How intentional leadership translates to peak performance

It starts with intelligent collaboration

Intelligent collaboration is the most important performance driver in knowledge-based organizations. We define intelligent collaboration as the ability for teams to create outcomes that far exceed what is expected from their particular set of circumstances. It happens when a team is in flow—if we're lucky, we've experienced it.

Several years ago, I was the engagement lead on a five-person project team for six months. The assignment was challenging, stretching all of us beyond our comfort zones and requiring us to think and solve problems in new ways. We all rose to the occasion and our client was delighted with the outcome. At the closing meeting, my project manager remarked, "I loved this project and my only regret is that someone must have been doing all the tedious parts, because I know I wasn't…."

After a moment of surprised silence, we compared notes and realized that was true for all of us. Somehow, our team was so interdependent, resourceful, and committed that we found ourselves contributing generously without a second thought. All the hard bits got done, but no one knew exactly how. We were stretching ourselves, but with a sense of energy and ease—of flow. As a result, our team of five completed more in six months than an average team twice that size could have, with an unusually high quality of individual experience. Such is the beauty of intelligent collaboration.

What if work could feel like that all the time? Research has since shown that teams can intentionally design for these conditions. And when they do, they produce exceptional outcomes—both for the business and the individuals on the team.

In this paper we outline the prerequisite conditions for intelligent collaboration, reveal a surprising link between two seemingly opposing factors, and offer specific actions leaders can take to foster peak performance everyday.

Prerequisites for intelligent collaboration

1 Collective ambition

2 A common goal

3 Complementary strengths and skills

4 Mutual respect and accountability

5 Well-tuned communication practices

6 Challenging work

7 Psychological safety
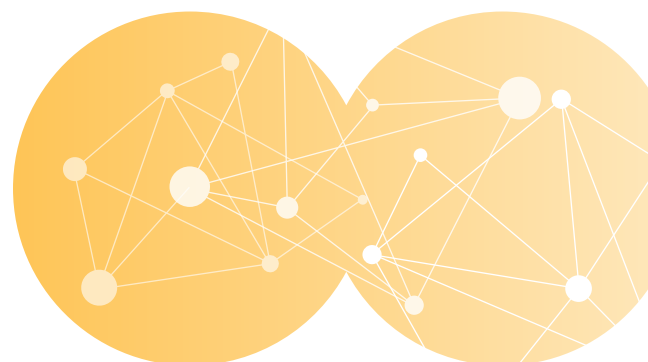
An eye-opening link

No big surprises on the prerequisite list, but there's an unexpected connection between challenging work and psychological safety that is often overlooked.

Much has been written about how we're happiest and most engaged when we play to our strengths. However, there's a nuance missing. We perform best when we play to our strengths **and** stretch to our own learning edge. In other words, we're at our best when something is challenging, just outside our comfort zone, and there are real stakes— meaning that we know for certain our actions will have consequences.

Psychological safety, it would seem at first glance, is just the opposite. It sounds like it should mean that we're in our comfort zone and that we won't fail. But again, there's an important nuance: psychological safety is not the absence of risk or failure. It's the absence of the *fear* of failure. It's taking on challenges, knowing that success will be celebrated and failure will be mined for valuable learnings.

In *The Fearless Organization*, Professor Amy C. Edmundson defines psychological safety as "an environment that encourages, recognizes, and rewards individuals for their contributions and ideas by making individuals feel safe when taking interpersonal risks." Psychological safety in the workplace is far more than a "nice to have"—it's a harbinger for high performance in an economy that requires swift critical thinking, a constant flow of fresh ideas and collaboration, and agility with challenges and uncertainty.

Assuming you have the prerequisites in place, **teams produce their best results when you combine strengths-based challenging work and an environment of psychological safety.** Safety without challenge leads to apathy and mediocrity. Challenge without safety promotes fear. The balance of both creates the performance zone—the place that unlocks intelligent collaboration.

The leader's path to intelligent collaboration

Manage yourself

"Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." – Viktor E. Frankl

Bring to mind one or two leaders you greatly admire. Do they:

• Explode with rage when someone disagrees with them?
• Gossip about people who are not in the room?
• Constantly skip 1:1s?
• Come dragging into a late afternoon meeting obviously disengaged?
• Have an image of themselves that is disconnected with reality?

Probably not. That's because the best leaders know they cultivate psychological safety by operating with self-awareness and curiosity and regulating their own emotions, time, and energy. They know that their emotional state has a profound effect on their team, who is constantly watching, both consciously and unconsciously. Thus it's a core leadership responsibility to manage your own emotional state.

Naturally, if you want to regulate your way of being, the first step is to be aware of it. We know a leader who spoke over 80 percent of the time in his meetings. When we asked him to estimate his airtime, he gauged it to be about 50 percent. Once he realized how much he was dominating, he was able to regulate himself much more effectively.

Similarly, there are untold demands on your time and energy. Through the meetings you prioritize, you signal what and who is important. By how you self-regulate your behavior in a meeting, you signal whether it's acceptable to diminish others, dominate, or disengage.

Here are three key steps to self-regulation:

• **Practice self-awareness:** When you feel your temper ignite or are particularly anxious about something, ask yourself why. *When Tom asked me about the data I used to make the decision, I felt my throat tighten and held my breath. Why was my response so strong?* By working to uncover what's behind your first reaction, you'll gain insight into your own patterns of interpretation and response.

