# Trust in building high-performing teams – conceptual approach

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## Abstract

Team building is one of the key factors of success in business. This study highlights the key elements of building winning teams, where trust is one essential building block and top-level sports teams serve as instructive examples. This study highlights earlier findings that revealed a strong connection between trust and high-performing teams. High-performing teams need talented people but also constant trust-based cooperation. Trust supports cooperative behaviour. Studies of top-level sports teams also emphasize the role of trust when building high-performing teams. This study is implemented using conceptual research in order to organize information related to the complex phenomenon of high-performing teams. The conceptual approach was chosen instead of empirical research due the lack of prior holistic research into high-performing teams including perspectives on trust and sports teams. A theoretical framework is proposed by analysing key characteristics and defining high-performing teams and related concepts. The framework highlights dimensions such as clear vision, trust and communication. Team member skill, motivation and responsibilities were highlighted, and respect and support were also addressed. Leadership is a critical dimension that includes clear roles, standards and goals. The proposed framework for building high-performing teams offers the basis for subsequent empirical research.

**Key Words:** teams, high-performing teams, trust, sport

## Introduction

*Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success. (Henry Ford)*

The growing need for efficiency, the pressure of competition and also the complexity and speed of change has led organizations to change their organizational structure into a team-based model to achieve a high-performing state (Sharp et al. 2000). "In a global business, conscious team building is one of the key factors to success. It is better to have a first-rate team with a second-rate plan, than to have a second-rate team with a first-rate plan. The goal of teamwork is to maximise synergy between different parts of the organization. Teams cannot perform without strong social interaction (Erdem & Ozen 2003). Social interaction needs trust. "When building high-performing teams, one of the most essential aspects is trust." (Hakanen & Soudunsaari 2012, 1)

There have been major changes in the structure of organisations – "…changes in the way of thinking and functioning of organisations during the last two decades of the millennium" (Costa 2003). A new strategy and high-performing teams arose in the 1980s. "…a strategy of total stakeholder involvement was combined with a complete redesign of all aspects of the work being performed, questioning assumptions that had been barriers to improvement." Companies saw the need for improvements in many areas, such as profitability, productivity, customer service and employee morale (Hanlan 2004). Organizations have become team-based organizations in the private and also the public sector. Team-based structures offer many potential benefits, such as increased involvement, empowerment of employees, improved problem solving, and increased creativity, work processes and performance (Holmes 2012). Flatter and more team centred organizations emphasize coordination, sharing responsibilities and shared decision-making (Keen 1990). However, there is lack of knowledge about the transition process to high-performing teams, including personal connections, extensive intervention skills and a solid understanding of the business needs of the organization (Hanlan 2004). Hanlan (2004) has found that a combination of education, training, experience and intuition can provide the most effective preparation for high-performing teams.

This conceptual approach to high-performing teams concentrates on finding the key dimensions of the phenomenon when trust and sports teams are included in the study review. The main research questions are:

- How have high-performing teams been studied and defined in previous literature?
- What is the role of trust when building and maintaining high-performing teams?
- What can be learned from top-level sports teams when building high-performing teams?
- What are the key dimensions of high-performing teams when literature on trust and sports team is included?

Conceptual research was chosen as a method for approaching a complex phenomenon with the aim of organizing information on high-performing teams. Before the phenomenon can be empirically examined, relevant analysis and definitions are required. In this study, the conceptual research aims to provide a theoretical framework by analysing key characteristics and defining high-performing teams and related concepts. This study will focus on finding the dimensions of high-performing teams. Trust is one of the key areas in the function of teams, and therefore, it was chosen for closer analysis. High-performing teams are a well-researched area in the world of sport, which emphasizes the importance of teamwork, and many of the examples of high-performing teams mentioned in the literature are from the sporting world. However, despite the mentioned importance of trust and sports teams in the high-performing team context, the essence of the relationship between these concepts is highly overlooked in empirical research. The proposed framework presented here aims to tackle the problem by offering a basis for further research. The conceptual research here is

appropriate because of the lack of prior holistic research into high-performing teams including the perspectives of trust and sports teams.

This article contains four sections. First, the conceptual research is introduced in the methodology section. The second section presents the concepts: high-performing teams, trust and sports teams. This is followed by the findings and discussion, and the article concludes with a summary of findings and suggestions for future research.

## Methodology

Concept analysis is an important part of every research but it can be also an independent approach to research in its own right, as in this paper, which is based on the conceptual approach (Näsi 1980). Conceptual research can be divided into the concept analysis and interpretative study of concepts depending on background assumptions and the meaning of the study (Takala & Lämsä 2001). This study is implemented using concept research, where the method used is more interpretative in nature than traditional concept analysis. Trust, sports teams and high-performing teams as broad research areas are examined from several perspectives and with several methods in the pursuit of abstract concepts. The aim of the research was to understand the meanings and characteristics of the key concepts and to clarify the order and relationship to associated concepts. Concept research was chosen due to its nature as a research method that aims to construct and develop conceptual frameworks, which is the purpose of this paper. Concept research and the resulting framework are necessary to describe the phenomenon and categorize and organize previous related studies.

