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player in the high-quality hygiene, health, and nutrition segments. Reckitt produces such well-known brands as Durex, Enfamil, Gaviscon, Mucinex, Dettol, Lysol, Harpic, Finish, Airwick, Woolite, and Vanish.

In this issue, Volker Kuhn, president of Reckitt Hygiene, discusses building a high-performance team that brings speed, agility, innovation, and customer centricity to a hypercompetitive landscape. Howard M. Guttman's column provides startups with a proven way to create lasting value and drive success. And check out Howard's video on managing conflict "for real!"

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Leader's Corner: Hygiene and HPT at Reckitt

Reckitt Hygiene is an \$8 billion global business unit that operates in many different product categories, from surface disinfectants to toilet cleaners and dishwasher detergents to fabric care and insect repellents. What drives your business?

Our mission at Reckitt Hygiene is not just a statement but a real commitment to improving consumers' lives. We strive to help consumers solve hygiene and health-related problems as they go about their daily tasks. Take Lysol, for instance, a product invented in 1889 to fight cholera and, later, the Spanish flu. It is still helping us fight epidemics, having played a crucial role in keeping everyone safe from the spread of COVID-19. It has grown over time to a billion-dollar brand that is trusted by millions of consumers to protect them and their loved ones from germs every day. To live our mission, we must better understand consumers, innovate to provide better solutions, and execute better than competitors. And we must do all this with agility and speed. A perfect example of this, to stay with Lysol, is the recent development and very successful launch of the first-ever air sanitizer approved by the EPA under the Lysol brand in the United States. During COVID-19, we focused on the insight that germs and viruses are spread through air and leveraged our superior science to come up with a solution that consumers love.

How do you cut through all the clutter so that your brands achieve a high share of mind among global consumers?

First, fast-moving consumer goods is a highly competitive industry. Its products are used daily and purchased frequently. Second, there is no such thing as a global consumer and a one-size-fits-all marketing approach. We understand that our consumers are diverse and have unique needs. Therefore, we need a big idea that opens minds and hearts of local consumers and delivers it effectively to all those we target. Our "global consumers" live in Nashville, Guangzhou, Sydney, Mumbai, Paris, and Nairobi. For instance, in China, we reach consumers largely through an influencer selling approach on a channel like TikTok, but in Pakistan we use direct door-to-door marketing.

What are your "sleep stoppers?"

I'm a very good sleeper, but there are things that I worry about! First and most importantly, I want to be sure that we focus squarely on our consumers—understand their needs, innovate to delight them, and serve them better than anyone else. There are also the classical macroeconomic and geopolitical concerns in our VUCA [Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity] world. I am also concerned about making the right strategic decisions regarding where we play, how we win, and how we deploy our human and financial capital.

How do you avoid getting “Kodaked,” in the way that that company didn't anticipate the impact of digital photography?

Keep the focus on consumers, how to improve their lives, and the evolving science and technology landscape. Be the disrupter! Use the latest advances in science and technology to rethink your product/market mix and approach. If you're not the disrupter, you will be disrupted one day. When you focus on the balance sheet, P&L and cash flow, and protecting what you have rather than on new, improved ways to serve your consumers and customers, it's often the beginning of the end.

When did you begin your high-performance journey with GDS?

We started in 2022, after I became president of Hygiene in March 2021.

What lit the spark?

Building high-performance teams is critical to the success of any business. It starts with the senior team. In the same way that a fish rots from the head down, organizations rot—or rise—beginning at the top. I was driven to have the right players in place and develop them into a high-performance team. For that, I engaged Guttman Development Strategies to help us take the journey.

What did you want to change in your leadership behavior?

I didn't have any one specific objective in mind. I spent 26 years with another company, so I wanted to be sure that I had the agility to adapt and adjust and the right structure and process to create a winning, high-performance senior-executive team.

What needed to change on your senior team?

