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PERSPECTIVES

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Some teams, by the very nature of their work, must consistently perform at the highest levels. How do you—as a team leader, as a supervisor, as a trainer, or as an outside coach—ensure that this happens?

To answer that question, we sought out a number of people who have worked with teams in settings where high performance is crucial: Michael Hillmann, deputy chief of the Los Angeles Police Department and commander of its Special Operations Bureau, which includes the SWAT team; Philippe Dongier, who headed up a joint United Nations/World Bank/Asian Development Bank reconstruction team in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban; the National Fire Academy's Robert Murgallis, who trains firefighting teams; Mary Khosh, the former career coach for players on the Cleveland Browns of the National Football League; Elizabeth Allen, a planner of society weddings, charity galas, and corporate events; and Ray Evernham, who, as a stock-car-racing crew chief, helped driver Jeff Gordon win three NASCAR championships. The following commentaries—drawn from interviews with each of the authors—offer an array of perspectives on developing and managing high-performing teams.

The types of teams represented here are very different. Some are ad hoc, formed for a specific task, while others are ongoing, typically improving their performance with each task they undertake. Some have a clearly defined leader, while others make decisions more collaboratively. Even when there is a clear hierarchy, some teams require a leader who micromanages whereas others rely on the individual initiative of their members. The teams may be composed of people with similar or very different personalities and areas of expertise. And success is measured in very different ways: the buzz of excited conversation and media coverage generated by a successful society wedding versus the little noticed resolution of a potentially explosive situation by a SWAT unit.

For all these teams, however, the stakes are high. And despite their differences, some similarities emerge in the ways they achieve top-

level performance. For example, selection of team members is crucial—as is a willingness to get rid of members who don't consistently deliver outstanding performance. A leader who supports and builds confidence in team members is also important—and high-performance teams without such a leader will often informally create one. Finally, the stress that defines the work of these teams in itself helps generate peak short-term performance—and poses the constant risk that members will eventually burn out.

Are lessons gleaned from such teams transferable to teams working in other environments? Certainly some of them are: Just ask the U.S. Army, which has studied NASCAR pit crews for ways to reduce the time their medevac teams take to get injured soldiers off the battlefield. And even those lessons that aren't directly transferable may suggest ways to improve the achievements of your own high-performance team.

When a suspect walks out of a building and raises a rifle to the head of a hostage, a SWAT marksman doesn't wait for the command to shoot.

Life-or-Death Tactics

by Michael R. Hillmann

Michael R. Hillmann is the **deputy chief of the Los Angeles Police Department** and the commanding officer of the department's Special Operations Bureau, including the **Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team**, of which he was one of the earliest members.

On February 28, 1997, three members of our Special Weapons and Tactics team heard over their police radio: "Officer needs help; shots fired." The call came from North Hollywood, where two suspects—heavily armed with automatic weapons and wearing body armor—had held up a Bank of America branch, shooting and injuring a number of people in the process. The SWAT officers, acting on their own initiative, drove to the scene and plunged into the thick of a firefight between the suspects and regular police officers already at the scene. As one of the suspects was about to carjack a bystander's vehicle, SWAT members shot and killed him and his cohort—thus preventing them from escaping into the surrounding community and doing any further harm.

By contrast, the SWAT unit several weeks ago got a report from the Foothill area that a vehicle belonging to a suspected gang member recently seen brandishing a firearm was parked at a residence. A SWAT team, led by their tactical team leader, arrived and systematically evacuated the surrounding neighborhood. Although a female leaving the house told SWAT personnel that no one was in the building, a probe of the exterior by a canine team determined people were indeed inside. Team members covertly entered the house and, using sophisticated electronic equipment, found the suspect and two others hidden in the attic, along with a stock of handguns. The three men—one of whom, it turned out, was suspected of involvement in several recent homicides—were taken into custody. Not a shot was fired.

These two incidents, one extraordinary and one very typical, together highlight a key characteristic of a successful SWAT team: the ability of members both to make quick and courageous decisions on their own and to work systematically and methodically as part of a highly coordinated group. When a suspect walks out of a building and raises a rifle to the head of a hostage, a SWAT marksman doesn't wait for the command to shoot. But if that same suspect has barricaded himself with others in a building, the team needs to execute a synchronized plan of action, from initiating negotiations to covertly removing door locks to creating a diversion that will draw attention away from colleagues entering the building.