The search for literature sources for the concept research included a total of 500 research articles and other literature sources tracked from the Google Scholar, EBSCOhost and Emerald Insight databases. Google Scholar was the main search database and the others were checked in case there was any additional material for analysis. The keywords for the search were: high-performing teams, high-performing teams + development, high-performing teams + sports, high-performing teams + trust and trust + team building. The first 100 hits by relevancy were selected from five keyword searches. The first stage search with 500 sources and three databases secured enough variety in the literature sources. During the first round of literature collection, all the papers and related sources were scanned, relevant papers for analysis were chosen discretely and great attention was paid to the quality of the papers. Those literature sources which concentrated on subjects other than the keywords were excluded from the analysis. Finally, a total of 50 sources were selected for primary analysis. The articles were first roughly categorized under the themes trust, high-performing team and sports team for further subtheme analysis. The research process involved continuous dialogue between the researchers. This enriched both the literature collection process by securing the right source material and the analysis process by concentrating on the key dimensions presented in previous studies in order to ensure analytical and objective presentation. Literature sources were cross-checked several times during the research process in order to increase the validity and reliability of the findings and conclusions. The findings were categorized under the main concepts, and the framework was built based on the dimension mentioned most.

## Background and defining concepts

Teams are a large part of our culture. "Due to the complexity and speed of change, organisations cannot become agile high performers without transforming to team-based structures (Sharp et al. 2000, 1). However, high-performance teams are not so common (Katzenbach 1993). From The Three Musketeers, Doctor House's invincible medical team, SWAT teams all the way through to astronauts, we have read about and watched stories of famous teams accomplishing the improbable. Many of the teams we follow are sports teams. Occasionally, teams arise that deliver a performance well in excess of similar teams, and far greater than could reasonably be expected. In the sports world this happens all the time. Even if you have the best individuals, more resources, extraordinary coaches and high-end facilities, it is not said that you will win the championship title.

### Team – working group – effective team – High-performing team

A team is a basic unit of performance, which combines the skills, experiences and insights of team members. Teamwork offers real organizational benefits by improving productivity, enhancing employee satisfaction and reducing absenteeism (Smith 2001). A team can be defined as "a group composed of a small number of people, with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (Katzenbach & Smith 1999, 45). Team working generates positive synergy through the coordination of effort (Robbins & Judge 2011). The concept of people working collectively to accomplish mutual goals is old and the earliest examples of teamwork can be seen in the Great Pyramid of Giza from 2650 BC. There 100 000 workers built the Great Pyramid over 20 years. Also "early hunters, clans and tribes worked cooperatively as teams for food, safety and the protection of their young." (Galbraith & Webb 2013.) A high level of experience and job-related skill are important predictors of team performance but other predictors are also important; for example, role composition issues (Humphrey et al. 2009).

Sometimes teams are confused with working groups where the focus is always on individual goals instead of team goals and the responsibility is only for their own results (Katzenbach & Smith 1993.) Hackman (1990, 493) stated: "A mixed model, in which people are told they are a team but are treated as individual performers with their own specific jobs to do, sending mixed signals to members is likely to confuse everyone, and in the long run, probably is untenable…" A team needs performance challenges to really come together as a team with a clear, specific purpose. "When members care about the group's success, the group is becoming a team." Teams go through a natural life cycle; first there are separate individuals, after that a coalition and finally a state of high performance that includes caring about one another's growth and success. Team building and forming needs time. To achieve a high level of performance, enthusiasm is needed and clear and frequent communication. Teams can achieve the best results when they can depend on their leaders to set clear standards (Katzenbach 1993). The manager's task should be to insist that the team monitor their own progress and also ensure that they have access to data that enables the process (Michaelsen et al. 1993). Trimble's research (1997) focused on effective teams. Effective teams linked purpose and performance and accomplished their tasks in a superior fashion. Trimble described "Members of effective teams exhibit group-orientated behaviours, resulting in cooperation, commitment, and participation of team members."

### The core elements of trust

Trust is difficult to define theoretically. Coleman (1990) defines trust as a commitment to cooperation without certainty about the actions of trusted people. Fukuyama (1996) describes trust as the expectations of honest behaviour. Trust includes the kind of risk that is based on expected behaviour. Trust can be perceived in behaviour towards others (Costa 2003); it can also be based on probability calculus, where the advantages and losses of interaction are measured (Tyler & Degoey 1996). Harisalo and Miettinen's (2010) research reveals that the results of actions is at least dependent on trust capital rather than physical capital. Trust is the foundation that enables people to work together, and it is an enabler for social interactions. Trust can be seen as a driver of performance and business results (Nemiro et al. 2008). Trust building is a long process, but it can be broken fast. Trust is dynamic and needs to be consciously monitored (Hay 2002). The key areas for trust building are personal knowledge, regular face-to-face interaction, empathy, respect and genuine listening (Hakanen & Soudunsaari 2012). Past experiences affect trust, and shared trust can decrease through negative experiences. Trustworthy relationships need maintenance. Trust makes it possible to share even negative aspects and criticism more openly (Barnett el al. 2010).

