2023, https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work-is-just-work



What Can Leaders Do?

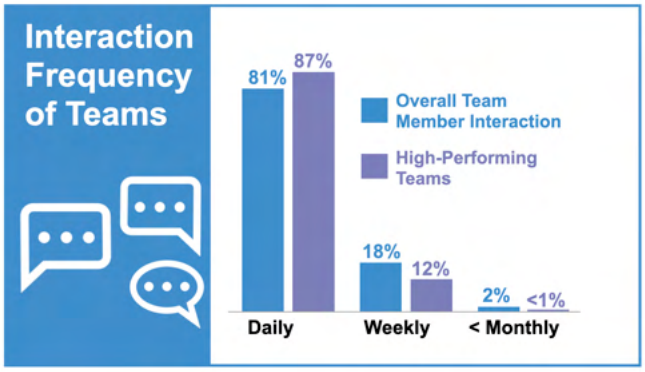
It is critical that team leaders engender both confidence and trust in their staff if they want to build satisfied teams. This isn't a one-time event but a continuous cultural requirement that empowers teams with opportunities to expand their knowledge and skills, technologies, and work processes that enable ongoing and widespread collaboration alongside a culture that celebrates collective teamwork.

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

Dale Carnegie's research found that members of high-performing teams are happy in environments committed to constructive feedback, where career growth and the use of individual skills and talents are encouraged and they are empowered to make decisions. Improving satisfaction does not happen by accident and an effective balance requires a focused effort on behalf of leadership as innovative concepts flourish with constructive feedback and healthy conflict. Yet, too much criticism can shut down idea generation.[2] Therefore, it's important for everyone, especially leaders, to be trained in effective inter-personal approaches that enhance team satisfaction in an effort to promote high-performance.

4 High-performing teams communicate effectively.

Establishing a clear purpose and vision is essential, but to foster high-performing teams, you must also communicate those aspects of the organization's brand with a collective understanding. Simply communicating in itself is not sufficient as doing so only becomes effective and useful when it's understood in the manner in which it was intended. A collective understanding through effective communication can help a team determine fit within the purpose and vision and provide extra motivation when heavy workloads or high-stress levels exist, ultimately supporting resiliency.[3]



[2] Jill Perry-Smith and Pier Vittorio Mannucci, "From Creativity to Innovation: The Social Network Drivers of the Four Phases of the Idea Journey," Academy of Management Review 42, no. 1 (2017): 53–79, doi: 10.5465/amr.2014.0462.

[3] "Developing a Resilient Workforce," Dale Carnegie & Associates, accessed September 2023, https://www.dalecarnegie.com/en/resources/developing-a-resilient-workforce

What Can Leaders Do?

Effective communication means providing clarity and transparency with the audience in mind, along with the appropriate tone, style, frequency, and channel. Encouraging open and two-way communication to instigate valuable feedback, mutual understanding, and ongoing collaboration is another key. However, leaders should learn to recognize that the richness of feedback will be influenced by the current organizational culture.

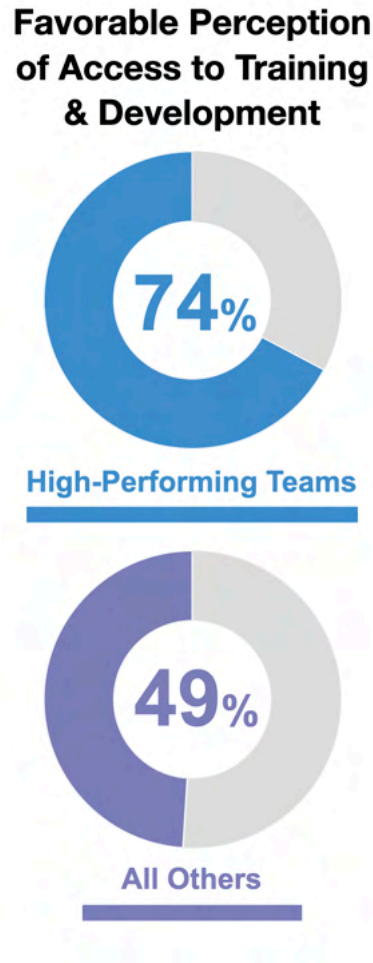
As part of the Dale Carnegie study, “Poor or no communication,” “lack of listening,” and “lack of collaboration” were frequently cited as reasons for dissatisfaction with teams and their leaders. This is alarming as 81 percent of individual contributors state they interact with their team members on a daily basis, and daily interaction is a hallmark of high-performing teams. Effective communication becomes all the more important when considering that individual contributors are also significantly less likely than leadership to want in-person meetings; highlighting the need to develop quality communication across various channels that promotes ease of access and adoption, doesn’t detract from productivity, and aligns with deadlines, metrics, and goals.

