

## How Does Inclusive Leadership Matter in High Performance Teams? Insights from Australia's Healthcare Industry

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**ABSTRACT:** *The health care sector plays a pivotal role in the world economy and teams that perform various tasks are the backbone of this sector. In culturally diverse countries like Australia, diversity of such teams is an important player in their performance. In this study we delve into the performance of these teams from the perspective of inclusive leadership. We explore how a leader's inclusiveness matters in the performance of teams. Data from leaders in Australia's health care sector reveal noteworthy insights into the dynamics of team performance and open new avenues for future research and policymaking.*

**Keywords:** Team Performance, Health Care, Inclusivity, Inclusive Leadership

## INTRODUCTION

*“Freedom is indivisible; the chains on anyone of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all my people were the chains on me.”*

*Nelson Mandela*

A specified reduction of patients on waiting lists, the rising number of satisfied outgoing patients, a higher percentage of completed projects in a given periods and many more similar examples demonstrate how critical performance of competing teams is in our daily lives. Not every team is, however, equal in its capacity to meet performance goals. Research on team performance shows that some teams are more successful and competitive than others (Rego et al., 2017; Schippers, 2013; Tsai et al., 2016; van der Hoek, Groeneveld, & Kuipers, 2018). Such teams known as high performance teams have fascinated scholars and continue to inspire numerous studies (Beech & Crane, 1999; Castka, Bamber, Sharp, & Belohoubek, 2001; Dutra, Prikladnicki, & Franca, 2015; Kets de Vries, 2005; Losada, 1999). Despite this wealth of knowledge, conditions, mechanisms and leadership styles that cultivate high performance in teams remain an open area for exploration and examination. More specifically, the influential factors contributing to the success of high-performance teams remain to be conclusively determined (Preece & Hunter-Jones, 2018). In this study we aim to shed new light on this topic from the perspective of a team leader’s approach to making use of diversity in the team. As reflected in the opening quote of this section, anecdotes tell us that inclusiveness enable leaders to achieve great things. In fact, leader inclusiveness briefly defined as an ability of a leader to involve, inspire, motivate and encourage everyone regardless of its individual differences in achievement of common goals (Javed et al. 2018; Najmaei, 2018) seems to be a much-talked-but-less-understood topic (Najmaei 2018; Najmaei & Sadeghinejad 2019) - specifically in the context of high performance teams. According to Castka et al. (2001), the knowledge, skills, experience, and perspectives of a wide range of people must be integrated in order for a team to succeed. High performance teams outperform ordinary teams because they can better unleash potential of their members toward their stakeholders shared purpose (Castka et al. 2001). Since leadership is an integral factor in team performance(Goodwin, Blacksmith, & Coats, 2018) there is theoretical ground to argue that high

performance teams benefit more from an inclusive approach to leadership than other teams, in fact, as pointed out by Sugiyama et al. (2016), trends in the extant literature suggest that more relational approaches are necessary for leadership that can harness the benefits of the diverse and globalized workforces of today and the future. Given that teams are the nucleus around which our organizations work (Katzenbach & Smith, 2015), we seek to answer the fundamental question of how inclusive leadership matters in creating high performance teams. In order to address this exploratory question, we designed a qualitative inductive research and collected data about different aspects of inclusivity from six executives who lead high performance teams in the Australian healthcare sector.

The remaining parts of this manuscript elaborate this research and is structured as follows. The next section reviews background literature on high performance teams and inclusive leadership. The third section elaborates the research design, data collection and analysis. In the final section we present research findings and discuss implications of our research and its limitations as well as some suggestions to further our research.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

In this section we review research on high performance teams and inclusive leadership and present our arguments in the form of stylized facts. Stylized facts are empirical regularities in search of theoretical, causal explanations (Hirschman, 2016). Stylized facts are both positive claims (about what is in the world) and normative claims (about what merits scholarly attention). Much of canonical social science research can be usefully characterized as the production or contestation of stylized facts (Hirschman, 2016).