Larson and LaFasto (1989) describe the four elements required in trust building: honesty, openness, consistency and respect. Trust can fray if one of these dimensions is missing. Openness builds trust and trust increases communication. Ståhle and Laento (2000) have also defined the building materials of trust: empathy, respect, interest towards the others' life and genuine listening. Ruuskanen (2003) believes that trust building requires openness, informing, honesty and arguments. The development of trust progresses from feelings and images to experiences and facts. Trust building also sets demands for communication: the information should contain not only facts but also feelings and emotions. Shared norms and morals help in increasing trust (Ståhle & Laento 2000). In addition, rightness is one of the key elements in trust building. Rightness should be present at every level of cooperation and team work. Resources should be shared fairly (Deutsch 1985). Communication should be honest and respectful and should be based on open dialogue (Bies & Moag 1986).

### Sports team as an important manifestation and learning example

Sports teams are highly relevant subjects when trying to understand the role of trust in high-performing teams. In this study, sports teams are seen as coach organized teams with high-performing team characteristics, a high level of commitment, and usually, clear goals (e.g. Mach et al. 2010).

Figure 1 below highlights the relations between the concepts presented in this paper. The literature and viewpoints in this study are anchored in discussions of leadership and especially the team-building context. Here, trust is seen as the background to every team-building dimension, and sports teams as important manifestations and learning examples of trust in successful high-performing teams.

## Building high-performing teams

Every team is not a high-performing team. Holmes (2012) defines the ten characteristics of a high-performing team: 1) develop goals and plans, 2) enhance communication among members, 3) develop and maintain positive relationships among members, 4) solve problems and make decisions on a timely basis, 5) successfully manage conflict, 6) facilitate productive meetings, 7) clarify roles for team members, 8) operate in a productive manner, 9) exhibit effective team leadership, and 10) provide development opportunities for team members. The study by Jones (2002) also highlighted that high-performing teams mean variables other than individual talent and ability, and include motivation, respect, responsibility and communication. Communication and trust are essential for the building of high-performing teams but other building materials are also needed, such as a shared vision, clear roles and responsibilities, willingness for cooperation and supporting and encouraging leadership (Hakanen & Soudunsaari 2012). Jones (2002: 8) has defined high-performing team as having "members whose talents and abilities are complementary, and whose effectiveness is underpinned by continuous team building that facilitates high-quality teamwork." Cheruvelil et al. (2014) instead defines high-performing teams as consisting "…of diverse members who are committed to common outcomes", and characterized high-performing teams as having positive interdependence of team members, effective communication and individual and group accountability.

The building of high-performing teams is dependent on a great variety of factors, which include the contribution made by individual members, leadership, communications and internal power relationships (Smith 2001). Task specific team-efficacy and generalized group potency have also been theorized as two important determinants of team performance. Group potency indicates beliefs about the capabilities of the team across tasks and context. Gully et al. (2002) offers an example of how ef-

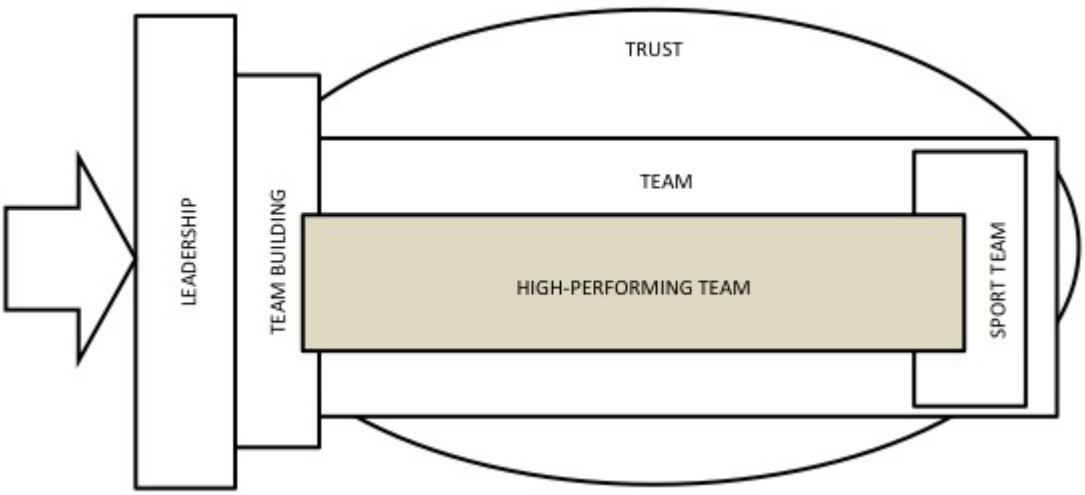


Figure 1. The conceptual map of the study

ficacy and potency work in the team context: "members of an engineering team might believe that they can design a specific new product (high team-efficacy) but might not believe that they can effectively produce, market, and sell the product (low potency)." The study by Myers et al. (2004) highlights the connection between self-efficacy but also collective, team-based, efficacy and performance. Trust and commitment are the two critical aspects for effective teams (Katzenbach & Smith 1993). Katzenbach and Smith's (1993) research revealed that all effective teams have 2–25 members. Groups become teams through disciplined action. They shape a common purpose, agree on performance goals, define a common working approach, develop a high level of complementary skills, and hold themselves mutually accountable for the results. A team needs goals to keep track of progress but also a broader purpose that provides meaning for the teamwork and emotional energy. Teamwork should represent a set of values: listening and responding constructively to the views of others, giving the benefit of the doubt, providing support and recognition for the interests and achievements of team members. The best teams invest time in exploring, shaping and agreeing on the shared purpose that separates them from failing teams, which do not usually develop a common purpose (Katzenbach & Smith 1993).

