In today’s business landscape, the acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) is used to describe the environment that encompasses the majority of today’s fast-paced organizations. Leaders are continually faced with complex challenges and may have no clear-cut answers or precedent to assist them in finding solutions—instead, leaders are turning to their teams to harness the collective wisdom of many minds.

In light of this, organizations can no longer ask if we need teams; instead they must ask how to more quickly and effectively develop high-performance teams, as they are the engine that runs the successful delivery of results.

Never before has the need for collaboration and teamwork been more critical. Harnessing and leveraging the power of teams is a means of differentiating ourselves as an organization and increasing our competitive advantage as we navigate this challenging environment.

When there is a complicated problem to resolve or an ineffective, outdated process slowing things down, a team’s combined know-how and variety of perspectives often lead to innovative ideas and more thorough, higher-quality solutions. When performing at its best, the collective effort and mutual accountability offered by a team will create the efficiencies we need to get more done in less time, whether it’s delivery of a product, completion of a project, or a response to a customer need.

In a VUCA environment teams must perform at exceptional levels, in less time, with better solutions. The hallmark of this global economy is working across boundaries and borders, which requires the diversity of thinking, experience, culture, and skills to drive the innovation that we need. This current state provides a golden opportunity for teams to flourish and add value at all levels of the organization.
Jeanne Meister, coauthor of The 2020 Workplace: How Innovative Companies Attract, Develop, and Keep Tomorrow’s Employees Today, predicts organizations will increasingly focus their attention toward teams, even to the point of hiring and training teams as a unit to leverage the effectiveness of coherent work groups. However, we are still asking the question, do teams really add up to more than the sum of their parts?

The answer, most often, is yes. But simply bringing a diverse group of individuals together, hoping they will figure out how to work together in order to achieve an agreed-upon outcome, isn’t the answer. The primary reasons teams fail are as well documented as the characteristics that make a high-performance team successful, and the last ten years have seen significant growth in the areas of team coaching, team building, and team productivity workshops. Cultural differences, conflict, power, trust, personality differences, and unwillingness to move from self-interest to shared interest are all among the obstacles teams face that ultimately keep them from achieving a level of high performance.

Yet for all of these options and approaches, too many teams still struggle—and their organizations are losing out. While proposed solutions are often designed to address the personality clashes, build collegiality and trust, and help teams get the most from their diversity, they frequently fail to make a measurable, lasting impact on the team’s actual performance or help them achieve the desired business goals.

Many of these activities “make us feel good,” says Margaret Neale, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business. “What they don’t do is improve team performance.” In fact, as a survey of 1,000 employees in the UK revealed, they often “only succeed in leaving staff feeling more awkward about dealing with their colleagues.”

Understanding the mechanics and dynamics of teamwork has never been easy. However, a simple and practical framework incorporating proven processes and effective team practices has emerged from many years of research and experience. Applying this methodology enables teams to achieve shorter learning curves, deliver higher-quality results, and increase the satisfaction of working together.

The Team Performance Process is a systematic framework that gives people tools and best practices that work well with today’s younger knowledge workers as well as with more senior leaders who have a number of years of experience with many types of teams. At the heart of this methodology is the acronym PERFORMS, which identifies the characteristics of all high-performance teams regardless of the type of team. This validated set of characteristics allows any team to benchmark itself against those characteristics and identify the gaps that need to be addressed. From this point, the team can then continue on the journey toward high performance.
Once the team members know what a high-performance team is and what needs to occur in order for them to get there, step one is to agree on how they are going to work together to achieve their common purpose. Clearly agreeing on that Purpose and what it looks like in action is the initial step in achieving high performance. Often teams take for granted that all members agree on what the team is supposed to accomplish, why they need to do it, and who they do it for. Many times, this information is implicit but never agreed upon; if you ask all seven members of the team what the purpose of the team is, you will get seven different responses. And a lack of clarity and alignment about Purpose can lead to conflict.

In step two, once Purpose is identified, it is up to the team to reach agreement on the values and norms that will guide their behavior whether in a team meeting or working interdependently to achieve their purpose. The need to identify clear goals and individual roles based on the Purpose and Values will then be the guide for day-to-day decision making, communication, and accountability. These three elements will then be distilled into agreed-upon best practices that will enable the team to more effectively and efficiently accomplish the purpose. In summary, all the work done by the team needs to serve Purpose and Goals. If team members are spending a lot of time in busy-work activities that aren’t related to Purpose and Goals, then they can be redirected through a set of agreements called a Team Charter, the purpose of which is to document how the team will work together.

Steps Three and Four of this dynamic process are to diagnose the stage of development of the team based on the two key variables of Morale and Productivity and then determine the appropriate leadership behaviors and actions that match what the team needs in order to progress through the stages. Understanding the characteristics and needs of each stage of development helps everyone on the team understand that what they are going through is a natural part of the progression toward high performance and provides a road map to accelerate the learning curve. Knowing the leadership behaviors that are suited for each stage makes understanding the complexity of the team’s journey much less daunting. As the team progresses through the stages, the leadership role becomes shared among the team members and the focus that began with individuals concerned about me transitions to a team focused on we.
About the Author

Lael Good is a skilled speaker and facilitator who understands both the people and business aspects of today’s organizations. Her capabilities in and knowledge of organization development and instructional design complement her natural ability to influence and involve people in solving their own problems.

As the Director of Consulting Services for the EMEA region, Lael has extensive intercultural knowledge and skills through her work and travel experience in Western and Eastern Europe, Central and Latin America, Africa, China, India, and the Middle East.

Lael is a coauthor of Ken Blanchard’s Leading at a Higher Level and of two other Blanchard programs, Situational Team Leadership with Don Carew and Eunice Parisi-Carew, and The Leadership Bridge: SLII and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator with Tom Hill and Ken Blanchard. Lael is an expert on the dynamics of people working together and high-performance teamwork.

The needs identified in Steps Three and Four then become the primary means for creating the strategies and actions necessary for progress that make up Step Five. During the evolution of this team, the levels of productivity and morale have shifted, depending on the stage; the team dynamics also play an integral part of the strategies developed in Step Five. These strategies need to be revisited and updated as the team progresses, providing a purposeful set of actions that move the team’s performance to the highest level. This framework provides a structure to move a group of disparate individuals to a disciplined and focused high-performance team.

In summary, it is important to remember that teams are trust-based systems, not compliance-based systems, so the only way to move a team from launch to high performance is to pay as much attention to the elements in this five-step process as to the business imperatives of the organization. A high-performance team does not just happen—it is built through intentional practices and attention to the needs at each stage. The magic of working with teams is that creating a high-performance team is both an art and a science: the science is the framework and structure of the process and the art is the individual members who make up the team, which is why no team is ever exactly like another. Love the journey!