SMB | Business Models And Organizational Structure

The Secret to Building High-Performance Teams in a Fragmented World

By **Daniel Lee**
02/11/22 AT 3:41 PM

- Covid-19 has resulted in a greater lack of connection between and among employees during a period of dislocation.

- A survey has identified employee anxiety and burnout, a lack of tools to accelerate collaboration, and a weakened culture in a virtual world as some of the biggest challenges faced by employees.

- Howard M. Guttman, founder of Guttman Development Strategies (GDS) says that, "In a world of global, matrix organizations, it's about thinking horizontally, driving up EQ, and rapid, transparent issue resolution."

Photo: Howard M. Guttman

I t has been almost two years since the global Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the norm, and since then organizations have been struggling to come up with innovative and effective ways of reaching their business targets. Internationally, CEOs, shareholders, and employees face the issue of fragmented teams, decreased productivity, and eroding ethos, as well as the effect that the "new normal" is having on employees' well-being.

A survey of chief human resource officers concluded that the biggest challenges that businesses now face are: "employee anxiety and burnout (51%); a lack of tools to accelerate collaboration, creativity, and coaching (47%); and weakened culture in a virtual world (41%)." Companies all over the world are struggling to ensure resilience and flexibility within the workforce during these volatile times.

It is imperative that businesses find a way to increase productivity while maintaining the well-being of their employees. Management consultants at Guttman Development Strategies, are providing solutions to companies, ranging from GlaxoSmithKline to Keurig Dr Pepper to Walmart, which are intent on building and maintaining high-performance teams.

Howard M. Guttman, founder of Guttman Development Strategies (guttmandev.com), commented: "In a world of global, matrix organizations, it's about establishing EQ.

It's also about changing mindsets, skill sets, and moving to a horizontal business model, where decision-making is distributed, and issues are rapidly confronted and resolved transparently. In a time of increased pressure and disconnection, major companies recognize the importance of developing cohesive teams of engaged leaders, rather than followers, who are more passionately committed to competing with competitors than with each other."

Vertical Integration and Horizontal, High-Performing Teams

Top-down decision-making, functional silos, vertical information flows, and chains of command—these are hallmarks of hierarchical organizations. They lead to built-in inefficiencies and a lack of agility. This way of operating is not sustainable, given the uncertainty, supply-chain scarcity, and financial and human performance management issues facing today's wired, virtual organizations.

There is a superior, horizontal, high-performance alternative that Guttman and his team have helped dozens of organizations, in many countries, put in place. It is characterized by streamlined structures; rapid, distributed

decision-making; the replacement of silos cross-functional, high-performance teams, and a culture of accountability. These high-performing organizations are able to move rapidly from idea to "done" without all the noise.

For many senior executives who have come up through the ranks of traditional hierarchical organizations, rethinking the issue of accountability has proven challenging. Leaders who have embraced the horizontal approach have found that the most difficult aspect of working in a high-performance, horizontal team environment is getting peers to hold peers accountable, which is a counter-intuitive notion.

Guttman's process is a unique combination of consulting, coaching, and leadership-capabilities development. The firm works to create horizontal, high-performing teams that are "strategically and operationally in sync." The ultimate goal is to break through the old leader-follower paradigm to create teams of leaders that are driven by clear goals, hold one another—including the leader—accountable, and operate as mini boards of directors. They share a set of common ground rules for decision-making, deal with conflict head-on, and work together transparently to achieve results.

Creating Better Team Connection and Alignment

Guttman emphasizes that communication is key and points out that in high-performance organizations the pattern and content of communication differ from the traditional hierarchical model. As a senior CHRO of a major California-based healthcare company and Guttman client explains, "In the hierarchical approach, communication is very guarded and characterized by just-in-time responses. If you ask, you'll get information, but it's not offered up voluntarily." In horizontal, high-performance organizations, channels through which information flows are well defined and move not just up and down but across functions and business units. Protocols are in place to ensure effective communication, whether it's face-to-face, voice-to-voice, or screen image-to-image. On a personal level, high-performance communication involves mastery of a new set of skills, typified by the experience of a Guttman client who is the CEO of a company that builds major infrastructures: "I learned to avoid asking leading questions, to depersonalize, and to not edit what someone was saying, but to first try to understand the other person."

Transforming to High-Performance Teams

The leadership-team alignments that Guttman conducts build a high-performance culture and team-focused behaviors. They result in transforming senior-leadership teams to horizontal, high-performance ones, which function as mini boards of directors, fully aligned on strategy, business deliverables, roles and responsibilities, decision-making ground rules, and business relationships. The high-performance culture and ways of working evolves to key teams throughout the organization.

Team alignments are supported by individual leadership coaching, in which consultants work one-on-one with executives to help them adapt to and work effectively within the organization's new horizontal, high-performance environment. These coaching sessions equip executives with the tools they need to excel in an environment focused on cross-functional engagement, transparency, peer accountability, rapid issue resolution, and conflict management.

For many leaders, operating within a horizontal, high-performance framework is counterintuitive. It's a challenge to break the tell-and-execute ethos of traditional organizations. It requires a new set of skills, ranging from emotional intelligence to active listening to influencing others to improving the ability to lead.

The CEO of a major consumer goods company once described the Guttman Development Strategies difference this way: "Guttman goes there." The Guttman approach is data driven, unafraid to raise the tough "elephant in the room" issues that are often shunted aside, and then work to resolve them collaboratively. GDS's client-centered approach is tailored to each individual client, taking into account factors such as the organization's cultural nuances and internal dynamics.

End Note

The last several years have been a pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you moment for most organizations. All the old compass points of routine and stability have shifted. The new "social-distance" reality, in which virtual teams are ubiquitous, creates challenges from how we lead, manage, and monitor performance to how we communicate and build relationships. The basic elements of horizontal, high-performance ways of working, with their focus on team alignment, transparency, "we" rather than me/my function, peer accountability, straight talk, ground rules for decision-making and conflict resolution, and business results, make it a superior model, tailored for the transformational challenges organizations face now and well into the future.