

 VIEW FROM THE TOP

Leading and Managing High-Performance Teams in a SEM Environment: The Overlooked Competitive Advantage

By Monique Perry

Last year AACRAO's national Strategic Enrollment Management Conference provided an opportunity to share a presentation regarding perspectives on building and maintaining high-performance teams within a SEM environment. The session was standing-room only and sparked dialogue among many of the enrollment professionals at the conference. Considering the strong SEM strategic and theoretical resources available to many in the enrollment management field, it's surprising to some that institutions with the best plans and resources still struggle with consistent execution. Some may attribute it to external environmental factors, funding, or SEM knowledge depth, but upon close examination, the ability to initiate, execute, and manage a successful SEM strategy rests upon the performance of the SEM organization. That performance is rooted in an institution's most competitive (or vulnerable) asset: the people of whom the SEM (or enrollment) organization is comprised.

While enrollment management can be heavily influenced by factors outside of an institution's control (*e.g.*, the economy), most of the strength and progress needed to build a high-performance enrollment management team is within the registrar's circle of control or line of leadership. Building and maintaining a high-performance team is the building block of a successful SEM organization. Throughout the trajectory of an enrollment manager's career, one may be hired into situations where one is tasked with building (or rebuilding) a

SEM organization for optimal performance. This article reviews why a focus on organizational culture is a foundational step to building a high-performance team and then discusses how to start the process for managing performance (including performance challenges within a current organization); a long-term president's perspective and a focus for the future are also featured.

No Overnight Successes: High-Performance Cultures Are Built, Not Born

Contrary to widely held perspectives, leaders who serve teams deemed high performing do not enjoy overnight successes. As in pop culture, there is typically a story behind the "headlines" and public outcomes one sees. Leaders of high-performing teams (small, medium, and large) understand that culture is the cornerstone needed to support high performance. They intentionally focus on culture and then carefully build upon it. As long as one has people in one's organization, culture will be a factor. Organizational development and leadership guru Peter Drucker (1995) stated famously that "culture will (always) eat strategy for breakfast"—underscoring the importance of culture as a precursor for success.

When organizations dive into performance management by strictly implementing new systems and plans without a focus on the culture, they may experience incremental success but miss out on the sustainable

momentum and productivity outcomes that a culture-based focus enables. This is why one can always find resource-rich institutions with top talent that can't seem to gain momentum toward success but appear on the surface to have all of the tools to do so. It's the omnipresent organizational culture aspect that is often forgotten about when FTE are added, new leadership is hired, and transformative enrollment strategies are introduced. Never underestimate the importance of the time and effort spent on culture development. I was fortunate to contribute and learn from this focus on culture and performance management at my own institution beginning in late 2012.

A President's Perspective: Performance Management as a Competitive Advantage

One of the major reasons I am so passionate about performance management and its impact on enrollment management success is my leadership tenure at my current institution, York Technical College. York Technical College is a mid-size technical/community college in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Following is the perspective of the college's president, Greg F. Rutherford, who oversaw the transformative SEM and performance culture-shifting efforts that began in late 2012.

In my leadership roles at the institution, I observed and served on the core leadership team led by Dr. Rutherford that was tasked with the college's rapid implementation of strategic enrollment management (SEM). This major cultural and strategy shift was in response to two years of double-digit enrollment decreases. Dr. Rutherford credits the SEM strategy and "breaking of the social contract related to performance management" to increase the college's focus on outcomes and performance as one of the major factors in its ability to achieve a double-digit increase in enrollment in the year following double-digit decreases. The right people in the right roles for high performance also contributed to that success.

In addition, Rutherford indicated that many higher education professionals (especially those who have worked in higher education their entire careers) chose the profession primarily because of their love of stu-

dents but also to not be subject to the quarterly and annual numbers and accountability races that are often perceived as characterizing the business world. When implemented in its truest state, enrollment management emphasizes performance metrics and data. This focus provides a somewhat objective view of certain performance indicators with which it is important to equip employees. With new metrics added to support the student success mission, leaders may have to negotiate differences with employees who do not embrace SEM concepts or who are unwilling to engage in the development and training needed to learn about it. Rutherford's leadership values always center around putting people first and employee engagement. He asserts that during change, employees must have the ability to contribute, have voice and communicate with leadership to grow together. Most employees want to do well, and with support from the institution they can. However, after support and voice are given, employees may choose that they do not want to support initiatives, and that can be challenging to accept, although reality.

This is part of the organizational culture shift that many leaders do not factor into their building of high-performance teams. Sometimes leaders are not comfortable with the attrition that comes with change, but when standards are being raised and accountability is being introduced, everyone will not be on board (although most, if aligned with the mission, will be).

