



# Extraordinary teams: Beyond high performance

By Don Mroz & Shawn Quinn

**A**nuclear arsenal clean-up effort within a unionized environment was projected to take 70 years at a cost of \$36 billion. Instead, the project was completed in 10 years at a savings of \$30 billion while creating more than 200 innovations and exceeding clean-up standards by a multiple of 13. As described in *Making the Impossible Possible* by Kim S. Cameron and Marc Lavine, many other sites were given the same timelines and funding but are either on or behind schedule. So, how was this team able to produce these extraordinary results?

In connection with a new movement at the University of Michigan, focusing on the study of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS), our colleagues are creating a research base which is enhancing understanding of what it takes to create extraordinary teams. Positive Organizational Scholarship ([www.bus.umich.edu/positive/](http://www.bus.umich.edu/positive/)) is the study of organizations, teams and leaders who create incredible results through tapping into the best of the human condition. Such uniquely high-performing teams create positive energy far beyond any prior team experience, and they continually outperform expected results.

We further define extraordinary as moving beyond the normal way of doing things to create an unusually high level of positive results. The concepts in this article will help you shift your team from high-performing to extraordinary. Take a look at the chart in the next column. This is the framework that explores some key elements found in both POS research and our own experiences in working with teams.

Extraordinary teams are teams that not only achieve outstanding results (going far beyond

expectations), but also know how to reproduce the magic that allows them to quickly re-tool, using a positive approach, for repeated success. We have found that these teams are able to work together in ways that bring out the very best in each member. They do this by focusing on positive attributes and creating space, which allows them to continually perform in a mode some would call “being in the zone,” thus producing remarkable results.

This is not just about being nice. It is about quickly creating a clear sense of purpose; identifying each team member’s strengths; assign-

ing roles and responsibilities accordingly; and allowing each person and the collective to shine in a manner that inspires individuals and the team to work beyond its apparent potential.

In one research study of 60 teams (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005), a distinct difference was identified between those teams that displayed high performance versus those with medium and low performance. In observing and measuring the teams, the largest single indicator for level of performance was the ratio of positive to negative statements made within the team. High-performing teams had a 3:1 ratio, while medium was around 1:1 and low was around 1:3.

Another important indicator was the inquiry-to-advocacy ratio. These elements and measures clearly speak to the potential for effective teams to put in place positive approaches to work and teaming, with the result of such teams becoming extraordinary.

## TEAM ENVIRONMENT

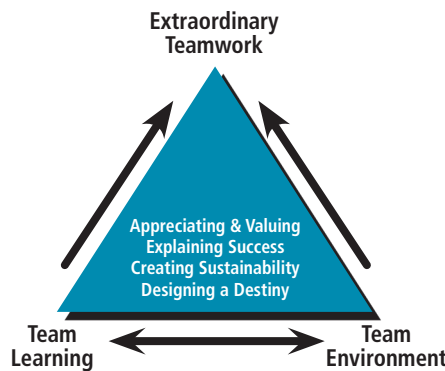
Many teams we have worked with seem to neglect the need to create an environment for effectively working together. Extraordinary teams focus on creating an environment that will enhance their work, bringing out the best in each person, as well as team synergy.

Our research shows that these teams consciously consider how to create open communication, how diversity will be recognized and used, what can be done to encourage risk-taking, how success will be celebrated, and how to challenge for improvement’s sake, which helps the team create new kinds of outcomes that go beyond the norm.

Research also shows that these kinds of actions create positive emotions in people. Feeling positive emotions changes how we interact with others, how well we learn, how creative we are, and how open we are to other people and their ideas.

An example of creating a positive and productive environment is found at Florida Production Engineering, a tier-one auto supplier with whom we have worked. This organization takes its environment for team performance very seriously. Specifically, the CEO has gone the extra mile to make certain that people on his leadership team feel safe to speak their minds, to provide ideas that may seem far-fetched, to take risks in meetings, and to challenge one another and himself without fear.

It has taken precious time to create this environment. The results have clearly been worth the journey — actually quite extraordi-



nary. Incredibly, this American auto supplier has found ways to grow, despite being in an extremely competitive environment during a time when U.S. auto manufacturing is at an all-time low.

Appreciating and valuing differences of opinion stand out as necessary norms within the team, and focusing on what success looks like has been key in creating a vision for the future. Critical thinking is also applied to each new or recurring situation.

### TEAM LEARNING

Individual learning is a given in most organizations these days. We have found, however, that team learning still lags behind in many companies, yet not in high-performing teams. Extraordinary teams purposefully use tools to make certain that the level of learning within the team is continuously rising to new levels.

Making certain everyone's voice is heard, and that conflicting points of view are discussed, is considered as key. Advocating for your point of view takes a back seat to gathering information. It's a means of focusing on the outcomes — both short term and long term. These teams share learnings regularly, and build on and spread successes, which in turn enhance the team energy and continually increase team results.

One example exists with the Lenawee Intermediate School District in Adrian, Mich. The leadership team finds differing methods to continually learn about themselves, the school district and the community, as a way to work toward a higher level of performance. The team regularly undertakes efforts to learn together through strategy sessions, dialogues, a book club format, and asking questions such as, "What should we be listening to in the community?" These efforts help them to keep pace with changes and to lead with a sense of urgency. This is true even though some of the efforts had the effect of teaching the team the value of slowing down in the moment to move faster in the long run.

Another example of utilizing the discipline of team learning became evident while working with a large financial services company which has been seeking to create a POS culture.

A new hire was amazed by what had just occurred in a meeting. The sales group had been dropped from the bidding process of a huge potential client. Instead of "heads rolling" as the new hire had experienced in other organizations, the team began to discuss what went well and how they could do better. No

**EVALUATING YOUR TEAM.** Is your team an extraordinary team? Have each member of your team answer the 14 questions below, giving each question a score from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Then average for a team score for each item and for all items together, to achieve a baseline score. Next decide on three actions based on the action questions. Remind each other of actions during meetings and quarterly (depending on how often the team meets), review what you have learned from the actions, and retake the assessment at a specified time, to see if the team is making progress.

We have a clear purpose.		We celebrate success on a regular basis.	
I understand how what I do affects the team's purpose.		We seek to understand what created the successes we have had as a team.	
I feel comfortable sharing ideas with the team.		I know my role on the team.	
I feel risk-taking is encouraged on this team.		People on this team know my strengths	
I feel valued as a part of this team.		Being part of this team allows me to use my strengths.	
I am regularly encouraged to come up with new ways to do my job.		Ideas — not people — are challenged.	
I have a chance to share what I have learned as part of my job with the team.		I have passion for what I am doing.	
We actively and consciously look for the positive in what we are doing.		We hold each other accountable for creating results that will move us toward our purpose.	

### Action Planning

What successes have we had that we will analyze and apply elsewhere as a team?
What one action will we take as a team to enhance the environment?
What one action will I take as an individual to increase the learning of the team?

one became defensive, and new ideas began to surface. One team member mentioned that they should thank the client for the opportunity to seek the business.

The client was so impressed by the "thank you" response that they reversed their original decision, put the sales group back into the bidding process and eventually gave them a piece of their business. The new employee, who already thought he had joined the right company, now felt more confident than ever with that decision.

Through these two examples, it is clear to us that team learning can take many forms, but the underlying principle of the team truly wanting to learn was evident in both.



Extraordinary teams do exist. Undertaking steps to create a safe environment that allows for team learning in a positive manner can help to produce extraordinary results. The question is: Is your team extraordinary? If not, what will it take to get it there? ☺



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