



Breaking the Code on High Performing Teams

By Phillip Sandahl, MCC



Most people in organizations, if they've been around long enough, have been on a great team or maybe two, a number of so-so teams, and a few disappointing teams. It's easy to conclude that the difference between them is simply the membership. That's often how team leaders approach poorly performing teams: replace the weak or broken parts. Sometimes, it's true, the mix needs adjustment to get the skill set, temperament and experience the team needs to be productive. But we've all been on or seen teams of high performing individuals who simply could not work together effectively. Great potential; disappointing results.

What do great teams do that others don't?

The question—the secret code that every organization and team would like to break is this: what do great teams do that others don't? And just as important, how to transfer that know-how to other teams?

Fortunately there is an answer supported by extensive research and real world team results. Fundamentally, high performing teams know how to connect. And not just in some vague, good-feeling way; in specific ways that result in exceptional and measurable results.

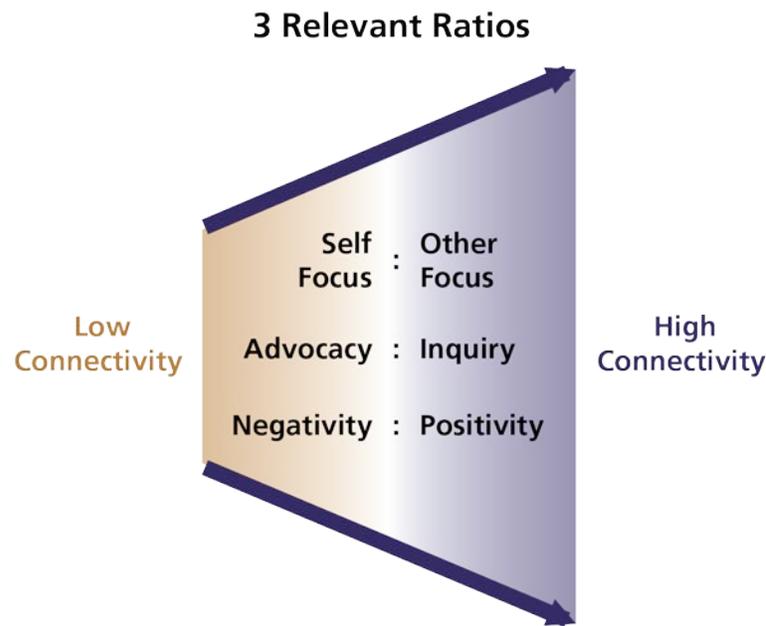
Constructive Connectivity: The Losada/Heaphy Research

One of the most comprehensive and ambitious research studies in recent years focused on the role of connectivity in the performance of business teams and was conducted by Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy in 2004.

The study looked specifically at the correlation between team member connectivity and business performance. Connectivity is seen as a continuum, and placement on that continuum, high or low, is determined by the number and the nature of the interactions between team members.

On the High Connectivity end of the continuum, behaviors result in increased interaction between team members, and sustained, generative dialogue among multiple contributors. On the opposite end of the continuum, Low Connectivity, the behavior limits interactions, discourages or undermines generative dialogue among contributors.

In the study, 60 business teams were observed during meetings and thousands of behaviors were coded by the observers in a capture lab. In the end the interactions were sorted into 3 connectivity ratios.



The behavior coding showed that more focus on Other led to more Inquiry, and more Inquiry led to higher engagement (*Positivity*). The reverse was also true. More focus on Self led to more Advocacy, more Advocacy led to disengagement (*Negativity*).

The relevant question would be what is the impact, if any on the business? Does it really matter? The answer is clear and compelling.

