

Empowering teams for sustainable high-performance operations: A person-centred approach

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People are the most important part of any industry. Many organisations have begun to value not only environmental stewardship, but also human sustainability. To do this we need to ask ourselves some difficult but important questions: Do we really care for our people, and do we empower them? Do we sustainably monitor and improve the wellbeing to add value to our teams? If we do this well, employees will thrive as individuals, not just at work, but in general. Many topical aspects of leadership, management and human factors have been researched and addressed in scientific and popular literature during the past few decades. However, practical guidance in understanding human behaviour and empowering people in specific industry contexts seems to be lacking.

In this paper we consider some of the basic needs of employees and discuss simple and practical building blocks for empowering teams in organisations. We report on case studies and best practices globally, and we present our views and the approaches we use at Ex Mente. We do this to create awareness and stimulate discussion within the pyrometallurgical industry; empowering people is a critical requirement for our shared success and sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, many organisations have begun to value not only environmental stewardship, but also human sustainability. The creation of value for current and future employees and, more broadly, human beings and society as a whole is held in high regard (Cantrell *et al.*, 2023). A key factor in achieving sustainability is the empowerment of teams within organisations. Empowered teams in the pyrometallurgical industry are likely to pro-actively engage with sustainability initiatives and drive meaningful impact and change.

But what does it mean to empower teams in our industry? As leaders and managers, we need to understand this to better support and empower our people, thereby sustainably improving our processes and operations. Organisations that unleash the potential of individuals and help them become healthier, more skilled, and more connected to a sense of purpose and belonging, are more successful in attaining human sustainability. Human sustainability differs from simply employee engagement in that the intent is to positively impact the people and communities who interact with an organisation, rather than just the organisation itself. In a global survey conducted by Deloitte (2022), 64% of workers stated they would be more attracted to and remain at an organisation that creates value not just for shareholders, but for workers as human beings and for the greater society as well.

In this paper, we explore the concept of empowering teams through a person-centred approach as a means of contributing to more sustainable operations. The purpose of this paper is to support role-players in industry, research, and academia to improve existing pyrometallurgical processes and operations, specifically focusing on people as an integral part.

We do this by providing practical knowledge and tools, with which we can better understand, care for and empower our people and thereby improve their operational efficiency and wellbeing.

The scope of this paper addresses some of the basic needs of employees, and we discuss simple and practical building blocks of empowering teams in organisations. We report on the principles we follow at Ex Mente and on the experience of successful companies globally. We discuss two equations on trust and environment health that we developed and currently use in Ex Mente.

WHAT IS TEAM EMPOWERMENT?

Team empowerment as an approach largely opposes performance management. We aim to create awareness and stimulate discussion within the pyrometallurgical industry regarding this important topic.

Traditionally literature refers to team empowerment as a management and leadership approach that involves granting team members the authority, autonomy, and responsibility to make decisions, solve problems, and take ownership of their work inside an organisation (Chen *et al.*, 2007; Hempel *et al.*, 2012). We define it as follows:

Team empowerment in the workplace enables and frees individuals and teams to perform their duties in such a way that it contributes to the success of the organisation, while supporting them to grow towards their own aspirations.

Foundational Principles

Our approach to team empowerment is based on a number of core principles, depicted in the framework shown in Figure 1. We believe that if we do the right things, if we do them for the right reasons, and if we do them well, we will be successful. We are also convinced that it is unlikely that you will achieve something of great significance, when you are primarily focused on yourself.

