All Blacks: A Case Study of a High Performance Team

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to identify the factors facilitating the functioning of a High Performance Team with the help of a real life secondary research (in the form of a case study) on the New Zealand National rugby union team also called the All Blacks. We will understand the concept of High Performance Teams (HPTs) and how certain factors differentiate from other teams and groups. We will then try to understand how the All Blacks rate on these factors based on the information available on the internet like interviews, books etc, and discuss what makes them a high performance team. This study can be useful for managers and employees, who aim to lead and be a part of high performance teams and impart insights about how to make a team an HPT.*

Keywords: high performance team, observational behavior, human resource management, case study

1. Introduction

Today's organisations face an extremely competitive and fast environment, where the need is to become faster, more efficient, more effective and at the same time more employee oriented than ever before. In such a scenario, achieving these goals through teams is crucial for any organisation. First we will try to explain the 'high performance team', and then move on to the definition given by researchers.

Teams and Teamwork
Various definitions for the term 'team' have put forward by researchers such as, Adait (1986), Johnson and Johnson, Kur (1996), and Katzenbach and Smith (1993). Francis and Young (1979) define a team as "*an energetic group of people who are committed to achieving common objectives, who work well together and enjoy doing so, and who produce high-quality results*".

Research has shown that effective use of teams can bring significant enhancement in the productivity, creativity, job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Colenso, 2000). There are essentially three reasons that make teams better than individuals:
- Individuals in a team have different specialised skill sets that can compliment each other, and hence teams are more equipped than any one individual.
- Teams involve brainstorming and real time problem solving through coordination towards common goals of the team members.
- Teams are more engaging and satisfying for the individuals to work in, and can help members socialise with each other; and at the same time help with finances and administration.

Performance can be usually described as a combination of tasperformace (that is, the efficiency and effectiveness of doing a job) and citizenship behavior of the members.

High Performance Teams and factors facilitating them
Kur (1996) defines High Performance Teams (HPTs) as teams that "*consistently satisfy the needs of customers, employees, investors and others in its area of influence*" and a result, "t*hese teams frequently outperform other teams that produce similar products and services under similar conditions and constraints*". Sharp et al. (2000) proposed 6 factors which enables a HPT:
1) Team member competencies;
2) Skills, processes, tools and techniques;
3) Interpersonal skills, communication, personality preferences;
4) Value system;
5) Shared vision, purpose, goals, direction; and
6) Organisational values including openness

Rickards and Moger (1999) called HPTs "*dream teams*" and described seven factors, which distinguished them from "*the teams from hell*" and "*standard teams*" as - *Strong platform of understanding, Shared vision, Creative climate, Ownership of ideas, Resilience to setbacks, Network activators and Learn from experience.*

We find that these factors essentially share the same idea about the attributes possessed by high performance teams.

HPTs have a strong common goal, norms and cultures imbibed deeply into each member, they are motivated and have a good leadership, which leaves space for conflict resolution and open communication. They have talented members, and each member is empowered.

Formation of High Performance Teams
The formation of a high performance team happens through five stages.

Working group- Is a group of people with expertise working together but without any team approach or mutual coordination/accountability. In this stage, there is no such need for a significant performance.

Pseudo team- At this stage, there could be a need for significant performance. However, there are no such measures undertaken for high performance and there is still no common purpose or team spirit. There is a high scope for

the pseudo teams to become potential teams and in order to do this, the group needs to lay down concrete team goals.

Potential team- There is a strong need for significant performance and the group tries hard to improve its real time impact. However, it still lacks clarity on the close ended objectives and disciplines required to work out a smooth and coordinated approach.

Real team- The group becomes a bit smaller where there is mutual accountability and coordination among the members. They are equally committed and engaged towards the common team goals.

High performance team- This group conforms to all the requisites of a real team and has a deep organizational commitment among its members working towards a greater mutual accountability, welfare and sped up growth. This type of a team goes on to outperform its competitors and set new standards.

The Need to study High Performance Teams
Despite the efficiency and effectiveness of high performance teams, and how much they are wanted in every organisation and every field, high performance teams are rare. It is very difficult to bring in that much talent, and synergy amongst talented individuals to form a high performance teams. Nevertheless, research is done to study them, so that managers and employers can gain insights on how to turn their own teams towards an HPT. All employees want to work in an HPT, and all leaders want to lead an HPT. Our study is also a step in understanding HPTs better, using the example of All Blacks.

2. Case Study

About "ALL BLACKS"
Rugby union, commonly known in most of the world as Rugby is New Zealand's national sport. The "All Blacks" are the most successful international men's side of all-time with a winning percentage of 77.21% over 566 Tests (1903-2017). In the past 20 years (1997-2017) since rugby has become a professional sport, the winning percentage has gone up to 84%. And in the past four years (2013-17) it has gone up to 93%. World Rugby introduced a ranking system in October 2003, and All Blacks have held the number one position since 2009. The side also claimed 'World Rugby's Team of the year' title on seven consecutive occasions from 2010-2016.