### **High Performance Teams**

High performance means different things to different people. Kirby (2005) argues that developing a theory for high performance is “so daunting that it might seem a fool's errand to attempt. In fact, no one did for the first thousand or so years of business history.” (P.30). Similarly, according to Zoogah (2018) the literature is inconsistent on high performance in organizations partly because it is studied by diverse scholars in different disciplines such as sociology and economics. Some have studied high-performance work systems (e.g. Messersmith, Patel, Pankaj & Lepak, 2011; Varma, Beatty, Schneier

& Ulrich, 1999), some have delved into high-performance work practices (e.g. Chang, Oh & Messersmith, 2013; Sikora, Ferris & Van Iddekinge, 2015), whereas others have focused on high-performance organizations (Coulson-Thomas, 2012; De Waal & Van der Heijden, 2015). This paper focuses, however, on a less studied topic: high performance teams (Castka, Bamber, Sharp & Belohoubek, 2001; Losada, 1999). Warwick (2016) points out that high performance teams are critically important for all organizations because mediocre teams can achieve only 63% of their strategic objectives (Mankins & Steele, 2005) but high-performance teams can outperform this manifold (Paul, Bamel & Stokes, 2018). Although performance of teams has been studied for decades (Beckhard, 1969; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Kanter, 1979). The research interest in high performance teams has only recently taken off (Cauwelier, 2019; Paul, Bamel & Stokes, 2018). The main reason is that high performance teams are extremely rare and can be challenging for a leader to manage (Castka, Bamber, Sharp, & Belohoubek, 2001; McCann & Margerison, 1989). There are various explanations about what constitute high performance teams. Katzenbach and Douglas (1993) assert that the essence of a team is common commitment. Without it groups perform as individuals and with it they become a powerful unit of collective performance. They further add that high performance or highly successful teams develop strong commitment to a common approach to work together to achieve their common purpose. In addition to a stronger commitment to a common purpose, Kets de Vries (1999) highlights mutual trust and respect as core ingredients of high performance teams. He adds that members of high performance teams avoid disruptive behaviour, such as side conversations or inside jokes, as much as possible because they are aware of the need for full effective collaboration. Kets de Vries (2005) extends his earlier studies on high performance teams by considering talent and human capital as what differentiates mediocre from high performing organizations. According to Kets de Vries (2005) members of high performing teams share common goals and values; respect (and build on) each other's differences; and learn to use the complementarities in their leadership styles to create an effective role constellation. Therefore, high performance teams exceed all reasonable expectations and produce extraordinary results. They are formed by groups who rely on each other, base their actions on a common vision, develop their activities through open communication, and have shared leadership, build confidence, enabling innovation from individual differences. (Dutra et

al., 2015). All in all, although different scholars characterize high performance teams differently, there is a consensus that high performance teams are built on the foundation of diversity in skills, talents and abilities and a commitment to make diversity work. In this study we enrich this line of reasoning by introducing inclusiveness as a concept that captures the essence of high performance. Inclusiveness is how diversity in talent and human capital can be capitalized on to make a team a high performing one. High performance teams “comprise of individuals with unique skills and talents; who appreciate the richness of diversity within the team to co-operate, consult and coordinate tasks effectively and efficiently.” (Qureshi & Dhaliwal 2016, p.10). Taken together, we present the following stylized fact:

*Stylized fact one: members of high performance teams have diverse skills, talents and human capital, they show strong commitment to a common goal and collaborate closely toward the goal based on the foundation of trust, respect and acceptance.*

### **Inclusive Leadership**

According to Day and Antonakis (2012), leadership is an influencing process and its resultant outcomes mainly in terms of goal achievement that occur between a leader and its followers and how this process is explained by the leader’s dispositional characteristics, behaviors, and followers’ perceptions and attributions of the leader and the context in which the influencing process takes place. Recent advances in leadership suggest that this influencing process needs to be inclusive (Najmaei, 2018; Najmaei & Sadeghinejad, 2019). It should be less leader-centric and more follower-oriented and include all followers regardless of their gender, ethnicity and other peripheral attributes. Inclusive leadership (IL) emerged from this view. In general terms, inclusiveness refers to something that “covers or includes everything” (Wuffli, 2016). According to Wuffli (2016), the inclusiveness concept expresses “the need to proactively ensure the participation of poor, underprivileged people in development processes” (2016, p. 2). In the context of workplace, Shore et al. (2011) define inclusion as the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness. Inclusion fosters belonging and connection. Inclusion and belonging are critically sought-after

workplace attributes that are often not achieved due to leaders who inhibit inclusion through their actions. (Coleman III, 2017). Similarly, Carmeli, Roni, and Ziv (2010) define inclusive leaders as leaders who exhibit openness, accessibility and availability in their interactions with followers. Put together, inclusive leadership is a leadership style that promotes and capitalizes on the power of diversity (Coleman III, 2017; Wuffli, 2016). Inclusive leaders maximize gains from diversity by fostering inclusion (Hollander, 2012). The essence of inclusion is fundamentally important in the leadership process because “people want to feel included, heard and valued, and they will go above and beyond if the essential need of belonging is met” (Coleman III, 2017). Therefore, inclusive leadership is about fostering relationships, relationships that accomplish things for mutual benefits of the leader and his/her followers. All in all, we present the following stylized fact:

*Stylized fact two: inclusive leaders focus on followers, remove hierarchies and make themselves available and accessible to everyone to promote inclusion and ensure that followers' needs for uniqueness and belongingness are satisfied.*

### **Inclusion in High Performance Teams**

There is no explicit research on the role or importance of inclusion in high performance teams. Let alone on the way how an inclusive leadership style matters in developing high performance teams. This paucity, as noted before, is the key motivation for this paper. Implicitly, few studies have pointed to the benefits of an inclusive atmosphere for high performance teamwork. Kets de Vries (1999) asserts that leaders of high performance teams:

*“encourage dialogue and interaction among the participants (i.e. reducing hierarchical barriers), balancing appropriate levels of participation to ensure that all points of view are explored (i.e. promoting inclusion, sense of uniqueness and belongingness). They capitalize on the differences among group members when those differences can further the common good of the group (i.e. promoting diversity of capital, skills, talents). They give praise and recognition for individual and group efforts, and they celebrate successes (i.e. helping followers feel belongs and unique).” (pp 74-5)*

Furthermore, Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) empirically show that leaders' inclusive behaviour is positively associated with psychological safety-belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking in the workplace. Duhigg (2016) discusses some findings of the project Aristotle at Google in which a common factor binding team members together and generating high performance was psychological safety. Based on these observations, O'Neill and Salas (2018) argue that psychological safety is a prominent teamwork variable influencing high performance teamwork.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Research Context**

We studied leaders of high performing teams in the health care sector because of the rising importance of health care in Australia. Australia has a service-based economy. The service sector accounts for up to 61% of the Australian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs 79.2% of the Australian workforce (Australian Government: Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, 2016). Therefore, performance of teams in the health care organizations has important ramifications for the economy of Australia and its sustainable growth.

### **Data and Sample**

As a qualitative research, purposeful sampling was employed (Pratt, 2009). The objective of this sampling strategy is to provide access to the most clear-cut examples of the phenomenon of interest in order to permit inquiry into and understanding of the phenomenon in depth (Quinn Patton, 2002). Among various types of purposeful sampling the intensity sampling was deemed to be suitable for this research because it generates information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon of interest intensely (Quinn Patton, 2002). Subsequently, we sought executives who lead high performing and culturally diverse teams in healthcare organizations. Data for a selection of such executives were obtained from a consultancy company based in Sydney.

### **Instrumentation**

An interview was designed to capture how executives perceive their inclusiveness and associate it with the performance of their teams. To design the interview protocol the suggestions of Creswell (2007, p. 133) were followed. Accordingly, open-ended questions were designed by sorting questions from general to specific and ending with questions on how to learn more or seeking comments. In addition, the pruning technique proposed by Gillhan (2005, p. 29) was undertaken to create a logical

narrative order. Finally, the wording and phrasing of questions were reviewed by some experts for its linguistic and conceptual accuracy. The interview was then piloted and tested by experts before the main data collection phase.

### **Data Collection**

The process of data collection took two weeks from early April 2019 to mid-April 2019. Interviews were conducted face-to-face. They lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. In total, 240 minutes of interview were converted into 41 pages of transcribed qualitative data from six leaders. Participants were representing large Australian health care firms.

### **Analytic Method**

To analyse data, we first adopted the coding procedure of Weber known as the Weber protocol (Weber, 1990). According to this method, a coding frame is developed deductively prior to the research and completed by codes which are developed inductively during the analysis. This framework is then used for organizing, classifying, and summarizing raw data. Subsequently, to analyse the coded text, pattern matching was employed where coded data was organized first into emergent categories known as subordinate themes. Then the sub-categories are grouped into super-ordinate categories known as main themes. Main themes represent the key emergent theoretical framework of the research.

## **FINDINGS**

Our research revealed six themes which show how inclusive leadership matters in the development and formation of high performance teams. Figure one schematically integrates these six.