For one, we had to take a big step back. Our company was about to go through a split with an IPO to create a separate hygiene company. Many members of my leadership team were looking forward to the new future. Then, when a new Group CEO came aboard, the decision was made to keep Hygiene within Reckitt. The team had to embrace the new reality and excel at taking both the Reckitt and Hygiene journeys. This meant ensuring that the team was aligned on the new vision, strategy, goals, and day-to-day operations and behaviors. There were also issues related to decision speed, functional thinking, and conflict management.

Like many team leaders, you had to transition to a post-COVID reality. What did you learn?

It was challenging! During COVID-19, we never really worked together physically. After the epidemic, some team members knew each other, while others were new. Nothing beats the informal social connections of face-to-face interaction, which facilitates group discussion, debate, and brainstorming. The biggest challenge in working virtually was to keep innovation and ideation going. In moving back to a traditional, collocated team, I learned that it was important to take time to get to know one another, know one another's life journeys, and understand the trigger points that can distract from performance.

What were the steps in your high-performing journey?

We began the journey with a partially new, partially existing team that is based in different parts of the world. We started by spending two intense days getting to know each other: our life stories, careers, and vulnerabilities. We provided feedback to one another about what makes us special and how to enhance each of our “superpowers.” This helped to build mutual respect and trust. We also focused on team dynamics. No more “prisoners” or “vacationers” in meetings, just players! We implemented a team-meeting process, which, amazingly, didn't feel like some artificial set of constraints but a natural flow of how we should interact.

What have you and your team done to ensure that the work done in the alignment session “sticks?”

We hold quarterly face-to-face team meetings in which focusing on high-performance team dynamics is a key part. Before each meeting, Thom and Wendy, our GDS consultants, interview each team member to assess progress and concerns. They also attend our meetings as coaches to provide feedback on what they've learned in pre-meeting interviews with team members, compare where we are now to where we were, and ensure in real time that we're functioning as a high-performance team.

What difference has the high-performance journey made thus far?

We've made many positive changes in team behavior. Some have been major, such as developing a better understanding of individual character and cultural differences—not easy for a diverse global team. We've also made minor ones, such as removing all desks from our meetings to avoid laptop temptation. We're focusing on meeting objectives, focused discussions, time management, and calling one another out when going down rabbit holes. We've significantly improved top- and bottom-line business growth, consistently delivering top-tier industry growth and profitability. Overall, we're much stronger now.

What's the biggest lesson you've learned while taking the high-performance team journey?

The Guttman approach to coaching “in the flow” of meetings had a huge impact. At first, we were very skeptical. There was no fixed agenda or tight structure. The GDS coaches just attended the meetings, followed the flow, and guided the team when needed. It was an organic, customized approach. It was an eye-opening experience. Our skepticism soon dissolved as we saw the magic.

Was your high-performance journey worth it?

Yes! Sports teams have coaches, but business teams often don't. That's a big mistake. The high-performance journey helped us improve our behavior and business performance, prepared us to better meet the challenges ahead, and facilitated onboarding new team members. It's a journey that never stops and will continue to be critical for our success. 🌱

From Startups to High-Performance Standouts

Howard M. Guttman



Startups and high-performance organizations. Are these two concepts in sync, or are they polar, irreconcilable opposites? Consider some of the challenges facing leaders of startups: cash squeeze, the need for results “now,” no safety net for missteps, edgy investors, CEO founders who are often more high tech than high touch, difficulty attracting and retaining talent, perpetual firefighting—the list goes on. Leaders of startups can be excused if they’re focused on just getting things done rather than getting things done right.

Not raising their heads above the fray to create a horizontal, high-performance way of leading and operating comes at a price. We recently worked with an early-phase pharmaceutical startup that had been underwritten with a \$50 million dollar venture-capital investment. The leader and her top team were heavy on technical competency but light on evolving and growing a company, communicating authentically, holding peers accountable, involving others, and using a common process for setting priorities and making decisions.

