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# The Four Cornerstones of a High Performance Culture, part 1

11 | APR 2012

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If culture was a pyramid there would be four cornerstones: staff, teams, purpose & values, and strategic planning. At the apex of the pyramid would be a work culture that attains performance beyond expectations. the cornerstones would be defined by the following.

1. Staffing your organization with the best employees
2. Teams that are high performance teams
3. Corporate mission and values that everyone is aligned with
4. A complete and implemented Strategic Business Plan

Only a pyramid with all four of these cornerstones will create a foundation stable enough for an ongoing high performance culture. What follows is an explanation of how to create these four cornerstones.

### 1. Staffing with the best – mediocrity can work with your competition. This is the mantra of a high performance culture.

As businesspeople, we do not directly control terrorist plots, the economy, our competition, taxes, healthcare plans, or national events. But even with unions, executives and managers do ultimately control who works in the company. We should make the most of this opportunity and leverage the ‘people piece’ to enhance our companies’ performance advantage.

Here are some suggestions for raising performance and driving out mediocrity from CMI’s ABC process.

- i. Educate managers: Help them understand the definitions of A, B, and C players.
- ii. Jointly gauge employee performance: at specific meetings, managers should jointly assess employee performance.

Only those who interact directly with the employee should state their opinions. This allows the employee’s manager to get candid feedback. In assessing performance, avoid grey areas – no pluses and minuses – managers must make a choice whether the employee is an A, B, C player.

- iii. Take action

Ditch the D&F’s. D & F employees will drag your company down. If you have more than a few D and F employees, sell the firm and do something to save yourself.

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Decide what to do with your C players. 'C Players' are mediocre employees; these employees are marginal in their performance and unremarkable in any positive attribute they bring to the workplace. They exist, take up space, and just get their jobs done, sort of. A test for 'C-ness' is putting yourself in this scenario: if one of these employees came up to you and said they were quitting, would you be relieved? Would your relief be because you're certain you could do better by recruiting a new employee from the open marketplace? If so, you have a classic C-Player on your hands. What do you do with them? Give them a new role, develop them in their current role, or ditch them.

Distinguish between A vs. B: The difference between A and B players are their ability to be promoted. B players are great and loyal employees. They are valuable and skilled at what they do. A employees have the drive and the focus to take all the great aspects that B employees have and they are promotable way beyond where they are now. They are the rising stars in the organization and destined for leadership.

iv. Follow up: check on the status of the manager's decision and actions

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### About the Authors

Since working for his family's boating business to founding his company CMI (Crusading, Marauding Interveners), Bruce Hodes has dedicated himself to helping companies grow by developing executive leadership teams, business leaders and executives into powerful performers. Bruce's adaptable Breakthrough Strategic Business Planning methodology has been specifically designed for small-to-mid-sized companies and is especially valuable for family company challenges. In February of 2012 Bruce published his first book *Front Line Heroes: How to Battle the Business Tsunami by Developing Performance Oriented Cultures*. With a background in psychotherapy, Hodes also has an MBA from Northwestern University and a Masters in Clinical Social Work. Contact Bruce via email at [bhodes@cmiteamwork.com](mailto:bhodes@cmiteamwork.com) or phone at 800-883-7995. Visit his website at [www.cmiteamwork.com](http://www.cmiteamwork.com).



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# The Four Cornerstones of a High Performance Culture, part 2

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### 2. Have High Performance Work Teams throughout your company.

Teams are powerful constructs, and high-performance ones do not spring up by magic. By the same token, business teams are not the answer for every performance issue.

In corporations, while the *talk* is about teams and working together, there is *actually* a focus on individual performance. For the most part, there is no formal practice designed to enhance or improve group performance.

High-performance teams are ‘a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and a working approach in which they hold themselves mutually accountable.’ This definition of real teams comes from the article *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Katzenbach and Smith. Real teams are basic units of performance, and members of the team are mutually accountable for the results. This is quite different from how most of the work world is organized.

When a group takes on mutual accountability for customers’ experiences, it can generate real customer-focused actions. From this, tangible and positive business results will occur. At my favorite restaurant, for example, the waiter greets me with my preferred glass of wine, letting me know that Chuck, the chef, has a special dish waiting for my beloved wife, Leslie. Then the bus boy appears and pours Leslie’s water without ice because that is the way she likes it. Everyone is clearly into giving us a personalized, pleasant experience, and we have not even ordered yet.

