WHITE PAPER

PERFORMANCE THAT HOLDS

The evidence for sustainable high performance

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The evidence for sustainable high performance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Most organisations can lift performance. Very few can hold it. The pattern is familiar to anyone who has worked inside a large employer for more than a few years: a programme is launched, the numbers move, the case study is written, and eighteen months later the organisation is back where it started with a slightly more cynical workforce.

This paper argues that the reason is structural rather than motivational. High performance is not a state an organisation reaches and then owns. It is a system that decays unless it is deliberately re-supplied. And the component that decays fastest is not the process, the measurement architecture or the strategy document. It is the community of trust and belonging that makes discretionary effort a rational choice for an individual employee.

We set the international peer-reviewed evidence alongside NSC Group's own applied research: more than 2,500 responses to the NSC Group High Performance Survey, together with interviews with senior leaders who have implemented the NSC Group High Performance Model.

0.20 SD	2,500+	.22–.38
lift in organisational performance per SD of high performance work system use	responses analysed in the NSC Group High Performance Survey	corrected correlations between engagement and business-unit

What this paper argues

1. High performance is a system, not a status. Left alone, it leaks.
2. The evidence for what produces it is real but more modest, and more contested, than the consulting market admits.
3. What sustains it is not more process. It is community: trust, belonging and the connection of a person's role to a cause larger than the role.
4. Leaders are the re-supply mechanism. Nothing else in the system can do that job for them.
5. Because the gap between what leaders believe and what the workforce experiences is where the leak starts, it has to be measured, not assumed.

The paper closes with what a leadership team can do about it: a set of embedding disciplines, and a self-reflection tool that helps a leader estimate their own exposure to the perception gap before they commission anything more formal.

1. WHAT WE ARE ACTUALLY TALKING ABOUT

"High performance" is one of the least disciplined phrases in management language. It is used to describe a quarterly result, a culture, a personality type and an aspiration, often in the same meeting. Before arguing about how to sustain it, it is worth being precise about what the research community means by it, because there are two quite different traditions and they answer different questions.

The systems tradition

The first tradition treats high performance as a property of the work system. Huselid's foundational study linked bundles of human resource practices — selective hiring, investment in skills, participation, performance-contingent reward — to firm-level productivity and financial performance, and gave the field its name: high performance work systems.[1] The literature that followed established two important refinements. Adoption is not the variable that matters; implementation effectiveness and strategic alignment are.[2] And the effects run largely through people rather than around them — through human capital, motivation and the opportunity to contribute, not through control.

Combs and colleagues' meta-analysis of 92 studies remains the most quoted quantification: a one standard-deviation increase in the use of high performance work practices is associated with roughly a 0.20 standard-deviation increase in organisational performance, with larger effects for coherent systems than for individual practices.[3] That is a genuine and commercially meaningful effect. It is also considerably smaller than the impression created by most vendor material.

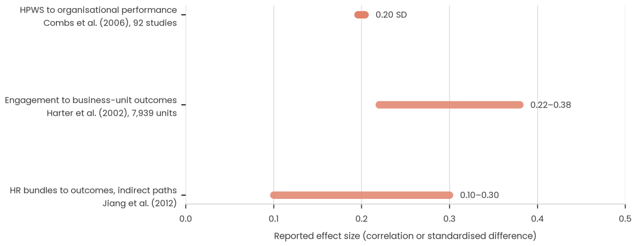

Figure 1. What the meta-analytic evidence actually reports. Effect sizes are real and commercially meaningful, and smaller than the market implies.

The organisational tradition

The second tradition treats high performance as a property of the whole organisation over time. De Waal's High Performance Organisation framework, built across studies of more than 290 organisations and since tested in other cultures and sectors, converges on five factors: management quality, openness and action orientation, long-term orientation, continuous improvement, and workforce quality.[1] Holbeche's contribution is the most useful for our purposes: she argues that sustained performance depends on "dynamic stability" — a paradoxical combination of change-readiness with a consistent identity and values — rather than on any static bundle of best practices.[12]

The two traditions agree on something that matters. Long-term orientation is not a nice-to-have that sits alongside the performance factors. It is one of them.

2. BEING HONEST ABOUT THE EVIDENCE

A paper that argues for a disciplined approach to performance has an obligation to be disciplined about its own evidence. Three criticisms of the high performance literature are serious and unresolved, and any leader being sold a performance programme should know them.