### The characteristics of high-performing team members

Bovee and Thill (2013) determined the ideal characteristics of team members: clear sense of purpose, open and honest communication, creative thinking, accountability, focus and decision by consensus. It takes time, at least several months, for a set of individuals to transform into a high-performing team (Michaelsen et al. 1993). Team working requires that members can work effectively together and that again requires interpersonally oriented skills, such as effective communication, listening and influencing others (Cohen 1995). Social skills are a very important aspect that contains social perspectives, coordination, persuasion, negotiation, instructing and helping others (Mumford et al. 1999).

Coole (2009) has defined the characteristics of a high-performance team: a commonly shared purpose, a clearly defined vision, mutual trust and respect, clear roles and responsibilities, high levels of communication, readiness to work towards the greater good, and a supporting and challenging leader. Sharp et al. (2000) have also defined the characteristics as: 1) common goals, 2) explicit and shared values, 3) members know their individual roles, 4) pride and respect in the individual, 5) openness, trust, honest, motivation and enthusiasm, 6) atmosphere is informal (a buzz), 7) everyone is included in discussion, 8) conflict is not avoided, 9) pride in the team and team performance, 10) team information is public to all team members, 11) achieving high performance. On-going feedback is important for two reasons: The team has to know when they are making progress, and secondly, reliable feedback also aids team development (Michaelsen et al. 1993). An atmosphere of cooperation and the ability to manage the perceived conflict are also needed, and the inevitable differences will be solved together. The earlier of the two studies also supports a positive correlation between team performance and creativity, coordination and cooperation. In the study by Chong (2007), the teams that had clear goals, co-ordinated activities and where members were generally more cooperative, achieved better results and high performance and the team members themselves also characterized high-performing teams in terms of trust, good communication, high commitment and good time management.

Katzenbach (1993) noticed that high-performing teams have a high degree of commitment to the team members. They evolve a genuine, mutual concern for each other's personal wellbeing that often transcends the life of the team. The assimilation of vision and desired targets is crucial in a high-performing team. Team members should take part in team discussions and also be open to the opinions of others (Larson & LaFasto 1989). Respect for each other is an important aspect for high team performance and it requires personal knowing (Clark & Westrum 1989). It is also important to note that some people feel uncomfortable in a team, for example, they could feel betrayed if the others fail them. These individuals are better working alone (Katzenbach 1993). Humphrey et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of recognizing specific team roles and making core role allocation a strategic decision.

Michaelsen et al. (1993) defined three main factors for achieving goals and team performance: the knowledge and skills of group members, the resources available to the group and the cohesiveness of the group. Cohesiveness depends on the willingness of members to invest their energy and intellectual and material resources in the teamwork. Nemiro et al. (2008) studied high-performing virtual teams and appointed three critical success factors for effective virtual collaboration: shared understanding, trust and effective communication. Sharp et al. (2000: 1) defined "…the key elements of having a shared vision, trust and openness whilst striving to achieve higher levels of performance". The study by Dietrich et al. (2010) introduced the term collaboration quality and proposed five areas for performance: communication, coordination, mutual support, aligned efforts and cohesion. Communication and collaboration were highlighted as key characteristics for successful team working in a virtual environment in the study by Egea (2006). Egea's (2006) study also introduced a reflective approach to the work of the team to understand dynamics in conversation, awareness and coordination so that the team can develop their cooperation.

### High-performing team management

Tuckman and Jensen (1977) divided the dimensions of team building into four areas: goals, roles, management processes and interpersonal relationships. Galbraith and Webb (2013) highlighted the benefits of teams: collaborative learning, diversity, synergy and experience. Especially in the early stages of team creation, the team members need to spend lots of time together to ensure a shared understanding. The team leader's role is to build and support commitment and confidence inside the team and also make clear to the team members that they will succeed or fail as a team, not as individuals (Katzenbach 1993). Leaders should take into consideration what they should say and do but also what they should not say and do. And also "…leaders should envisage the future before dealing with the present" (Harkins 2006, 1). The study by Westre and Maureen (1991) about the relationship between perceived coaching behaviours and group cohesion revealed that "…coaches who were perceived as engaging in higher levels of social support, training and instruction, positive feedback and a democratic style were associated with higher levels of task cohesion within their teams." Teams need a commitment-building process that usually takes time to resolve who best suites each task. People vary in terms of their background, talents, personalities and prejudices (Katzenbach & Smith 1993).

Clark and Westrum (1989) saw that there are two important areas in the function of high-performance teams: the management of information and the management of emotions. The study by Jones (2002) highlighted that organizational issues probably have the biggest impact on performance both in the

sporting and the business world. Some personal characteristics have a positive correlation to contextual performance – conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability have a relationship to performance (Hogan & Holland 2003; Morgeson et al. 2005). Clark and Westrum (1989) studied high-performance teams in wildlife conservation and found out that rapid decision-making is one of the key cognitive characteristics for high performance of teams that includes the willingness to examine any and all alternatives for problem solving. Communication should facilitate high creativity and contain emotional supportiveness and brainstorming (Prince 1972, Stein 1975).

