

## Introduction

Against the background of dynamic organizations and turbulence, there is a desire to recruit talent resources with fresh perspectives as well as experience and competencies suited to the challenges at hand. Moreover, there is growing appreciation of the fact that teams composed of members with varying perspectives are more likely to 'ask the questions that matter' rather than succumbing to 'group think'. At the same time, however, organizations want to preserve and leverage their existing knowledge and relationships.

Numerous factors affect the composition of teams and offer a model of aspects to guide organizations in refining their composition strategy. Balancing each of these considerations is not a question of 'either/or' but 'both/and'. The challenge is in finding the right proportion of a variety of qualities to be represented and translating that into a strategy that drives team member appointments.

## Characteristics of the High-Performing Team

Our experience in working with teams suggests that high-performing teams focus on a common set of tasks, which include the following:

- Responding to strategy and contributing to rigorous dialogue.
- Realizing the implementation of strategy through operational plans.
- Ensuring that team members are *doing what they are good at* most of the time.
- Overseeing the quality of leadership and management, ensuring that individuals are developed.
- Maintaining a governance framework that adds value to the business at hand.
- Safeguarding the company's values and reputation.

What do teams need to successfully accomplish these tasks and meet the expectations of their various stakeholders? We suggest that the best teams have four common characteristics.

***Clear purpose and focus:*** high-performing teams begin with a clear understanding of their purpose, scope of responsibilities and expected contribution to the overall strategy of the organization. Some teams have a formal charter that covers these points and which can serve as a touchstone to ensure continuity and common understanding.

***An effective team lead:*** the chairperson sets the team's tone and direction as well as its performance culture. He or she creates the appropriate environment for full engagement by all members of the team, drawing out opinions and shaping discussions of sensitive issues. Beyond the team meetings, the most effective chair people spend time with their team members individually to ensure that issues are discussed, performance is assessed, and timely and effective contributions are encouraged. The chairperson manages the process of integrating team members into a cohesive team in which all parties are aware of their strengths, responsibilities and boundaries. Finally, effective chair people have established an open and honest relationship with their sponsor based on mutual trust and understanding.

## What Makes for a High-Performing Team?

**A diverse but balanced team:** a team is only as good as its members, but like many things in business, recruiting the right team-members is something that is easy to talk about but hard to execute. A high-performing team includes team members who can provide broad strategic perspective while also bringing their specific experience and expertise to bear on team issues. And high performing teams are balanced not just with respect to expertise but to temperament as well, mixing analytical thinkers with visionaries, conciliators with challengers.

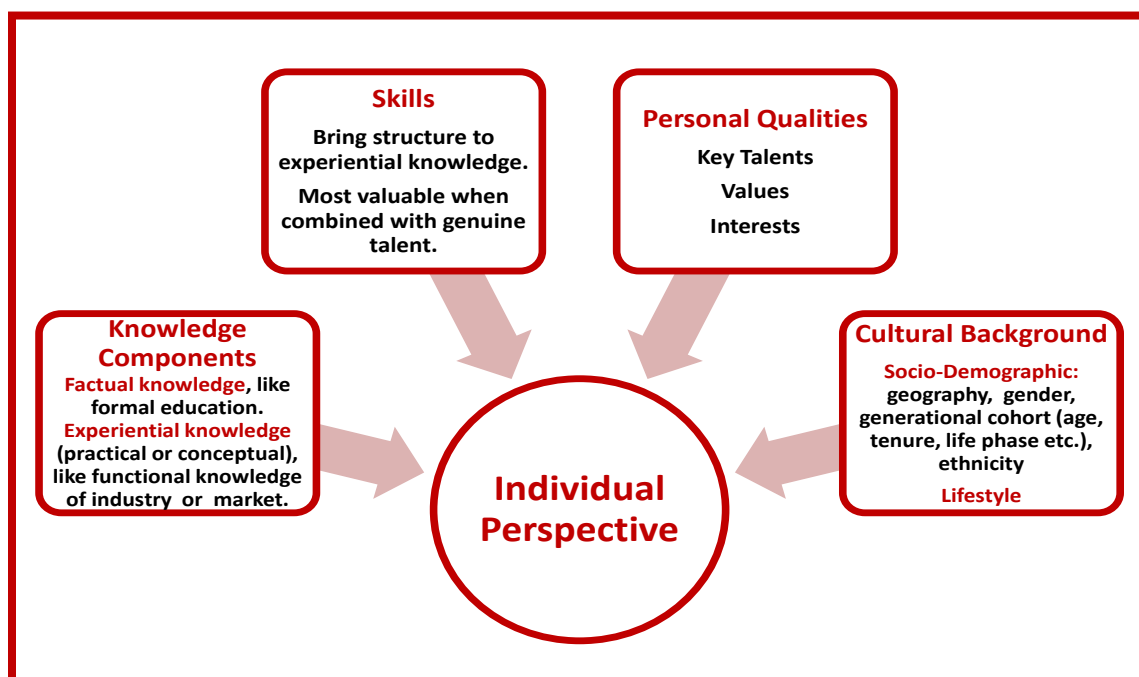
**A culture of trust and respect:** a team is not just a group of individuals and talents but a team. For it to function as such, effective chemistry, candid communication and mutual respect are critical. This ensures that probing questioning, constructive criticism and challenging debate can take place between the team members. Which is how the company truly reaps the benefits of an engaged team.