This combination of individual initiative and disciplined teamwork requires a certain type of person, which means that selection of team members is crucial. When the Los Angeles Police Department formed the nation's first SWAT team in 1966 in response to a growing number of unusually violent and dangerous situations, it was staffed with volunteers, many of them Vietnam veterans using their own equipment. But in the following years, there were incidents—a deadly shoot-out at 4115 South Central Avenue involving members of the Black Panther Party, a confrontation at 54th and Compton with members of the Symbionese Liberation Army during which 9,000 rounds were fired—that made us realize we needed more than a volunteer organization of committed officers. We needed a budget and training and a formal selection process.

Over the years, we've developed selection criteria based on a number of key personal traits, including self-discipline, perseverance, maturity, loyalty, and, crucially, the ability to work as part of a team. Officers applying to

join the SWAT unit—already screened on the basis of their physical condition and their work record within the LAPD's elite Metropolitan Division—go through a six-day selection process. The grueling test includes time in "Hogan's Alley," a mock street scene where candidates are confronted with surprise situations in which they must instantly decide, among other things, whether or not to shoot at a suspect. There are obstacle courses designed to test the physical reserves of candidates so that we can see whether they are able to think clearly and make correct decisions when they are exhausted or even hurt. And a series of exercises—for example, a six-mile group orienteering test over rough terrain—show us whether an individual is a good team player. It's important to add that the majority of candidates who don't make the cut are treated with honor and dignity and their tremendous effort during the six-day trial is acknowledged.

Passing the test doesn't guarantee a permanent place in the 67-member SWAT platoon. If someone fails a physical fitness qualification more than once, he is removed from regular SWAT duties until he can pass the test. The fitness requirement is a measure of whether someone is really committed to SWAT duties.

Despite the high ongoing standards, membership in the unit is very stable. The average SWAT team tenure is 14 years for supervisors and eight years for officers, and people sometimes turn down promotions within the department to stay in the unit. This consistency is crucial to the team's ability to work together and carry out its mission: to defuse violence and save lives.

A Country at Stake

by Philippe Dongier

From November 2001 to February 2004, **Philippe Dongier** (pdongier@worldbank.org) was the **Manager for Afghanistan Reconstruction** at the World Bank in Washington, DC. He now leads a task force aimed at enhancing organizational effectiveness within the World Bank.

Crisis is a powerful motivator. That truth was brought home in 2001 when I led a joint team preparing the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan following the defeat of the Taliban. The team included approximately 60 colleagues from the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations, and the World Bank. Our mission was to help set Afghanistan on the path to reconstruction and development.

The urgency of the situation in Afghanistan focused our minds sharply. We all knew that the country could easily fall back into conflict if the government did not show rapid results. Because the international community was keen to get started as quickly as possible, we had just one month to conduct a needs assessment in order to guide how much assistance donors would pledge and how help would initially be channeled to the country.

The team met the challenges and delivered. We consulted with many Afghans, analyzed all possible data, fleshed out a vision of what needed to be achieved over the next ten years, and prepared plans and cost estimates. Building on the needs assessment and the subsequent work done with the Afghan government, the city of Kabul doubled its power supply in one year. By the end of 2004, about a third of the country's 20,000 villages were receiving grants and implementing small reconstruction projects such as those for water supply, schools, and roads. These villages also conducted secret-ballot elections to choose leaders to manage the projects—and the majority of the women voted despite expectations to the contrary. During the same period, basic health services expanded in almost all of the country's 34 provinces. In Helmand province, for example, the number of functioning health clinics has increased from six to 42. These are just some examples of the progress that has been made in Afghanistan.

That progress has largely come about because the government espoused the team's recommendation of hiring private firms and not-for-profit organizations to design and run many of the country's reconstruction programs, guided by a cadre of outstanding Afghan government officials. In parallel, the government set in motion longer-term reforms of the civil service. Arriving at such a strategy usually takes years of debate between aid organizations and the governments being helped—and the strategy is rarely so clear and shared by key players.

When the team began its work, we found it was important to step back and take a moment to define our roles. We had to be selective in deciding who was going to produce what, as opposed to just rushing into action in many directions. Probably because of the pressure,

team members needed little convincing to stay focused on true priorities. Clear accountability helped generate results.

Furthermore, high team performance didn't require micromanagement. To be effective, I had to step back from the details and play a support role that, in the end, proved crucial to the team's success. It was important, for example, to keep the teams linked with one another. The group focusing on the health sector needed to remain in contact with those focusing on water supply, for obvious reasons. As overall team leader, one of my roles was to ensure this communication took place.

Forming the right team was probably the single most important factor in our success. In choosing team members to lead each sector, we looked for people who had a reputation for making things happen. We needed to be sure that they had firsthand experience with getting a country rapidly on the path to reconstruction and development.