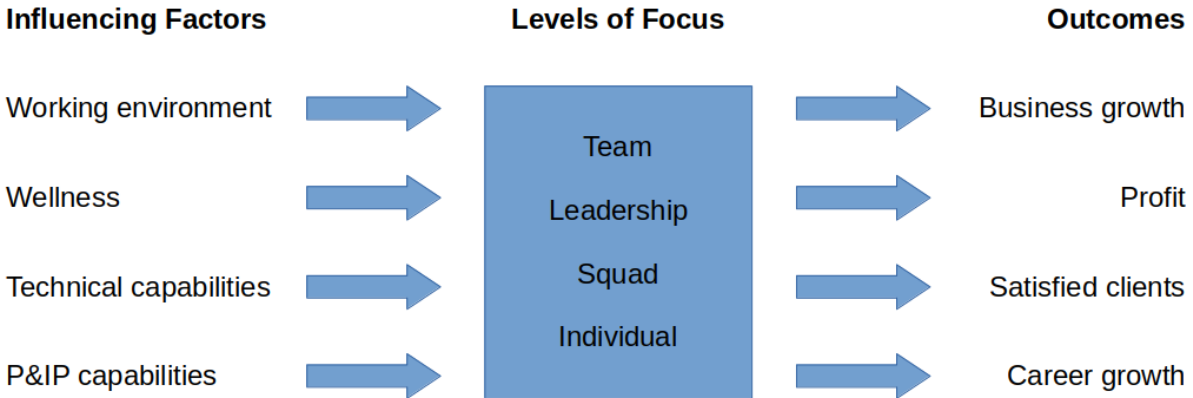


Figure 1. Ex Mente’s framework for thinking about team empowerment. (P&IP: personal and interpersonal).

Although many organisations focus on output measurements as key performance indicators, we believe that if there are problems in the outcomes, you need to find the reasons in the inputs. Potential negative consequences of performance management have been well studied by several authors (Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018; Siverbo *et al.*, 2019; Welter and Enslin, 2022). We therefore refrain from performance management, and rather focus on empowering our team. It is important to take care of the influencing factors to ensure sustainable high performance.

Wellness

For any team to be well, it is important that the individual team members' wellness is addressed. Individual wellness is a state of being in which an individual experiences a sense of physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing. It involves taking care of oneself in a holistic manner, including aspects such as nutrition, exercise, stress management, and social connection. Wellness is not just the absence of illness or disease, but rather a state of good health and vitality that allows individuals to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives. It is a lifelong process of making conscious choices towards a healthy and balanced lifestyle, which can positively impact an individual's overall quality of life.

At Ex Mente we put a high premium on not only individual and team wellness but we ensure that as a company we are also well. Aspects like environmental wellness (are we located in a healthy and safe location?), financial wellness (are our finances managed in a sustainable way?), leadership wellness (do we have a strong and healthy leadership team?), and infrastructure wellness all contribute to creating an environment conducive to good employer-employee relationships, which support the team to perform at a high level.

High-performing Teams

The value of a high-performing team has long been recognised. However building high-performance teams doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and a clear purpose. But the results are worth it for the individuals, the team and the business. Keller and Meany (2017) identified three important characteristics of high performing teams, after interviewing 5000 executives, all with over ten years experience: The first is alignment on direction, where there is a shared belief about what the organisation is striving toward and the role of the team in getting there. The second is high-quality interaction, characterised by trust, open communication, and a willingness to embrace conflict. The third is a strong sense of renewal, meaning an environment in which team members are energised because they feel they can take risks, innovate, learn from outside ideas, and achieve something that matters.

A question we often ask ourselves is: why do some teams perform better than others? There is far more to building a high-performing team than just throwing together a group of talented people. While every team is different, from experience we see the following eight characteristics that most high-performing teams share (Beaumont-Oates, 2023; Boshoff, 2022):

- 1. Clearly identified mountain:** High-performing teams have a common goal, and they know what they need to do to get there. Table Mountain is 1086 m high, and you can do it in a day. At 5892 m, Kilimanjaro will take more planning and preparation, and will take you three or four days just to climb. And if you want to summit the 8848 m Everest, you'll need months, if not years, of preparation and slick teamwork. The key is to have a shared goal.
- 2. Clear roles and responsibilities:** Strong teams avoid duplication and conflict by clearly defining who does what. This removes any doubt over who owns what and ensures accountability for every part of a project.
- 3. Credible and trustworthy:** A hallmark of high-performing teams is that they get things done. They do what they say they will.
- 4. Focused on the goal:** A British rowing team had set itself the crazy goal of winning an Olympic gold medal in two years. And they did it. How? Before doing anything, they asked one question: "Will it make the boat go faster?" And that's what high-performing teams do. If it makes the boat go faster, they do it. If it doesn't, they try something new.
- 5. Celebrate success:** High-performing teams take time to celebrate their success together, yet at the same time, are continually looking to be better.
- 6. High trust levels:** A team can only do great things when the team is built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect. High-performing teams value each other and trust each person to do their job. By

