

MHR

# Eight ways to achieve high performance: a practical guide

Eight proven methods to creating high performance



The science behind  
a new world of work

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# Introduction

We recently commissioned a survey, talking to 1500 employees and 150 C-Suite executives across the public and private sectors.

The result? Leaders and employees have a huge misalignment about what a high-performing organisation looks like. And while 91% of employees said their team was high performing, just 51% of leaders agreed with them.

98% of leaders believe their organisation has the ability to be high performing. But one in two leaders say they don't have a clear understanding of what creates high performance.

One thing is clear: leaders are worried about their ability to deliver. If you're one of the 75% of leaders worried about how they're going to achieve high performance in the year ahead, this guide is for you.

To dig more into what a high-performing organisation is and to uncover the gulf between leaders and employees, **check out the complete research report**. Otherwise, read on for a practical look at how to build the team you need, backed up with even more exclusive data from our research. Don't just meet your performance objectives. Exceed them with this scientific approach.

## Using this guide to create a high performance culture

With additional research by André de Waal, we've uncovered ten pillars of high performance. A high-performing organisation will make use of all of them at some point or another, but you will need to reprioritise depending on the challenges at play.

They are:

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**2.**  
**People given  
empowerment  
and autonomy.**

**5.**  
**A culture of learning  
and growth.**

**8.**  
**Commitment to  
recruiting, retaining,  
and developing  
top talent.**

**3.**  
**Clear  
communication,  
collaboration,  
and feedback.**

**6.**  
**Operational/  
process excellence.**

**9.**  
**High employee  
engagement.**

**1.**  
**Shared vision  
and goals.**

**4.**  
**Openness to  
risk taking and  
innovation.**

**7.**  
**Agility and  
adaptability  
to change.**

**10.**  
**Future focus  
and investment.**

We've pulled out eight practical techniques to help you transform your team into a group of high performers. Each one is colour-coordinated to show you which pillar they align to, so you can put your focus where it matters most.

# Setting goals

## Get everyone on the same page from day one

While it might feel like the world is constantly changing, the goals of organisations and leaders haven't changed much. We all want efficiency, growth, productivity, and impact. But how we get there has shifted. This is where a lot of conflict comes in.

60% of leaders aren't clear on their personal goals for the year ahead, let alone the goals of the organisation at large.

Is it any wonder that employees aren't matching their leaders' expectations? If no one has a

clear picture of their end goal or the timeline to achieve it, they'll never know when they've got there.

The solution here involves taking things back to the drawing board.



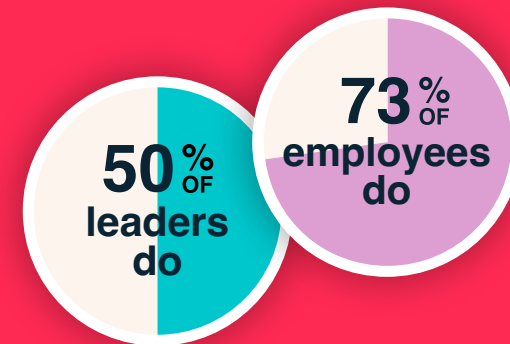
SMART objectives are the gold standard of goal setting. If you find you're not certain about what your goals for the team are, sit down and list out any KPIs or metrics you're aware of (such as 'increase sales by 5%'). Then think of some of the harder-to-define missions you've been given (such as 'build market confidence in our product').



*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Set goals that have a clear path to success and share those goals with the entire team**

## Do you know what high performance looks like?



But only **47% OF leaders** have a clear understanding of how to get there

## Check these goals against the SMART criteria

### Specific

Is it about a particular area, or is it vague and all-encompassing?

### Measurable

Is there an indicator of progress, or is it 'we'll know it when we see it'?

### Achievable

Can you feasibly achieve it in the set timeframe?

### Realistic

Can the result be achieved with the resources you have in hand?

### Timely

When can you expect to see results?