### Learning from top-level sports teams

High-performing sports teams rise to perform "the impossible": winning the championship, more often than not as an underdog with inferior players, lower resources and inexperienced coaching teams. Due to the fact that interactive sports require a high level of task interdependence, highly cohesive teams show a significant relationship with performance. A meta-analysis of team settings found that the relationship between cohesion and performance in sports teams is significant and stronger than in other working teams. It seems that highly cohesive teams tend to be more successful than teams with no cohesion (Carron et al. 2002). Moreover, sports teams have higher levels of commitment compared to business teams: they usually have clear goals like the championship title or getting to the playoffs. The goals are precise, demanding and held in common. Business teams often have not so well defined goals, which leads to lower levels of individual commitment and poorer results (Mach et al. 2010).

Jones (2010) found in his research that the principles of elite performance in sport are easily transferable to the business context. To maximise the performance of different teams, sports teams often identify and implement an action plan to maximise support and minimize constraints, in other words focus on the social capital. This is especially helpful for teams that have lost sight of how to move their performance forward and that are focusing on the obstacles and a perceived lack of control. Sports organizations have also been found to be relatively close to this approach: their focus has been not just on the individual performers themselves, but also on the performance environment within which they operate.

Dirks (2000) has researched high-level basketball teams. His research reveals that the team that had the lowest level of trust in its coach won only about 10 per cent of the games. However, research indicates that trust between team members does not have significant meaning and does not have an effect on the team's performance. One basketball player explained his point of view about the role of trust: "Once we developed trust in our coach, the progress we made increased tremendously, because we were no longer asking questions or being apprehensive. Instead, we were buying in and believing that if we worked our hardest, we were going to get there." Clearly, team leaders have an important role, and a wide variety of people and personalities can lead teams effectively. However, effective team leaders are characterized mostly by attitude and belief, especially in the sports world. They should believe in the team's purpose and know that the team cannot achieve their goals with individual contributions and accountability alone. The team must succeed or fail together (Katzenbach 1993).

In sports teams, trust can be measured between team members but also between team members and their coach and the management. Zhu's (2004) study reveals the mediation connection between trust in the coach and the athletes' performance. Furthermore, Mach et al. (2010) highlight the effect of trusting relationships on team performance in sport. Trust among team mates mediates the trust in the coach but also team cohesion, which is a key enabler for team performance. In addition, competence and trust in yourself is needed. Pep Guardiola, the former coach of the winning, high-performing team FC Barcelona describes his team: "…they are the team! And most important, they trust very much in what they are going to do" (Millward, 2009). Healthy rivalry goes with the territory in high-performance team building and it enables the team's performance, but it needs robust trust as a bedrock (Tienari & Piekkari 2011).

One of the most important tasks of the team leader is to build trusting relationships between players, coaches, support groups, sponsors and team owners. From the team leader's point of view, trust can be enhanced by sending reliable messages, taking every member's interest into account and developing team trustworthiness (Tzafrir & Dolan 2004). Larson and LaFasto (1989) have defined the most important characteristics for team leaders: sharing the vision successfully, creating the needed changes and motivating the team members to their best actions by supporting a healthy climate and high energy.

## The role of trust in high-performance team building

The study by Hay (2002, 46) found that "…trust between team members was fundamental to the functioning of the team and saliently promoted cooperative behavior." However some research has found that effective team performance is independent of the formation of trust, but information symmetry and good communication divides high-performance from low performance teams (Aubert & Kelsey 2009). "Trust and openness refers to the degree of emotional safety in relationships. When there is a high degree of trust, team members trust one another and feel 'safe' enough to be open and honest with their colleagues. Where trust is missing, team members are suspicious of each other. In these situations team members find it extremely difficult to openly communicate with each other and function as a team" (Isaksen & Lauer 2002).

Trust building is a long process compared to fast paced business processes. Trust building can be sped up via open interaction and good communication skills (Ståhle & Laento 2000). Reagan and Zuckerman (2001) have revealed the connection between communication frequency and productivity: frequent communication creates higher productivity. They also found that homogeneous teams have a lower productivity level than heterogeneous teams. Research by Chong (2007) revealed that teams that are creative have clear goals, co-ordinate activities, and team members who are generally more cooperative can achieve better results. Furthermore, the study by Cheruvelil et al. (2014) highlights two important components in the building and maintaining of a high-performing team: team diversity and interpersonal skills.

Trust on the team level is a complicated but necessary aspect. "In order to help a team to break the ice and form productive working relationships, trust serves as the glue that maintains the cohesiveness of a team" (Tseng & Ku 2011, 4). Motivation for shared vision helps to build trust (Meyerson, Weick & Kramer 1996.) Trust has a direct effect on communication, commitment and loyalty. Trust helps open idea sharing, which is important, for example, when creating new solutions or when the team is suffering from major setbacks and has a role in co creation and innovation. Moreover, trust improves the quality and extent of interaction. Trust supports people's willingness to enter open discussion, but also trust supports seeing the other's

point of view (Harisalo & Miettinen 2010). Varamäki et al. (2004; 2006) define the optimum interaction, which contains dialogue that includes an open and responsive atmosphere.

