

# High Performing Clinical Research Teams

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**T**eam building has become a catchphrase in companies around the world, but the concept is even more relevant in clinical research. Teams operating at a high level of efficiency are vital to the success of clinical trials. How can such teams be created, and how do they evolve over time?

The clinical research environment has become highly competitive. Those involved in the clinical research process are under increased pressure to maximize the use of limited resources and to complete studies quickly. This constant time and resource pressure takes its toll on the quality of life at work. What can we do about this situation? We can develop high performing clinical research teams.

## Why High Performing Teams?

Clinical research is a team activity. There is no aspect of the clinical research process that does not require individuals to work together to accomplish their goals. In the past, the clinical research team was seen as the sponsor's clinical research internal staff: CRAs/monitors, site managers, project managers, clinical trial supplies coordinators, and administrative support. With the changing regulatory and competitive envi-

ronment, this definition has expanded in recent years to include: the sponsor, investigators and site staff, CROs, SMOs, and other suppliers who contribute to the successful completion of trials.

Teams that interact in a highly effective, efficient manner have a direct impact on the success of a clinical trial. Furthermore, these high performing teams can accomplish the following:

- decrease R&D timelines
- make the most effective use of resources
- maximize individual and team potential

Clearly, a high performing team is beneficial to the goals of clinical researchers.

## Characteristics of a High Performing Team

An understanding of what constitutes a high performing team and how you can



**CHARACTERISTICS**

- ◆ clearly defined purpose and goals
- ◆ complementary skills
- ◆ agreed working approach/process
- ◆ mutual accountability
- ◆ open communication
- ◆ shared leadership
- ◆ trust
- ◆ collaborative skills
- ◆ ability to resolve conflicts
- ◆ opportunities for play and celebration

contribute to the creation and maintenance of this kind of team will allow you to develop and create this environment in your workplace. What are the characteristics of a high performing team? The list in the box below combines the observations of a number of important researchers in this area.

Each of these characteristics can be explained in greater detail individually.

**Clearly defined purpose and goals:** Team members must agree on their purpose as a team and what they plan to accomplish. Agreement is key, and may take some clarifying in the early stages of a team's development.

**Complementary skills:** The team must include people with the necessary knowledge and skills to accomplish the agreed goals. A range of skills will be needed. Skills that complement each other may not make the initial going as smooth, but it will enrich both the process and outcome.

**Agreed working approach/process:** Team members must come to an agreement about how the work will be done. Sorting out how the team will work together, what roles and responsibilities will be, and how you will interact are all parts of this process.

**Mutual accountability:** Individuals on the team must be accountable to each other for what they promise to do and for their roles and responsibilities. Team members must be able to challenge lapses in this accountability, to avoid unspoken hostility and resentment. This accountability is key in developing trust, ensuring that communication channels are kept open, and accomplishing the goals of the team.

**Open communication:** Channels for listening to other team members and being heard as an individual are key to a high performing team. Interactions should provide opportunities to solicit feelings and ideas. This communication includes the ability to provide feedback, both positive and negative. Negative feedback should always be constructive, never a

personal attack, and should further the goals of the team.

**Shared leadership:** This approach may be a unique concept to some. The leadership function serves the team best when all members take on that role at some time during the team's life. Team members can demonstrate leadership in a variety of ways, such as facilitating a discussion or suggesting alternative solutions.

**Trust:** Trust among team members will facilitate communication, collaboration, and problem solving. Trust is built and supported by open communication and mutual accountability.

**Collaborative skills:** Shared goals form the basis of effective collaboration. The ability to collaborate raises team performance to a higher level by bringing several team members' knowledge and skills into play. The capacity to deal creatively with obstacles is increased when team members are receptive to helping one another.

**Ability to resolve conflicts:** Conflict will inevitably arise in team interactions. The ability to resolve those conflicts effectively will make a crucial difference in the team's performance.

**Opportunities for play and celebration:** All work and no play not only makes for a dull team, but can inhibit positive team interactions. Celebrating successes allows the team to acknowledge its accomplishments, have a sense of closure, and move on to the next challenge.

## Skills Development for High Performing Teams

Now that you know what the characteristics of a high performing team are, how can we take that knowledge and make it useful? The next step in having a high performing team in your workplace is to develop skills that support the existence of a high performing team. In the clinical research environment, this range of skills is broad and challenging. Some examples follow:

- *Getting agreement/reaching consensus* about a working approach/process is difficult when there is no authority relationship, e.g. a colleague in another department whose skills are needed to quickly relabel some clinical supplies, and a site that has their own procedures for conducting an investigation that is in conflict with the study protocol.
- *Mutual accountability and open communication* are particularly challenging when so much communication is done via electronic means and at a distance, e.g. e-mail, fax, and the Internet.
- *Trust* cannot be developed overnight. It requires time and shared experiences. Team members have to work hard to achieve trust in an environment that has changing team membership and revolving sites and suppliers.

Some ways in which high performing team skills can be developed include:

- learning the process for successfully obtaining consensus as a team, practicing it in a learning setting, and then applying what was learned to the team
- practising conflict situations with a colleague to test how one's approach may be received
- trying to put yourself in the other person's shoes: practise the same conflict scenario with yourself as the person you are having the conflict with
- understanding how our own assumptions influence how we communicate, what we say, and how we taking a chance in team settings to try out new skills: set goals for yourself, and take small steps, one at a time, toward those goals.