This will help you figure out which goals are viable, which might need to be adjusted, and which link together. These are the goals you should communicate to the wider team and set out a plan of action together to achieve them.

# Effective decision making

## Be ready when the moment arrives

As a leader, your average day is made up of decision making. Some of those decisions only make a small impact, so you won't give them a second thought.

But when those decisions really matter, you need to be ready to make them, and make them quick. On top of this, you have to balance short-term tactical thinking with long-term strategic thinking. There's a constant need for balance, and it can be especially tempting to disregard the long term for quick wins.

Data plays a huge part in effective decision making. But it's not just gathering it; it's also getting that data at the right moment to support you. When you're backed with real-time data, you know

you're making decisions with all the information you need, giving you and your team more reassurance and confidence in what you're doing.

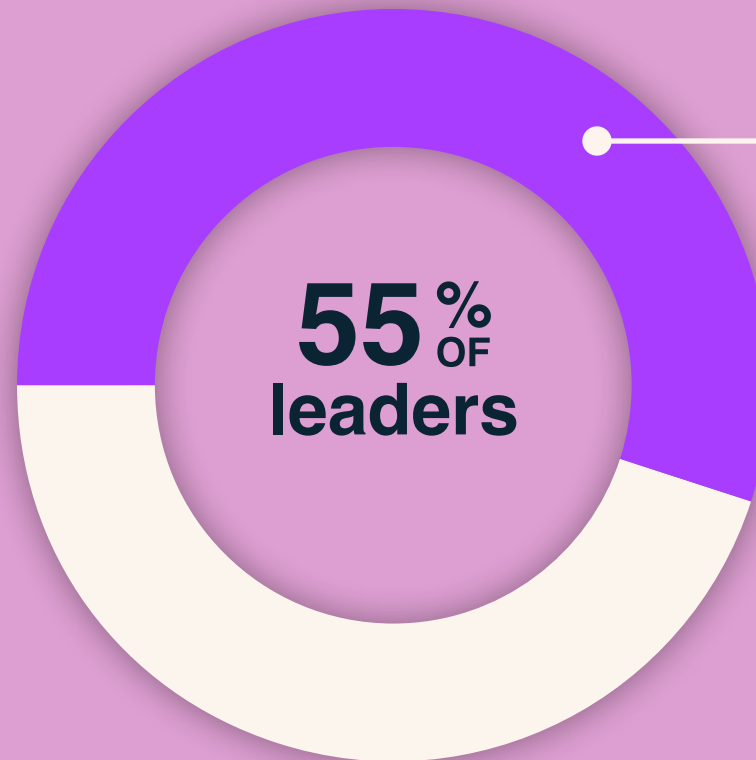
Removing silos between sources of data will help, as this improves data accessibility and collaboration across departments with a single source of truth

AI is often pointed to as a great tool to support decision making, as it can assist with forecasting and planning. The decisions ultimately need to be made by leadership, but it can help guide you through masses of information with minimal lead time.

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*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Look into ways to unlock and unleash real-time data**



think it's impossible to improve performance without access to real-time data and insights.

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# Efficient processes

Always strive for a better way of doing things

An interesting contrast in our data indicated that leaders felt operational excellence was a key driver to high performance... yet they also felt it was one of their weakest areas.

It makes sense. Effective processes, measured by clear KPIs make work easier. But it can be so easy to get caught up in the way things have always been done that finding the most effective process isn't always simple. It also means you can often find yourself retrofitting

old processes into new ways of working, as opposed to building new processes that suit those new methods straight away.

How often do you review processes? Do you allow teams to suggest changes? How much manual work could be automated? How has AI been adopted? These are all questions that must be asked if you're aiming to find more efficient processes. They'll also ensure you're better equipped to handle change when it's needed.

HR, payroll and finance software were cited the most vital pieces of technology in driving high performance. As, arguably, the key drivers of process efficiency – how happy are you with your current set up? Check out our [tech review](#) for more details on how to evaluate and improve your tech stack.