Trust has a critical role in high-performance team building. Clopton (2011) highlighted in his study: "Results show a significant connection between social capital and team performance". Social capital includes trust but also communication and community, in another words, a team spirit. The study by Tseng and Ku (2011) found that the level of trust has a strong positive relationship with team performance and also the level of trust has a strong positive relationship with teamwork satisfaction. Furthermore, Costa's (2003) study supports these connections: "Trust was also positively related with perceived task performance and with team satisfaction". Xiao et al. (2010) studied both individual and team trust and found: "The results show that both the team trust and the individual trust are positively correlated with cooperative performance". Trust can strengthen knowledge sharing but also transactional memory systems, which can positively impact job satisfaction and team performance (Robertson et al. 2013). The data from Dirks (1999) supported the moderating role of trust – "trust seems to influence how motivation is converted into work group processes and performance." Dirks defined trust as a construct, which indirectly influences group performance. The study by Moldjord and Iversen (2015) states: "Trust has emerged as a fundamental factor for collaboration and team performance". The study by Erdem et al. (2003) found a strong relationship between trust and performance in two of the organizations in their study, but only a limited correlation in the other two. An empirical study by Erdem and Ozen (2003) of 50 work-based teams revealed that teams with high levels of cognitive and affective trust perform better and stated that trust "…causes the development and protection of the team spirit by providing cooperation and solidarity among team members. Trust also affects the outputs of the team and consequently the outputs of the organisation, both directly and indirectly."

However, trust building is not easy for highly competitive people. Trust needs a willingness to become familiarized with the interests of others. Team members need to know personally their team members. Increased familiarity and personal knowing increases information sharing, improves conflict resolution and task performance (Gruenfeld et al. 1996, Jehn & Shah 1997). Meyerson et al. (1996) defined that forceful actions lead to a greater willingness to trust and also trust starts to develop more rapidly. Trust needs many areas to build: openness, honesty, active listening, communication, consistency, competence, fairness and mutual respect (Solomon & Flores 2003). Earlier research supports the idea that trust is an important factor in the efficiency of any complex system that needs coordination (Granovetter 1985; McAllister 1995). However, some studies do not support a strong connection between the level of trust and its effect on team performance (e.g. Aubert & Kelsey 2009), in turn some other studies support a significant connection (e.g. Jarvenpaa et al. 1998, Jehn & Mannix 2001). Aubert and Kelsey's (2009) study did not find that trust would directly influence team performance, but they did find many elements where overall effort is lower in teams who also trusted their teammates. The study by Chong (2007) characterized high performance with trust, good communication, high commitment and good time management amongst team members, whereas low performing teams were associated with mistrust, a lack of commitment and poor leadership.

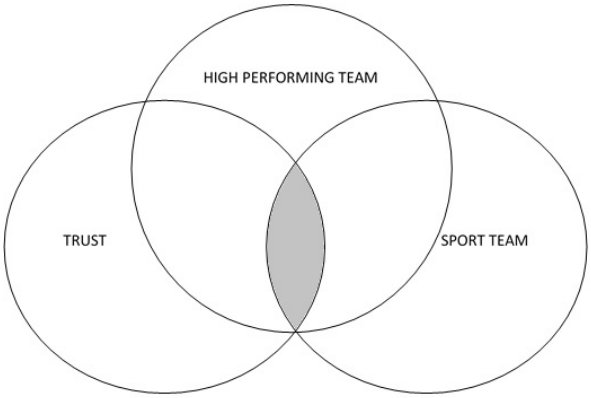


Figure 2. Conceptual overlap for framework building

## Findings and Discussion

In this study three different concepts are included in the analysis in order to find the overlap between trust, high-performing team and sports team. That is the basis for building the framework. The overlap of these concepts is illustrated in Figure 2.

### Trust – one of the key characteristics

Trust is seen as a key characteristic of high-performing teams in many studies, for example, in the study by Katzenbach and Smith (1993). The study by Hay (2002) and also Moldjord and Iversen (2015) highlighted that trust between team members is fundamental to the functioning of the teams. Cheruvelil et al. (2014) noted that team diversity and interpersonal skills are two of the most important components in the building and maintaining of a high-performing team. Tseng and Ku (2011) experienced trust as the glue that effects the cohesiveness of a team and trust is needed so that a team can break the ice and form productive working relationships. The study by Clopton (2011) found a significant connection between social capital and team performance. A strong positive connection between trust and team performance has also been found (Xiao et al. 2010), but also with trust and teamwork satisfaction (Tseng & Ku 2011; Costa 2003). Robertson et al. (2013) noted that trust strengthens knowledge sharing and transactional memory systems, and these dimensions have an effect on job satisfaction and team performance. However, some studies have found that effective team performance is independent of the formation of trust but instead, for example, information symmetry and good communication separates low and high-performing teams (Aubert & Kelsey 2009). Some studies have seen that trust has no direct but rather an indirect effect especially on communication between team members. The study by Aubert and Kelsey (2009) also did not find a direct influence of trust on team performance but found instead indirect elements. In the study by Erdem et al. (2003), a strong relationship was found between trust and performance in two of the organizations studied, but only a limited correlation between the other two. Trust has been seen as an important factor in the efficiency of any complex system that needs coordination (Granovetter 1985; McAllister 1995).

