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MAKE YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM GREAT
BY REN WIEBE & JONATHAN KIRSCHNER

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AIIR Consulting creates business results for organizations by increasing the performance of leaders. AIIR's services include Executive Coaching, Team Effectiveness, Leadership Pipeline Development, Talent & Culture Advisory, and Talent Development Technologies. To learn more, visit us at
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Leadership teams address complex issues, make quick decisions, and execute plans through labyrinthine organizational networks. Together, the individuals that make up these teams bring a diversity of understanding, skills, and perspective to bear on today's most pressing organizational challenges. Harnessing the potential of these teams is particularly important and rewarding. Academic research shows that well-functioning teams almost always make better decisions than individuals, based on their collective intelligence.[1] Industry research shows that high performance teams achieved huge improvements in areas including customer experience, employee satisfaction, and operational performance often in less than a year.[2] And yet, we know that the promise of leadership teams is largely unfulfilled! So many leadership teams are mediocre at best, and dysfunctional at worst. The hard costs and opportunity costs of this unfulfilled potential are staggering.

What Can Go Wrong?

The team coaches at AIIR Consulting have seen the full range of leadership team dysfunction, as well as its direct costs and consequences. In our work with teams, we often challenge leadership teams to do the simple math on the salary costs of their meetings. Between standing operational meetings and ad hoc meetings, many leadership teams spend over 200 hours per year in meetings. Most teams are shocked to discover that the salary cost alone of these meetings can rise to over $500K per year. There are also substantial opportunity costs of team dysfunctions, resulting from bad decisions, poor execution, and low engagement.

A few recurring patterns predominate in the lower-performing leadership teams we coach. We have found that under-performing teams fall into one of three main categories.

Recently, we worked with the top team of a major infrastructure network provider. The team was led by a very strong, hard-working,

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1 Are Two Heads Better Than One?: An Experimental Analysis of Group V.S. Individual Decision Making, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 7909, A. S. Blinder and J. Morgan, 200, pg. 46, 47.

2 Marc Hanlan, High Performance Teams: How to Make them Work (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Press, 2004)

ASSESSMENT INSIGHT IMPLEMENTATION REINFORCEMENT

and decisive President. He set aggressive growth targets, invested heavily in acquiring top talent, and regularly challenged his team to deliver on their accountabilities to customers, the board, and shareholders. They had clear team roles and specific priorities. Meetings were highly structured around a clear agenda. Many decisions were made and actions initiated. And yet with all this talent, decision-making and action, financial results consistently fell short of plans. When our coaches observed team meetings and dug a little deeper, the underlying issues became clear. Team members postured and competed for the President's attention. What we heard from members was that back-room conflicts were rife and turf protection the norm. Leadership team members brought these dynamics back to their own teams as well, and engagement surveys kept showing deep dissatisfaction among rank-and-file

employees. Key leaders repeatedly left to join the competition,creating constant turnover challenges. The leadership team at this company is an example of what we at AIIR call a **Driven Team**. Productivity and effort on a driven team is high, but a toxic team culture diminishes the impact of work efforts.

A second leadership team type is the **Comfortable Team**. We encountered an example of this in one business unit at a major telecom carrier. The leadership team had vast experience and deep loyalty to one another and their leader. They genuinely seemed to like and care about each other. In team meetings, trust in the room was high, and there was obvious respect in their communication. Individual members listened to each other and were generally supportive and collaborative. And yet, with all this goodwill at the table,

TEAM CULTURE

TEAM PRODUCTIVITY

	Driven Team	High Performing Team	high
	Frozen Team	Comfortable Team	low

weak   strong
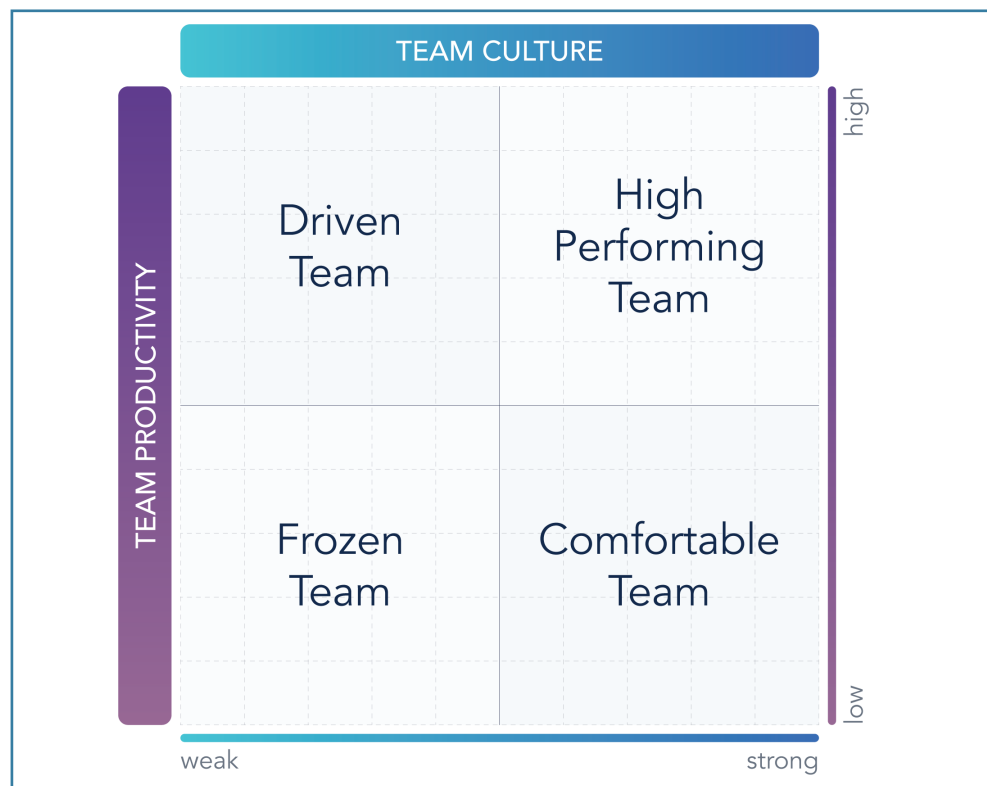
financial results and customer satisfaction ranked in the bottom quartile in comparison to the competition. The team was averse to change, conservative in its goals, and slow to act on performance problems. Members did little to connect with other business units and often let team discussions drag on forever. Because team members were unclear about who had the right to make what kinds of decisions, few members took the initiative to push for innovation. In a comfortable team, team culture is very positive, but the lack of productivity leads to substandard performance.

