

How a global finance team went from a 3 to a 6,4 in team success

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CASE STUDY

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I will share a story from one of my clients. The finance team, I work with, is part of a global pharmaceutical company. The headquarter is located in Denmark and they are present in 7 countries with research, sales and production facilities. The company currently has more than 1500 employees.



The team, I will tell you about, is part of the finance department and consist currently of 10 members. The first time I met all the members was at a global finance summit for around 50 people. I facilitated the 2-day summit together with the leadership team. We worked with trust, neuroscience, communication, behavior and more. One of the specific tools we worked with, was The Conversational Dashboard©, a tool you can use to diagnose and increase the quality of daily conversations. We had two great days at the global finance summit.

Well, as you may know, going to a summit (even though it might be based on high-learning principles), will not change people's behavior automatically. It is still 100%

related to the quality of the implementation. One of the leaders decided to get in touch with me to continue the work with her team. I still remember that I asked her how The Conversational Dashboard© worked for them. She replied: "Before we would have been a -2 on The Conversational Dashboard©, now we are a level I". (A level I conversation is considered low trust conversation and a level III conversation is a high trust conversation). So, the new tools provided the team a language to evaluate the quality of their communication and reduce the tension in difficult conversations. They were already seeing results that pointed in the right direction, but there was still room for improvement.

Some background and challenges

Let me give you some background on the team. I have high-lighted 3 main challenges the team faced, when I started to work with them.

Challenge #1

When I started to work with the team, they were in the process of finalizing a big outsourcing project. They moved many tasks to Hungary, with the purpose of saving money. The site in Hungary was expanded to consume new tasks from other locations. As you can imagine, this is often a difficult and sensitive process. Both for those who give up their tasks, and for those who receive them at the other end. This was also the case here. Employees were extremely busy and overwhelmed during the transition. At the same time the organization wanted to pay a lot of attention to other big projects. It is normal behavior that

you tend to withdraw from the team, when you feel pressure, stress and overwhelm. The brain is designed to take care of you and therefore you often withdraw from other people, when you feel pressure. The team suffered from the fact, that all members worked as individuals trying to get things done, but not as a team.

“ When you are busy, you withdraw ”

Challenge #2

The Danish located finance team and the team taking over worked closely together. Visited each other regularly and held many meetings. Despite their significant efforts another challenge became visible. They did not really trust each other. Not because they didn't want to, but that is what happens naturally. The brain likes to interpret things that are 'unknown' or 'far away' as negative. If you don't KNOW what 'they' are doing in the other area/team, it is probably negative! When there is lack of trust for some reason, it has a huge impact on performance. The brain reduces access to the prefrontal cortex when you don't trust people. The prefrontal cortex

is the host of empathy, planning, creativity, making good decisions and so much more.

“ When you don't know, you tend to think less of other people and your performance goes down ”

Challenge #3

The Danish team was skilled in handling the tasks and the other team had a learning curve in front of them and they didn't know each other well. The people in Hungary was highly skilled people, but it turned out that the screening process, could have been better. The local HR-people were not fully prepared and trained to recruit the new employees. Another brain pitfall that became present in the team is something called illusory superiority, which in short means that you tend to value yourself above average on several skills. The brain will like to tell you, that you are more awesome, smarter, experienced etc. than your colleagues. In this case there was also a cultural aspect and it was easy to assume that the Danish culture

and way of working was the correct one, which would then make the other culture wrong. You can probably imagine that misunderstandings in handovers and communication is very normal in a transition like this.

“ You tend to think you are better than others and thereby trust other people less ”

Let's make one thing clear. The Danish team was a group of very smart and skilled people and so were the people in the team that should take over the new tasks. This is not about how smart your people are, but how you can tap into each other's competencies through the daily communication and behavior.

In summery there were (at least) 3 challenges that affected the team's ability to perform on a high level.

What we did!

I started working with the team just after they had outsourced a big chunk of tasks and things were not as hectic. We conducted a 2-day off-site workshop and worked with the following areas.

1. We created a team success assessment and on a scale from 1-10 in team success, they rated themselves a 3!
2. We double-clicked on the term 'team success' and what the team would like to create together.
3. We wanted to focus on all the good things that had happened and things that were working well in their area. The team had conducted a very demanding transition of many tasks to another country. The team found themselves focusing too much on the things that were not working (yet). This is also normal. Good experiences and memories are loaded with a weak hormone called oxytocin (with a half-time of 2-3 minutes). Negative experiences and memories are loaded with a strong hormone called cortisol (with a half-time of 13 hours) The brain will help you remember difficult things and negative memories much easier than good memories. So unfortunately, this is a default of the brain, that doesn't always serve us well.
4. Let go of negative stories/projects from the past. Many of the team members had worked together for many years. Some stories about situations and people were still told even though it was not serving the team and the company. It could be projects that could have been run differently or people who could have acted differently. We wanted to get a fresh start and see with new eyes. We created helium balloons with the stories and memories attached that the team members wanted to let go of. The balloons were sent to the sky. Sometimes it can be helpful to make a ritual and add accountability to let go of those stories that are (too) hard wired in your brain. It is easy for the brain to remember negative experiences and so much more difficult to look for new data to create a new future.
5. TRUST assessment. Prior to the workshop all team members created a TRUST assessment. They were asked to evaluate their contribution of trust and mistrust to the team. Everyone received an individual feedback session and we worked on the results together at the workshop. The results of the TRUST assessment often show that individuals believe that they have a higher positive contribution to the team than their perception of TRUST in the team overall. Do you remember the illusory superiority described above? It is the same story here. We basically believe that we contribute more than everyone else. This is also normal, but now we had data to discuss. We discussed how the level of trust in the team could be improved.
6. There was one theme present in the team that was not addressed until the end of the workshop. Individual members of the team talked (not openly) about the extreme workload and the perceived expectations to the workload. I could sense that they found it very difficult to bring the topic to the table, so I decided to help them. Several employees had the impression that the leader of the team expected employees to work many hours, but they never had a conversation about it. During my conversations with the leader it was my impression, that she had a good and genuine understanding and support of work-life-balance. This conversation was important for the team as it was not (only) founded in data, but also on assumptions.