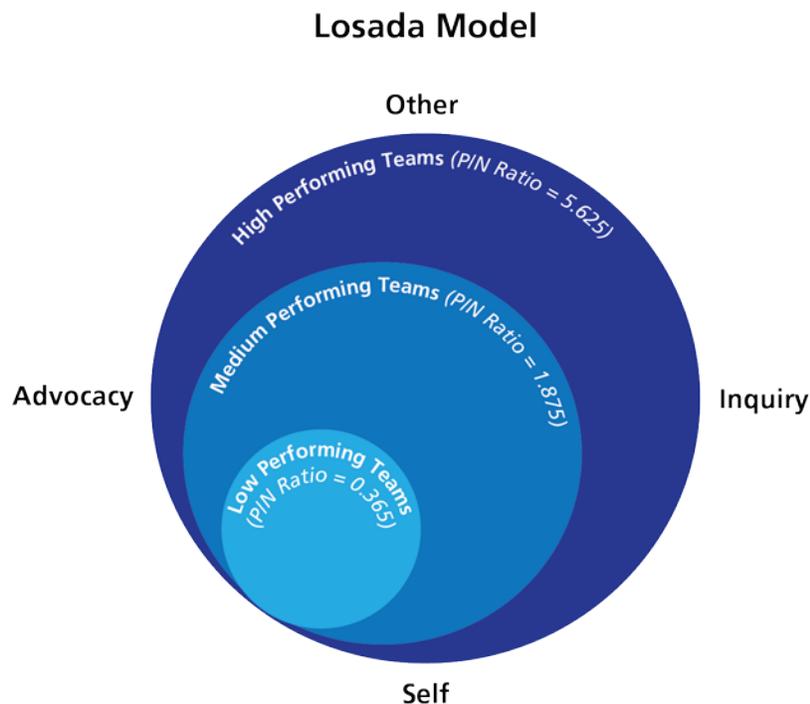
In addition to studying team behavior, a parallel branch of the study evaluated the business performance using standard business measures. Extensive data was accumulated using measures of profitability from profit and loss statements, customer satisfaction from surveys and interviews, and 360-degree evaluations of the team members by superiors, peers and subordinates.

Based on this data business teams were divided into three performance categories: High, Medium, and Low performing. These two parallel initiatives were performed independently of each other so that the observers who coded the teams'

behaviors did not know the performance levels of the teams they were coding. In the same way, those who evaluated the business performance did not know the results of the team coding.

When the two elements of the study were brought together, the results showed:

- *High performing business teams* had a Positivity/Negativity ratio of 5.625 and maintained a balance of Inquiry:Advocacy and Other:Self throughout the whole time they were observed.
- *Medium performing business teams* had a Positivity/Negativity ratio of 1.875 and the balance of Inquiry:Advocacy and Other:Self was maintained until the last quarter of their meetings at which time they ended in an unbalanced pattern with more Advocacy and Self Focus.
- *Low performing business teams* had a Positivity/Negativity ratio of .365 (more negativity than positivity) and were highly unbalanced toward Advocacy and Self Focus from early in the meeting.



Although this is one of the most comprehensive studies of business teams, especially for its inclusion of standard business performance measures for correlation, the case for connectivity is finding more and more voice.

Leaders who openly express their positivity get the most out of their teams.

Here is a summary excerpt from a study of teams in the U.S. Navy:

"In environments thought to be even more stoic than corporate America—like the military—leaders who openly express their positivity get the most out of their teams. In the U.S. Navy, researchers found, annual prizes for efficiency and preparedness are far more frequently awarded to squadrons whose commanding officers are openly encouraging. On the other hand, the squadrons receiving the lowest marks in performance are generally led by commanders with a negative, controlling, and aloof demeanor. Even in an environment where one would think the harsh "military taskmaster" style of leadership would be most effective, positivity wins out."¹

Productivity/Positivity Balance: Data from Team Diagnostic™ Results

The emphasis on Connectivity and the critical importance of how the team interacts is also borne out in the data we have accumulated from thousands of teams that have used the Team Diagnostic. The Team Diagnostic is an assessment tool that measures team performance in two fundamental dimensions and 14 separate competencies. By reviewing the data we can clearly identify high performing, sustainable teams and we can drill down to see exactly which competencies separate the best teams from all others.

