

# Environment's Role in High Performance

BY GRAHAM JONES

To achieve sustainable high performance, it's not enough to bring in the right talent. CLOs must take a holistic look at the workplace environment to create results that last.

**Y**ou may have great people in your organization, but if the environment is not right for them, you will either lose them or their performance will drop off.

Too often, the assumption is made that these people will achieve under any circumstances. This is not the case, and the crucial lesson is that the performance environment an organization creates is just as important as the people who work within it. It is necessary to identify the essential elements of high-performance environments (HPEs).

There are four key components of HPEs — strategic focus, leadership, performance enablers and people — that drive sustained high performance in the workplace.

## Getting the Strategic Focus Right

High performance that is sustainable requires the effective management of two dynamic tensions that are factors in the environment:

- **Current vs. future tension:** A current focus involves attending to the short-term performance, efficiency and stability of the organization. A future focus involves attending to longer-term stability, flexibility and change initiatives. A strong focus on the current means there is little focus left for the future, and vice versa.
- **Internal vs. external tension:** An internal focus is largely on organizational capability through people, systems and processes. An external focus is directed toward stakeholder demands, competitive position and differentiation in the marketplace. A strong internal focus means that there is little focus left for the external end of the continuum, and vice versa.

But what should the specific areas of strategic focus be when managing these tensions? Figure 2 illustrates the two dynamic tensions along with the

factors in the quadrants that have been shown in scientific research to determine bottom-line business performance: well-being, innovation, achievement and internal processes.

- **Well-being:** This future and internal focus is about people's level of commitment to the organization, their job satisfaction and their trust in and loyalty to the leadership.
- **Innovation:** This future and external focus is largely on the marketplace and things like new products and marketing.
- **Achievement:** This current and external focus is about delivering against short-term goals, typically in the form of revenue and profit.
- **Internal processes:** This current and internal focus is on the internal systems, processes and procedures that underpin the efficiency of organizations.

The relative degree of focus on these factors and how the levels are balanced against each other is what is important. Of particular relevance to this balance is the notion that a dominant focus on internal processes and achievement, rather than well-being and innovation, reflects a strong current focus, which is typical in tough times. Conversely, a dominant focus on innovation and well-being reflects a strong future focus.

The safer option for leaders of any organization is to focus on the short term — hitting the numbers. This is what leaders are generally incentivized on and how stakeholders measure their performance. In HPEs, leaders recognize their responsibility is to focus more on the longer term — innovation and, in particular, well-being. These are what the long-term health of the organization is dependent upon.

High-performance organizations are in a constant state of formal or informal change. They can never stand still as they seek to maintain and extend their competitive advantage. This is where leaders play a