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### Team Configuration: Turning a Complex Issue into a Strategic Asset

Teams would benefit from a candidate selection and nomination process with a more holistic, multidimensional view. Such an approach would help to construct better teams that can draw upon a wide range of perspectives, as well as skills and knowledge. In our experience, a person's perspective is influenced by a combination of four different sets of features:

1. *Knowledge Components*, such as formal education, and functional, industry or market experience.
2. *Skills*, structured practice and experience.
3. *Personal Qualities*, including key talents, values and interests.
4. *Cultural Background*, including gender, geography, generational cohort and lifestyle.



## What Makes for a High-Performing Team?

Our practice and research confirm that this broad way of thinking about what informs people directly impacts how they contribute to the team and its performance. It shapes how each individual approaches a situation and responds to others with similar or varying features. These features combine to influence the lens through which they approach the world. These perspectives, in turn, shape the competencies a person develops, the priorities that guide his or her work, and the insights that he or she generates in solving problems, identifying opportunities and assessing risks. Our multidimensional model provides a starting point that allows to more consciously shape and optimize the collective skills and dynamics of a team by identifying the full range of variables to be considered. Analysis of these variables should be included in the candidate selection process.

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A team composed of people representing a range of perspectives leads to an environment of collaborative tension that is the essence of strategic diversity. In a room where everyone has different points of view there is a greater opportunity for cross-pollination of ideas, there are fewer unspoken assumptions, less 'group think' and a greater likelihood of innovation. This allows the team to ask the probing questions and tackle the challenging issues. There are several ways in which strategic diversity may be incorporated into a *candidate selection process*.

- ***Determine the set of competencies, priorities and insights to be sought and establish a process for screening for those qualities.*** In addition to needed functional or regional expertise, it is critical to include other competencies, such as conceptual thinking, resilience and the ability to manage ambiguity, that are prerequisites to adding value to team room discussions. The list, of course, will vary for each context and requires thoughtful analysis.
- ***Conduct a gap analysis of the purpose versus the composition of the team that considers the full range of preferred features to 'get the job done'.*** A gap analysis can be a helpful tool to identify the experience and competencies represented around the team table—and those that are lacking. Traditional gap analyses, however, usually are focused on a fairly select range of competencies and professional accomplishments. By expanding the analysis to include the full range of the personal, knowledge and cultural features that form perspective, the selection process will be executed with greater awareness of the variables at work in shaping a team.
- ***Place priority on effective communications skills and interpersonal acumen for the team leader.*** Effective communication is essential to competent team leadership. This is all the more so in a diverse environment where shared perspective cannot be assumed. Team leaders should have a track record of successfully working with multiple constituencies and building support for difficult undertakings. They should be able to succinctly and clearly express their point of view, probe and learn from the perspective of others, and extract solutions from the flow of team room dialogue. An effective team leader is one who can stand out for what people bring to the table and fit them in so that they can be listened to.

## What Makes for a High-Performing Team?

- *Look beyond 'the usual suspects'.* We suggest that there is a substantial pool of developing talent that can be tapped into if nominating parties are willing to cast a wider net. These candidates can contribute additional competencies and perspective, in addition to uncommon energy and drive. When diversity becomes a requirement for the candidate pool, it makes for a better search and it forces the issue of people getting comfortable with people who are not like them.
- *Ensure a meaningful evaluation process.* A diverse team is united by common team standards and goals. A thorough evaluation process is central to maintaining that touchstone. Teams need to get beyond the 'clubby' perspective that keeps them from providing robust direction and evaluation of their members.

### 5 Practical steps to configure high performing teams with the AEM-Cube®