The Team Diagnostic model features two dimensions: Productivity and Positivity. The Productivity dimension includes the conditions most any team member would list as necessary in order for the team to get the job done. The seven competencies in the model include team leadership, effective decision making,

¹ Bachman, W. *Nice Guys Finish First: A SYMLOG Analysis of U.S. Naval Commands*. In Polley, R.B. et al. (Eds.), *The SYMLOG practitioner: Applications of small group research*. NY: Praeger, 1988.

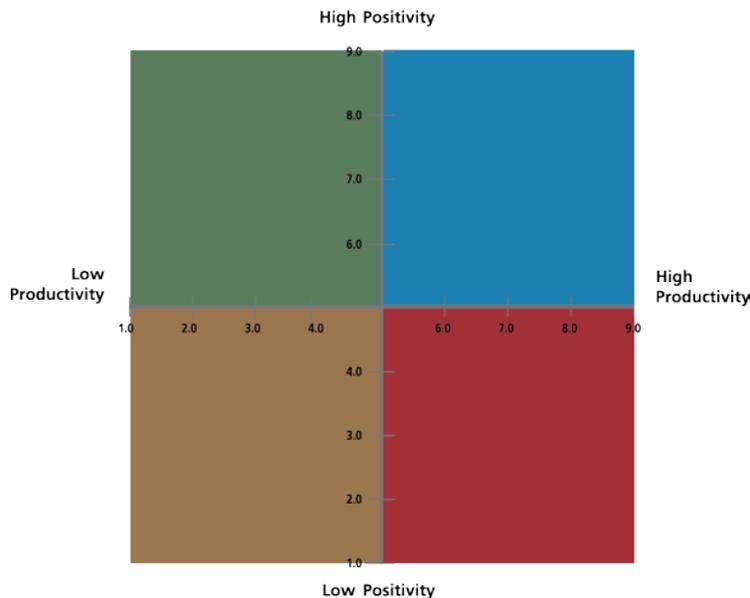
clear goals and strategies, alignment on mission and purpose, accountability, ability to manage resources and a consistent ability to take initiative, be proactive.

When team performance is not where the team wants it to be this side of the equation often gets first attention. It's important. In fact it's essential. And it is only half of the equation.

The Positivity side of the equation is often the neglected side of the team's focus. When you invite team members to evaluate it, they often consider it "soft" and frankly not as important as Productivity competencies—until you ask them about their own personal experience of being on great teams. Then, inevitably, they remember the levels of trust, respect, camaraderie, the excellent communication, the ability to disagree, the appreciation for team member differences, and a sense of "we can do this" even under very challenging circumstances.

When we lay out a continuum on the horizontal axis for Productivity performance, based on those seven factors—then lay out a continuum in the vertical for Positivity performance, the result is a familiar matrix.