Their name and distinctive all-black playing strip are well known to rugby and non-rugby fans worldwide. Most of the young New Zealanders aspire to become an All Black. All Blacks have been studied extensively as a High-Performance Team in the last few years.
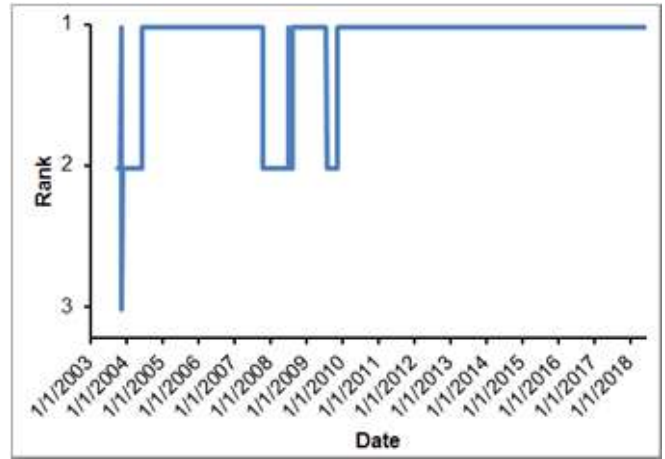

Figure 1: Shows the historical world ranking of the All Blacks, where they have been number 1 in 11 out of 15 years since 2003.

3. Purpose and Goals

- They set long-term goals and move towards achieving it by setting mini goals along the way. For example, At the conclusion of the victorious 2011 World Cup, they set the ultimate objective of being the first team to win back-to-back world cups. Four years out is a long time in sporting terms, and yet they set the aspiration early and focused on it. Simultaneously the Rugby Championship, Bledisloe Cup, and Grand Slam tours all become part of the process on the field.

- The entire organization is crystal clear about the purpose and everyone is aware of what the group is trying to achieve and how are they going to get it.

- Everything is done in such a manner that consistency with achieving the ultimate goal is maintained. For example, off-fieldgoals such as enhancing a likable brand or creating positive role models, all are consistent with their ultimate goal and form part of the building blocks to their success.

- The goals for the players have an *intrinsic dimension*. David Kirk (former captain, All Blacks) says, "*The world-class teams I played with had a vision of pushing back the boundaries of the game—of moving the playing of rugby union onto a higher plane. We were simply trying to play the game better than any team had ever played it before. The opposition was no longer the other teams we played against, but ourselves and the game itself. Opponents were the medium through which we attempted to realize our vision.*"

- Even when they don't have an intrinsic goals, the players are aware about their predecessors and the team's long history of success and therefore blemishing that tradition is something which bothers them. This so called '*Negative vision*' creates a lower limit to the performance and prevents it falling below that level, but it need not lead to a world-class achievement.

Tri Nations (1996–2011)									
Nation	Games			Points			Bonus points	Table points	Championships
	played	won	drawn	lost	for	against	diff			
New Zealand	72	50	0	22	1936	1395	+541	32	232	10
Australia	72	29	1	42	1531	1721	–190	14	152	3
South Africa	72	28	1	43	1480	1831	–351	24	138	3

Rugby Championship (2012–present)									
Nation	Games			Points			Bonus points	Table points	Championships
	played	won	drawn	lost	for	against	diff			
New Zealand	33	30	1	2	1136	540	+596	21	143	5
Australia	33	15	3	15	748	841	–93	7	74	1
South Africa	33	14	3	16	791	774	+17	14	76	0
Argentina	33	3	1	29	576	1096	–520	9	23	0

Figure 2: shows the winning-losing tally for all the World Cup matches played since 2012 and the tri-nations matches before that; with New Zealand clearly leading the tables.

Culture

Rituals
- The All Blacks have developed their own '*haka*' and they perform it before every match. (The haka is a type of ancient Māori war dance traditionally used on the battlefield, as well as when groups came together in peace. Haka is a fierce display of a tribe's pride, strength, and unity. Actions include violent foot-stamping, tongue protrusions and rhythmic body slapping to accompany a loud chant). This has become a distinctive feature of the All Blacks. A link to the video is given in citations.
- *Au, Au, auebā! – It's our time! It's our moment! the final line of the haka, that is performed at the starting of every match.*

Contribution
The contribution of more than 50% of every All Blacks' salary for the growth of the sport is a part of their culture which strengthens the *sense of belongingness* among themselves.