The outcome of the 2-day workshop

These are the outcomes the team decided to focus on after the 2-day workshop (their words):

- They wanted to improve team success from 3 to 7.
- They wanted to get to know each other better and to help each other more
- The leader of the team should have individual conversations with all team members about work-life balance. I created a list of questions for this purpose to structure the conversations.
- They wanted to increase the level of trust in the team
- They wanted to use each other's competencies more
- They wanted to ask more open-ended questions
- They wanted to become better at talking about the things that are important for example work-life balance
- Share wins and successes
- Be more open to other perspectives and better listeners

One year later!

After one year we did a new team success assessment and the score was 6,4, not far from their goal of 7. They rated themselves a 3 one year earlier. One interesting thing was, that they could not recall that they rated themselves a 3 one year earlier. When you wear other glasses, you see the past differently.

Some of the things the team experienced was (their words):

- They recognized each other more (and they had fun with it)
- There was a stronger WE
- They use each other's competencies more
- They know each other better and working climate has improved
- They have a high tolerance for diversity
- They feel they can prioritize their time and tasks
- There is more calmness around deadlines.

As you learned above, when you increase the oxytocin (trust and feeling connected) and reduce the cortisol (miss-trust and fear), you will perform better, because you have better access to the pre-frontal cortex.

These were some pretty big wins for the team.

Next level!

The team decided to continue the journey to work towards a better performing team. They could see that they have improved a lot, and they also knew that they could get even further. They decided to do another workshop and to work with the following areas:

- How to improve knowledge sharing and task handover (both inside the team and towards other areas in Denmark and globally)
- How to decide what to delegate and how to communicate when you delegate.
- Practice high-trust (level III) conversations.

So, these were the topics for our next workshop where we did the following

- I created a document with best practices on knowledge sharing and delegation. They learned about how to delegate, how to know WHAT to delegate, how to communicate when you delegate, how to ensure relevant knowledge is shared across team members, teams and areas
- Around the table - make a wish. During the workshop we conducted an 'around the table' where everyone could make a wish for new tasks that they would love to conduct in the future, and they could share which tasks they would like to handover to someone else. We did not limit the conversation to tasks inside the current team. We also invited the other members of the team to give feedback on individual wishes. They really enjoyed this open conversation and they decided to have more of those conversations in the future.
- The last important thing we did at the workshop was to practice high trust conversations. So how do we talk to each other without closing the other person down. How do we talk to each other so that we feel high trust and connected? When there is trust, you feel safe enough to put all important things on the table and this is critical for a high-performing team. We practiced listening, how to let go of our own thinking (for a while at least) and to be curious towards another person and their ideas. To conduct high trust conversations is a true superpower and the immediate result is that people feel seen and heard.

Did you know that more than 40% of those who leave jobs (US study), leave because they don't feel seen and heard?

When we practice level III conversations in the team, I provide personal feedback. This is important to integrate the techniques in high trust conversations. It is a little nerdy, because all the little words, the body language and tone of voice matters. Once you get it and understand the impact and power of the relationship, most people really want to increase the quality of their conversations. And the tools work in all types of relationships (also at home with your kids and partner)

A note. After the workshop I had a short follow-up session with 2 new employees. The leader wanted to bring them up to speed on the tools and learning. I believe it is critical to onboard new members into the culture and 'how we work here' and fortunately the leader of this team agrees with me.

Fast forward to the present

We are still on a journey together - the team and me. The team and the leader want to continue the journey towards even better corporation and higher performance. The next step will be a 2-day high-performance workshop. We will work with:

- How to work with goals in 3 months cycles
- How to break goals into daily productivity
- Increase self-control
- Reduce distractions
- Personal implementation of the new tools.

We are now in the process of designing the next step of the journey together and I hope that I can tell you more about it in the future.

Want to know more?

This case study is a good example on how I work with my customers. If you look at the graphic of *'how to grow a sustainable high-performance team'* below, you might see that the finance team has worked with several of the elements. I have customized the journey for the team, as I believe, it must meet them exactly where they are. If you want to receive the full roadmap of *'how to grow a sustainable high-performance team'*, just let me know at tina@leadinspire.dk and I will send you the details on the *'grow a sustainable high-performance team'* program.

'The 4 Gardening Principles'