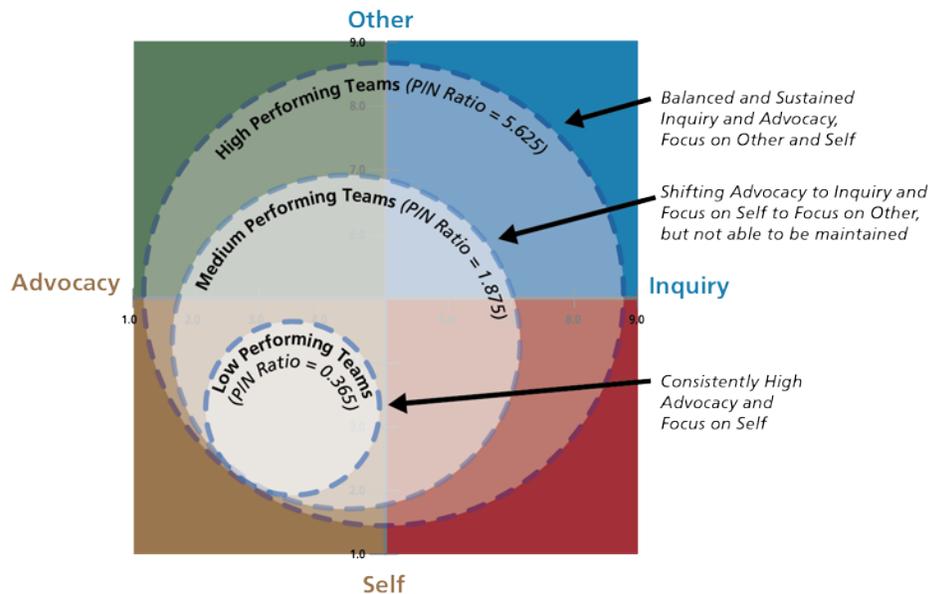
Team Diagnostic™ Model



- Lower right – **red** – high productivity but low positivity – *not sustainable*
- Upper left – **green** – low productivity but high positivity – *not sustainable*
- Lower left – **brown** – low, low – *not sustainable*
- Upper right – **blue** – high productivity and high positivity

Effective, sustainable business results require a balance of both Productivity and Positivity. This is where the Team Diagnostic model and the Losada research clearly overlap.

Losada Model Superimposed on Team Diagnostic™ Model



High performing, sustainable business teams have achieved a balance of Productivity and Positivity competencies and have a balance of Self and Other, Advocacy and Inquiry, and a strong ratio of Positivity to Negativity.

Unfortunately most high performing teams are remarkable accidents: the confluence of the right people, task, and circumstances. In fact, based on the baseline assessment results of hundreds of teams, less than 10% of teams score themselves as high performing in Productivity and Positivity. Most teams are floating somewhere in that 90%.

Fortunately, the Team Diagnostic data also points to the competencies that the upper 10% share. These are competencies that can lead to significant improvement in team dynamics and to improved business results.

When we compare best teams in the data base to all other teams certain factors stand out. On best teams, the three that typically score the highest are Accountability, Trust and Communication. On all other teams these three tend to be at or near the lowest.

Accountability

This is more than individual accountability; this is mutual accountability. On best teams, team members hold each other accountable for team results. If you ask the team, “Who is responsible for this team’s performance?” They will answer, “We are.” Great teams are distinguished by their mutual support, having each others’ backs, providing each other with feedback, and having rigor about team accountability.

Trust

Often when we see team results from the Team Diagnostic, we see that Respect scores higher on teams than Trust. It makes sense because respect is something team members bestow often based on experience, rank, or credentials. Trust is built over time by interaction. Teams that make it safe for challenging conversations, and place a value on honesty, and candor, learn to develop trust. Clear team agreements around disagreement and feedback are also essential.

Communication

This is not fundamentally about increasing the amount of communication. The answer is not **more**. Team members are buried in communication. This is about clarity, and as we saw from the Losada research, it is about Inquiry and Other. Too often in organizations the need for communication is interpreted as more talking, more information, when what teams need is more listening. Listening is a skill, along with Inquiry—being curious, inviting Other—that can be learned.

Getting from “What” to “How”

To get from Point A to Point B, start with a clear picture of Point A.

Simply naming the areas of focus is a start, but the bigger question is how to build competencies in teams. The Team Diagnostic™ methodology begins with measurement. If you want the team to get from Point A to Point B, start with a clear picture of Point A. This is where the team is today, on the map of team performance. That picture also provides a road map for the work ahead.

Establishing new behavioral norms requires time and practice. A really great team building event will stir emotion and give team members an experience, a bookmark, but that experience can quickly fade when the reality of work sets back in. Sustainable change is a learning process. No one would go to a one-day class in fly fishing and assume they knew how to do that set of skills effectively. It's a learning process with all the usual bumps in the road. Like learning a new language, proficiency comes in time with practice.