FIGURE 1: THE HIGH-PERFORMANCE ENVIRONMENT MODEL

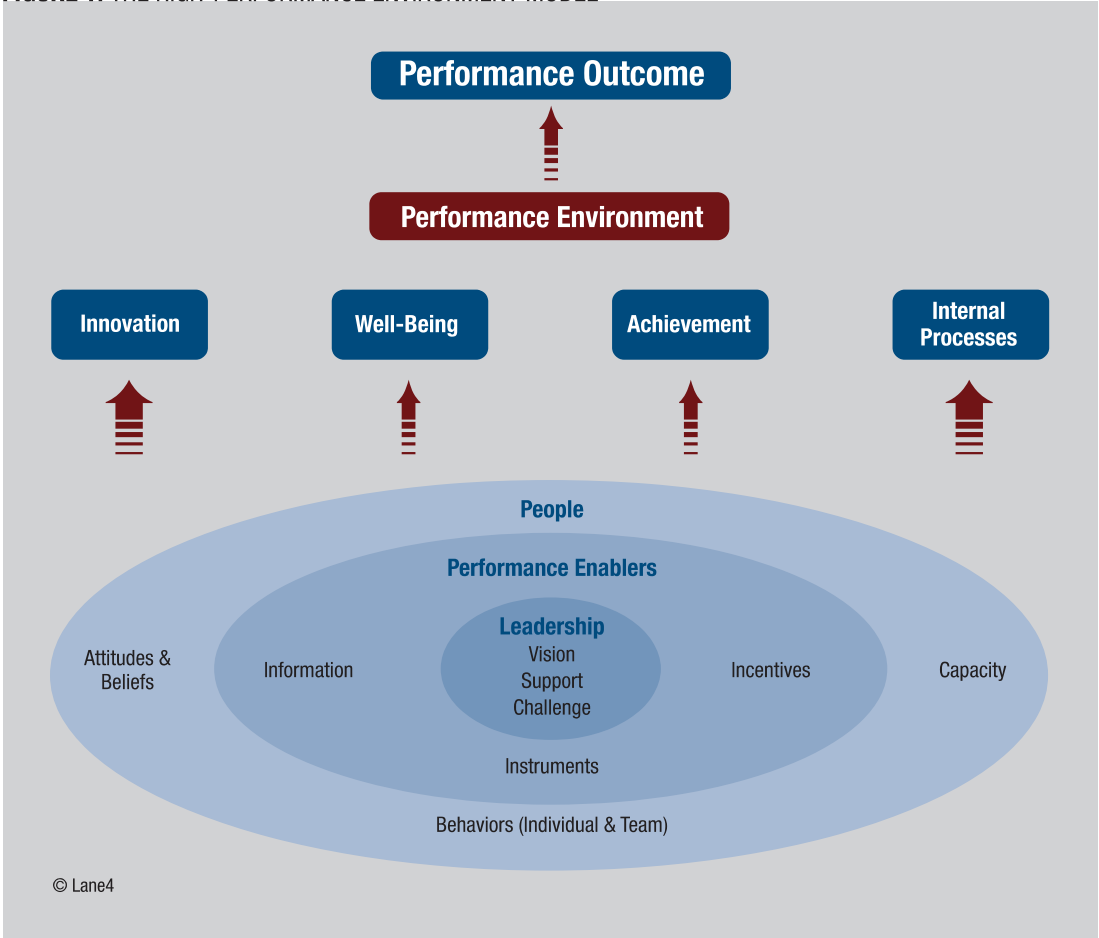
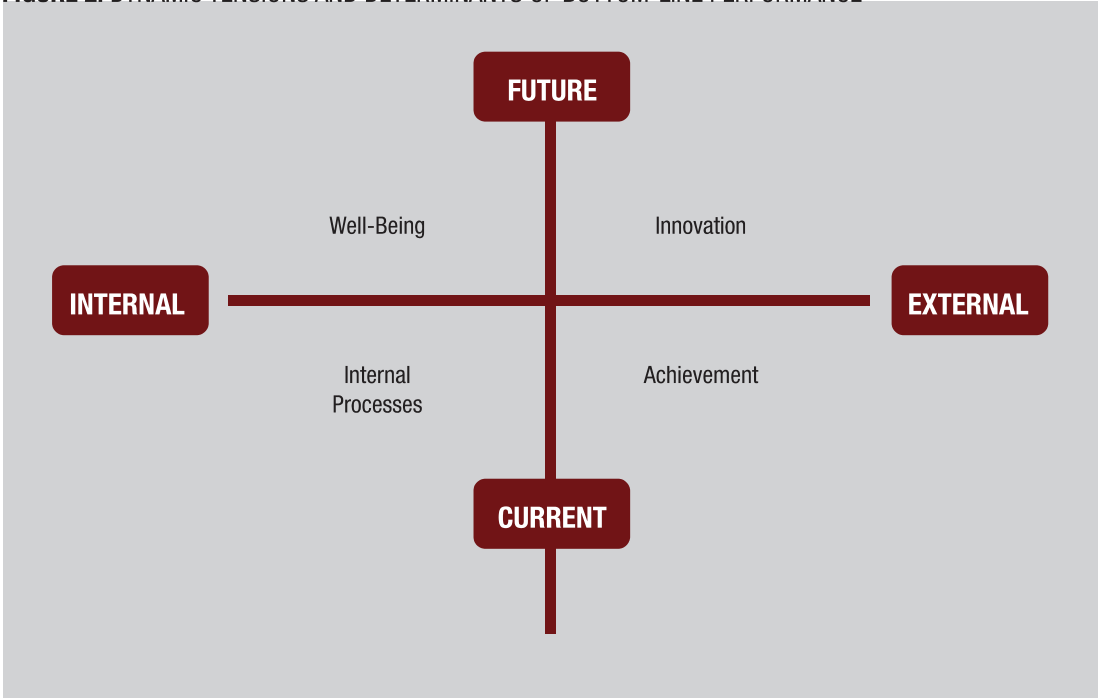