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### **Theme 1: Promoting Trust to Increase Collaboration and Boost Open Communication**

Inclusive leaders believe that trust is key to achieve high performance. Interview one asserted that:

*“...So creating a safe space where they have a venue to offer their opinion without feeling that it's going to be judged in any way.”*



This point was further substantiated by the third interview when he pointed to the role of trust in promoting open communication in high performance team:

*I really believe in open communication. I feel most conflicts and things like that always come down to lack of communication. If you're constantly in communication with your team, you're building trust, you're building a rapport and a relationship, and then ultimately I guess they feel more empowered and then they want to contribute and really give their best."*

### **Theme 2: Promoting and Taking Advantage of Diversity in Human Capital**

We established that inclusive leaders promote diversity and use inclusivity to capitalize on diversity in human capital. We also learned that teams need different sources of skills, talents and capital to achieve their full potential. These points were vividly demonstrated in our findings. Interview five, discussed the importance of inclusion and diversity in successfully completing a complex project:

*"There was no way I could actually do that by myself without technical expertise. Having a team around me that could also be responsible for those areas was critical and therefore no choice but to be inclusive really, where I didn't have the knowledge myself"*

Similarly, interview six, discussed how he is involved in a cultural awareness training to increase productivity and inclusivity of his team:

*"We are just doing a culture awareness training on, if you come from China and when you come to a situation and the different viewpoints from the different backgrounds that you've had and how do you distinguish in the meeting where the response might be different to what you expect"*

### **Theme 3: Making Diversity Work by Cultivating an Inclusive Culture**

Leaders of high performance teams appreciate the criticality of having a work atmosphere where everyone feels accepted and belonged because inclusion breeds safety, productivity and creativity. The second interviewee expressed this point very clearly:

*“So, that may take form in not judging, making it an environment where people respect one another's opinions and don't feel stifled by certain neither procedures or maybe even some regulations around conduct to make sure people feel accepted and safe.”*

Interviewee six also considers inclusivity an integral part of teamwork in all projects where high performance is expected:

*“So, to me my role as one who is setting the vision and the direction, but then to spend my time including staff and actually working with staff to showcase what they do to bring in their variances to what we do and to enable that inclusivity in all the different projects.”*

#### **Theme 4: Leverage Diversity in Making Decisions Inclusively**

High performance teams make decisions inclusivity. That is, by involving all members. This inclusivity is built on trust, open communication and commitment and helps teams members contribute more to the attainment of a common goal. As the first interviewee states:

*“If you have a culturally diverse team, for example, as I would here or most companies in Australia, then you need to be aware of that and make sure those people are included when you make decisions”*

Second interviewee also substantiated this point as exemplified below:

*“And so an inclusive leader, the title itself I think implies that you're cognizant of what your people have to offer and you're leveraging the most out of your people, to both acknowledge and celebrate what they have when making a decision” (Interviewee two)*

#### **Theme 5: Removing Hierarchical Barriers to Boost Performance**

Inclusion is based on heterarchy not hierarchy. Inclusive leaders are aware of this and removes hierarchical barriers in teams, divisions and organizations to boost productivity and performance.

*So yeah, for me everyone has a role, and they're all equally important because any one of them is not played well or hampered by others in other levels could help make it all fall down.” (Interviewee one)*

*“Well, I would hope if you were asking them that they would agree that the team functions fairly in a flat structure with a very egalitarian value to it.” (Interviewee two)*

### **Theme 6: Being available and accessible to make members feel supported**

High performance is a function of trust, transparency, commitment and collaboration. Inclusive leaders support these values by being actively approachable, accessible and available to followers.

*“I have an open-door policy, so anyone can come in. I think my personal style is quite friendly and happy. This enables me to build rapport, trust, respect and commitment” (Interviewee one)*

*“Every Wednesday morning, we have a get together around here, so all the staff come, and it started off with me saying, this what I've been doing, and the other executives saying that.” (Interviewee six)*

Informed by this analysis, we took a step further and quantified the number of times each interviewee contributed to each theme. This quantification allows us to better visualize how important each theme is in our model to our participants. Table one exhibits the results of this analysis.

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As Table one shows, making decisions inclusively and promoting trust followed by nurturing a culture of inclusion are the most talked about themes. A rather surprising finding is that promoting diversity is the least talked about theme. These observations have important implications for theory, practice and research.

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

This research has important implications for theory and practice of leadership and performance management and opens new avenues for future research. The following sections briefly discuss these implications.