Forming the right team also meant letting go of the least productive team members. As work progressed, it became clear that familiarity with the country was less important than teaming up with Afghans who possessed deep knowledge of the way the country operated. In fact, some expatriates who had been working in Afghanistan for years resisted the leadership of new outside experts by systematically critiquing their efforts. In the end, those who inhibited team performance by focusing solely on risks and failing to offer constructive strategies had to be sidelined in favor of strong outside technical expertise.

A compelling shared vision of a rebuilt and stable Afghanistan and the urgency of the situation at hand helped to instill a focus on results and overcome the inertia that often pervades large organizations like ours. The Asian Development Bank, the UN, and the World Bank are not known for their speed, but in this case we were able to do away with much of the red tape during the critical stages of our project. Clear goals and accountability and close attention to team composition were other key success factors.

There's no time-out during a fire. You can't tell the fire to wait a minute while you consult somebody or look up the solution in a book.

Performance Under Fire

by Robert P. Murgallis

Robert P. Murgallis (robert.murgallis@dhs.gov) is a training specialist for the Emergency Incident Policy and Analysis Programs at the **National Fire Academy** in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

The difference between a team like the New England Patriots and a team of high-performing firefighters is the time pressure. In football, you can call a time-out. There's no time-out during a fire. You can't tell the fire to wait a minute while you consult somebody or look up the solution in a book. This is one business where you have to make very quick decisions on the basis of very little information.

Intuition is critical to high-performing firefighting teams—it can mean the difference between life and death. But our kind of intuition is learned. Through training, reading, responding to emergencies, and talking with veterans, we learn the cues and signals that indicate that certain things might occur. We have a vast mental data bank that is based on experience and training. If a fire is a certain color, we know the chances are pretty good that a particular product is burning. In a wildland fire, for example, you know that certain trees burn at a faster rate. And you know that a fire burns uphill more quickly than it does downhill. But your training has to be such that you recognize those cues immediately. You can't start pondering and planning and getting an official weather report before making decisions and taking action.

The fact that there is seldom chaos when firefighters go into a burning area can be summed up in one word: confidence—confidence in their skills and in one another. Confidence is contagious. If leaders are self-assured, capable, and knowledgeable, their people will respond with high performance. Being a leader in name only and driving and intimidating your teams will reduce the effectiveness of any unit. People need to be guided and motivated. Even self-motivated individuals will lose their drive if you don't provide them with positive reinforcement. The trick for you as the leader is to make your team members believe that you believe they have worth.

Like most high-performing teams, firefighters need a mission. It's the mission that sets the priorities. If your mission is to stop the fire from getting to a certain place, all your actions and decisions will be targeted toward that outcome. Often the mission will force you to make very difficult decisions. You may have to anticipate letting houses burn that haven't even

caught fire yet, because they're not defensible based on the type of roof they have or the fact that they're surrounded by highly flammable brush. You can't waste your resources if you're going to accomplish the greatest good for the greatest number. But it's hard trying to explain to home owners why you decided not to protect their homes.

People who can't cope with that kind of pressure shouldn't be leading high-performing teams, and in my line of work, leaders who don't perform don't last long. On September 12, the day after the attack on the World Trade Center, the New York City Fire Department contacted the National Fire Academy to ask us if we could help them restore their command structure because they had lost so many of their top people. As part of that effort, I saw one of the team leaders struggling. He was a nice person, but he really didn't have a good understanding of what needed to be done. His training and expertise in other areas did not equip him for the situation. As his inability to cope became more apparent, an unofficial leader emerged from among his crew who shepherded the project along. I've seen this happen many times on high-performance teams: If a leader is not up to the job, the top performers will step up to produce a leader who can carry the ball.

Whatever form the coaching takes—athletic or psychological—a coach needs to focus on just one thing: his players' confidence.

The Confidence Game

by Mary Khosh

Mary Khosh was a **career coach for the Cleveland Browns** in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During that time, she advised players on work/life issues and was the only woman doing psychological coaching in the NFL. She is currently a consulting psychologist with the Leadership Development Institute at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida.

When I worked with the Browns, the coaches emphasized playing one game at a time—always focusing on the immediate play and the immediate goal, always focusing on high performance. The Browns' coaches pushed for team excellence—in life as well as in the game—player by player.

Coaching is a major factor in an athlete's success. Most of the players I worked with recognized this. They've been coached since they were first discovered in youth football leagues, and they've always believed in and trusted their coaches. In fact, sports players' reliance on coaches may explain why so many of them make mistakes in life and lose most of their money after their athletic careers are over. They are still looking for a coach, and there are many con artists happy to oblige.