FIGURE 2: DYNAMIC TENSIONS AND DETERMINANTS OF BOTTOM-LINE PERFORMANCE



# Your strategy is over here.

The safe option is to focus on the short term, but leaders in high-performance environments recognize their responsibility is to focus on the longer term — innovation and well-being.

crucial role. It is their above-the-line focus that will ensure continual progress onward and upward.

Even during tough times, leaders in HPEs make sure their focus is predominantly on the longer term because they are aware that good times will return and they need to be equipped and prepared to take advantage when those times come. Leaders with a short-term focus will probably have stripped away so many costs in bad times, and also lost some of their best people through lack of development opportunities that they find themselves under-resourced and playing catch-up when the better times return.

## **Leaders Provide Vision, Challenge and Support**

Leaders in HPEs recognize that they are not the real performers any longer and that their task is to create the conditions where the people who are delivering the bottom line are able to thrive with as few constraints and as much support as possible.

Leaders are at the core of this environment and they ensure that carefully selected performers with a variety of talents and skills appropriate to the different roles they are playing are inspired to produce a clearly defined and communicated output. As such, these leaders do not “do” the performance themselves. Instead, they make sure the right people are in the right roles, they all know what is expected of them and they understand how their individual inputs contribute to the total output. Leaders ensure



efforts are synchronized and create collective commitment to producing the best performance possible day after day.

The day-to-day role of leaders in HPEs is to remind their performers of the vision, challenge them to deliver their contribution to achieving it and support them in doing so. But what underpins vision, challenge and support in leaders?

**Vision:** This is the vehicle by which leaders engage people's motivation and provide purpose, direction and cohesion. But creating a compelling vision is not enough to inspire people day in, day out. Leaders in HPEs continually remind them of it, and more importantly, role model it. This creates engagement and commitment to the vision, driving a collective responsibility across the organization to set appropriate goals that lead to delivering it.

**Challenge:** This can take many forms, some of them more constructive than others. Challenge behaviors exhibited by leaders in HPEs include reinforcing their high expectations and challenging people to think about old problems and issues in new ways. Providing developmental feedback on areas for improving competence is a powerful tool for instilling accountability and responsibility in teams. Challenge is about moving people out of their comfort zones and opening them to experiences that will test and develop their capabilities. Through appropriate challenge, leaders communicate performance excellence, set stretching goals and foster innovation and adaptability.

**Support:** This complements leaders' challenge behaviors to ensure that performance is sustainable over the longer term. High challenge without support creates a sink-or-swim scenario. Through appropriate support, leaders promote learning and build trust among their respective followers. People in HPEs are told when they are doing a good job. Motivational feedback in the form of encouragement supports them in reinforcing what is expected of them and helping to maintain their confidence and motivation. Leaders know their people as individuals and provide them with the specific individual support they desire. Taking a personal interest in them earns considerable loyalty and commitment among them.