Causality runs both ways

Wright and colleagues tested the direction of the relationship and found that prior firm performance also predicts subsequent ratings of human resource practice. Profitable organisations can afford good practice. This does not eliminate the effect, but it means the honest claim is association plus plausible mechanism, not proof of cause.

The black box is still open

Guest's review concluded that after two decades the field still lacks consensus on the mechanisms connecting practice to performance, and that much of the research is cross-sectional and single-respondent. Wall and Wood went further, describing a field prone to advocacy-driven overstatement and calling for large-scale longitudinal designs.

Mutual gains are conditional, not automatic

The optimistic reading is that high performance work systems are good for the organisation and good for the people in it. Appelbaum and colleagues' multi-industry work supports that under the right conditions.[13] But Ramsay and colleagues found evidence of work intensification rather than empowerment,[3] Kinnie and colleagues documented the same dynamic in practice,[3] and Godard argued that published effect sizes are likely inflated by publication bias and common-method variance.[3]

> **A statistic we will not repeat**
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> The claim that "70% of change programmes fail" appears throughout consulting material. Hughes traced it and found no credible empirical source; the figure appears to have originated as an assertion and been laundered through repeated citation.[1] We have dropped it. Where we need evidence on why execution unravels, we use Sull and colleagues' survey of more than 7,600 executives instead.[3]

None of this undermines the case for pursuing high performance. It sharpens it. If effects are moderate and conditional, then how the work is done, and whether it is sustained, matters far more than which practices are adopted.

3. WHY PERFORMANCE LEAKS

The decay problem is under-theorised in the literature and over-experienced in practice. Four mechanisms account for most of it, and each has an evidence base.

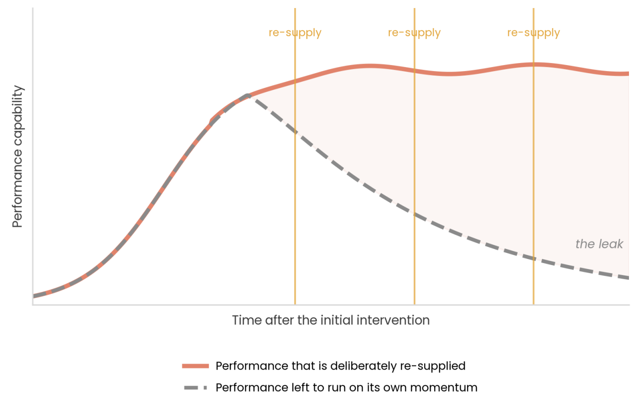

Figure 2. The leak, schematically. Both organisations run the same intervention. Only one keeps re-supplying it. Illustrative; no data implied.

Compliance decays; commitment does not

Meyer and Herscovitch's three-component model distinguishes affective, normative and continuance commitment.[2] Gains built on continuance — people complying because the cost of not complying is high — disappear the moment the pressure is removed. Gains built on affective commitment persist because the person actually wants the outcome. Most performance programmes buy compliance and record it as commitment.

Intended, actual and perceived practice diverge

Nishii and Wright's central observation is that the policy an executive intends, the practice a line manager actually delivers and the practice an employee perceives are three different things, and the gap between them widens with distance from the centre.[31] Nishii and colleagues showed that employee outcomes depend on the attribution employees make about management's intent — whether a practice is read as commitment-focused or control-focused.[1] The same initiative can therefore raise performance in one division and depress it in another, for reasons invisible to the executive who designed it.

Execution unravels at the seams

Sull and colleagues found that the dominant causes of execution failure are not lack of alignment to the top but the coordination between units, and unclear accountability at the boundaries.[3] Performance leaks out of the joins.

Conditions change and capability does not

Teece's dynamic capabilities framework — sensing, seizing, transforming — explains why an organisation optimised for the conditions it faced three years ago underperforms in the conditions it faces now.[1] O'Reilly and Tushman's review of ambidexterity shows that organisations sustaining performance exploit current capability and explore new capability at the same time, and that this depends on senior-team integration rather than on structural separation alone.[1] Jansen's multi-level dissertation confirmed the benefit is contingent on environmental dynamism and mediated by senior team social integration.[1]

4. WHAT THE EVIDENCE SAYS MAKES IT LAST

Set against those four leaks, the literature on sustainability converges on a smaller set of things than the literature on attainment. Sustained performance appears to require a capability layer, a legitimacy layer and a psychological layer, and organisations tend to invest in the first while neglecting the other two.