Great coaches understand the way the minds of high performers work. Each player has his own needs. You can see this most clearly after the players lose a game. Some want the coach to come up to them and talk to them about it. Others want to be left completely alone; they want to deal with the loss in their own heads first.

During my time with the Cleveland Browns, I saw players working with several different coaches. The successful coaches kept the individual needs and interests of each player in mind. The players willingly worked harder for them because they wanted so much to please them.

In my own work, my priority was also to try to get a sense of who each player was. I would begin with an interview, in which I focused on understanding a player's background—when his talent was first recognized, how he had been steered into pro football. In a second session, I would conduct a more formal assessment to gain a deeper understanding of the player's core personality, motivations, values, needs, problem-solving skills, and interests. Finally, in a third session, we would go through all the results of the assessment tests. It was at that point we talked about who the player was, what really challenged him, what put fire in his belly.

Whatever the coaching takes—athletic or psychological—a coach needs to focus on just one thing: his players' confidence. In a top pro-football team, all the players are talented and fit. What differentiates the winners is self-confidence. And that kind of confidence is a matter of choice. It isn't something your opponents can take away; it's something you give away when you stop believing that you can win. That's why a good coach never undercuts or demeans his players when a game is going badly. The players need to believe that their skills are better than their opponents'. That's not to say that coaches should ignore failure—far from it. They have to analyze and understand the failure in order to avoid repeating it. But they must not point fingers, because that

only makes the players more likely to repeat the mistake.

I think my main contribution to the Browns' performance was to get players to separate their personal identities from their results on the field. If self-worth were linked to scores, the pressure associated with each game would be tremendous. It was important for the players' self-confidence to see football as their job—what they did, not who they were. We talked about their lives in general—about their families, their education, and their off-season careers. The decisions they made in these areas helped maintain top performance as well as an attitude about success that accompanied them onto the field.

In my current work as a consulting psychologist focused on coaching high performers in companies, I have found that effective senior executives are a lot like the best sports coaches. Like coaches, executives need to be excellent listeners, able to evaluate the characteristics of the people they manage. They need to be able to work in different ways, with different people, and in different places. They need to be dedicated, determined, persistent, and fair. They need to be visionary and able to communicate that vision with confidence to those who are charged with executing it. As a woman, I used to object to all the male sports metaphors that are thrown around in business conversation. Now that I see the parallels, I occasionally use sports language myself.

The trick is learning how to manage diverse individual personalities and take control with style and grace.

Creativity on Demand

by Elizabeth K. Allen

Elizabeth K. Allen is the **founder** of Elizabeth K. Allen, Inc., an **event-planning company** that organizes and produces society weddings, charity galas, and corporate events across the United States. The company has offices in New York and Boston.

As an event planner who conceives, designs, and orchestrates every type of event from corporate affairs to weddings, it's my responsibility to put together and manage the individual creative teams that are contributing to the occasions. Together, we do everything from selecting the perfect stamp for the invitations to installing temporary roads in order to provide access to an event.

One of the greatest challenges of my job, yet one of its most rewarding aspects, is working with creative people on a day-to-day basis. I deal with a lot of high-profile, artistic individuals—people who are extremely knowledgeable and well known in their own right. They are passionate and talented, caring and wonderful individuals who often have their own vision of how they want particular elements of events designed and executed. Therein lies the challenge. As the event producer, it's my responsibility to keep everyone focused on the overall concept and design and to work with each team leader to ensure that the teams move forward in the same direction, all while minimizing difficulties and drama.

When you are working with creative minds, it's crucial to keep them on track so they don't go off on tangents and disrupt the project's rhythm or production schedule. This means taking a very active management role. If an individual is not functioning as part of the team in the way that he should be, I will manage him a bit more than the others until I feel he is back on track. If needed, I will take the person aside and remind him that producing an event is a team effort and not a platform for an individual to shine.

If you can't get the creative team leaders to accept some kind of direction and parameters, then you must strongly consider removing them from the project and not hiring them in the future, however brilliant they are. For example, I worked with a very well-known and talented but very self-centered florist. His volatile behavior would wreak havoc on the team and affect the overall event production. Now I just won't work with him. If I have a client who insists on hiring this particular florist, I decline the project.

At the same time, you do have to trust your most talented people. People in general always produce better results when you trust them—trust that they are going to perform not only to your expectations but to their highest levels. People hate being micromanaged because it implies that you don't respect or trust them. The trick, I believe, is how to manage diverse individual personalities and take control with style and grace. I make sure that my people understand their position within the project while giving them the latitude to express their abilities, talents, and ideas.