Rutherford notes that "you can't be passive and fulfill the mission;" he accentuates the importance of culture building, performance management, and the attention institutions must provide to ensure sustainable success. The dedication of time and effort to the study of high-performing teams and strategic talent development—not uncommon in the private sector—is a practice worth considering in the realm of higher education. A deeper understanding of what defines a high-performance team is a pivotal reference point for an enrollment professional.

The Definition of a High-Performance Team

Lafaso and Larson (2001) interviewed 6,000 members of high-performance work teams in the private and public

sectors to learn their common characteristics. In *When Teams Work Best* (2001), the authors assert that “a successful team begins with the right people.” Often, leaders and SEM managers focus solely on SEM strategy and tactics without reviewing the SEM organization itself. LaFasto and Larson (2001) describe the following commonalities that make up high-performance teams. These characteristics should serve both as building blocks of and as a lens for evaluating one’s current SEM organization.

■ **A Principled Servant Leader:** A strong SEM team starts with the “man (or woman) in the mirror.” An organization’s culture and standards are set by its leadership. Ensuring that leaders at all levels are mission- and student-centered is critical to building a strong SEM team. One can hire and assemble a strong staff, but poor-quality and stagnant leaders can stifle SEM efforts and the ability to keep high performers engaged in the organization. This characteristic also speaks to the necessity for SEM leadership at all levels to actively engage in its own leadership development to ensure that it remains equipped to lead strong teams. The stronger and more mature the team, the more important it is for its leader to ensure that he or she is also growing. This means not only professional development related to SEM, but also development activities (readings, workshops, etc.) related to leadership development and change management.

■ **Standard of Excellence:** Charles Kettering, a famous inventor, is reported to have said that “high achievement takes place in the framework of high expectations.” This is equally true for employees. SEM organizations must have an expectation of excellence. Higher education professionals often set the bar high for their students but fail to hold themselves to the same standards. When building and maintaining a team, excellence must be an expectation. This is not just true of metric performance related to enrollment, but also must extend to customer service, processing, regulatory aspects, team communication and respect, and overall enrollment management.

■ **Joint Commitment and Collaborative Climate:** While the SEM team can set the bar for excellence high,

it must have the support and collaborative spirit of the organization to help support SEM efforts. It can be derailing and demoralizing for a SEM team to have a strong and healthy performance structure yet experience a significantly different commitment to excellence and collaboration among departments. This is why leadership must ensure that support areas and key collaborative partners understand their roles in supporting SEM and are measured appropriately. That commitment to success must be shared; if it is not, then it must be revisited to ensure that all parties are making progress toward shared organizational values and focus.

■ **A Results-Driven Structure:** Higher education at its core can be organized on the basis of people rather than what’s best for students. Other structures may be based historically on capacity. Of course people should be treated with dignity and respect, but often there is a clear organizational alignment issue that could accelerate SEM success that is ignored, or there is not the leadership will to address it. This can be an organizational alignment issue or the organization’s unwillingness to deal with performance challenges within the structure (this will be considered in greater depth in a future article), but it’s imperative that the alignment and structure are poised for results that support enrollment and, ultimately, student success.

■ **A Clear, Challenging Goal:** Whether starting one’s SEM team, refreshing strategy, or actively managing a plan, it all starts with a goal. A high-performance team is always going to yearn for a metric that is clear, challenging, and attainable with extra effort. Collins (2001) states that “what matters gets measured,” so while a goal for the organization is important, it also needs to be broken down at the departmental and individual levels. Everyone on the SEM team needs to know how their positions and roles directly impact the overall organizational goals and how that impact will be measured.

■ **Competent Team Members:** While a SEM organization can set a bar high, leadership must be competent and willing to develop and coach strong team

members. Often, high-performance members of a SEM team can become disengaged and a retention risk as a result of working alongside colleagues who are not competent in their roles or who are not interested in improving. While everyone on a SEM team may not be an all-star, there should be a performance standard that is high enough that *all* demonstrate and contribute their best competencies to SEM work. Emerging leaders often leave because they are frustrated with teammates who have no interest in doing their best.

■ **Support and Recognition:** As a strong SEM team emerges, it is important to recognize milestones and successes in monetary and non-monetary ways. This practice is common in the private sector, but institutions may shy away from singling out high-performance teams or individuals. Institutions must embrace this culture shift if they expect to maintain the performance of competent talent. This can translate into the ability to gain pay for performance or sponsorship or other support for advanced degrees and professional development. Just as students expect to earn a good grade for strong performance, institutions must reward their SEM teams for the right behavior and values that impact student success.

This list and associated commentary provide guideposts for the dialogue about SEM teams and managing performance. While these are ideal characteristics, what does an enrollment leader do when challenges prevent these characteristics from being in place? There are several steps one should take when building a performance culture and managing challenges.

