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The Ultimate Guide to Building a High-Performing Manufacturing Team

How to attract, select and keep the people who make a manufacturing business work. By Rhys Williams, founder and Managing Director of Sigma Recruitment.

Most manufacturing companies know that a high-performing team is crucial to success. Every organisation needs the right selection of carefully-chosen candidates to support their business objectives. The challenge is transforming a group of individual hires and current team members into a cohesive community of employees, all dedicated to achieving the same goals. Creating and nurturing the ideal team means starting from the beginning. A specialist manufacturing recruitment partner can support you in selecting the right people for your positions, who you then go on to onboard into their roles as you work with them to deliver results in your manufacturing organisation. Of course, you may not be able to start from scratch if you're taking over a pre-existing team, but you can still implement the strategies below when you do start recruiting. There's incredible value in building your team from the foundation, up. In fact, the book "Leading Organisations: Ten Timeless Truths" by Mary Meaney and Scott Keller, the authors suggest that there's a 1.9 times higher chance of achieving a great revenue flow when your team is working towards a shared vision. As basketball champion Michael Jordan once said: "Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence win championships." This guide will provide you with everything you need to know to streamline the transition into building a high performing manufacturing team. Best regards, Rhys Williams

Achieving The Right Team Composition

Creating the ideal manufacturing team is essential, but it's also incredibly tough. The manufacturing sector is suffering from a significant skills shortage. Employers are continually competing to earn the attention of the top-tier talent their recruitment companies send them.

The fact that everyone is scrambling for skills often means that when you find an ambitious and capable recruit, you're keen to get them onboard as quickly as possible. However, while certifications and experience count it's essential not to overlook the importance of "composition" when crafting the right team.

Ideally, you'll need to look not only at the things someone new can bring to their specific role but also the complementary attitudes and skills they can use to supplement your existing team. The best employees feel accountable for the success of the business overall. They're natural team players, rather than individual stars that soak up the spotlight.

So, how can you make sure you attract and recruit candidates that will make up the ideal team composition.



Start With Your Employer Brand

Attracting an employee that fits into your existing culture means ensuring that culture shines through in everything you do. A strong brand demonstrates your values and work culture to potential employees, which may be why 59% of managers feel branding is crucial to their HR strategy. Your manufacturing employer brand is how potential candidates see your organisation. It's how your recruitment partner "sells" you to the best talent in your industry. The more magnetic your brand is, the more likely it is that you'll attract the right people for your future growth. To build an employer identity, you'll need to:

- Listen to your staff: Use surveys and confidential meetings to determine what existing employees like and dislike about your company.
- Define your Employer Value Proposition: The Randstad global workforce report for 2017 indicates that while 58% of candidates are looking for good salary and benefits, 43% want exceptional work/life balance and 35% want opportunities for progression. What can you offer candidates that will set you apart?
- Articulate your mission: Show what you want to accomplish in your community or sector (beyond making money). Give your team something to get behind. For instance, are you a company with a green side? Do you donate some of your profits to charity?

Write A Compelling Job Description

While your employer brand will begin to attract talent in your sector through your recruitment partner and the work they do on your behalf with social media platforms and review websites, it doesn't replace the standard job description. A dynamic job specification gives your recruitment company a framework so they can start connecting the dots between a candidate's ambitions, and the opportunities your organisation can offer. If you're hoping to work with talent in a competitive space, then you'll need to design a description of your role that stands out. This means analysing what's going to speak to your preferred applicant. Remember to:

- Sell your position with useful “hooks”: Talk about your salary and benefits, outline the skills they will need for the role, and provide plenty of descriptors that show your would-be employee what’s in it for them.
- Make sure your description aligns with your employer brand: Use this important document as an opportunity to show what your company is all about. Highlight the nature of your business, and what it can bring to your recruits.

Use Profiling Tools

Your employer brand and job description can help to sell your company and convince top-tier talent to agree to an interview. However, once you’ve got those candidates in front of you, how do you make sure they’re right for the role?

Around 18% of companies turn to personality tests in the hiring process. That number is growing as more organisations begin to recognise the power of profiling. While a CV will give you a good insight into what a candidate is capable of, and the right questions reveal plenty of useful data, personality profiling can be vital in achieving the ideal team composition.



Building And Developing Your Team

Focusing on composition is a great way to launch your strategy for a high-performing manufacturing team. However, it’s important to start as you mean to go on. This means not only hiring the right people but also giving those people a clear vision of what they need to do to succeed in your company.

A strong vision ensures that everyone understands where you are heading. For instance, ask yourself:

- Are you the kind of business that cares more about results, or method?
- Do you encourage innovation and curiosity, or prefer a focus on tried-and-tested techniques?
- Do you have a “why” for your business beyond the quest for profits? What is it?

