How do you change behaviors in an organization to accelerate performance?
A three-pronged approach targeting all levels of the organization
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Introduction

A high performing organization is the Holy Grail. Seventy-nine percent of executives rate performance management as a top priority, an organization where team members, team leaders, and organizational leaders run like a finely tuned engine in a high-performance sports car. But how do you best tune the behaviors, habits, and actions to accelerate performance? Organizational culture defines the values and behaviors that shape how an organization turns strategy into operational reality. Additionally, adopting a performance management approach that encourages action, reinforces appropriate behaviors, and enables honest dialogue at all levels, can positively reinforce the organization’s culture. So how does an organization change behaviors to accelerate performance? It begins with a three-pronged approach, affecting all levels of the organization—team leaders, team members, and organizational leaders.
Team leaders – ‘the ground level’

For many organizations interested in having a culture inclusive of ongoing performance coaching, the journey begins with team leaders – the ‘ground-level’ leaders closest to team members’ work.

Team leaders drive the notion of ongoing improvement by looking at individual and team performance not as an annual administrative task, but as a part of their daily rhythm, much like the coach of an athletic team who consistently provides real-time coaching to their athletes. These team leaders understand the need to set clear goals and expectations of their teams, to revisit them frequently, and to allow their teams the autonomy to work against them. They understand the importance of recognizing great performance and addressing poor performance in real time, when candid conversations have the greatest impact for team members. Finally, team leaders who operate as performance coaches make it their job to know their team members’ interests, improvement areas, and career goals and they offer team members projects and stretch roles that support their development. Beyond improving performance at the individual and team levels, this team leader-to-coach paradigm shift is driving a broader culture change that is already showing increases in team member engagement and business results.

In addition to demanding the honest and ongoing dialogue that sits at the heart of high-performing organizations, team members want to see these conversations translate to professional development opportunities, which employees under the age of 25 consider the top driver for engagement.

Team members are not just on the receiving end of positive behaviors like coaching, autonomy, recognition, and a focus on accelerating performance; in many ways, they are the driving force behind these changes in organizations.

Team members, now exposed to a vast array of personal and professional social media tools, expect to both give and receive feedback in ongoing and organic ways. When organizations recognize this expectation and respond accordingly, they not only demonstrate an investment in their people, they begin to develop a new generation of team leaders whose professional experience prepares them to be natural coaches for team members, peers, and leaders. In addition to demanding the honest and ongoing dialogue that sits at the heart of high-performing organizations, team members want to see these conversations translate to professional development opportunities, which employees under the age of 25 consider the top driver for engagement. This emphasis on growth and development opportunities is spurring more and more organizations to consider their ability to facilitate talent mobility, and has organizational leaders considering new ways to emphasize the importance of learning and development experiences.
Organizational leaders – ‘the role-models’

By definition, team members and team leaders “look up” to the organization’s leaders to see if they are role modeling the behaviors aligned to the organization’s culture.

First and foremost, organizational leaders should be involved in shaping the desired culture and the performance management program that supports it. Organizational leaders’ actions are a powerful force in shaping culture. In fact, there is an old adage that supports this concept and that is “your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.” Perceptive leaders understand that culture change can take years, so they need to adopt new practices as a part of an ongoing organizational journey, and consistently be that model for the workforce.

The C-Suite plays a vital role in helping team leaders become full-time performance coaches versus part-time evaluators. Investing in leadership development practices that build the coaching muscle in senior, middle, and front line team leaders demonstrates commitment to building a high-performing culture focused on engaging and motivating team members. Additionally, implementing processes that increase discipline on coaching and ongoing feedback can help foster these coaching behaviors and hold team leaders accountable for practicing them regularly.

Lastly, role modeling the behavior as an organizational leader and becoming full-time performance coaches themselves can cast a powerful leadership shadow and produce ripple effects that spur direct reports to demonstrate these behaviors with their own teams. In attempting to develop a high performing and engaged culture, organizational leaders should seize opportunities where they can be out front sharing stories of how coaching is influencing performance and engagement with their teams. Storytelling is a powerful tool in shifting a culture and organizational leaders have an opportunity to help embed the change through sharing personal insights, triumphs, and lessons learned as they exercise the new behaviors.

Changing behaviors to accelerate performance happens at all levels of the organization—with team leaders, team members, and organizational leaders. An organizational culture that promotes a sense of pride, courageous behavior, and inclusivity at all levels can establish a foundation for accelerated performance to take hold. In this type of environment, performance management can become less of an annual process and more woven into the fabric of the organizational culture. Organizations that implement tools to measure and monitor culture and engagement on an ongoing basis help reinforce the commitment to the change. Additionally, implementing feedback mechanisms at a more micro-level, such as team ‘pulsing’ tools or individual check-ins and team leader effectiveness surveys, can provide individual insights to how employees are responding and operating in a high-performance environment. These tools and feedback mechanisms help encourage the long-term sustainability of new behaviors and are an important component to finely tuning an organization’s performance engine. However, beyond any tool, the most powerful ingredient for success is the organization’s willingness and appetite to make the change a priority, embody the change at all levels of the organization, and encourage forward momentum through measurement, feedback, and monitoring.

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What are the behavioral hallmarks of an innovative performance model?

**Team leaders**
- Annual performance discussions
- Long-term goals, revisited 1-2 times per year
- Ad hoc performance check-ins focus on development needs

**Team members**
- Feedback is received from team leaders
- Goals are largely role-specific
- Limited professional development opportunities

**Traditional performance model**
- Weekly/bi-weekly performance discussions
- Short-term goals set and revisited often
- Check-ins are strength-based

**Innovative performance model**
- Feedback received from team leaders, peers, & team members
- Personal, professional, & business objectives shape goals
- Development is linked to goals, roles, & daily work

**Organizational leaders**
- Performance management led by HR
- Leadership development limited to HiPos
- Appraisal and process-focused

**Traditional performance model**
- Performance management led by business, enabled by HR
- All team leaders are prepared to be performance coaches
- Strengths and development-focused

**Innovative performance model**

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**Endnotes**

2. Take Your Corporate Culture Off Cruise Control, A. Abbatiello, S. Chheng, M. Kaplan, 2016
8. Take Your Corporate Culture Off Cruise Control, A. Abbatiello, S. Chheng, M. Kaplan, 2016