

HOW TO BUILD HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

Spain's World Cup win showcases an ideal model for building high-performing teams

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Introduction

The Spanish men's soccer team became world champions for the second time earlier this year, defeating Argentina 1–0 after extra time in New Jersey. Substitute Ferran Torres scored the decisive goal in the 106th minute.

But Spain's victory was about much more than one opportunity. It was the result of a team operating within a model that every player appeared to understand and trust.

Spain had exceptional talent. Rodri, Lamine Yamal and Nico Williams would command a place in almost any side. Yet talent alone did not win the tournament. Their real strength was how effectively those individuals worked within a cohesive system.

That distinction matters for business leaders. Companies invest heavily in top executives and specialist talent. Individual quality matters, but putting talented people in the same organisation does not automatically create a high-performing team.

The best team is designed around roles, not titles

Job titles establish hierarchy and reporting lines, but they can become a poor substitute for genuine role clarity. A title tells people where someone sits. A role explains how that person contributes to performance.

In elite sport, calling someone a midfielder or defender tells us little about what they will actually do. Their role is defined by the team's system, the decisions they make and how they respond to colleagues.

Business is no different. Two executives with the same title may need to make very different contributions depending on strategy. Even the same person may need to play different roles in different situations.

In one sales pitch, the head of sales may lead. In another, the product expert may take centre stage while the head of sales supports from the background. What matters is the value each person brings, not who gets the spotlight.

Leaders therefore need to go beyond conventional job descriptions. People should understand the outcomes they own, how their work connects with others and when they are expected to lead or support. Without that clarity, teams can end up with several people trying to score while nobody protects the space behind them.



Why consistency alone is dangerous

In my book, *The Optimal Performance Formula*, I describe a way of operating that I have repeatedly observed among elite performers. I call it CAGE-mode: Consistently Accurate, Gritty and Enduring.

Consistency matters, but consistency by itself is neutral. A sales team can consistently qualify opportunities badly. A leadership group can reliably hold the same unproductive meeting every Monday.

Repeated behaviour becomes default behaviour. That is why “practice makes perfect” can be misleading. Practice makes permanent. The quality of the practice is what counts. Accuracy provides the discipline. It means repeating the right behaviours and measuring performance against a meaningful standard.

For leaders, the question is simple: what is your organisation practising every day?

Meetings, approval processes and recognition all train the organisation to behave in a certain way. Spain showed this discipline in the final. The team controlled the centre of the pitch and retained possession. They did not manufacture urgency because the score remained level. They trusted their model and waited for the right opportunity.

Grit needs direction and duration

The other elements of CAGE-mode are gritty and enduring. Grit governs how someone responds to resistance. Endurance determines whether that response can be sustained. Many organisations can produce short bursts of intense effort when targets are missed or competition increases. That energy often fades once the pressure passes.

Elite performers cannot depend on feeling motivated every day. They rely on routines and shared standards that help them perform when progress is hard to see. Spain failed to score in regulation time against Argentina. A less confident team might have become impatient and abandoned its approach. Spain did not.

The team changed personnel, but not its core model. The winning goal came from a substitute who was ready to perform his role immediately.

That is an important lesson for business. A strong operating model should allow leaders to change responsibilities, people or investment without creating confusion. Organisations become stronger when they are built around the skills required to win, rather than individual personalities.



Reward the contribution the system needs

Corporate cultures often celebrate the most visible performers. Recognition flows towards the person who wins the account or delivers the big presentation.

Those achievements deserve credit, but sustainable performance also depends on less visible contributions. A football team cannot succeed if every player wants to be the star attacker. A business cannot succeed if everyone chases the work that offers the greatest personal visibility.

Leaders shape this behaviour through the stories they tell and the people they promote. If recognition rewards individual heroics, employees learn to pursue visible outcomes. If leaders reward role excellence and collaboration, they strengthen the system.

Spain's World Cup campaign leaves business leaders with a useful test.

Does everyone understand how the organisation intends to win? Does each person know the contribution expected from them? Do everyday routines reinforce the required standard? Can the team keep executing when results take longer than expected?

Spain needed 106 minutes to find the breakthrough. The players did not allow the absence of an immediate result to create disorder. Their confidence came from preparation, role clarity and trust in the way they worked together.

That is the lesson for business leaders. High-performing teams are not created by collecting stars. They are built by creating a model in which talented people know exactly how to contribute and can keep doing so when the pressure is highest.

That is when individual talent becomes team performance.



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