The vision driving your team can be an essential source of motivation and support. Not only can an explicit goal help your employees to make critical decisions for themselves, but it can also inspire them to go above and beyond when they feel an affinity with your goals.

This is particularly true for Millennial, and Gen Z hires, who like to know that their contributions are making the world a better place.

Your vision can even help you to put “best practice” guidelines in place for your staff to follow when they encounter a problem or need help. For instance, do you want new hires to seek help from managers when they’re lost, or turn to a team mentor? The more guidelines you have in place, the more productive your team will be.

Create A Company Culture

According to the Head of Industry at Google, Paul Santagata, “there’s no team without trust”. Building and developing your team starts with establishing the right atmosphere in which employees can thrive and grow. For instance, in Google’s two-year team performance study, they found that a culture of “psychological safety” - believing you won’t be punished for small mistakes - allows for better creativity and risk-taking.

For instance, the ANZ bank published an incredible case study of how employee attitude changed when the brand altered its culture. In the first two years, productivity in meetings went from 61 to 91%, and revenue per employee improved by 89%.

To establish a healthy culture for your team:

- **1. Establish a Common Understanding of Cultural Expectations** Research suggests that the best, most high-performing teams are often driven by a shared vision - like the ones we mentioned above. If you want your culture to thrive, then you need to make sure that everyone in your organisation has the same idea of what that culture is. Do you define yourself as a friendly and creative company? If so, then you’ll need to establish an environment where people feel comfortable sharing ideas and offering feedback.

One of the biggest mistakes that modern manufacturing businesses make is assuming that company culture is a set-it-and-forget-it concept.

- **2. Make Essential Changes** Surveying your staff and speaking to them about their needs will help you to get a better idea of the culture you currently have. If something isn’t right, then a change is crucial. However, studies show that it’s not possible to make more than five meaningful changes at once. With that in mind, it’s essential to narrow down your list of the things you want to change and start with the basics.

For instance, the ANZ banking team started by focusing on “openness and honesty” and creating a “can-do” attitude for personal accountability. Determine which culture aspects might help your company to grow. For instance, a manufacturing team might focus on safety

and responsibility to reduce the risk of dangerous mistakes.

- **3. Make Company Culture a Constant Consideration** One of the biggest mistakes that modern manufacturing businesses make is assuming that company culture is a set-it-and-forget-it concept. The most successful cultures are something that organisations work on every day. For instance, if you want to make your team as productive and accurate as possible, then don't just tell them that those things are part of your culture.

Implement training methods to help improve accuracy. Introduce group mentoring sessions for employees that struggle. Consider offering suggestions for time management to assist with productivity.

Improving The Onboarding Process

- Building and developing a powerful manufacturing team also means that when you do choose new employees, you must onboard them properly. Finding the right people for your company is only the first step of the hiring process. Onboarding is a critical part of welcoming someone into your organisation, introducing them to the culture you've established, and giving them the tools they need to thrive.

Ask yourself:

- When will onboarding start?
- What impression do you want your recruits to have of your business after the first day, week, and thirty days?
- Which tools and resources will you need to supply to help them thrive in their job?
- What kind of goals will you set for your new candidates?
- How will you gather feedback and measure the success of your onboarding programme?

Once you've answered these questions, work with your recruitment team and HR to put a plan into action to assimilate employees into their new roles. For instance, here are some of the things you can have ready for your hire's first day:

- A welcoming culture: Let everyone in the office know to expect someone new and treat them well.
- A security card, badge, and any other credentials your new employee will need
- A computer, software, hardware and additional must-haves (like a company email address)
- A working phone system
- An FAQ sheet answering common questions like: Where's the cafeteria? Who can the employee talk to if they have questions? Where's the meeting room? Where can he/she park?

Develop Strong Team Dynamics

Now that you've got team composition and development worked out, you can move onto considering team "dynamics". A high-performing team is a group of goal-focused people with complementary skills and expertise who innovate, collaborate, and continuously produce amazing results.

A team is a group of skilled people who hold themselves accountable for a shared goal. To function well, a team needs more than just multiple people, it also needs:

- A sense of commitment and purpose
- Ambitious goals with a smart focus
- Mutual accountability and understanding
- Diverse expertise that complements the group
- Trust between members



The Tuckman Model For Team Dynamics

While there's no singular yardstick to measure team performance by, there is a commonly-accepted model available for developing team dynamics. Dr Bruce Tuckman, a psychology professor, conducted a significant amount of research into group dynamics and eventually came up with a four-phase model for development.

The Tuckman theory prompts companies to focus on "four" stages of development in team dynamics, including:

- **Forming** The initial stage when individuals are getting to know each other. This refers to the first few days when you're bringing new employees into your team. You know you have the right people onboard, but they haven't formed strong bonds in your organisation yet. During this stage, your HR group might use personality profiles to assess the kind of personalities in your staff. From there, they can help each member to understand each other's differences and operating styles.