*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Scrutinise your 'we've always done it this way' processes, and figure out where you can make improvements**

**25%  
OF  
leaders**

rated operational excellence as the most important factor in building high performance

**87%  
OF  
high-performing  
organisations**

attribute their success to the strategic use of technology

# Communication

## High performing teams aren't built in silos

Communication forms a bedrock that supports a range of other techniques. For example, setting goals means nothing if you can't communicate those goals. When employees feel heard, employee engagement reaches new heights, and high performance comes more naturally.

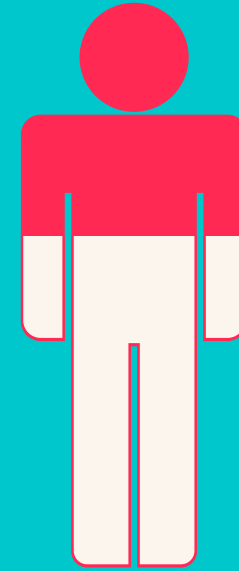
The best way to build effective communication is to model it from the top down. That means opening conversation channels. For example, pivoting to regular **check-ins** from formal appraisals gives everyone a space to offer open, regular feedback.

This pipeline goes both ways. Use it as an opportunity to embed high performance into every aspect of your organisation. You can also find out what your employees think and adjust your strategy accordingly.

One of the critical issues our research flagged suggests that neither leaders nor employees are wrong about high performance - they just fundamentally see the issue through two different lenses.

Employees have boots on the ground; they have to deal with day-to-day concerns, but that means they potentially lose sight of the big picture. Leaders have that big-picture view but can often forget to consider or fail to understand what an employee can do every day.

Check-ins will help everyone align. Good tech can support this with AI-enabled sentiment analysis giving you a clear picture of what's going on.



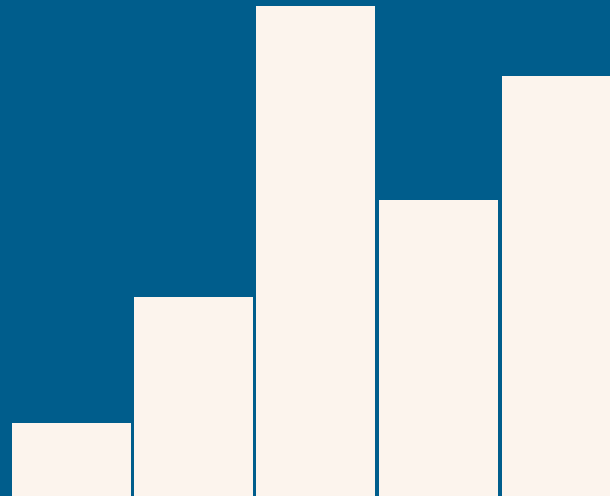
»»»»»»»»  
**59%**  
**OF**  
**high-performing organisations**

think that extra investment in collaboration and communication would boost performance

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*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Start holding check-ins and logging what employees say about morale and being a high performer**



# Rewards and recognition

## A little appreciation goes miles

This technique may seem simple, but it's vitally important. Different people are motivated by different things, and the employee who is solely motivated by their salary is rarer than you'd think. Many people thrive off rewards and recognition, and these can push them to greater heights. Making recognition a regular part of their time with you massively improves their employee experience.