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

Highly successful teams in the workplace are significantly more likely to share ideas with one another, get questions answered through access to company provided technology platforms, and embrace collaborative communication software such as Slack and Zoom. Tailoring the level and channel of communication to meet employees where they are, encourages team member satisfaction and high-performance as it allows for a unique balance of managerial guidance with team members’ autonomy.

5 Adaptability is more than a buzzword for high-performing teams. It’s an individual mindset, shared culture, and an action plan.

Team success is enabled when we adapt to new work models and align work culture to business challenges; a concept easier said than done. Adaptation is a commitment that requires teams to embrace lifelong learning to tackle an ever-changing professional environment, such as tactics for successful fractional work or role-sharing, which are making their way into mainstream work life. Most importantly, those learning opportunities must be visible and easy to access. In fact, 74 percent of teams who exceeded goals reported favorably regarding access to training and development materials compared to 49 percent of those who either met or failed to meet their objectives. In addition, the greatest statistical difference setting high-performing teams apart across several workplace aspects was having the opportunity for personal development and growth. Both examples support why adaptation as discussed here is a very important component of high-performing teams.



What Can Leaders Do?

A commitment to ongoing development opportunities must be a part of the organizational culture. Empowerment is key. Team members need to feel they have the necessary skill sets and permission to act and contribute in a productive way for their work product and colleagues. This need is also reflected in the sentiment of leaders who identified problem-solving capabilities and decision-making among the top three selections (the third was effective communication) as a way to improve their team’s productivity.

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

Access to training and development empowers teams to improve their readiness for execution and performance, enhance their understanding of internal operations, and build confidence. Dale Carnegie Training's Employee Engagement Study[4] found that confidence was the emotion that most empowered employees value, increasing their performance, engagement, and creativity. Confidence, trust, empowerment, and feeling valued all impart a sense of psychological safety to employees, allowing them to be more effective in their roles.

6 Collaboration and cross-functionality are essential (and look different from the past).

Successful teams have a healthy attitude toward one another, ideally understanding each other's role and how it contributes to the overall vision. This connectedness allows for better utilization and consideration of each team member's skills and abilities in the pursuit of team success.

What Can Leaders Do?

Accountability plays an important role here, ensuring team members can rely on one another to address tasks and provide support without resistance. Accountability comes when there is a clear plan and common purpose. Leaders of high-performing teams foster an environment of constructive feedback, mutual recognition (including among team members), and growth where team members can reveal concerns about their own (and others') workloads. To do so effectively also calls for diversity across team skills and priorities.

> **"If you have a common purpose and an environment in which people want to help others succeed, the problems will be fixed quickly."**
>
> -Alan Mulally, Former President and CEO of Ford Motor Company

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

Today, most work with the same group of individuals daily and report to the same manager. In fact, according to our research, as the frequency of interaction between team members dropped, so did the chance they would be a high-performing team. As more flexible models like fractional work, role-sharing, and matrixed teams (where individuals report to different managers) are taking hold, the importance of quality collaboration and cross-functionality will only increase in importance. Teams that can create agile cooperative models, will have a smoother transition into new ways of working going forward and supporting cross-functionality can help teams that are simply meeting goals become high-performers. In this regard, it's important to reassess culture and ask, "Does our team culture offer people the space and opportunity to grow to their fullest potential within the team—no matter where they're working from?" If it doesn't, we need to redefine how our teams interact in order to succeed in a hybrid world.

7 Technology is not a replacement for culture.

Amidst headlines that tout the race for digital transformation, it's easy for organizations to fall prey to myths that technology is the solution to every workplace challenge. With rising tools like generative AI,[5] natural language processing (NLP), virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR), work environments are becoming more automated and technologically dependent. When we commit to widespread digital transformation, especially in hybrid work environments, it's more important than ever to remember that technology has a supportive role in creating and empowering high-performing teams, not a primary one.

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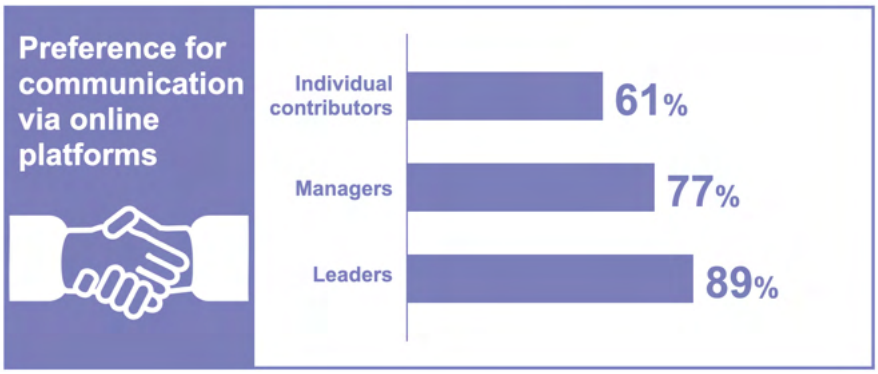
[4] "Engaging & Retaining Empowered Employees," Dale Carnegie & Associates, accessed September 2023, https://www.dalecarnegie.com/en/resources/engaging-retaining-empowered-employees.