Implementing High Performance as a Cultural Framework in the SEM Organization

Implementing SEM as a cultural framework will vary according to organization and leadership style. One principle is to focus continually on the fundamentals. Even the basketball or football team in the midst of a winning streak continues to practice and review tape. If one's team is performing well, it's always advantageous

to take a fresh look in order to keep the momentum going. If there are gaps of opportunity, it may be possible to apply the pragmatic tips described below. If one is new to his role, it is especially important to conduct this assessment through a high-performance lens. Depending on the circumstances, one may be expected to act as a change agent and be given the unique opportunity to lay a foundation and gain buy-in for high performance. This is also an opportunity to set a new standard for employee performance and managing challenges as they arise.

Refresh and Reset: Managing Performance Challenges in an Organization

Whenever one embarks on a new position, especially in leadership, the first 30 (and 60 and 90) days are considered an important time during which to learn the culture, assess challenges, develop relationships, and make an impact. Regardless of one's tenure in a role, it is never too late to reset and refresh one's understanding of the culture as a prerequisite to building or strengthening the organization into a high-performance team.

Consider some initial approaches to starting this journey:

■ **Step One—Go first: Model what matters.** The ability to develop and manage a high-performance team starts at the top. Whether leading a division, department, team, or function, performance can't be managed and led by one who doesn't examine himself. Key questions to consider are whether one is ready and willing to truly be transparent in the process of assessing, working, and addressing a high-performance team. And is the leader equipped? In some cases, leaders need to spend a bit of time in their own "boot camp" to learn more by reading and participating in training, workshops, and development in order to be as ready as possible for the planning phase. As noted above, a competent team is requisite for a high-performance organization. This is not only for the team members, but also for the team leader. One must start there.

■ **Step Two—Take it higher: Gain some emotional altitude.** Craig Groeschel, leadership expert and pas-

tor of Life Church (the entity that founded the You Version Bible App that has millions of subscribers worldwide) often discusses the importance of performance and encourages leaders to ask the following question: “What would someone new in my position do in this situation?” Leaders often have to take the “refresh and reset” approach. The longer one is in an organization, the more one becomes so ingrained in the culture that he fails to see what really is going on. Leaders must shift their mindset as if they were just entering their position. Detach from emotion (a bit) to truly assess the state of culture and performance. Questions to ask when assessing the performance of one’s organization include:

- ★ When operating at our very best, who is always involved, and what characteristics do they demonstrate?
- ★ When we experience challenges, what are the common themes of those challenges as they relate to how we approach our work?
- ★ Are people aware of the impact of their work on students and the institutional mission?
- ★ What is the level of accountability within our organization?
- ★ What are the “elephants in the room” related to performance that are we ignoring?

■ **Step Three—Put on your big boy (or big girl) pants and admit the issue.** Hesitation to address performance—and in some cases to ignore it within the institution—is common. While this is not universal, compared to the business world, higher education tends to be more tolerant and long-suffering in addressing performance challenges. In many cases this contributes to a false perception by some in the private sector that higher education professionals have easy jobs, do not work hard, and do not have to meet the high expectations/demands of their “business.” In order to build a high-performance team, gaps and challenges must be assessed and then addressed. A challenge today doesn’t mean a challenge forever. But if issues aren’t addressed when they arise, they can grow and spill over and impact students and

other employees in a negative way. So what is a leader to do?

One’s success in addressing performance challenges, especially if they are not isolated to one person, is paramount to one’s skill as a change-savvy leader. Herold and Fedor (2008), in *Change the Way You Lead Change: Leadership Strategies That Really Work*, outline some critical steps a leader should think through when addressing change and challenges. They include:

- ★ Listening and learning (especially if one is a new leader);
- ★ Carefully (not rashly) diagnosing the situation;
- ★ Forthrightly addressing concerns;
- ★ Being enthusiastic, genuine, and sincere about what needs to be changed; and
- ★ Developing a credible plan for fixing the problem.

These tips are critical when handling an individual issue (such as an employee who may display an attitude that is off-putting to students and co-workers) that may require specific customer service training or addressing more significant team or cultural issues that may be affecting organizational success and productivity. Think about it: Would students who displayed unprofessional conduct toward one another in a classroom setting be held accountable for their behavior? What action is taken when students turn in assignments late or do not prepare for class by reading assigned content or submitting reports? Often, high standards for and expectations of students are not mirrored in high standards for and expectations of employees. Enrollment management professionals cannot hold students to higher expectations than they hold themselves.

■ **Final Step—Prepare a winning game plan, but prepare for losses.** When challenges are identified, every possible action must be taken to provide an opportunity for employees to resolve them. This means developing a coaching plan (or “game plan”) for success to help identify goals that align with the high-performance culture being maintained or created. A key “play maker” in a winning game plan is the

human resources department. It is especially critical in a union environment where restrictions related to roles and performance may exist. Before a leader initiates any action, it's important to engage the human resources department to ensure that rules are being followed and to seek counsel. (After leading change and managing a number of performance challenges over the years, I do not do anything without first calling human resources. Some leaders complain about not feeling supported by human resources or about feeling “stuck” in wanting to deal with performance situations but lacking support from human resources. In such cases, one may have to refresh one's approach.)