## The Evolution of Teams

The foundation for understanding how high performing teams work, as well as how they can be created and nurtured, is an understanding of group development. To find out what characterizes this particular form of human interaction,

Team Stage	Behaviors
Forming	Initial stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>getting to know team members</li> <li>how do I and my skills fit in?</li> </ul>
Storming	Conflictual stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>power struggles</li> <li>questioning of the leadership</li> <li>desire to be self-directed</li> </ul>
Norming	Maintenance stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>increased trust between team members</li> <li>more cohesion</li> <li>increased ownership</li> </ul>
Performing	Results stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>task-oriented: bulk of the work is accomplished in this stage</li> <li>self-directed</li> <li>team members are able to manage their own conflicts, timelines, problem-solving</li> <li>acceptance of each other</li> </ul>
Adjourning	Final stage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>may regress to earlier stage</li> <li>apprehension</li> <li>not knowing how to bring closure</li> <li>celebration of accomplishments</li> </ul>

researchers have long scrutinized groups, i.e. teams. They have found that teams go through stages over time. Tuckman, et al., outlined the details of the (adapted) chart below, which explains the stages of team development.

Some statements or thoughts we might hear or think in each of these stages are:

■ **Forming:**

- “These other people seem to know each other pretty well. How am I going to fit in here?”
- “What kinds of norms should we have in this group? How about making sure everyone gets a chance to be heard?”
- “Do I have to be at this meeting? I have so much work to do.”

■ **Storming:**

- “Why does that person always have to be taking over the group? I thought we were going to share leadership on this team.”

- “I’m concerned that we are heading in the wrong direction with this site. If we don’t deal with them at the beginning, we’re going to get way behind in patient recruitment.”
- “This team is just not working. I’m not sure I can continue to work with these people.”

■ **Norming:**

- “I think we need to reach a consensus here. Let’s hear from everybody and then come to a decision. What are people’s views about how to deal with the late delivery of replacement drug?”
- “My, is today’s meeting a relief from how we were operating last month! Everybody is so much more relaxed.”
- “One of our norms is to show up for meetings on time. Since Dave is late, I think we should start anyway, and he’ll catch up.”

■ **Performing:**

- “Let’s take this decision off-line. We don’t need to involve the whole group to decide.”
- “I think Carol is too swamped to take that on at the moment. Who can take care of making that phone call?”

■ **Adjourning:**

- “I don’t know how we’re supposed to resolve this problem. Let’s call a meeting.”
- “That was our last meeting, and nobody even said anything about never meeting again, including me.”
- “I think we should celebrate the completion of this study. Let’s get together for dinner after all the data is in.”

Take note of the stages that a team must go through before they reach the performing stage, when much of the work gets done. A team’s work consists of not only the tasks to be completed, but also the process of becoming a team. There is a great deal of pressure to have a high performing team immediately, or after a workshop or two. This expectation is simply not realistic. Team members often must work on the team development process as much as they do on the tasks at hand in order to reach high performing team status. While that task may seem daunting to some, the rewards for the individual, the team, and the organization are as unlimited as human potential. To paraphrase what John Seely Brown of Xerox Corporation once said, “It’s when you bring [team skills and cognitive ability] together that you can create magic.” How inspiring our workplaces would be, if we went there every day to create magic!

Teams may try to skip stages, particularly the storming stage, in order to avoid difficult situations or to speed up the process. The team will never progress to high performing efficacy without going through the preceding stages. Therefore, it may be helpful for team members to know about team stages, so that everyone knows what to

expect, what is normal, and that there are rewards on the other side of each stage.

Teams may also cycle through stages, returning to an earlier stage to resolve unfinished issues. This “recycling” is also quite normal for a team, and can be anticipated.

## Team Leadership

Team leadership competencies have direct benefits on product development time: pharmaceutical company teams with individuals trained in team leadership skills had a 30% reduction in product development time in a 1990 study. These teams also had higher morale and esprit de corps.

Leadership, whether it is shared by all members of a team or not, has to evolve along with the team itself. The style of leadership that worked in the early, forming stage will not be nearly as effective when the team is in the self-sufficient performing stage. Adaptive leadership is one way to look at different leadership styles, and may include matching the leadership style to the stage that the team is in. For example, a more directive style would work best in the forming stage, when the team is trying to find its way and needs some guidance. The storming stage is always difficult for teams, and would benefit from a coaching style that would allow team members to work through their conflicts. In the norming stage, individual ownership begins to take place, so leaders only need to support team members in their activities. During the performing stage, teams are highly effective on their own, and leaders may take the role of delegator. Given the repeat cycling that happens through team stages, the line between these styles of leadership is not clearly defined.

The ability to utilize a range of leadership styles is a learned skill and requires time and effort to develop. It is a rare individual, if any in fact do exist at all, who can successfully utilize the necessary style for every situation. Therefore, shared leadership benefits the team greatly, since you can draw on the skills of everyone on the team and their range of strengths.

Shared leadership also helps the team by empowering individual members. Ken Blanchard and his colleagues rightly said, “Empowerment is not giving people power—they already have it.” Allowing people to exercise power is a significant aid to team development and to achieving the team’s goals.

High performing teams are like living entities that evolve over time. The process of becoming a high performing team is an ongoing one. The team skills presented here are goals in themselves, and high performing teams are always working toward these goals and improving their process. It requires work, sometimes difficult, but inevitably rewarding in terms of the team’s accomplishments, the individual’s development, and the organization’s R&D performance. “There is a longing in each of us to invest in things that matter,” stated Peter Block in his book, *Stewardship*. A high performing team in the workplace is one worthy investment. ☐

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