The indirect role of trust in team performance is noted in many studies. The study by Dirks (1999) revealed how trust influences motivation concerning work group processes and performance. Ståhle and Laento (2000) highlighted that trust increases openness, which is an important factor in shared value creation. A strong connection between trust and communication has been discovered, where frequent communication creates higher productivity (Reagan & Zuckerman 2011). The

study by Chong (2007) noted that creativity, clear goals and cooperative actions generate better results. Trust has a direct effect on communication, commitment and loyalty. In addition, trust can be seen as an important enabler in open idea sharing (Harisalo & Miettinen 2010). Trust develops and also protects team spirit, and the broad study by Erdem and Ozen (2003) revealed that a high level of cognitive and affective trust supports better performance. In an atmosphere of trust, information sharing and conflict resolution is easier (Gruenfeld et al. 1996; Jehn & Shah 1997). Trust can be seen as one of the most important dimensions in team performance, but so also are good communication, high commitment and good leadership important (Chong 2007).

Sharing personal opinions, information and feelings helps to increase trust in teams. People express their feelings and give feedback and recognition to each other more freely in high-trust teams. In high-trust teams, interaction and discussion is more open and it helps to solve inevitable disagreements. Trust is an enabler in the creation and growth of team spirit – "the us factor". This is very important because highly cohesive teams tend to be more successful than teams with no cohesion (Carron et al. 2002). The team's cohesion and integrity can be increased through team-building exercises and spending time together and sharing experiences (Järvenpää et al. 1998).

As said earlier, trust is needed when high-performing teams are built. Existing research supports the relevance of trust and team building. Without trust, problems in communication, empowerment and quality will be inevitable (Owen 1996). Furthermore, without trust, opinions, questions and improvement ideas are not always taken into account; moreover, this may lead to a situation where the team members are not willing to help each other (Sitkin & Roth 1993). Modern organizations without formal policies and rigid rules need trust even more. Erdem et al. (2003) have defined trust as a "hygiene factor" for team performance. Trust supports cooperative behaviour, which increases knowledge transfer. Lower levels of trust between team members lead to poorer results. In contrast, a high degree of cohesion and harmony, which are built on trust, can improve team performance. Clarity, reliability, concern for others and openness are the cornerstones of trust (Mach et al. 2010).

### Sports teams – highly researched area

Sport teams are highly researched in the area of high-performing teams. The study by Carron et al. (2002) found that the relationship between cohesion and performance is stronger in sports teams than other working teams, and moreover, highly cohesive teams are more successful. Sports teams tend to have higher levels of commitment compared to business teams. Sports teams usually have more precise goals, which support better results (Mach et al. 2010). The study by Jones (2010) highlighted that the principles of elite performance in sport can also easily transfer to the business context. Jones' study found that high-performing sports teams do not only focus on individual performers but also the performance environment. The role of team leader in high performance is crucial; especially the attitude and belief of the leader are important characteristics (Katzenbach 1993). Moreover, the trust between team members and trust towards the coach effects team performance in sport (March et al. 2010). Trust towards one's own and the team's knowledge and skills is also an important aspect in the sporting world (Millward 2009).

High-performing teams can start with a mediocre idea and deliver something great. If you give a mediocre idea to a mediocre team they will fail. High-performing teams will either fix it or throw it away and come up with something that works (Catmull 2008). Overcoming barriers to performance is how groups become teams: in other words, experiencing small wins in their shared journey. The building of a high-performing team requires more than just the best, brightest and skilled individuals.

Clear and specific purpose, communication and trust were the three components raised the most in the studies of high-performing teams (Katzenbach 1993; Katzenbach & Smith 1993; Erdem & Ozen 2003; Cheruvelil et al. 2014; Holmes 2012; Coole 2009; Sharp et al. 2000; Nemiro et al. 2008; Sharp et al. 2000; Hakanen & Soudunsaari 2012; Bovee & Thill 2013). Many other areas where also included. The members of high-performing teams have the necessary skills and knowledge and they share the same understanding of the vision and goals (Jones 2002; Cheruvelil et al. 2014; Bovee & Thill 2013; Sharp et al. 2000; Katzenbach & Smith 1993; Michaelsen et al. 1993; Tienari & Piekkari 2011). They are also highly motivated towards the shared vision (Jones 2002; Cheruvelil et al. 2014; Katzenbach 1993). The studies also highlighted the importance of positive relations between team members but also with managers, and clear roles and good leadership (Holmes 2012; Hakanen & Soudunsaari 2012; Bovee & Thill 2013; Mumford et al. 1999; Coole 2009; Sharp et al. 2000; Michaelsen et al. 1993; Dietrich and al. 2010). Positive relations need respect, cohesiveness and personal knowledge (Mumford et al. 1999; Clark & Westrum 1989; Michaelsen et al. 1993; Dietrich and al. 2010). The members of high-performing teams share responsibility for and commitment to the main purpose (Katzenbach 1993; Katzenbach & Smith 1993; Jones 2002; Cheruvelil et al. 2014). Clear standards and functioning decision-making and problem solving were also seen as important factors for the performance of the team (Katzenbach 1993; Holmes 2012; Sharp et al. 2000). Monitoring growth and development was also noted for identifying growth areas (Michaelsen et al. 1993).