- **Storming** In the “storming” stage, development can be complicated. Team members might challenge each other as they get used to their new positions and as they are working out their role within the team. This is the place where leadership shines by coming in and taking charge of the situation. Leaders deal with conflict and avoid problems between staff members. They also reinforce company expectations and the boundaries that the company want their employees to operate within.

This is the stage where some team members will test a leader. It’s also where ‘blame’ is apportioned when things go wrong; generally due to a lack of trust.

- **** Norming**** Once the people in your business have worked through their conflicts and built trust and mutual respect your high-performing team can begin to develop. Diverse members of staff will begin to appreciate each other’s differences, and how the right combination of strengths and weaknesses create harmony in the company. Leaders in this stage take the role of “facilitator” offering guidance, additional support, and encouragement wherever necessary.
- **Performing**
- Finally, you’ll reach a point where your team is fully-functional and ready to deliver exceptional results. Members will be able to manage their relationships themselves and communicate with each other openly and honestly. Here, the leader focuses on maintaining the status quo, delegating responsibilities appropriately, and identifying when the team starts to move in the wrong direction.

While other researchers have used alternate names for the stages of developing team dynamics, most include the same process. High-performance teams often work in similar ways, and this four-phase model can help you to bring cohesiveness and consistency to your work environment.

Building On Team Strengths

As someone responsible for putting together a high-performing team, it will be up to you to identify strengths and development areas in candidates. This is often the secret to unlocking the true potential of your staff. When you understand a group’s strengths and weaknesses, you can work to create a balanced group of people who thrive in their roles, support each other, and deliver on every task.

There are a few ways leaders can build on team strengths. For instance:

- **1. Use Competition** Competition is a powerful motivator and an excellent way to bring out the best in your people when used correctly. Holding contests between teams, or departments across an organisation can be an effective way to engage employees, bring some fun into the working week and see who excels in specific areas. For instance, if you’re looking for someone to lead your new project, a contest will help you to determine the right man or woman for the job.

Competition can also encourage teamwork, which boosts productivity in the long-term. The key is to make sure that and game you use remains a fun and relaxed process.

- **2. Introduce Opportunities for Growth**

- While it's vital to hire candidates who already have the skills to perform well in your manufacturing organisation, you can also provide development opportunities to take these to the next level too. As you begin to analyse your high-performing team, you may notice gaps in their skill sets that you can fill with mentorship and training; both on the job and formal classroom based workshops.

Not only will training opportunities help you to build on the existing comradery and dynamics of your staff, but it will also show your employees that you value them.

Today's manufacturing talent consider opportunities for development to be a crucial benefit of an engaging position.

- **3. Encourage Two-way Feedback** Most companies in the South Wales manufacturing sector will discuss strengths and development areas with their staff during regular performance reviews. A better alternative may be to encourage two-way honesty by asking your team member to offer feedback about their experiences with your company, while you give feedback on their performance.

Your feedback ensures that your employee can build on their skills in the areas that matter most to your business. On the other hand, their opinions can give you an insight into where you need to improve your process as you move forward.

Prioritise Excellent Leadership

Speaking of leadership, the right guidance is crucial to any high performing team. A leader needs to be able to balance their focus successfully among different employees in their business. After all, no matter how proficient your team might be, they'll often look to your leadership for guidance on how to behave.

The Adair International Institute, founded by John Adair, references the "ACL" or Action Centred Leadership approach for successful team building. This unique methodology indicates that leaders have three distinct levels of leadership to consider when running a company. They need to concentrate on a multi-dimensional approach to organising the team, the task, and the individual. **For the Task:** When it comes to leading employees through a successful task or project, leaders need to start by establishing a clear vision for their group, complete with definitive aims, and a strong guiding purpose, as we have previously mentioned. Once that vision is set, it's crucial to ensure that team members have milestones, and measurements to guide them from start to finish. ACL also encourages a task-level focus on:

- Giving teams access to the right systems and resources

- Outlining standards of behaviour
- Establishing responsibilities for the task
- Offering feedback and guidance
- Adjusting plans according to milestone results **For the Team:** When it comes to supporting the team, a leader needs to use the information established at the task level to determine how they can best help the team throughout the project. This means giving regular feedback and encouraging staff members to support each other. It also means building in collective disciplines and routines that push a group towards success. ACL fosters leaders to:
 - Make sure the team knows how to deal with conflict
 - Ensure that cooperation and morale are in a good place
 - Establish work standards regarding performance, and quality of work
 - Build leadership abilities in others throughout the team. **For the Individual:** Finally, for a team to work seamlessly together, everyone needs the right level of support and guidance. Leaders need to dig down into the needs of each person in their group and ensure that every employee has the coaching, training, and feedback they need. This means that leaders must:
 - Get to know their teams (their strengths, weaknesses, and concerns)
 - Give training and recognition where necessary
 - Build development plans with new candidates
 - Delegate work effectively

Showing Incredible Leadership

- A high-performing team starts from the top down. If employees don't have the leadership they need to guide them to success, then they'll struggle to maintain the unified view that makes them so effective. According to the Harvard business review, a great leader must be able to inspire and motivate others, demonstrate integrity, and solve problems.