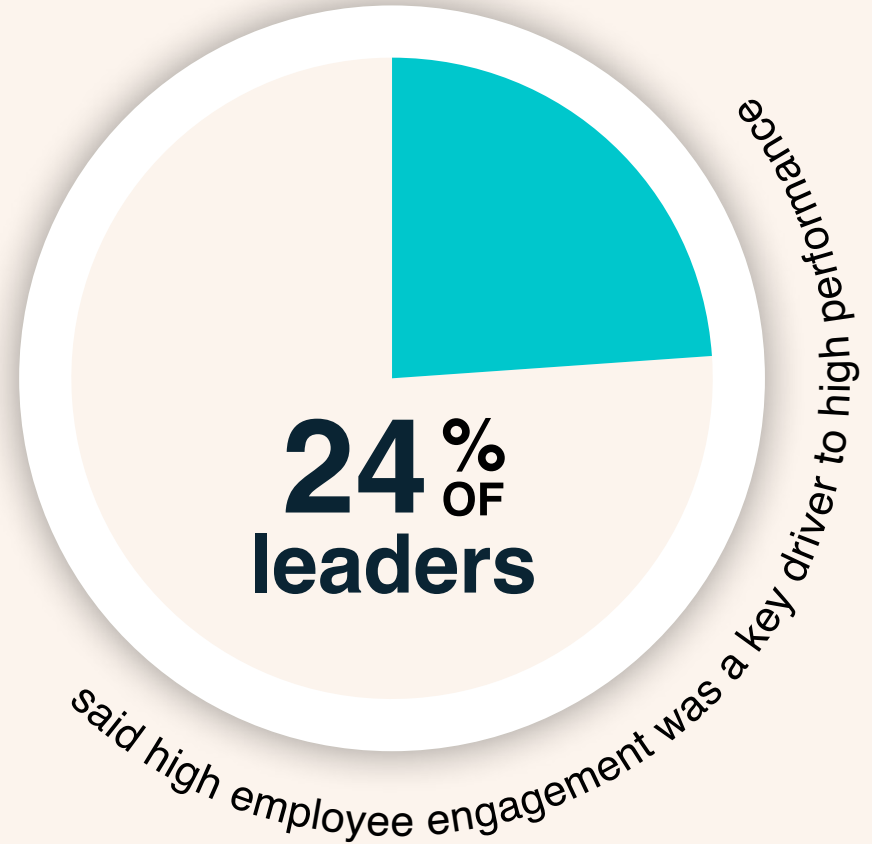
*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Start by thanking an employee for their high performance**

Note that this isn't a reason to deprioritise competitive wages. Rewards and recognitions work alongside a robust compensation package and general **employee experience** strategy to help an employee feel appreciated.

Internal communication platforms are very helpful here. They enable you to communicate wins and achievements within your team and across the business. When employees feel they're on the right path, they feel reassured and able to push themselves along it.

This can also help overcome the disconnect between what employees and leaders think high performance looks like. When you reward employees, you're encouraging them to continue performing well.





# Talent management

## The talent feedback loop pays for itself

Modern talent management spans a huge range of functions. It's how you keep employees on board with your mission, ensure they're happy and productive and give them the capacity to build their skills. That's the sort of thing that high performance is built on.

When you get this right, it supports autonomy and empowerment. Like many of the other factors at play, this leads naturally to high performance without having to force it. When you attract the right talent and ensure they're nurtured properly, you get employees who are more engaged with your

mission and keener to deliver high performance. That nurturing also means employees will get a clearer picture of what success looks like in your organisation, reducing the gap between leaders and employees.

Talent management creates a positive feedback loop. When you invest in it, you become a more attractive employer, leading to more talent competing for the opportunity to work with you. There's a lot of power in aligning your career development programs with your talent pipeline, and using proactive succession planning to ensure key positions are always filled by great people who understand the organisation. Conducting talent mapping will

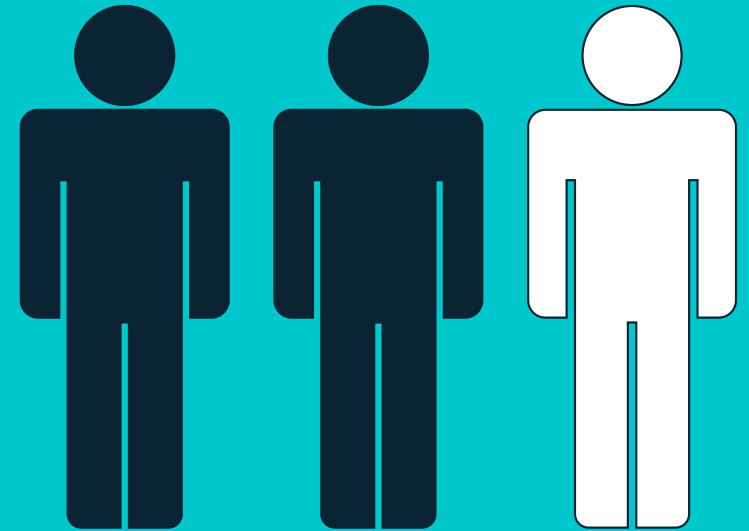
help you identify current and future skills gaps across your organisation. That enables you to build effective development strategies for your current employees and more targeted recruitment for future ones.

