

CREATING HIGH-PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENTS

Leadership is not just about getting the best out of people. It is about creating the conditions that allow their best to emerge.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood & Dallas Ludwick

Performance Does Not Happen in a Vacuum

We spend a lot of time talking about the qualities of high performers.

Are they skilled enough? Motivated enough?
Resilient enough? Do they communicate well?
Can they handle pressure?

Those things matter.

But after decades of working with people performing in demanding environments, from elite sport to emergency response, aviation, health care, and corporate leadership, we have become equally interested in another question:

What kind of environment are we asking people to perform in?

Because performance is never just about the individual.

The environment around people can make it easier to think clearly, take appropriate risks, learn, communicate and recover from mistakes.

Or it can make all those things harder.

We have seen extraordinarily talented people flourish because the environment around them helped them become better.

And we have seen exceptionally capable people become guarded, disengaged or exhausted when the environment continually worked against them.

Usually, neither outcome is intentional.

Leaders rarely wake up intending to create mistrust, confusion or burnout.

But environments that are not deliberately shaped tend to drift, and that drift has consequences.

That is why we believe creating a high-performance environment is one of the most important jobs of leadership.

Not an environment where everything is easy.

Not one where everyone is happy all the time.

And certainly not one where standards are lowered.

A genuinely high-performance environment holds people to high standards while creating the conditions that help them meet those standards.

We have identified three key areas:

PERFORMANCE CLIMATE.
PERFORMANCE AWARENESS.
PERFORMANCE PROGRESSION.

1.PERFORMANCE CLIMATE

What does it feel like to perform here?

Leaders set the tone.

Performance climate is the collection of everyday signals people receive about what happens when they speak up, make a mistake, struggle, improve, succeed or need help.

And those signals shape behaviour.

High-performance environments are demanding. They should be.

But high demand without sufficient support becomes unrelenting. When high expectations are paired with strong support, people are more able to adapt, grow and perform. When support disappears, the same demands can contribute to disengagement, burnout and poorer well-being.

Support does not mean lowering the bar.

It means helping people have a realistic chance of reaching it.

In our work, three factors repeatedly influence motivation:

Clarity. Trust. Attainable goals.

Do people understand what is expected?

Do they believe their leader wants them to

succeed?

Can they see a realistic pathway toward progress?

This becomes especially important when things go wrong.

Mistakes are unavoidable wherever people are learning, stretching or operating under pressure. A leader's response to a mistake can either build motivation or erode it.

The goal is not to avoid difficult feedback.

High performers need honest feedback.

The goal is to deliver that feedback in a way that keeps the focus on learning rather than shame, defensiveness or blame.

A useful leadership question becomes:

When someone falls short, does our response make them more capable of succeeding the next time?

That is performance climate.

2.PERFORMANCE AWARENESS

How am I affecting the environment I am trying to create?

Leadership always involves influence.

And the more power you hold in a room, the more your state matters.

Your pace.

Your tone.

Your facial expression.

The assumptions you bring into a conversation.

What happens to you when you are frustrated, rushed or uncertain.

How you react when someone makes a mistake.

All of this becomes part of the environment.

Performance Awareness begins with leaders understanding both their role and their impact.

It asks:

How am I showing up?

What happens to me under pressure?

What do other people experience when I am in that state?

This is not self-indulgent reflection.

It is a leadership responsibility.

Under stress, humans become less flexible. We can become impatient, controlling, avoidant, reactive or overly focused on getting an immediate result.

Often, we are unaware it is happening.

But other people notice.

And when the person experiencing that stress is the leader, their emotional state can quickly become the emotional climate of the room. The workshop material makes this point explicitly: the person with more power often sets the tone, and greater self-regulation allows their response to be guided by what the other person actually needs.

That is why effective leaders learn their own patterns.

Maybe you rush when things get difficult.

Maybe you overcontrol.

Maybe you withdraw.

Maybe you become exceptionally blunt.

None of these patterns automatically makes someone a poor leader.

The problem is being unaware of them.

Awareness creates choice.

And choice gives a leader the ability to ask:

What does this moment need from me?

3.PERFORMANCE PROGRESSION

Are people getting better?

A high-performance environment must be developmental.

People should not simply be busy.

They should be progressing.

Performance Progression is about deliberately creating the conditions for growth through appropriate challenge, focused practice and useful feedback.

Challenge matters.

Too little challenge and people become bored or disengaged.

Too much challenge and people can become overwhelmed, anxious or frustrated.

The goal is not maximum difficulty.

The goal is the right difficulty for where someone is now.

That requires leadership to pay attention.

What can this person already do?

What are they ready for next?

What is the one thing that would create meaningful improvement right now?

Then we create opportunities to practise that.

Not ten priorities.

One meaningful next step.

The workshop work describes this as goal-directed practice: identify a clear performance outcome, structure the task around it, increase challenge based on readiness rather than an arbitrary timeline, and focus feedback primarily on the key goal.

This is as relevant in a workplace as it is in sport.

Instead of saying:

"You need to become a better communicator."

A leader might identify:

"In tomorrow's meeting, your job is to clearly state your recommendation before giving the supporting detail."

Now the person knows what they are working on. They can practise it.

The leader can observe it.

And both people can tell whether progress occurred.

That is how confidence grows.

Progress creates a sense of accomplishment.

Accomplishment creates readiness.

Readiness builds belief that the next challenge can be handled.

HIGH PERFORMANCE IS A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

One of the most important shifts in a high-performance environment is moving away from blame.

When something does not work, the first question should not automatically be: What is wrong with that person?

It can be:

What happened in the system?

Was the expectation clear?

Was there enough trust?

Was the task attainable?

Was the challenge appropriate?

Was the feedback useful?

And yes, sometimes the person simply needs to perform better.

Accountability still matters.

But high-performance leaders look first at what they can influence before assigning responsibility elsewhere. The workshop framed this as a "no blame," deliberately developmental environment committed to continual evolution.

That mindset changes everything.

Because leadership stops being about having all the answers.

It becomes about continually improving the environment in which the answers are found.

And that means everyone, including the leader, must remain a learner.

No title makes someone an expert in everything.

High-performing teams evolve because the people inside them are willing to keep learning, unlearning and adapting.

A SIMPLE LEADERSHIP CHECK-IN

When you think about your own team, ask yourself:

PERFORMANCE CLIMATE

What does it feel like to perform here?
Do people experience clarity, trust and a realistic pathway to success?

PERFORMANCE AWARENESS

How do I show up when things get difficult?
What impact does my state have on everyone else?

PERFORMANCE PROGRESSION

Are the people around me getting better?
Have we created the right challenge, focus and feedback to help that happen?

You do not create a high-performance environment once.

You keep creating it.

Conversation by conversation.

Decision by decision.

Response by response.

Because high performance is not simply about finding great people.

It is about building an environment where people can become great.

THE TAKEAWAY

High standards matter.

So do the conditions surrounding them.

Create the climate.

Know your impact.

Build progression.

Then keep learning.

Because the strongest high-performance environments are never finished.

They are continually evolving with intention.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

Dallas Ludwick is a high-performance coach and culture builder with 25 years of experience helping individuals and teams face fear, grow boldly, and perform with purpose. Known for her direct and supportive approach, she brings a deep passion for creating space where real conversations — and real growth — can happen.