We know from the data that this approach works for real teams. Using both the initial baseline assessment and a follow-up assessment after a period of coaching (typically six months) here are documented results:

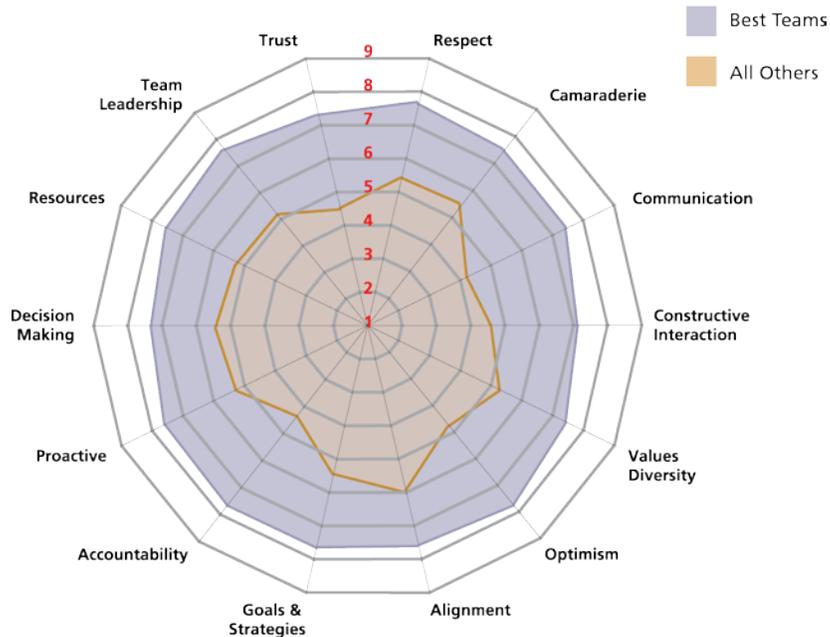
Productivity improvement on average 19%

Positivity improvement also 19%

On best teams, Constructive Interaction, the ability to wholeheartedly disagree for the sake of something important to the team, increased the most: 27%, Communication increased 24%, and Trust increased 23%.

When we compare best teams with all other teams we see a remarkable difference in competencies, but just as important we see the balance that best teams achieve in both dimensions of Productivity and Positivity.

Best Teams vs. All Others



The numbers tell the story in metrics. Case studies from real teams tell the story from the team member point of view:

“We’ve made huge progress on becoming a team and trusting each other.”

Trust improved 60%

“We’re now excited about ‘what’s next’ and no longer afraid of what might happen.”

Proactive improved 49%

“We have worked well as a team to communicate and resolve issues as they have arisen. We genuinely get along.”

Constructive Interaction improved 45%

And what the organization wants to know, “Is there positive impact on business measures that matter?” Here are a few examples:

- 12% gain in national customer satisfaction scores
- 9% increase in customer volume per day
- 17% increase in employee engagement scores
- Double digit increase in sales revenue
- Record organizational revenue and profits achieved
- Projects that are on time and on budget after several attempts with over-runs

Doing More with Less

The pressure is on to do more with less. In fact, it is usually interpreted to mean work harder, longer, put more pressure on productivity. In short bursts and out of necessity that approach can work and is sometimes necessary. But it is not sustainable over time. There are real costs in turn-over and human costs as well.

The answer to the requirement to do more with less is to find the balance of productivity and positivity that results in **more** communication, more trust, more commitment, connectivity and engagement, and **less** drama, burn out and stress. The data from thousands of teams confirms it. Best teams do not have to be an accident of circumstances. With a clear picture of the team as it is today, and a map for future development it is possible for teams to achieve extraordinary results. We have seen the data and heard from the teams.

Reference to the Full Article

Losada, M. and Heaphy, E. (2004, February) The Role of Positivity and Connectivity in the Performance of Business Teams. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 740-765

A Note about the Team Diagnostic™

The Team Diagnostic is one of four assessment tools created by Team Coaching International, all based on the same model. The Team Diagnostic has been used by more than 1,000 teams worldwide and is available in 21 languages. The other three assessment tools include:

- Team Leader View™ for an individual team leader to assess the team that person leads.
- Team 360 View™ to provide a team with feedback from important stakeholders.
- Organization View™ provides a broad picture of the organization as a whole or a significant subset.

The assessment tools are available through certified practitioners in more than 35 countries: Authorized Facilitators of Team Coaching International products. For more information go to: www.teamcoachinginternational.com.