



Driving Team Performance Through Purpose, Clarity, and Psychological Safety

■ Introduction to High-Performing Teams

When a group of individuals work together in synergy, they can create more efficient and effective outcomes. Building strong and resilient teams is increasingly important for organizations as business continues to become more complex and disruptive than ever before. Some of the factors contributing to this new reality are the rapid changes in technology, globalization, workplace environments, and the greater interconnectedness experienced every day. This ever-changing landscape means business leaders must continuously improve workplace dynamics and create teams capable of solving complex problems. Individuals cannot simply just work together, doing an “okay” job is no longer accepted—leaders must build high-performing teams.

Team performance is critical to ensuring organizational success in today's competitive climate. Given this disruptive landscape, the need to ensure quality in both product and production is of the utmost priority. In addition, LinkedIn researchers calculated that employee disengagement costs companies over one-third of their annual salary per employee. Aggregating this cost among organizations of all sizes leaves disengagement cost for the US economy at as much as \$350 billion every year. However, when employees are a part of high-performing teams, they are more likely to produce quality outcomes and be engaged in their organizations.

Therefore, it is even more imperative for leaders to break this stagnation and find ways to better align employees and empower them to reach a high-performing status.

In the workplace, team members do not always get to choose who they are going to work with, but they can be intentional about how they are going to work together. So, when thinking about maximizing team success, it is not so much about predicting the *who* than it is about optimizing the *how*.

High-performing teams are driven by a common Purpose and continuously create an environment of Clarity and Psychological Safety (Birkman 2019). The concept of a high-performing team is both concrete and abstract—concrete through defined performance metrics and task completion, yet abstract in more figurative concepts such as demonstrating emotional intelligence and appreciating personality complexities. These are not concepts that can be created once nor are they a destination to be arrived at—they must be continually developed and strived for.

■ Purpose

The team's unifying factor for why it exists.

Simon Sinek created the idea of “The Golden Circle,” a concept that begins with asking:

1. **Why?** The organization's cause, belief, or purpose that pulls it together,
2. **How?** The ways a business operates, and;
3. **What?** The product or service delivered by the organization.

Similar to the Golden Circle, Purpose works from the “inside-out” as it answers the Why (internal) until it reaches the What (external). Often, leaders think of Purpose only at the organizational level.

Yet, having a clearly defined Purpose at the team level is an essential pillar to support and define team success. To get the best results, teams cannot be out of alignment with the organization and individuals cannot be out of alignment with their team.

Creating a Purpose should trickle-down from the organization's goals until it reaches a personal interest for each individual. Having a clearly defined team Purpose allows team members to understand how they can contribute to their team's success. When the team's Purpose truly unites team members, individual engagement will rise, team motivation will increase, and teams will become more resilient.



■ Clarity

An environment where you continuously strive to understand and create alignment between the team's people and tasks.

Information overload is more prevalent than ever before. With thousands of articles, reports, and data points at our fingertips, a constant bombardment of facts happens every day. This also appears even more at work, where individuals often enter a meeting and leave with more questions than answers. Lack of clear understanding of the topic at hand often leads to a sense of bewilderment and misunderstanding, creating a rippling effect of inaction and lack of direction. Time spent wondering what to do is time spent not doing what needs to get done.

It is important to note a key distinction between transparency and Clarity, as these words carry different connotations when applied to the work environment. Full transparency is *access* to all the facts, while full Clarity is *access to understanding* the facts. For example, imagine transparency is a pie. You know all the workings of the pie; flavor, temperature, ingredients, etc. While you have all of this information, your only concern is what type of nut is in it because you are allergic to nuts. While in some situations, it is important to know all the information there is to offer, it renders meaningless without relevant context and true understanding.

If Purpose is the meaning and reason for the team's existence, Clarity is about understanding the people and the projects that bring the team's Purpose to life.

Clarity is an environment where you continuously strive to understand and create alignment between the team's people and tasks.

There are three key parts to defining Clarity:

1. Understanding the individuals on a team in terms of their behaviors, motivations, and expectations.
2. Understanding the tasks for which the team is responsible.
3. Creating alignment between people and tasks in order to optimize productivity.

When there is an understanding and appreciation for differences in people's approaches, teams can optimize task-behavior alignment. In order to achieve this alignment, there must be an effective transfer of information by taking time to ask questions, actively listen, and understand the people and tasks that make up the team. Clarity seeks to contextualize, and when teams have Clarity, they are able to execute with confidence.



■ Psychological Safety

An environment where team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

Amy Edmondson coined the term “Psychological Safety” when she joined a team of researchers analyzing the number of medication errors made in hospitals. She assumed that top-performing hospital’s teams would make fewer mistakes than others, however, the data collected showed the opposite. High-performing hospital teams *appeared to make more mistakes...* because they were open to admitting them. Because these teams felt more comfortable openly talking about their mistakes, they were less likely to repeat these same mistakes in the future. Amy Edmondson realized that this environment of Psychological Safety drove the success of these top hospital teams.

Psychological Safety is an environment where team members feel safe to take risk and be vulnerable with each other. When teams create environments of Psychological Safety, individuals feel more comfortable presenting new ideas and

diverse opinions, admitting short-comings, and demonstrating greater self-awareness. Feeling this sense of acceptance greatly improves team performance. When there is Psychological Safety, leaders are better able to have open discussion around challenges and conflicts by getting deeper into the root cause of issues. In addition, open discourse without fear of judgment allows for teams to naturally increase their collective I.Q., as more people on the team speak up and share a greater diversity of perspectives.