Legacy
- The All Blacks believe that their task is not only to represent all those who have come before them but also the ones who follow. They say, *"As the sun shines on you for this moment, this is your time, it's your obligation and responsibility to add to the legacy – to leave the jersey in a better place."*
- *In 1999 Adidas ran a commercial starting with Charlie Saxton, then the oldest living former All Blacks captain, pulling a jersey over his head and is 'reincarnated' as Fred Allen, the greatest All Blacks captain and coach. In chronological and successive jerseys it created a lineage of leadership to the then captain, Taine Randell.* This captures the essence of leading to sustainability and legacy.
- When a player becomes a part of the All Blacks, he is given a small Black book. The pages of whose shows jerseys from various teams like the 1905 Originals, the 1924 Invincibles, it also includes pages of principles, heroes, values, the ethos and the character of the team. And then the rest of the pages are left blank, waiting to be filled by the player. The All Blacks call it *'Write your legacy'*.

Leadership
- Central to the All Blacks belief is the development of leaders and the nurturing of character off the field, to deliver results on it. This involves a literal and metaphorical handing over of responsibility from management to players so that by *game day the team consists of one captain and 15 leaders*.
- All Blacks more or less follow a *Collective leadership approach*. Rather than an autocratic coaching style, coaching group seeks to become a "*resource*" for the players. Former head coach Graham Henry made pre-match time the team's owner, as part of his devolved leadership plan. He left the players alone as a group to do what they had to do. The coach basically helps the team achieve their goals, by clearing the path for them to do it. This conforms to the *path goal theory of leadership*. The coach and captain merely play the role of *supporting* the team, and do *not direct* every step of the way.
- The team has core leadership group *(ingroup)* of core people who sit alongside the coach and captain. They share the responsibility, contribute to the ideas and ensure that nothing gets missed. They put faith in the members they have selected and given them time to perform, recover from injury, and adapt to changes.
- When the captain retires, they know who will replace him, and they were already talking about who will take over as coach in 2017. This essentially *avoids the uncertainty* in the organization when the leader retires or resigns.

Communication and conflict resolution:
- The new players in the team are made to feel welcome so that they perform and express themselves and become a part of the team.
- There are *open channels of informal communication* amongst the members, and conflicts are resolved easily.

Incentives and motivation:
- The great All Black Captain Richie McCaw once said: *"It's about finding the joy in being an All Black Captain, as opposed to being a burden."* When he got his first All Blacks shirt, he spent a minute with his head buried in the jersey.
- *Intrinsic Motivation -* Protecting and enhancing the legacy of the jersey is one of the central ideas shared by the team. The All Blacks play for honor, for pride, and for the sport of Rugby. Rather than fear of failure, embracing expectations, walking towards the pressure & developing gratitude for the opportunity is the motivator.
- *Organisational Commitment -* They have a high level of organisational commitment, where the players not just play for themself, but see their success secondary to the success of the team. They help each other, and *mentor new players*.

Talent and ethics
- The team focuses on the processes that lead to the outcome. Once the processes are set right, the whole team starts simply following them with a very high sense of discipline, without worrying about the outcome which eventually becomes bound to happen. They are ruthless in their desire to stretch and grow their capability as a team.
- Their mantra is, *'Better people make better All Blacks',*

this emphasizes on personal character, initiative, and team spirit.

- Apart from a **difficult recruitment process** for the team, that gets them the best players, they have a very intense and disciplined training program to hone their skills.
- They have **very high performance standards** set for the team, which make winning a norm for the players.

Norms and Standards

- 'Keep a blue head': All Blacks have a framework to maintain mental balance and think clearly and correctly under moments of extreme pressure:
  - **Red Head** is a state under which a player is off task, results-oriented, panicked and ineffective.
  - **Blue Head**, on the contrary, is an optimal state under which a player is on task and performs to his best ability, expressive and calm at the moment.
- In situations of extreme pressure, the All Blacks use triggers to switch from *Red head* to *Blue head*. Using this strategy player are able to achieve clarity and accuracy to perform well under pressure.
- Humility is core to the culture of All Blacks. One of the examples which depict this is '*Sweep the Sheds*' i.e, before leaving the dressing room at the end of the game, players stop and tidy up the shed.
- The whole team respects 'Time' as none is ever late for training, all the players set their watch ten minutes fast. Even the coach is condemned for arriving late at a team meeting. The norm behind this is, ' *No one is more important than the team*'.

Thus, having a **large number of norms and standards** makes it easier for everyone to follow them, so that everyone performs their best.

4. Conclusion

Understanding the various components of high performing teams can be helpful in creating and developing these types of teams in organizations today. These teams not only have an increased organizational performance but also have a high level of team member satisfaction. A case study of a team like All Blacks can be a starting point for more sport-specific studies with an aim to develop better coaching techniques and more high-performance teams, in sports as well as other fields.

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