But you can't do this blindly. It all needs to align with your broader business goals, as well as your culture. Employees are more likely to engage with your talent management strategy if they feel involved in it, so take their thoughts into account. Remember: communication is a critical bedrock layer!

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*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Invest in your biggest asset with a robust talent management strategy**



**2/3<sup>OF</sup>  
leaders**

agree they would perform better if they invested in their people

# Learning and development

## Learning builds stronger teams



**40% OF**  
**employees**

agreed that having a highly skilled workforce is critical in creating high performance

**60% OF**  
**workers**

believe that generational differences impact high performance within their organisation

**Skills gaps** are a huge barrier to high performance, so conducting audits where you can spot potential risks is a critical first step. From there, you can start actioning a more robust **learning** and development (L&D) plan. If your skills gaps are around compliance and hard skills, this might include formalised learning, enabled by a learning management system (LMS). Or for more soft skills, you may require a more embedded learning culture, as well as social learning, which is more of a long-term strategic mission enabled by a learning experience platform (LXP).

There's also a generational gap to consider. While 62% of leaders believe that Gen X (people born between 1965 – 1980) have the biggest positive impact on performance, this can lead to issues down the line without proper succession planning.

Simply put, you cannot keep those older employees with you forever! Even if they decide to stay with you for the rest of their

careers, they will retire at some point, leaving you with a skills gap problem that will cause a huge hit to your performance in time. You need an organic pipeline of talent and a strong succession plan where every generation is given opportunities to become a high performer.

This will become even more apparent as Gen Alpha (people born between 2010-2024) enter the workforce. As the most educated generation ever, they will likely put a strong focus on lifelong learning, and will look for workplaces that integrate this into their company culture.

Creating and managing **multigenerational workforces**, where younger employees are given the opportunities to gain the skills of their older counterparts, is critical. Mentoring and reverse mentoring (where a younger or less experienced employee mentors a more experienced one) can also provide a lot of benefits – without any formalised learning involved at all.

It can be tempting to avoid investing in employees out of the fear that they will leave and take that investment with them to other companies. That does happen. But it's a natural part of the employee-employer relationship. Investing in employees means you build an employer brand as someone who cares, so you will naturally attract more high performing candidates. Likewise, while some employees will eventually leave even with L&D opportunities, many will stay for longer than they would without.



*Get started with one quick tip:*

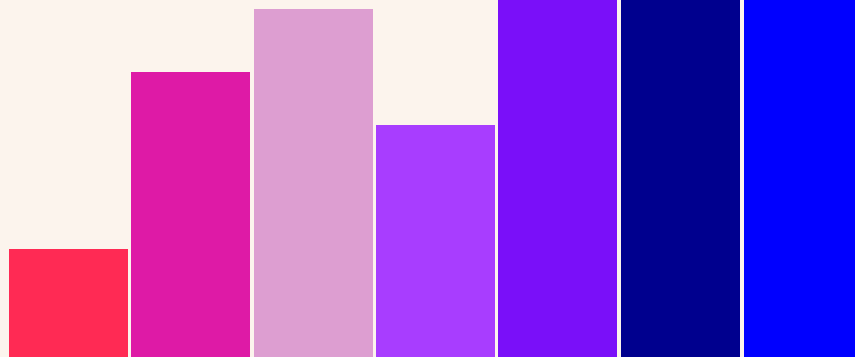
**Conduct a skills gap audit and see what critical skills you're missing**

# Strong leadership

## It starts at the top

This is it. The driver behind every other point we've raised. Without strong leadership, high performance is just another unattainable idea. It takes strong leadership to set goals, make decisions and enable communication and recognition to spread from the top down.