Capability: the ability to change without losing yourself

This is Teece's territory, and Holbeche's dynamic stability.[112] Lengnick-Hall and colleagues make the practical bridge, arguing that resilience capacity — cognitive, behavioural and contextual — can be deliberately built through the design of the human resource architecture.[1] Van der Weerdt tested which configurations sustain performance under market turbulence specifically.

Legitimacy: performance that does not consume its own base

Ehnert and Harry define sustainable human resource management as practice that maintains the social and human resource base over the long term, and explicitly critique short-termist high-performance-at-any-cost models.[2] Kramar argues the single-minded focus on financial performance is itself incompatible with sustaining performance.[21] Guest's well-being-centred reformulation of the human resource management and performance link is the clearest statement of the position: an approach that damages well-being is not a high performance approach, it is a loan against future performance.[22]

Psychology: safety, voice and learning

Edmondson established psychological safety as a team-level construct that enables learning behaviour — help-seeking, error reporting, experimentation — and through it, team performance.[2] Van den Bossche's dissertation traced the same social and cognitive factors driving team learning, and Knapp extended the construct into distributed teams, which is where most Australian knowledge work now happens. Godard's point completes the picture: embedding requires genuine voice and participation mechanisms, not just well-designed practices, or the gains are superficial and short-lived.[3]

> **The through-line**
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> Capability keeps the organisation relevant. Legitimacy keeps it able to ask. Psychological safety keeps the information flowing. Remove any one and the performance system stops re-supplying itself — which is what decay actually is.

5. WHAT OUR OWN DATA SHOWS

NSC Group designed the High Performance Survey to measure an organisation's progress on its high performance journey. Its items are grouped into six sections. We have analysed the cumulative responses of more than 2,500 respondents.

Three of the six sections carry the most instructive trends: organisational commitment and performance, leadership characteristics, and work characteristics. What we found is that specific patterns appeared early in the organisation's high performance journey and were then sustained over time.

Organisational commitment and performance

This section measures the behaviours, perceptions and attitudes that reveal a respondent's commitment to the organisation and to performance, focusing on strategic intent and the respondent's connection to it. The analysis identified primary conditions of community, belonging and consideration.

The community condition is not customer service. It is a desire to deliver high quality service to the organisation's broader community. Belonging is the desire to feel part of that community. Consideration is the perception that the organisation considers its own people as well as its customers, expressed through flexibility and work-life balance. Sitting beneath these were secondary conditions: the organisation living its vision and values, and being prepared to equip its people with the tools to deliver.

Leadership characteristics

This section measures respondents' evaluation of their immediate leaders. Authentic, people-centred leadership emerges as the central primary condition. Two further primary conditions are personal impacts of it: the perception that the leader truly cares, and the leader as a positive role model. These in turn drive the secondary outcome conditions — leaders seen as caring, setting realistic expectations, explaining goals, demonstrating honesty and integrity.

The ordering matters, and it is the opposite of how most leadership programmes are built. Employees do not arrive at trust because their leader explained the goals well. They accept the goals because they had already concluded the leader cares.

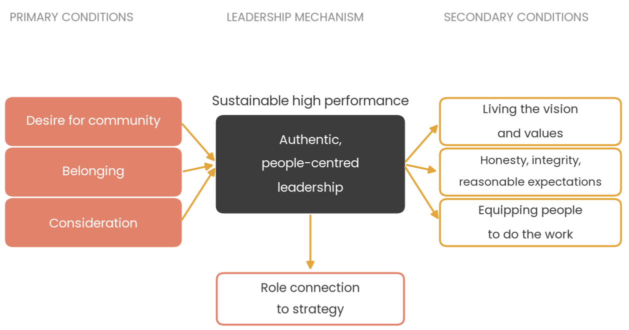

Figure 3. The conditions structure observed across the NSC Group High Performance Survey data. Primary conditions are met through the leadership mechanism, which produces the secondary conditions.

Work characteristics

The primary condition operating in this section is role connection: employees' understanding of the importance of their own role, and the connection of that role to the strategy of the organisation. This is the mechanism that converts a good leadership relationship into sustained performance rather than sustained goodwill.

> **What the three sections say together**
>
> People want community, and will invest discretionary effort to get it.
> Authentic, people-centred leaders are the mechanism by which that desire is met.
> Role connection to strategy is what converts the resulting goodwill into performance.
> Remove the leader behaviour and the first and third both decay, regardless of the process architecture.

6. WHAT THESE LEADERS ACTUALLY DO

Alongside the survey analysis we interviewed senior leaders who have implemented the NSC Group High Performance Model in their organisations. We asked them to describe their leadership style, and how they go about building trust and belonging. Their answers are unglamorous, and that is the point.

