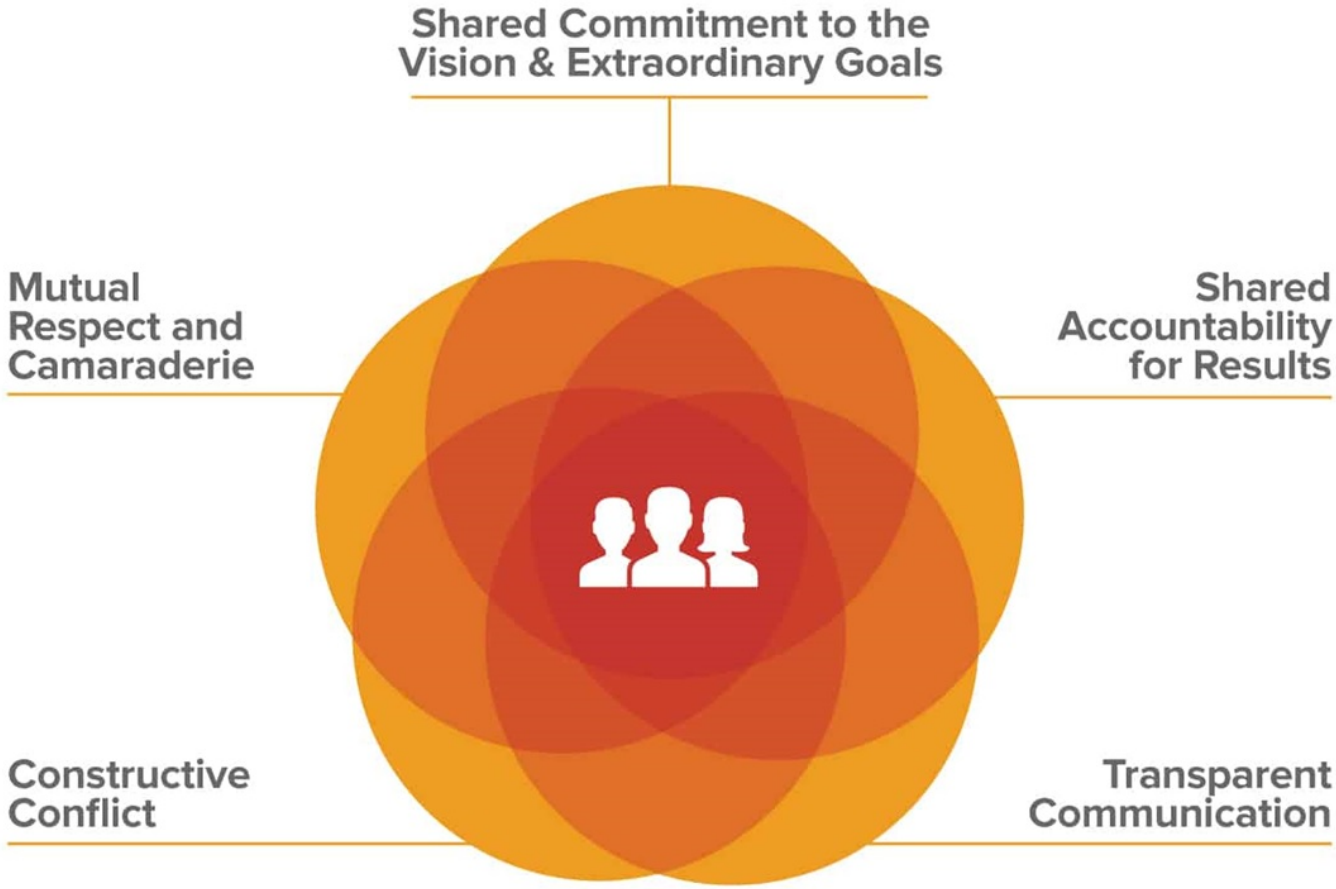
Understanding the Leader’s Role in Creating High Performing Teams





“Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and rare.”

This is how Patrick Lencioni began his book, Five Dysfunctions of a Team, in 2002. Seventeen years later, this is a still a provocative statement worthy of more discussion.

In over four decades of consulting at Vantage Leadership, we have found that high performing teams are indeed rare. Many teams under-perform or are average, at best, and while there is a myriad of reasons for this, the role of the team leader in creating high performing teams is worth exploring.

Vantage's preliminary research conducted across 50 executive teams that have used our High-Performance Team survey suggest that team performance is highly correlated to leader performance, such that when team leaders are more effective, his/her teams are more effective.

The reality of team improvement, however, is generally not that simple: saying that team improvement comes about only because of the leader's performance tempts an error of attribution. It is more likely that improvement comes from an interaction of the two where each leverages the strength other.

While both the team and the team leader combine to drive high-performance, the leader's influence on setting the tone for the team's interactions is such that we retain a focus on the leader as the catalyst for improvement.

Out of the five dimensions of High Performing Teams (see model), Mutual Respect and Camaraderie is one of the most critical factors contributing to the leader's success, according to our research. Essentially, this dimension asks: does the team leader demonstrate respect and genuineness, and hold people accountable to a high level of collaboration?

Team leaders who score high on Mutual Respect and Camaraderie typically develop followership by building trust, respect and loyalty. They allow for and promote having tough conversations and challenging debates on business matters, and they say what they intend and act on their word.

These leaders make conflict productive and this positively impacts team behavior and collaboration. They take other's opinions into consideration and weigh what others say carefully.

Perhaps most importantly, they don't exercise positional authority – when a team and its leader are at their best, the leader becomes part of the team and everyone's opinions are given a full hearing.

In our experience, this isn't common as it can be hard for leaders to give up control and see beyond themselves in this way. It may not be surprising, then, that Mutual Respect and Camaraderie is also the most commonly reported developmental area for *team leaders.*

Taking it a step further, our research indicates that engaging in Transparent Communication is the most commonly reported developmental area for *team members.* This could reinforce the assertion that if the team leader does not establish an environment of trust, mutual respect and camaraderie wherein members feel comfortable being candid and open with one another, the entire team is impacted.

What the Best Teams Do

We have found that the best teams are continually being coached – by the leader and by each other. The leader engages the team, inspires it to action and holds it accountable to evolve, learn and grow. Scoring high on Mutual Respect and Camaraderie allows for this coaching to occur in a safe environment.

In "Senior Leadership Teams: What it Takes to Make them Great" (2008), Wageman et al. studied 120 executive teams and found that every CEO in a sample had a strong external focus, attending to matters in the broader environment. However, the leaders of *outstanding teams* had an equally strong internal focus on how the team coaches and develops itself.

In sum, one of the most critical elements of building a high performing team is the

interaction between the leader and team members such that the leader becomes a facilitator for team development and not the sole driver of the team working together at a higher level.

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