I have found that having a team design its structure allows the team to develop and perform more quickly. This is because in doing so, the team has to confront the performance issues it will encounter. The process allows for those issues to come to the fore sooner than later, which speeds up the overall process. Once this process is complete, it is important that the team honors and walks the talk that it designed.

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# The Four Cornerstones of a High Performance Culture, part 3

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### 3. Create corporate mission & values that employees are aligned with.

The foundational material — mission and values — of a company can be critical to the overall success of the organization – but they're often forgotten. The corporate mission and values are created by the senior leadership team, captured on posters, and strategically tacked up around the building. Meanwhile, how does a corporate citizen react to this phenomenon? They see it as 'Horse manure!' Whatever is in the mission or values statement is not seen as relevant to the organization's day-to-day operations. In other words, the organization's behavior is not congruent with its declaration of ideals.

However, at their best, a mission (or 'reason for being') and values give an organization a future to live into. This potential future galvanizes and focuses the organization. Whether or not goals are met entirely, movement toward them develops teamwork and is valuable to the company. So how do organizations get to this point?

Some of the following thinking and exercises were inspired by an article called *Building Your Company's Vision*, by Collins and Porras, the authors of *Built to Last*. In the article, the authors describe how to write a reason for being and values.

When thinking about your company's mission, think about purpose. Ask participants in your session to consider the following: What is the purpose of your organization? What would be lost if the organization ceased to exist? What kind of organization would you work for regardless if you got a salary or not, etc.

Now onto values. In this process, when I say 'values,' I mean the right behaviors that will support the business in its interactions with customers and vendors. They are the conduct and beliefs that will support positive and productive interaction between employees. This conduct will support the organization in delivering its reason for being. When working with your leadership team to create values, know that you only need to create between four and six. Too many and you end up with something like you do when you mix all colors: a sort of a purplish, brownish goop.

Start out by asking the group what values they come to work with. Then ask, "If you did not have to work, would you still demonstrate those values and behaviors just because they are the right ones to have?" Here's the kicker: "What values, because they are the right ones, would you want your children to adopt for work?"

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Typically, I ask for more than a one-word answer. If the value is 'integrity,' I ask the group to give me a sentence that describes what integrity means. Everyone then writes their four to six values on flipcharts and posts them on the walls.

Afterward, participants present their values and the group can ask questions. Typically, the group discovers that their values are in the same ballpark, and they find comfort and reassurance in that fact. This is good news.

The next step begins when you split the larger group into smaller groups of five to seven people to develop the organization's values. Ask the groups: "Given our reason for being, what are the four to six behaviors and values that will truly support the business, employees, and customers? What are the 'right' values to have, even if they are not advantageous in some business situations?"

These do not have to incorporate or include any of the team's individual values. They do, however, need to align with them. What this means is that organizational values and individual values cannot go head to head and oppose each other. If a company values diversity and I'm a skinhead who values white supremacy above all else, that could be a problem. However, if one of my personal values is teamwork and the company value is collaboration, clearly there is synergy and alignment.

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# The Four Cornerstones of a High Performance Culture, part 4

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### 4. Strategic planning creates the platform for a healthy company.

Strategic planning is a critical part of growing a successful business. A high performance work culture needs a system that makes sure that employee goals are aligned and everyone is focused on the right stuff.

The fact is that many small- to mid-sized companies do not have a structured process from which to conduct strategic planning. This is like many adults who do not exercise, despite knowing it's good for them. Perfect health isn't guaranteed by regular exercise, but the likelihood of attaining good health is dramatically increased. Strategic breakthrough business guessing/planning works for businesses in much the same way as exercise works for the individual.

The process should take place over two to three months and take three to four days. It is predicated on white papers and dialogue. Listening and understanding are critical. Better research ensures better debate and thinking. "What is a white paper?" you ask hysterically.

A white paper is a three- to five-page paper that addresses the critical issue. The paper should deal directly with the issues. It is, with research and analysis, the 'answer' submitted by the smaller group to the entire planning team.

Once you have created the plan, you need to make sure it is acted upon. Monthly meetings of one to three hours and spending time on objectives and action plans will ensure focus. Then, once a quarter, the planning team should meet offsite, preferably with a coaching resource like yours truly. (Bonus points if the coach is bald-headed. It makes the coach smarter and buffer—really.) At the session, the group will look at what happened in the quarter and then focus on what needs to happen in the next quarter. This will keep everyone aligned on what needs to take place to push the company forward.

So there you have it four steps towards building a high performance culture. Any movement up the slope to establishing these cornerstones will prove valuable. You will also learn by doing. So do not contemplate your next steps - get going. Let us know how you do and what you are learning and developing.

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