The senior leaders in this startup had the brains but were unconsciously incompetent regarding how to create the organizational context in which high-performance teams and ways of working prevail. This impeded the top team’s ability to scale the company, attract talent, and harness the entire organization’s brainpower to drive results. The company was stuck running in place.

If you’re operating in a make-or-break startup environment—as the leaders of most startups are—focus on the high-performance essentials:

- Do we have a clear, compelling vision and strategy that articulate our basic values; why we are in business; our competitive advantage; and the critical product, market, capability, and financial choices needed to put our vision into action? Can our senior leader and others on the top team inspire and enroll others to live the strategy?
- Are our planning, priority setting, and day-to-day decision making aligned with our strategy?
- Are roles and responsibilities clear?

- Do we have a common process for making decisions and for involving the “critical few?”
- Are we all pulling in the same direction and comfortable “going there” with colleagues to make course corrections?

Startup environments favor agility and leaders who think like entrepreneurs. These leaders must be capable of aggressively seeking product/market opportunities within the strategy’s framework; remaining adaptable in a changing environment; and being flexible in the face of setbacks, which are inevitable in early-stage startups.

Here are five capabilities that are essential for startup leaders:

- 1. Coachability**—the ability to turn the spotlight inward to assess where you excel, where you fall short, and where you need support to close the gap
- 2. Choosing**—the ability to make decisions rapidly, using a common process for selecting the best alternative, setting priorities, and determining how decisions get made—unilaterally, consultatively, or by consensus
- 3. Collaboration**—the ability to work jointly with stakeholders, from the investor group and Board to teams across the organization
- 4. Communication**—the ability to clearly and persuasively articulate the vision and strategy, convey vulnerability, provide and accept feedback, and walk the talk
- 5. Conflict management**—the ability to have tough, fair-minded conversations; create a safe environment for expressing disagreements; and establish ground rules for resolving differences

In the pharmaceutical startup that we mentioned earlier, we worked with the top team to create a horizontal, high-performance environment. As a result, the senior leaders extricated themselves from their one-dimensional, technical

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From Startups to High-Performance Standouts

focus to think more expansively about the organization: what norms should guide it; what needed to evolve in infrastructure, processes, and protocols; and what high-performance expectations should guide behavior. Decisions were no longer bogged down in endless debate. Having a common process and language increased decision speed and decreased meeting fatigue. With less player dependency on her, the CEO found more time to think strategically, interact with investors, and hunt for additional funding sources. This startup is now moving forward.

While the benefits of moving startups to the horizontal, high-performance model are undeniable, there is a gravitational pull favoring the status quo. For one, startup leaders tend to be unaware of what a high-performance organization looks like. They have never run one. They often have high control needs and are occupied playing a Maslow survival game. This keeps them riveted on the financials. Many startup leaders tend to be technical experts and one-dimensional thinkers.

All this puts a premium on providing leaders of startups with an understanding of organizational context and the dynamics needed to optimize performance and create value. The high-performance, horizontal model provides leaders, their teams, and everyone in the organization with the strategic and organizational context—the structure, processes, capabilities, and behaviors, all aligned with the strategy—needed to power up the organization to achieve rapid results and lasting value.

In my initial conversations with startup leaders, I emphasize the need for the early adoption of high-performance principles and ways of working. This speeds up the transition. Rather than lecturing them, I ask for informal meetings with a few key players to assess the current situation. It is not unusual for these to reveal glitches in decision-making, conflict management, performance management, keeping one another engaged and informed, and thinking beyond functions. Holding up a mirror to the “as is” is an eye-opener!

In our consulting experience, we have found that startups and high performance are not necessarily polar opposites. They can be synergistic. If you are a leader intent on turning your startup into a high-value standout, begin—and begin early on—by taking the high-performance journey.



Conflict Management for Real

by Howard M. Guttman

Today's workplace is home to five generations, from The Silent Generation to Gen Z, making it a breeding ground for conflict. Take Howard M. Guttman's short course on turning conflict into productive disagreements and "win-wins." 