[5] "Preparing People for Success with Generative AI," Dale Carnegie & Associates, accessed September 2023. https://www.dalecarnegie.com/en/resources/preparing-people-for-success-with-generative-ai.



What Can Leaders Do?

Technology has become table stakes for driving efficiency at scale, so it's vital to foster technological skills alongside the human skills that support strategy, culture, collaboration, and ongoing innovation. However, tech's role is supportive, not a replacement for culture and team dynamics.[6] Organizations cannot simply adopt the technology to enable hybrid work and expect it to craft a teamwork culture or solve team dynamics. Afterall, tech is neutral and without a strategy, there's an equal chance that it can drive frustration resulting in missed opportunities and inefficiencies.

There is also a marked divide between how training and development of teams connect with the overall vision of technology transformations. For example, according to our research, while favorable toward the speed of tech communication, individual contributors are less likely to prefer methods like Slack and Zoom than managers and leaders (managers are also less likely than leaders). Yet, while preferring these communication methods more than the others, leaders are also almost twice as likely to claim they have trouble using technology. This discrepancy in perception versus utilization between team members and their leaders is a recipe for frustration, poor communication, and hampered teamwork.

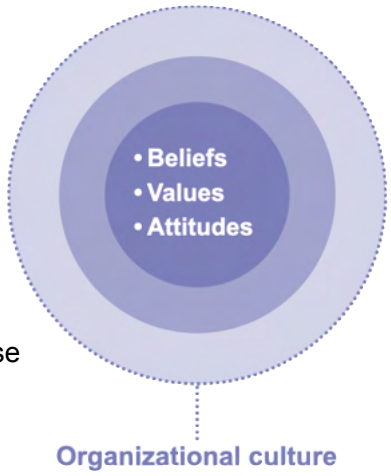
Further, remote work technology can increase team productivity and satisfaction, but this isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. When asked about the reasons for dissatisfaction with team leaders, one respondent in our study said, "How can they lead when they work from home and others are on-site?" Concerning practical and tangible processes that must happen onsite as well as in remote locations, employees are more likely to respect leaders and managers who take a hands-on approach to cultivating and managing their teams. It's vital to consider when and where new methodologies and technologies help or hinder that process and to understand the impacts will also continue to change as technologies and priorities evolve.

What Does This Look Like in the Workplace?

A technology strategy tied to the company's vision, mission, and ethos ensures there are tactics and activities spelled out for employees that contribute and support broader organizational goals in line with the desired culture. This not only requires detailed and ongoing training opportunities that consider the implementation of new technology and its fit within your organization, but also includes opportunities to focus on continuous cultural improvement overall.

A Growth Culture Has the Power to Make High-Performance Intrinsic to Teams

At its core, organizational culture can be defined as a company's beliefs, values, and attitudes that impact how individuals experience our organization and influence the behaviors of team members. At the foundational level, this means culture is the key to effective teamwork and today's hybrid work landscape has created both challenges and opportunities for leaders. Remote work can enhance productivity and satisfaction but cannot come at the price of social capital or work-life balance. Organizations that prioritize a culture of empathy, accountability, trust, and supportive technology will maintain a competitive edge and harness the diverse perspectives necessary for innovation and the creation of high-performing teams.



[6] "Beyond Technology," Dale Carnegie & Associates, accessed September 2023. https://www.dalecarnegie.com/en/resources/beyond-technology.

Building high-performing teams requires ongoing effort from leaders, managers, and team members alike. Leaders must champion adaptability, engagement, and a culture that values individual and collective achievement in an ever-evolving business landscape. Effective team leadership involves transparent communication, clear goals, and cross-functional collaboration, creating adaptability and psychological safety. Within this setting, individuals are able to commit to accountability and transparency in their teamwork culture, founded on shared values, continuous learning, and meaningful communication.

> **People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing.**
>
> -Dale Carnegie

About the author

Joe Hart, President & CEO, Dale Carnegie

Becoming CEO of Dale Carnegie in 2015, Joe has continued to lead the effort that has helped thousands of organizations and millions of individuals take command—of their businesses, their careers, and their futures.

Joe started his career as a practicing attorney at two prominent firms where he focused on contract-related litigation. In 1998, he joined The Taubman Company, developer of regional shopping centers, becoming Development Director. In 2000, he followed a dream and started a venture and angel-backed e-Learning company called InfoAlly. In 2005, Joe sold InfoAlly and went on to co-found and become president of AssetHealth.

To learn more about how Dale Carnegie Training can help you define and develop a high-performing team culture in your people and organization, contact your local Dale Carnegie office today. Please go to: **Dalecarnegie.com/office**.

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