Many researchers saw communication as one of the key elements in the building and maintenance of high-performing teams. Strong social interaction was demanded (Erdem & Ozen 2003) and sharing information, good access to the necessary data and productive meetings were all highlighted (Katzenbach 1993; Michaelsen et al. 1993; Holmes 2012; Coole 2009). The studies of Hogan and Holland (2003) and Morgeson et al. (2005) emphasized the role of personal characteristics in relationships. Conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability are characteristics that relate positively to performance. In high-performing teams, members are not interested in their own goals and success, but care and help their team members so they could reach goals together as a team (Katzenbach 1993; Bovee & Thill 2013; Hakanen & Soudunsaari 2012).

A demanding challenge and clear goal setting tend to develop a group of people into an A team. Teams cannot succeed without a shared purpose for why the team exists. They rarely work without common goals; yet more teams than not remain unclear about what they want to accomplish as a team and why. Maybe this is why sports teams have higher levels of commitment compared, for example, to business teams – they usually have clear goals like the championship title or getting to the playoffs. The goals are precise, demanding and held in common. Sure, business teams, such as start-ups or executive boards, have goals but often those are not so well defined. For example, ten per cent market share is a goal, but team-wise it is not as concrete as getting to the finals. Specific goals allow the team to achieve small wins as it pursues its purpose. Small wins are invaluable to

building member commitment and overcoming inevitable obstacles that get in the way of achieving a meaningful long-term purpose (Katzenbach 1993).

### Framework for building high-performing teams

This conceptual study concentrated on the dimensions of high-performing teams as illustrated in Figure 3. Based on more than 50 studies, trust can be seen as one of the most important dimensions; others include clear purpose/vision and communication. However, many other dimensions are important in the functioning of teams. Teams need clear roles, standards and goals and also a shared understanding of the desired purpose. Team members should have motivation, responsibility and creativity for high performance. Specific knowledge and skills are needed. Team members should be able to develop their skills and it is important to monitor progress at the individual and also the team level. Team meetings should be productive and decision-making and problem solving are a critical aspect for team working. Team members need access to the necessary data so that they can make the right decisions. Communication should be open and clear and teamwork should be based on positive relations and cohesiveness. The key for teamwork is help and support where respect is needed between the team members.

## Conclusions

High-performance teams have attracted great interest as a phenomenon in business studies, although a comprehensive conceptual definition is lacking. Research reveals a connection between trust and high-performing teams. Trust builds through shared experiences, active communication, openness and mutual respect. Personal ideas and critical information can be revealed in trusting relationships. The challenge is to improve team performance to a high-performing level and for that, trust is a key enabler. Commitment at the team level requires trust at the personal but also conceptual level. The intensification of trust requires regular, diverse interaction. Interaction that is only based around facts does not support trust building.

In response to the lack of a comprehensive conceptual definition, this study proposes a framework of the dimensions of high-performing teams. Further empirical study could offer evidence to support these findings. Many dimensions effect the functioning of high-performing teams, but clear vision, trust and communication were the most highlighted dimensions in the 50+ articles reviewed. Team members should be skilled, motivated and responsible team players. Respect and support between team members are important characteristics. There are also critical aspects in terms of leadership. Roles, standards and goals should be made clear. Team members need support from the management so they can develop their skills. After all it is noteworthy that the team dynamics as an important area of high performing team building was not highlighted in this research. Also the critical angle questioning team performance superiority was not stressed based on the reviewed literature.

This research is especially addressed to business researchers interested in high-performing teams and related concepts. The comprehensive literature review, conceptual analysis and proposed framework helps other researchers to understand the context of high-performing teams from the perspective of trust and sports teams. The study benefit firms as well. For the business oriented practitioners it offers tools for understanding the phenomenon in unstable environment. For example, the framework helps to solving challenges in management team building by addressing the high performing team characteristics and the key dimensions related to the successful team building.

### Limitations and further research

The findings of this study are limited as they are based on conceptual analysis tracked from literature sources collected during the research process, and the researcher's interpretations of previous studies. The challenges of conceptual research, such as narrow source literature or incorrect emphasis due the variety of sources of information, were addressed and great care was taken to eliminate incorrect information during the study process.

Based on the source literature, high-performing teams have been thoroughly studied in the past two decades, starting with initial intense interest in the 1990s, although there have not

Figure 3. Framework – dimensions of high-performing teams based on this study

been so many studies concentrating on the history of the concept of high-performing teams. In business research, it is important to know how this concept has developed and how it is used today both in everyday language and academic discourse. More conceptual research is needed around the concept of high-performing teams. High-performance team building is quite a well-researched area in the context of virtual teams, but more research in other contexts is still needed. Trust as a phenomenon and a concept has also attracted interest in business studies, especially in the discussion of leadership. However, there is also a need for more research into trust, to offer new viewpoints or uncommon research methodologies.

Overall, future research options in the field of high-performing teams are varied. In the future it would be interesting to study how winning teams are built and what role team culture plays when strengthening trust in teams. There is also a lack of research of the different roles that members have in high-performing teams, which might offer great tools for management, especially in the first stages of the team-building process. Trust plays a crucial role in a high-performing team, and there is a need for research about which tools and functional models can be developed to support trust building. This kind of research can offer direct implications for the management of high-performing teams. In addition to trust, attitudinal dimensions are also important in the context of high-performing teams. The literature overview revealed that the research on how attitudes toward knowledge and know-how among team members as individuals and as team members directly affects team performance in rather narrow.

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