showing your team members that you hear them, and that their input is valued, you challenge and support them to be the best they can be.

7. **Open communication:** High-performing teams communicate clearly and honestly with each other, without being destructive or disrespectful. When conflict happens, they deal with it in a healthy and constructive way.

8. **A winning mindset:** No team ever woke up one day and found they'd suddenly become a high-performing team. High-performing teams see themselves as just that: they're not a family, or a bunch of work buddies. They embrace a winning mindset and think they can be the best. That way they set themselves high standards and achieve them.

A recent example is South Africa's national rugby team, the Springboks, who won the Rugby World Cup in 2023 for an unprecedented fourth time. They personify a high-performing team with a greater goal than just to win rugby matches, but to inspire a nation. They are also an excellent example of the powerful influence of unity and strong leadership. For a team to be truly successful, each member must be willing to put the team ahead of her- or himself. Being part of a high-performing team invariably carries a personal cost. Each team member must be willing to sacrifice something for the greater good of the team.

TEAM EMPOWERMENT AT EX MENTE

When considering empowering teams for high performance operations, it is important to use a systematic approach. At Ex Mente we identified four major building blocks (Figure 1):

1. Create a healthy working environment by providing several inputs for establishing the right culture, implementing the right systems, living the right principles and values, and providing strong leadership. A strong drive towards awareness and understanding of common purpose, vision, principles, values and strategy are critical in aligning the team. Clarity on roles and responsibilities, and how each individual team member, squad and leadership contribute to the overall goal and purpose of the team must be communicated clearly and often.

2. Monitor and develop the wellness of each team member based on genuine care. Individual wellness is essentially the responsibility of the individual, but we support team members as far as possible to be aware of, improve and sustain their wellbeing.

3. Identify and develop technical capabilities of individuals, squads and leaders that need improvement to align with and enhance business growth and success.

4. Identify and develop personal and interpersonal capabilities of individuals and leaders that need improvement to ensure a healthy, safe and engaging company culture.

In this paper we do not discuss the details of each building block, but rather focus on some practical learnings and tools from our experience in Ex Mente. To this end, we created a full-time position: manager of team empowerment, to have a dedicated person with the capacity and mandate to drive these aspects forward. This has been invaluable in fostering a culture of collaboration, communication, wellness and empowerment within the team, and to ensure that the team has the resources and support that they need to succeed.

A Culture Based on Principles

Part of our DNA at Ex Mente is that we are firstly concerned about others and our contribution, and less concerned about ourselves and our reward. Even in a team context we are less concerned about individuals, and more concerned about the team. Although we care about each and every team member, we care more about the team, and we always ask the question: Is it good for the team? We do just about

everything with the team in mind, always trying to improve whatever we do to make us stronger. This outward mindset of not always focusing internally, aligns the team to a greater purpose than themselves, embracing challenges as growth opportunities for our clients, collaborators, and ourselves.

We further believe and have learned from experience that holding ourselves accountable to strong values and principles creates stability and clarity amidst complexity and chaos, which most organisations are confronted with today. We see our values and principles like caring for others as the glue that attaches strategy to our purpose. This is demonstrated and communicated daily by leaders and team members.

Questions that we need to ask ourselves regularly are:

- Do we really care?
- Is our care genuine?
- Do we care for the wellbeing of our team, our clients and for society as a whole?