What our research showed is that a third of leaders admitted they don't enable their team to achieve high performance. That makes sense when you consider only half of them say they have a clear picture of what high performance looks like. How can you lead a team if you don't know where you're going next?



Strong leadership isn't about micromanagement or having constant oversight of everything your employees are doing. So much of what this guide covers is about setting employees up for success on their own. Strong leaders work smarter, building strategies informed by the needs of the organisation and employees that lead to long-term success.

It starts with figuring out where you stand.

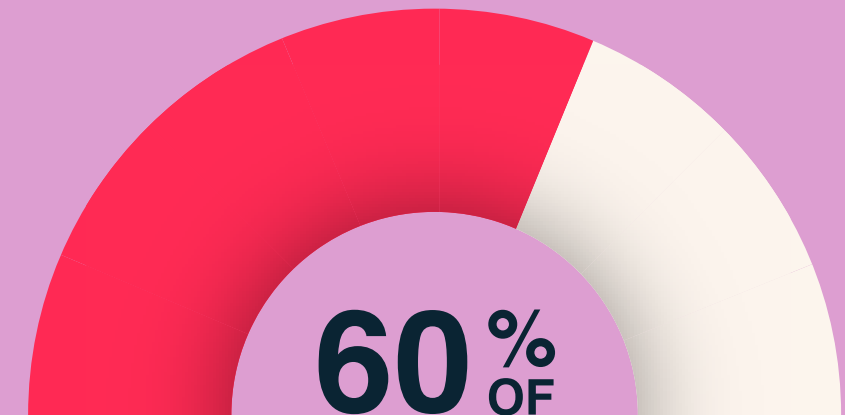
What does high performance look like to you?

Once you have that, you can start putting the rest of the pieces into place.



*Get started with one quick tip:*

**Write down what high performance looks like to you, how you think your team can achieve it, and how you'll measure success**



**employees**

have reservations about their business leader's ability to deliver high performance

# The next step forward

## Technology is the high performance enabler

One thing should be clear. There's no single solution to what defines high performance- because what high performance actually is can vary from organisation to organisation and moment to moment. But by getting that clearer picture, you can set your team on the path to success.

There was an area our survey flagged that had employees and leaders in complete agreement. 100% of leaders and 99% of employees say that the right tech is a vital factor in achieving high performance. It makes sense. While no single strategy will make you high performing, good tech such as our own People

First can form a baseline from which high performance can grow. For starters, tech can ensure you have a more holistic, real-time picture of your operations, enabling stronger communication and faster decision-making. Rather than silos, tech enables disconnected employees to feel more like one team pulling towards a clear goal.

To learn more about the role technology- and specifically **People First** - can play in enabling high performance, download our checklist.

**Download the High Performance checklist**



**100%  
OF  
leaders**

**99%  
OF  
employees**

**say that tech is  
a vital factor in  
achieving high  
performance**



# About MHR

MHR ([www.mhrglobal.com](http://www.mhrglobal.com)) is a specialist provider of HR, payroll and finance software. Through its People and Finance platform, MHR enables sustainable high performance – for organisations and for the people working within them – by making work flow. MHR powers better real-time decision-making across the core business functions of HR, payroll, finance and learning, helping organisations to be more effective and efficient. Proudly independent and family owned since its founding in 1984, MHR's 900 employees based in Nottingham serve over 1,400 customers across the UK and Ireland.

To find out how MHR can help with HR, payroll and finance solutions please get in touch:

[info@mhrglobal.com](mailto:info@mhrglobal.com) | [mhrglobal.com](http://mhrglobal.com)  
+44 (0) 115 945 6000 (UK) | +353 (01) 541 3778 (IRE) | +1 (470) 890 6170 (US)