In a later study led by Google called Project Aristotle, researchers analyzed what distinguished the most successful teams at Google from the rest. Many of the top-performing teams held different customary practices, however, the common thread among top teams was that they demonstrated social sensitivity and equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking. These practices allowed for everyone’s voice to be heard and feel safe. At the end of Project Aristotle, *Google concluded that Psychological Safety was the top predictor of team success.*

Amy Edmondson’s Psychological Safety Questionnaire

1. If I make a mistake in this team, it is held against me.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk in this team.
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

■ The Birkman Method

Exploring and understanding the personality dynamics within oneself and one's team can help more intentionally build Purpose, Clarity, and Psychological Safety, which ultimately builds individual and team resilience. In the Birkman *High-Performing Teams* program, The Birkman Method presents information in the form of Usual Behavior, Interests, and Needs for both individuals and the team as a whole. In understanding these perceptions and how they influence each other, individuals can better understand the emotions and actions that influence team results and success.

Personality dynamics are pivotal elements for understanding team dynamics. However, just understanding personality is not enough. Purpose, Clarity, and Psychological Safety are the three pillars that can help position any team for success. These pillars, as well as emotional intelligence, can help create stability from the inside-out. In addition, teams cannot try to use one pillar to make up for the others. For example, just because a team may have a lot of Purpose and Clarity does not make up for not having enough Psychological Safety. Like a three-legged stool, if one leg is weaker than the others, the stool will either wobble or completely fall over. Ensuring teams have established these three pillars creates a stable foundation for success and growth.



■ Interests

Your interests identify activities you enjoy as well as the environments you like to work in. Interests influence what projects and functions each team member will likely prioritize and gravitate towards most.

High-performing teams understand that each team member is motivated in different ways. They ensure that all Interest areas are accounted for — even those that they do not naturally prioritize. Birkman Interests reflect an individual's passions and activities that give them enjoyment. Interests are the motivators that light a spark in us during the day and energize us toward success. Interests tend to inform the activities individuals are likely to prioritize and those they may need to give more attention to.

Purpose and Interests are two different points that can help describe the “why” for an individual or team. Understanding an individual's Interests and relating them to the tasks associated with a team's purpose can exponentially increase the output of any team's efforts.

Usual Behavior

Usual Behavior reveals your natural style and how you likely approach tasks and manage relationships.

High-performing teams recognize and appreciate that team members can utilize a variety of behavioral approaches to achieve success, and that the best teams intentionally leverage their diverse strengths. Birkman data on Usual Behavior helps inform how individuals approach tasks and what they consider their productive strengths. Usual Behavior is readily observable by others and is typically how an individual will act when their Needs are realized. Understanding Usual Behavior helps teams gain Clarity on the work approach of their peers by creating a shared understanding of each person's unique behavioral approach and strengths.

High-performing teams also understand that at times they may overuse their strengths. They mitigate the effects of these unproductive tendencies through greater awareness and by identifying options for alternate action. Often, individuals tend to assume their behavior is always effective, but true effectiveness depends on the situation. For example, wrenches are perfect for tightening a bolt—however, they are not the right tool for screws. While this is not the most optimal use of a wrench, you can still manage to remove the screws, but in time, you risk the wrench breaking under the pressure and leading to an even bigger problem. Usual Behavior provides insight into strengths (tools used effectively), overused strengths (tools used ineffectively), and ways one may need to flex their style depending on the situation.

Needs

Needs reveal the environments where you feel most comfortable and how you expect others to behave. They give insight into what you need to be most productive.

High-performing teams are aware that each member has different Needs. Team members know how to communicate these expectations to ensure they get the support they prefer from their work environment to be most productive.

Needs are critical personality components that typically go unknown until they are communicated to others. Typically in interactions individuals attempt to mimic the way someone is behaving. For example, if someone communicates in a candid and straightforward way, the most common way of responding is in the same manner. Yet through an understanding of Needs we know this is not always the best approach since our style is often different than what we expect.

When individuals can openly express their Needs, teams can practice a higher state of sensitivity and more appropriately engage with their peers. Psychological Safety pertains to creating an environment for open discussion without prejudice or fear of not being accepted. Needs provide specific actions and behaviors that can either help build Psychological Safety for an individual, or break it.

■ Closing Remarks

When thinking about maximizing team success, it's not so much about predicting the *who* than it is about optimizing the *how*. That's why Birkman believes that leaders can optimize how teams work together by understanding and appreciating one another's personalities and by leveraging the power of Purpose, Clarity, and Psychological Safety.

High-Performing Teams: Building The Foundation is a Birkman workshop geared towards guiding in-tact teams to create the foundation for high-performance. Throughout this workshop, participants will explore three core aspects of The Birkman Method—Usual Behavior, Interests, and Needs—both at an individual and team level.

Key workshop features include:

- Personalized participant workbooks featuring individual and team data to expand emotional intelligence
- Action planning to help create the operational stability needed for teams to solve complex problems
- Ability to deliver for in-person or remote teams as well as in one full day or over several learning sessions

Learn more about the Birkman High-Performing Teams workshop at:

www.birkman.com/hpt

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9090 Katy Fwy Building, Suite 450
Houston, TX 77024

+1 (800) 215-2760 | birkman.com

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