Here are some examples from our own experience. If you do not know the basic needs of your employees or clients, how can you expect to address their wellbeing and to add value to them? In our specific context, we intentionally make daily contact and ask caring questions. We actively listen to our team members. They have a voice. We are interested in their well-being, and we ask them about it. We engage similarly with our clients.

This approach has led to an environment where team members feel relaxed and cared for. We also promote this personal approach of staying close to your employees, compared to the traditional impersonal once-off wellness assessments and development programmes deployed in many cases.

The Team Empowerment Life Cycle

Our team empowerment life cycle starts upon first contact with a prospective team member and continues until an employee leaves the company. In brief, the life cycle stages include the following:

Recruitment: We follow a very specific process in which we interact on a personal level to ensure an identity, expectation and values fit. We also perform a battery of psychometric tests to ensure technical ability, personal and interpersonal fit within the bigger squad and team environment.

Onboarding: During onboarding we firstly ensure awareness and understanding of our values, principles, processes, systems, and tools. Next, we ensure a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. This approach helps new team members to find their feet quickly, so that they can start contributing to the team.

Caring, monitoring, support, and development: We use regular coaching, weekly stand-up meetings, and monthly team talks to continually grow and strengthen our team. In monitoring, we focus more on assessing inputs (influencing factors) as per Figure 1 than on outputs.

Offboarding: We see this as an important part of the learning process for our company and follow a structured and positive process of exit interviews, handover management and thanking team members for their contribution.

Leadership

We adapt our leadership approach and style to each unique situation or task to lead and serve the team effectively. We acknowledge that certain basic mind-sets, behaviours and actions commonly influence leadership efficiency. We therefore encourage our leaders to focus on the vital practices of leadership and essential actions to drive influence and results. We use the framework developed by Bluepeaks (2021) consisting of seven vital practices (or focus areas), each including three essential actions to drive success. It provides a simple and practical reference for leadership in:

- Understanding yourself as a leader

- Having strategic insight and focus
- Building trust and collaboration
- Establishing presence and influence
- Drive results
- Develop talent and teams
- Foster a culture of innovation and change.

We emphasise development of each leader's strengths, and proactively address weaknesses where necessary, rather than attempting to equip all leaders equally in all aspects.

When appointing experienced senior personnel, we want them to operate with autonomy within the business. For this reason we utilise mandates for senior team members to successfully and effectively operate with freedom and creativity inside set organisational boundaries. This establishes clarity, assurance and trust among team members.

Stages of Implementation

We implement team empowerment in the following stages:

Awareness and understanding: We start off making the team aware and have a basic understanding of the team empowerment building blocks. We use a six-month period to address this and evaluate awareness and understanding at the end of this time to ensure that all team members are ready for the next stage of implementation.

Measure and monitor: After the initial phase we measure the components of individual, squad and team empowerment effectiveness and monitor individual, squad and team wellness. When needed, specific and applicable interventions are implemented.

Outcomes: Although we are not outcome-focused, we do measure team and individual effectiveness. This is important for evaluating and developing our ability to realise our strategic goals.

PRACTICAL TOOLS

Trust and a healthy environment are critical requirements for sustaining high team performance. Several experts have dedicated their lives to explore these topics. One of these experts is Amy Edmondson who has coined the term 'psychological safety' (Edmondson, 1999). Her work identified four aspects of psychological safety:

1. Willingness to help
2. Attitude towards risk and failure
3. Inclusion and diversity
4. Open conversation.

Our equations still need further development, testing, and validation, and we view them as first prototypes tested inside our own organisational boundaries. We have, however, already found them to be valuable in empowering and leading our team.

The Trust Equation

We developed a trust equation, which we use to assess relationships. As a team of mostly engineers, we are naturally inclined to equation- or model-based approaches. We use this tool to reflect on trust in relationships between team members, between individuals and the company, as well as in relationships with our clients. This makes us aware of the underlying factors needed for healthy relationships, and helps us to understand the current state of a relationship. Problem situations can easily result in heightened emotions, and using this equation to reflect and openly communicate reduces the emotional price that we pay in such circumstances.