Behind any high-performing team is a visionary leader. In fact, a highly-engaged leader can increase engagement by 39%. Just some of the things you can do to demonstrate exceptional leadership include:

- **1. Setting Clear Expectations** Statistics show that only about half of most teams know what's expected of them in the workplace. If you want a unit of high-performing employees in your organisation, then you need to make your expectations clear from day one. Highlight any key requirements or goals that you want your staff to achieve and provide them with milestones to keep them on track.
- **2. Providing Consistent Feedback**

- The only way to make sure that your team is continually improving is to provide them with consistent feedback. Many top performers in the marketplace today value feedback more than other benefits or rewards. Communicating correctly with your employees can help them to understand what you need most from them.

If you struggle to offer constant feedback, consider encouraging your employees to give each other friendly reviews from time to time. Just make sure the advice is structured. For instance: “You might be able to get more done if you avoid multi-tasking and focus on one thing at a time.”

- **3. Motivate and Empower** Finally, remember that happy staff are more productive. It’s important to show your employees that you value them and the effort they’re making on behalf of your business.

A large amount of the current job market is made up of people searching for new positions because they don’t feel appreciated by their current employer. Don’t allow feelings of discontent to persist in your company. Offer rewards when you meet your project milestones, like a free meal or the chance to work from home. Even a quick “thank you” in public can be enough to inspire your team.



Managing Performance

Creating a high-performing team in your manufacturing organisation is an ongoing process. Even when your employees are working together seamlessly, you’ll need to keep working on your leadership to ensure that things don’t fall off-track.

One crucial point to remember is that while building a good team spirit is essential; you’ll also have to manage each person within the team. Working with your employees on their objectives helps them to become more deeply ingrained in your business, creating a loyalty that lasts for years.

As a leader, make sure you welcome each new person to the group by:

- Designing a development plan with agreed competencies, objectives, and training needs.

- Reviewing individual performance against those objectives and business goals throughout the year.
- Provide feedback and adjust plans as necessary when circumstances change.
- Help staff achieve their objectives through training and coaching. So where do you start when managing performance?
- **Know How Each Individual Fits in the Team** Performance management starts with establishing a shared understanding of what your company is trying to achieve. You'll have a fundamental vision outlined in your business plan, and if you've been following this guide, you may have addressed it when building your employer brand and looking for new hires.
- **Embrace the Power of Conversations** When you're managing team performance, there are few things more important than communication. Great teams have great relationships with each other, and great conversations are how you build that connection.

From the moment you onboard someone onto your team, engage in a conversation with them that outlines what your business needs, what they need, and how the two concepts interact. As that employee grows in your organisation, keep coming back to that initial conversation and how you can link the development plan of each to the over-arching vision of your company performance.

- **3. Agree on S.M.A.R.T Objectives** If your manufacturing team has a group of people who carry out similar tasks, then you can also consider common objectives for that unit. For instance, you might want to reduce the number of errors by 20% or improve production by 15%. After a careful discussion with the employees in question, choose a goal that's "SMART". That means:
 - Specific - Outline the desired outcome
 - Measurable - Ensure the employee can see when they've accomplished their goals
 - Achievable - Goals must be challenging, but possible
 - Relevant - How do these goals connect to the employee's development plan, and your business vision?
 - Timebound - When will the objective be achieved?

Closing Thoughts

Ultimately, there's no way to avoid the time and energy required in building your high-performing team in a competitive sector like manufacturing.

It takes commitment, focus, and a plan that involves all the areas we've mentioned above. However, while high-performing teams take time, they're also worth the effort. Research suggests that they can be up to five times more productive than the average business group.

Start by making sure that you have the composition right from day one with the help of your specialist recruitment agency.

Look for employees that fit with your company values and have a personality profile that will support your existing culture. Once you have an idea of what kind of people you need to bring on board, use onboarding to welcome them into your organisation, and develop a strategy for strong team dynamics.

Finally, make sure that your leadership skills and development strategies are perfectly attuned to the needs of your high-performing team. This will ensure that you not only build the right unit for your company but retain it too.

Best regards,

Rhys Williams Established in 2005 – Sigma Recruitment have recruited for some of the largest and most successful manufacturing companies in South Wales and the South West, including many blue-chip global organisations.

Our experienced team of consultants have a wealth of recruitment experience in manufacturing including; automotive, life science, aerospace, electronics, packaging, FMCG, power generation, plastics and many other manufacturing sectors.

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