Alice Percy described her style as:

"Inclusive, caring, collaborative, and outcomes-focused. Kindness is the biggest one I think; empowering people, being authentic and accepting of others. Just being a person, understanding that people are people, and they've got stuff going on outside of the workplace, putting on the empathetic hat."

Toni Gilliver is a manager in a large public hospital, part of the leadership team of a 500-person Mental Health Services unit. She described her style as open, and as a coaching style — working alongside her team rather than above it. On trust:

"I think that humans aren't solitary creatures, they like to feel needed and in a work situation, they want to know their role, they want to know how to contribute, how they can participate. Trust is about a personal connection which creates trust. As trust is built and respected, it builds over time. The leader sets the tone of the relationship, as the leader goes about building relationships so too will the team."

Lloyd Smith went to the cost of it:

"Trust is an essential pillar of success of a leader. Without trust the leader will fail. As the leader, I need to be prepared to take risks through vulnerability and openness to build trust. It is an iterative process which builds trust. It is the after-work telephone calls, it is the check-ins, it is the side conversations, understanding what is important to the individual, that builds trust over time."

Scott Waters, a chief executive, focused on consistency:

"You build trust by being consistent in your approach as a leader. A lack of consistency will lead to a lack of trust, particularly if you're going through any level of change management. Deviation from your message as a senior leader will erode trust. People's job security is important to them, so they may continue to be a member of the team, but the erosion of trust will dilute the outcome and the sense of belonging in the team."

Alice Percy's answer on how she builds it was the most structural: weekly one-on-ones of an hour with each direct report, project plans that set expectations early so people can be empowered to deliver without checking in, annual and performance plans, monthly check-ins and a six-monthly review.

Four leaders, four styles, one shared property. Every one of them described a recurring, scheduled, personally costly activity. That is what re-supply looks like in a diary. It is also the first thing deleted when a leader gets busy, which is precisely why performance leaks.

7. MEASURING THE GAP BEFORE IT COSTS YOU

Every mechanism in section three shares a property: the organisation cannot see it from the top. The divergence between intended and perceived practice, the compliance that is being recorded as commitment, the seam where accountability is unclear — all of them are invisible to a leadership team that is reading its own dashboard. The gap between what leaders believe is true and what the workforce experiences is not a side effect of decay. It is the leading indicator of it.

Conventional instruments are not built to find it. Engagement surveys ask how people feel. Performance surveys ask how good we are. Very few read the difference between leadership perception and workforce reality at the level of the specific behaviour, which is the only level at which anyone can act.

An instrument designed for exactly this

Our colleagues at Influential have built a diagnostic for this problem. Their CBD-40 instrument reads behavioural high performance and emotional engagement together, and compares three respondent groups — senior leadership, middle leadership and the workforce — so that the divergence between them becomes the finding rather than a footnote. It reports across six facets: integrity, discretionary effort and adaptive collaboration on the performance side; vigour and dedication, and meaning and belonging on the engagement side; with psychological safety and voice as a bridge facet that suppresses both when it is low.

The conceptual grounding will be familiar from the sections above: behavioural integrity, Edmondson's psychological safety, the Utrecht work engagement tradition, and affective commitment. What the instrument adds is a divergence engine that flags the specific behaviours where leadership over-rates workforce reality — which, on the argument of this paper, are the highest-leverage interventions available, because they are the points at which the organisation is operating on a story rather than on the truth.

Figure 4. The shape of the problem: the same six facets, rated by leaders and by the workforce. Schematic illustration only — no client data shown.

> **A note on the instrument**
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> CBD-40 is Influential's proprietary instrument. Its item wording, scoring architecture, index weightings and classification thresholds are Influential's intellectual property and are not reproduced here. This paper describes what the instrument measures and why that matters; it is not a specification, and nothing in it should be used to construct a substitute.
> Enquiries about the instrument itself are best directed to Influential at influential.solutions.

Ten questions to ask yourself first

Before commissioning any formal measurement, a leadership team can get a useful reading from a cheaper exercise. The questions below are NSC Group's own, written for reflection rather than scoring. Answer each one twice. First, how true is this of my organisation? Second, how true would my workforce say it is? Then look only at the questions where the two answers differ, and ask what evidence you have for your answer beyond your own confidence.

- When we commit to something publicly, we do it — and people can name recent examples either way.
- People here raise problems early, including problems that make their own area look bad.
- The effort people put in beyond their role description is offered, not extracted.