• **Practice self-management:** When you notice the way you're handling yourself during an interaction is out of step with your intention, pause, take a breath, and make an adjustment. It's more than OK to say, *"Elizabeth, I realize I am getting heated around this decision. I'm sorry. How about we start this conversation again?"* Not only will you be sending a powerful signal, you're modeling what you expect of others.

• **Practice self-care:** Recognize that leadership is an intensely demanding job. If you don't refill your tank, self-management simply isn't possible. First get clear on what self-care looks like for you, then prioritize it. For most of us, it will likely involve creating boundaries around work so you can recharge. Put down your devices and be fully present with your family, your dog, or your Netflix.

Particularly during challenging times, your team is watching you to gauge their own sense of safety. If you try to put on a brave "all-good-here" face, they'll see through it and assume the worst. If you're overly emotive, they'll worry you're cracking under the stress and again assume the worst. By regulating your emotions and managing yourself, you bring your best self to work, which inspires those around you to do the same.

Lead your team

"People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." – Maya Angelou

While managing yourself is necessary, it is, of course, only the first step. The choices you make as you lead others determine whether your team will play in the performance zone. While leading is never easy, in our current environment you can't rely on ambient information or hallway conversations to read signals, which creates an even greater risk for collaboration overload. Your highest performers are already at risk to be spread across multiple priorities and projects because everyone wants them. And that's great, but once they get too fragmented, they can burnout and disengage.

In the current environment, that risk is exacerbated by the cumulative impact of people having more to do than ever, hindered productivity because of home situations, fear that if they don't say yes to everything their job may be at risk, and the reality that you

can't read nonverbal cues to gauge how they're doing. Both psychological safety and performance are at risk to suffer.

To lead others during challenging times, here are three of the most important things to get right:

• **Prioritize your 1:1s.** Microsoft has done some fascinating analysis during the pandemic and found that employees who had the most 1:1 time with their managers experienced fewer increases to the length of their workday than those who had less frequent check-ins.

• Consciously **manage your ratio of positive and constructive feedback.** Emerging research indicates that telling people how we think they should improve their performance actually hinders progress. Other research suggests that negative feedback is useful in extreme situations, but positive feedback reinforces what's working. All of the reasons we're subject to the negativity bias loom even larger in the current context, making it even more important that you lead with strengths. Positive attention is thirty times more powerful than negative attention in creating high performance on a team— make it a point to acknowledge good work and be compassionate and curious when the team is coming up short.

• See your **primary job as coach.** Like any other coach, your job is to see your team win and thrive. You do that not by playing the game for them, but by being on the sidelines every step of the way. Sometimes you guide, sometimes you cheerlead, and sometimes you ask. But you're always on their side and rooting for them to succeed.

Guide the work

"People grow best when they continuously experience (both) support and challenge. Environments that are weighted too heavily in the direction of challenge are toxic. Those weighted too heavily toward support without adequate challenge are boring. Both kinds of imbalance lead to withdrawal." – Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey

Intelligent collaboration in the performance zone requires that people are using their strengths and feeling the right amount of challenge. When you skillfully delegate work, you set the stage for that.

There are three different forms of delegation:

• **Autonomy:** You empower your team to produce an **outcome** and make yourself available to coach and remove roadblocks.

• **Roadmap:** You break the work into **distinct milestones/deliverables**, empower your team to decide how to accomplish each step, and connect at each milestone for feedback and guidance.

• **Instruction:** You give your team precise **step-by-step direction** to accomplish a task and check on their performance frequently.

The key is to match the level of delegation to the type of task and the person to whom you are delegating. If you give instructions to someone with advanced skills and experience, they will see that as micromanaging. In response, they are less likely to be creative or motivated. They may become passive and figure "why bother when my boss is going to tell me what to do anyway…."

On the flip side, it can be just as ineffective to give autonomy to someone prematurely. This leads to the feeling of being set up to fail, hung out to dry, or that you've abdicated your responsibilities.

To ensure you delegate at the right level, calibrate your form of delegation to your team's skills and experience with the particular work. Now that you're guiding work virtually, it's more important than ever to be explicit in your requests and curious about what your teams need.

Consider incorporating statements and questions such as:

• **Autonomy:** "Our goal is to secure funding to expand the pilot project based on what we're hearing from customers. The funding request is due in September. Can I ask you to be on-point for this? Please let me know how I can help."

• **Roadmap:** "The first step is to analyze the customer feedback survey. I'm picturing a 5–10 page report that includes the data, themes, insights, and recommendations. Do you feel comfortable taking that on? Let's meet next Tuesday to review your draft."

• **Instruction:** "Here's an example of the last customer survey analysis that we did. As a first step, could you replace the first few pages with the data from the current survey? Let's look at it together after you've done the first three questions."

Always make it safe for your employees to give you feedback by being explicit: "Hey, let me know if you feel like I'm too hands-on and we can discuss it," or "Don't hesitate to tell me if you need more back-up on this—I'm here anytime."

Shine the light ahead

Leaders have the power and responsibility to cultivate performance-zone conditions for their teams. By thoughtfully managing yourself, building psychological safety, and calibrating the right amount of challenge, you set the stage for intelligent collaboration to flourish. Teams that operate in the performance zone are key differentiators for knowledge-based organizations—and particularly valuable as we navigate a changing landscape and build the future of virtual and hybrid work.

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