When you want people to produce at their peak levels, empowerment and communica-

tion are vital. I strongly believe in communication—it's what I do all day. I am constantly on the phone or in meetings. Communication doesn't always have to be direct, of course, and I am a tremendous fan of e-mail. But I do think, even in this day and age, you really cannot beat just talking to someone face-to-face or at least by phone. Obviously, as a leader, you cannot do all the communicating yourself. The key is to identify the items that you really must communicate yourself and delegate the rest. Of course, for that to work you need to have an associate who can function as your right-hand person.

Inspiring and motivating a team to perform at the top of its game is exciting and sometimes exhausting. But the process is always very rewarding. You learn a huge amount from your creative people, and they constantly surprise you with their ideas.

The Mechanics of Speed

by Ray Evernham

The performance of the entire race team was crucial to our success: The greatest car and driver in the world, after all, can lose four or five places during a stop on pit road.

Ray Evernham was the **crew chief for driver Jeff Gordon** from 1993 to 1999, during which time Gordon won three **NASCAR** (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) championships. Today, Evernham is president and CEO of Evernham Motorsports, which fields a team of NASCAR entrants for the Dodge division of DaimlerChrysler.

When seven people have to change four tires, fill up a gas tank, make quick adjustments to the suspension, and get a car back on the track in just over ten seconds, teamwork is, to put it mildly, essential. And not just for those seven pit crew members who "go over the wall" during a race.

Behind the wall is an entire team of people—several dozen mechanics, engineers, and other specialists—who must also work together under extreme time pressure, even if measured in days rather than in seconds. From one weekend race to the next, they'll dismantle an entire car and several engines, making repairs and modifications to correct problems and customize the car for the particular demands and configuration of the upcoming track.

I was a young, unknown mechanic when I began working with a young, unknown driver named Jeff Gordon. But from the beginning, I realized that the performance of the entire race team was crucial to our success: The greatest car and driver in the world, after all, can lose four or five places during a stop on pit road. How were we going to get the top-notch performance that we needed?

First, we put together a team of particularly dedicated and intelligent people, looking even to individuals who didn't have a lot of racing experience. Our chief mechanic was a former truck mechanic who'd been working at a car dealership in New Jersey. He soon learned the car racing business and was better than anybody. Our parts guy was a kid whose full-time job had been selling plumbing supplies. He was able to find and get the best piece at the best price—whether it was a wheel or a toilet, a shock or a sink.

We also put in place some formal processes that were unusual for the sport. We'd get everybody together to watch "game films" of the previous race and discuss areas for improvement. We kept careful records of race and mechanical data. We hired a pit crew trainer, a former Stanford football player, who was responsible for the physical training of the crew and the high-speed choreography of the pit stop. Many of our rivals thought things like this were a waste of time. But our record, and the later adoption of many of our methods by competitors, proved their value.

And we worked hard to keep people motivated. NASCAR's nearly ten-month season is the longest in professional sports, and it's easy for people to burn out. But our "Rainbow Warriors"—the nickname adopted by the race team because our fire suits bore a rainbow of paint colors offered by our sponsor, DuPont—stayed motivated not only for an entire season but from one season to the next. In fact, the team remained pretty much intact for the six years Jeff and I worked together for Hendrick Motorsports, the owner of the car and employer of the crew.

More recently, I've run a much larger team that reflects the changes in NASCAR as the sport has grown rapidly in popularity. In 1999, Dodge offered me the chance to lead the automaker's return to NASCAR after a 20-year absence. Today, we employ nearly 250 people, many of whom work in areas that go beyond racing itself: engine and body design (our engineering staff consists of numerous specialists, including one who holds a PhD in aerodynam-

ics), sales and marketing, product licensing, travel logistics, and so on. We have four facilities that house R&D and manufacturing, six tractor trailers and three aircraft to transport cars and people from race to race, and an annual budget of around $50 million.

Again, I've tried to establish processes—some of them, again, unconventional—that will help this team perform at a high level. These processes are particularly important as we grow, because they'll allow newcomers to get up to speed quickly. With a team of this size, I can no longer communicate daily with everyone as I did when I oversaw 25 people, but we can instill in individuals a way of thinking that will make us winners.

In fact, our team represents a new approach. Instead of the traditional NASCAR model that focuses on the individual driver and car, we've adopted a model that we think represents the future of the sport, one (based on Formula 1 auto racing) that focuses on the team's technology and its sponsors. We run two identical cars in NASCAR's Nextel Cup Series, which doubles our sponsor's exposure and the chances of winning. At the track, each car has its own team, and they both are out to win. (All I ask of our drivers, Jeremy Mayfield and Kasey Kahne, is that they don't crash into *each other*.) But our motto is: "One team, one goal."

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