- When two teams need each other to deliver, they sort it out without needing an executive to arbitrate.
- Someone junior could disagree with me in a meeting this week without it costing them anything.
- People can explain, in their own words, how their job connects to the corporate plan.
- Our leaders are visible in the parts of the organisation where the work is physically done.
- The last time we asked people for their view, something visibly changed as a result.
- The behaviours we reward and the behaviours we describe in our values are the same behaviours.
- If our best people left tomorrow, we would already know why.

Where your answer and your estimate of the workforce's answer are close, you are probably right. Where they diverge sharply, you have found the place to look — and a reason to measure it properly rather than argue about it.

8. EMBEDDING: THE DISCIPLINES THAT STOP THE LEAK

If high performance is a system that must be re-supplied, then embedding is not a phase at the end of a programme. It is the programme. Six disciplines follow from the evidence.

1. Build for commitment, not compliance

Every mechanism should be tested against a single question: if the pressure were removed tomorrow, would this continue? If the answer is no, it is a continuance-based gain and it will decay.[2]

2. Close the intended-actual-perceived gap deliberately

Treat line-manager delivery as the intervention, not the policy. Measure what employees perceive, not what was issued, and act on the divergence.[3,11]

3. Fix the seams before the boxes

Coordination between units and accountability at the boundaries are where execution actually fails.[3] That is a design question about how work flows, not an org-chart question.

4. Protect voice as infrastructure

Psychological safety is not a mood. It is the mechanism by which the organisation finds out things it does not want to know, early enough to act.[23]

5. Connect every role to the strategy, in the person's own words

Role connection is the strongest work-characteristic condition in our own data. The test is not whether the strategy has been communicated. It is whether the person can explain their part of it without reading it.

6. Put re-supply in the diary

Every leader we interviewed described a recurring, scheduled, personally costly activity. Trust is built in the in-between moments, and in-between moments do not survive contact with a full calendar unless they are protected as deliberately as a board paper deadline.

> **A note on cost**
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> Some readers will conclude that this is expensive in leader time. It is. The relevant comparison is not against zero. In our article on the real cost of not pursuing performance and engagement improvement, we set out how the cost of doing nothing accumulates quietly, and it is not smaller — it is simply unbudgeted.

9. CONCLUSION

Our hypothesis in Sustainable High Performance was that the answer was hidden in plain sight: successful enterprise leaders build community, and not just any community, but a high performance community that delivers on the promise of the word "organisation" — that we organise so as to achieve more than the sum of our individual parts.

Setting that alongside the international evidence has not weakened the claim. It has explained it. The systems literature tells us that coherent practice bundles produce a real but moderate effect, and that the effect runs through people. The sustainability literature tells us that what holds performance in place is capability, legitimacy and psychological safety. The critical literature tells us to be sceptical of anyone promising otherwise. And our own data tells us the sequence: people want community, authentic people-centred leaders are how they get it, and role connection to strategy is what turns that into performance.

Performance that holds is not the product of a better programme. It is the product of leaders who keep showing up in the same way, long after the launch, and who are willing to find out where the organisation's story about itself has come apart from its people's experience of it.

Where to from here

If any of this describes your organisation, the useful next step is usually small: a conversation about what you already know and cannot yet prove.
NSC Group works with Australian organisations on workforce culture diagnostics, organisational review, capability frameworks and executive coaching.

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ABOUT NSC GROUP

NSC Group is an Australian consultancy working with organisations on workforce culture, organisational review, capability frameworks and executive and leadership coaching. Our practice is built on applied research: the NSC Group High Performance Model, the High Performance Survey, and a series of whitepapers including High Impact High Performance, The Leader, Communication & High Performance, Trust & Belonging, and Sustainable High Performance.

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The CBD-40 instrument referenced in section 7 is the intellectual property of Influential (influential.solutions) and is described here with attribution.

NEXT STEP

Where to take this

If this paper described your organisation, the next question is how wide the gap is between belief and experience.

TAKE THE SELF-CHECK

The perception gap

A ten-minute self-assessment that measures the distance between what your leadership team believes about the workplace and what the workforce experiences. You answer twice — once as you believe it is, once as you think your people would answer — and the gap is the finding.

nscgroup.au/perception-gap

THE SERVICE BEHIND THIS PAPER

Workforce culture diagnostics

How we scope, run and hand over the work.

nscgroup.au/services/workforce-culture-diagnostics

Or start a conversation

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