The third type of leadership team is truly stuck in the mud: this is the **Frozen Team**. Meetings in a frozen team are little more than individual reporting updates that give minimal evidence of business success and leave no room for fun. Team members rarely engage in debate in these meetings, and often lack clarity about individual roles, collective goals, and team purpose. Difficult decisions are routinely put off, making meetings fundamentally unproductive. People retreat quickly to their offices and operate autonomously. Absenteeism in these organizations is significant and the entire mood seems defeated and disengaged. A frozen team lacks both the productivity and the culture needed to collaborate in effective ways. Imagine what it's like for the members of such a team to wake up every morning and think about the day ahead.

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What Great Looks Like

This year, AIIR Consulting embarked on an ambitious research program to support the redesign of our Team Effectiveness solutions. As a first step, we produced a detailed study on the unique characteristics of high-performing leadership teams. We consolidated our experience, looked at the literature on teams, and surveyed customers and team coaches to determine what Great leadership teams look like. Based on a wide range of research articles and team assessment tools, we created a survey to identify the characteristics of such teams. Over fifty participants responded to both quantitative and qualitative questions, giving us a clear picture of the ideal leadership team.

Our research shows that high-performing leadership teams are both highly productive and have a strong team culture. It further clarifies the key attributes and behaviors that lead to each of these characteristics. In fact, it demonstrates a remarkably even split between the importance of behaviors that contribute to high productivity and those that create a strong team culture. Based on our research, AIIR Consulting defines a High Performing Leadership Team in this way: A leadership team that maximizes its potential and fulfills its mandate by generating high productivity and nurturing a strong culture.

Team Productivity

High-performing leadership teams have three characteristics that are crucial for Team Productivity:

1. **A Clear Sense of Team Purpose:** AIIR research shows that leadership teams are most productive when they know clearly why they exist and what the organization needs them to do. Productive teams create shared objectives that they drive together. They are empowered by the rest of the organization to act on their mandate.

2. **Shared Understanding of Roles and Accountabilities:** Productive leadership teams spend time clarifying individual roles and accountabilities within the team. Each member understands his or her role and how it relates to others'. Team members also know who their stakeholders are and spend time nurturing those relationships. The team leader is supportive, yet rigorous in holding team members accountable for results.

3. **Effective Processes for Making Decisions:** Productive teams make effective decisions. They have the right conversations and use efficient processes to make decisions. Once made, members align themselves to support and execute those decisions. These teams are seldom complacent and are prepared to make tough choices in order to produce the change needed to increase organizational success.

Team Culture

High-performing teams also develop a strong Team Culture by fostering:

1. **Care and Support for Each Other** AIIR research shows that people in high-performing teams are willing to ask for help, and colleagues step up to provide it. Team members have empathy for the needs and concerns of their peers. When mistakes happen, they don't point fingers of blame, but instead look for ways to resolve problems and learn from setbacks.

2. **An Environment of High Trust:** Team members demonstrate trust in one another through their personal interactions, and in particular through open and honest communication. They raise uncomfortable issues and reveal their vulnerabilities openly, with the intention of making things better. The team leader plays a key role by modeling this behavior, which in turn allows others to follow suit.

3. **Effective and Respectful Communication:** Strong team culture is created through effective communication. The team explores opposing viewpoints about important issues in productive ways. While debate can be animated, it is seldom personal. Members bring forward clear points of view but also listen to the perspectives of others with curiosity. They demonstrate respect for one another in the way they address each other.

Creating a High-Performing Team

We have seen that leadership teams often fail to focus sufficient attention on Team Effectiveness. Instead, they focus their time and attention on running the business. "Team building" activities often focus on having fun and doing things to promote social connection. Little time is devoted to having the crucial conversations that would improve Team Productivity and Team Culture in concrete ways. Other teams hold high-stakes meetings where people are asked to voice grievances; often, without proper planning or facilitation. These meetings consistently do more harm than good. Short-term offsite approaches often deliver short-term results.

AIIR Consulting's Team Effectiveness suite offers clients a unique combination of coaching and content. We use an integrated, programmatic approach to diagnose the root causes of underperformance and proven processes to enhance team effectiveness. We believe that while each team has unique needs, there are core factors that consistently lead to high team performance. Our multi-step, modular approach blends simplicity with cutting edge Team Zone™ technology to bolster results. AIIR Consulting's global team has the experience and sector diversity to connect quickly with leadership teams and drive the kinds of discussions that lead to sustained growth. Results are measured before, during, and after AIIR TE engagements.

AIIR Consulting's work and research demonstrates that a leadership team's productivity and culture have a direct impact on its ability to execute business strategy. Leadership teams achieve measurably better results when members invest focused time to align around their central mandate, understand one another, enhance their productivity, clarify operating principles, and create an environment of trust and communication.

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