Demonstrating vision, challenge and support behaviors creates an environment where:

- Individuals and teams are clear about what is expected of them on a day-to-day basis as well as in the longer term.

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- Success is recognized and celebrated.
- People thrive in conditions created by the combination of high-performance expectations that are accompanied by high levels of support to achieve them.
- Coaching is the norm, underpinned by good working relationships, a feedback culture, accountability and ownership, and clearly defined goals.
- There is a “we’re in it together” mentality that is the foundation of high-performing teams.
- Healthy competition exists in the form of shared learning and commitment to everyone’s development, as well as individual and team goals being completely aligned.

Focusing on demonstrating vision, challenge and support behaviors results in significant and sustained performance gains. This combination unleashes the performance potential of people by providing them with an environment where they can thrive.

### Performance Enablers

Leaders in HPEs ensure that their people have the necessary tools to do their jobs to the best of their ability. These performance enablers comprise information, instruments and incentives.

- **Information:** Effective communication in HPEs means people are clear about how to do their jobs effectively. They have definite goals they have helped to set that are specific to their roles and stretch them appropriately. They understand their responsibilities and the behaviors required to fulfill them. People know how their roles are evaluated and what they can do to progress within the organization. All of these factors give employees a sense of meaning and structure within their performance environment.
- **Instruments:** In HPEs, people are equipped with the appropriate instruments or tools to help them perform effectively. Instruments will be specific to individual organizations, but common ones include sophisticated IT networks, videoconferencing facilities to improve communications channels and effective performance review systems.
- **Incentives:** In HPEs, incentives are not just in the form of compelling salaries, bonuses and benefits that attract, motivate and retain people. This is only one dimension of incentives. Other incentives include strong relationships with managers, which are valued by employees and vital if communication is to be open, honest and frequent. People have access to opportunities for development and also have a chance to have their say and be heard by senior leaders.

### People

There are three aspects of people that are important in delivering sustained high performance — attitudes, capacity and behaviors.

- **Attitudes:** In HPEs, people’s trust in their leader is a big factor in motivating them to perform above and beyond what is expected of them. They have bought in to what their leader is trying to achieve, enjoy their jobs and are committed to their organization.

This organizational commitment means that people put in more effort at work. Job satisfaction and high performance are inextricably linked. Put simply, people who enjoy their work try harder and, in this way, attitudes drive behavior. Alongside enjoyment, people work hard and perform well because their personal values are aligned with their organization’s values.

- **Capacity:** Having people with the right attitudes is not sufficient on its own to deliver sustained high performance. In HPEs, people have the necessary abilities and capacities to do their jobs. These include a blend of knowledge,

experience and technical capabilities, as well as the softer elements, like mental toughness, confidence and emotional intelligence.

Leaders recognize the need to ensure the recruitment and development of individuals with the right mindset and ability to do their jobs because both are critical for high performance. This means that talent assessment and development is always a high priority in HPEs.

Naturally, these assessments have a focus on technical skills and knowledge specific to the role. Yet, the importance of emotional intelligence (the ability to perceive, understand and regulate emotions) and mental toughness (the ability to consistently perform to high standards through times of personal and professional pressure) are also factored in.

- **Behaviors:** People in HPEs give extra effort and persist in the face of problems because their leader inspires them and has created the right performance environment. They regularly go beyond what is expected for the benefit of the organization and

have high levels of energy, dedication and absorption in their day-to-day work. These behaviors lead to strong inter- and intra-teamwork throughout the organization.

All organizations will claim that they aspire to creating HPEs, but relatively few have the insight to know what it takes and where to begin, while others lack the commitment and perseverance to stick with what can seem like a daunting challenge.

Taking a critical look at HPEs provides a valuable starting point and tool for diagnosing areas of strength and development requirements within organizations. Its holistic perspective enables leaders who face a myriad of issues that may appear unrelated to piece them together in a big picture that drives a coordinated approach to developing the whole organization. **CLO**

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