A well-known model of trust in popular literature is the trust equation developed by Charles Green (Maister *et al.*, 2001). It details four components that affect trust. Credibility, reliability and intimacy increase a person's trustworthiness, while self-interest reduces it. Equation (1) shows that we added honesty as a make-or-break variable in our equation, as well as lack of ownership, withholding information, and having unrealistic expectations as factors that reduce trust. Equation details are provided in Table I.

$$TR = HO (CR + RL + IN) \frac{1}{3} + (SI + LO + WI + UE) \frac{1}{4} \quad (1)$$

Table I. *Ex Mentis*'s trust equation symbols and scoring ranges. Descriptions are stated from the perspective of one person (I) assessing his/her trust in another person or entity (you)

Symbol	Description	Range
TR	Trust Score: An indication of the level of trust that I have in you. A score of 4 indicates that I trust you completely, and -4 indicates my complete distrust in you.	-4 - 4
HO	Honesty: I perceive you as honest (1) or dishonest (0).	0/1
CR	Credibility: I think that you know your stuff.	0 - 4
RL	Reliability: I am confident that you do what you say you will do.	0 - 4
IN	Intimacy: I experience that you care and have empathy.	0 - 4
SI	Self-interest: I experience that you only think of and care about yourself.	-4 - 0
LO	Lack of ownership: When you make mistakes, I observe that you do not take ownership.	-4 - 0
WI	Withholding information: I experience that you withhold information. I have learned that you will not share your observations with me, regardless of whether they are good or bad.	-4 - 0
UE	Unrealistic expectations: You have unrealistic expectations of me. I experience that it is difficult or impossible for me to satisfy your expectations.	-4 - 0

The Environment Health Equation

Equation (2) shows our environment health equation, which is still a work in progress. We use it to address 'psychological safety' from a more positive and constructive perspective and added to the aspects identified by Edmondson (1999).

With team members that I can ask for help, feel included, can communicate with openly, and can make decisions within their areas of responsibility, indicates that the environment is healthy. When they are afraid to take risks, to make mistakes, feel that they are not noticed by the team, and feel anxious coming to work, it shows that there are problems that need to be addressed. Equation details are provided in Table II.

$$EH = (AH + IN + OC + MD) \frac{1}{4} + (AR + AM + NN + WA) \frac{1}{4} \quad (2)$$

Table II. Ex Mente's environment health equation symbols and scoring ranges. Descriptions are stated from the perspective of one person (I) assessing the work environment

Symbol	Description	Range
EH	Environment health: My perspective on the health of our working environment. A score of 4 indicates a very healthy environment, and -4 a completely toxic environment.	-4 - 4
AH	Asking for help: I can ask for help when I need it.	0 - 4
IN	Feeling included: I can contribute to the team with my work, views, and talents.	0 - 4
IC	Open communication: I can be frank in asking questions and expressing my views.	0 - 4
MD	Making decisions: I have the authority to make decisions regarding the execution of my responsibilities.	0 - 4
FR	Fear of taking risks: I am afraid to take reasonable risks that are within the bounds of my role in the execution of my duties.	-4 - 0
FM	Fear of mistakes: I am afraid to make mistakes.	-4 - 0
NN	Not noticed: My contributions to the team are not noticed.	-4 - 0
WA	Work anxiety: I feel anxious coming to work.	-4 - 0

CONCLUSION

Great organisations shape the lives of the people who work for them and lead the market by example. They focus on people and performance, design their organisational systems in a manner that not only enhances productivity in the present but also establishes fundamental elements that enable sustainable success (Madgavkar *et al.*, 2023).

To create awareness and stimulate discussion in the pyrometallurgical industry, we reported on principles and practical tools to empower teams as a critical requirement for success and sustainability. South Africa has wonderful resources, but to extract full value from our ores requires more than just the high-temperature processes. We also need to have positive, healthy, and mutually beneficial relationships with our most important asset, our people. In this paper we highlighted trust and a healthy environment as essential components for empowering and sustaining high performance in our teams.

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