### **Theoretical Implications**

High performance teams are dream teams and every leader wants to have a dream team yet high performance teamwork is difficult to achieve and most teams fail to reach their full potential and many fail dismally (O'Neill & Salas, 2018). Castka et al. (2001) highlight the misalignment between human (skills, knowledge, needs and group culture) and system (organizational context, defined focus, measurement of performance) factors in the team performance framework as the main barrier against high performance. More recently, van der Hoek et al. (2018) suggest that goal clarity, information elaboration and self-management separate ordinary from high performance teams. Our research contributes to this line of inquiry by emphasizing the importance of team leader's inclusivity. We conceptually showed and empirically demonstrated that leaders of high performance teams in the Australian healthcare sector promote inclusion and this inclusivity facilitates commitment, trust, collaboration and shared leadership which in turn cultivate high performance.

### **Practical Implications**

Knowing how to lead a high performance team is undoubtedly a top priority of any business leader. Even though, based on our findings, we advise leaders to become inclusive to boost performance of their teams, we are cognizant of the fact that being inclusive is easier said than done. Leaders face many challenges in exhibiting inclusiveness. Research shows that removing hierarchical barriers is not as easy as it seems to be because they entail cultural and structural changes for many businesses are not prepared or designed for (Wuffli, 2015). Leaders also struggle to become available and accessible due to political, structural and organizational priorities entrenched in today's business cultures (Adapa & Sheridan, 2018). Therefore, investment in high performance teams must be accompanied with inclusive leadership development programs and practicing leaders need to be aware of pedagogies and framework that facilitate inclusivity at leadership level (Read, Betancourt, & Morrison, 2016; Sugiyama, Cavanagh, van Esch, Bilimoria, & Brown, 2016).

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our research is limited in several ways which can serve as opportunities for expansions, refinements and extensions. Firstly, this research is done in the health care sector. Future studies can replicate our method and test our conclusions in other sectors such as hospitality, manufacturing and even public

sector. Secondly, our research is exploratory in nature and lacks generalizability (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019). Quantitative research designs can be used to test the external validity and generalizability of our findings. Furthermore, more research is needed to investigate mechanisms through which inclusiveness interacts with other leadership characteristics to improve team performance. Finally, as a qualitative exploration we did not study situational factors such as levels and types of diversity in teams in our study (Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003). Future research can extend our findings by delving into such factors in order to enrich the body of knowledge on the micro and meso mechanisms that affect effectiveness of inclusive leaders in high performance teams.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study is the first of its kind to explore how leadership inclusiveness matters in the performance of teams. Evidence from the Australia's health care sector shed new light on the importance of a leader's approach to inclusivity. Factors including leaders' increased approachability, accessibility and nurturing capacity in cultivating a culture that promotes team's members uniqueness and belongingness constitute inclusiveness. We found that leaders who excel at these dimensions witness a higher level of performance and a lower level of negative emotions in their teams specially in sensitive and complex contexts such as health care. These findings add to and extend the body of knowledge on inclusive leadership and team performance and have important implications for policy making, leadership development and practice.

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## Stream 3: Gender, Diversity and Indigeneity Refereed Delivered Session

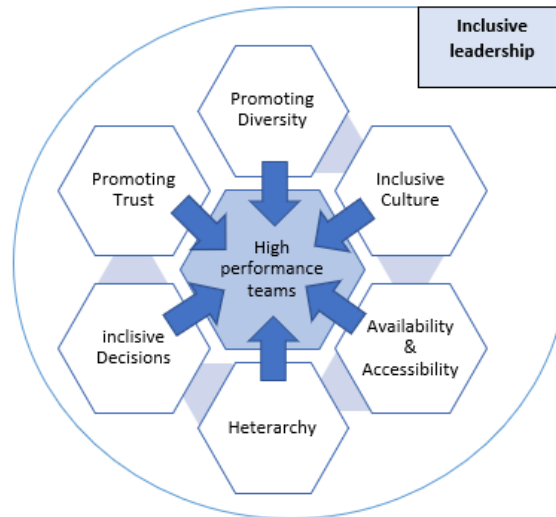


Figure 1: How inclusive leadership matters in high performance teams

Table 1: Contribution of each participant to each theme

Theme	Interviewees					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Promoting Trust	23.30%	20.60%	15.00%	12.00%	13.50%	14.50%
Promoting Diversity	9.10%	10.20%	15.00%	6.80%	10.50%	18.60%
Inclusive culture	21.20%	20.40%	5.00%	15.40%	8.30%	20.40%
Inclusive decision making	27.30%	32.70%	20.00%	38.50%	42.10%	18.30%
Heterarchy	13.00%	6.10%	25.00%	15.20%	10.30%	9.90%
Availability & Accessibility	6.10%	10.00%	20.00%	12.10%	15.30%	18.30%

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