For example, if an employee is competent in his or her craft—processing admission applications, for example—yet has poor customer service skills in his or her work with students, families, and co-workers, his attitude outweighs his competency performance. Making the case that not addressing this person's character (attitude) directly impacts revenue may be a good way to gain support. Documenting situations is critical as it is important to be as objective as possible. The goal in managing performance is to coach someone into the right behavior and to ensure that he is aware of the impact of his current behavior. It is difficult to argue when evidence is presented related to losing students (and, thus, revenue), which ultimately translates to jobs at the institution.

Some of the performance issues present in one's organization are not new. This is often because prior leaders did not address issues when they first arose, and over the years they became deep-seated in an individual's work. Addressing the issue(s) may seem “nitpicky,” especially if the employee has been “rewarded” with continued employment and satisfactory job evaluations. That is why it's important to “reset”: there may be standards and expectations that need to be recalibrated globally that will influence the expectations and coaching of individuals. First, the organizational bar has to be raised; then individuals know the expectations to align with it. This is especially true if employees have not received

coaching and feedback in the past and so may feel blindsided by having their performance addressed. Resetting or in some cases re-emphasizing the organization resets the expectations of the entire team and depersonalizes the situation.

In addition to first consulting human resources, a leader must prepare for and be thoughtful about these types of conversations; the goal is to always support employees doing their best. That doesn't mean that one is not candid; maintaining a direct yet respectful approach is always important. Don't “wing” coaching conversations. If such interactions are difficult, read *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson 2002) and other training. This skill is important whether supervising individuals directly or working on committees or project teams.

An unpleasant aspect of performance management is the “necessary ending.” Sometimes, even after coaching and support are provided, the best way to serve students and the institutional mission is to terminate an employee. Or, if the employee has valuable skills they may be able to seek employment in another department. However, do not make the mistake that some institutions do and send your challenging employees somewhere else so you do not have to manage them. While termination should be a very last resort, as a leader we have responsibility to steward the people in our organization, and not pass it along to someone else. To maintain the high-performance culture needed to achieve the mission (and to retain other high-performing employees), support must be provided and yet one must know when an employee is not right for the institution. This means that one may have to address certain non-coachable non-negotiables; a game plan doesn't always mean a winning game. Prepare for the departure of some employees, but find peace in making the right objective decision for the betterment of the institution.

Looking Ahead: Maintaining Performance and SEM Momentum

Rutherford once said, “You have to operate as if you have competition even when you don't.” Embody this focus and tenacity in order to maintain a high-performance

environment. It is not easy. It takes knowing what a high-performance team looks like. It takes being able to assess one's team, refresh one's team, and manage challenges when they arise. This is achieved by continuing to improve as a leader, team, and organization.

Consider the focus on professional development: is it consistent? Professional development is not just limited to competency but extends to leadership. This investment in one's team and in oneself must continue, whether through webinars, training, workshops, or conferences. Development is continuous. It includes lots of reading—of articles, books, etc. Always have a book or key leadership source to refer to. Do so deliberately and frequently.

This can be challenging. Maintain a book list on Amazon.com, and order a couple to reference while waiting at the doctor's office, traveling, or during a quiet moment at home. Leaders who better themselves inspire better teams. High-performing teams are led by leaders who are always learning and improving. Some initial reads relative to performance management include:

- *The Ideal Team Player* by Patrick Lencioni
- *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*
by Patrick Lencioni

- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when the Stakes Are High* by Kenny Patterson

- *Strengths-Based Leadership: Great Teams, Great People, and Why People Follow* by Tom Rath

Consider attending AACRAO's SEM programming and annual conference to extend knowledge and build networks.

In addition to partnering with human resources, focus on acquiring great talent. Hire for high performance, and don't be afraid to search a couple times to find the right fit. Don't just hire "a body" to fill a spot (that is a huge mistake). Bringing in talent that doesn't align with the new culture will undermine progress. Involve key team members in the process, and ask questions related to professional competency and behavior.

The final and most important way to maintain momentum is to remember that the work is ultimately for the institution's students. In building a high-performance team, keep that focus in mind. Always keep students and their needs first. They are counting on us in more ways than we will ever imagine.

About the Author



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Monique Perry, Ed.D., serves as Assistant Vice President for Enrollment Services at York Technical

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opportunities through publications, conference presentations, and speaking and is a strong supporter of AACRAO and its work in the SEM space. Dr. Perry was recently chosen as one of 40 administrators from across the country to be a member of the 2018-2019 Aspen Presidential Fellowship cohort for Community College Excellence.

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