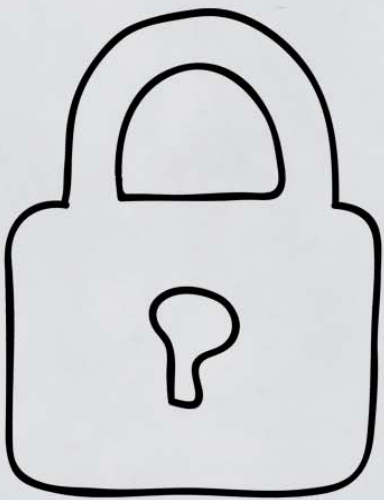# **Unlock Team Potential**

Potential

Performance

Organizing a structure to achieve high performance is one of the biggest strengths agility can help you gain. Acquiring certain methodologies will boost team performance almost immediately. **by Stefan Posch and Julia Fadler**

Are you working in a team – or even more than one team? If you belong to Generation Y or Z, this question might strike you as a strange one; how else could somebody work? You participated in team projects at school and university and all your work environments had team-based structures. The interchange of ideas was on an eye-to-eye level, with everyone contributing to a commonly agreed-upon goal. You will be surprised that your »normal« is what many old-fashioned and ancient industries are desperately craving for. Experimenting and learning how to work in team-based structures is very hard for many businesses; but moving fast in small groups is crucial in our fast-changing environment.

What it takes to boost performance

How to build such teams and prepare them for high performance has been a hot topic for years. In our research, we have identified three essential dimensions for the development of high-performance teams:
1 Framework conditions
2 Psychological safety
3 Shared mental models

An especially interesting perspective on how to nurture a high-performance team is relying on agile working models. When diving into agile methodologies, we find a wide range of settings, routines and tools in place to enable high performance in teams. How does a retrospective serve to constantly shape the framework conditions? What does a stand-up meeting have to do with psychological safety in teams? How does visualization of the joint work support the emergence of a shared mental model? Let's connect the dots and have a look at successful strategies (see illustration).

Retrospectives – time and space for us as a team

Coming from SCRUM, the retrospective is a facilitated team meeting taking place after every sprint. The team comes together to talk about the quality of cooperation in the team and proactively works on what to do differently to improve the process in the future. Teams work around the following guiding questions:
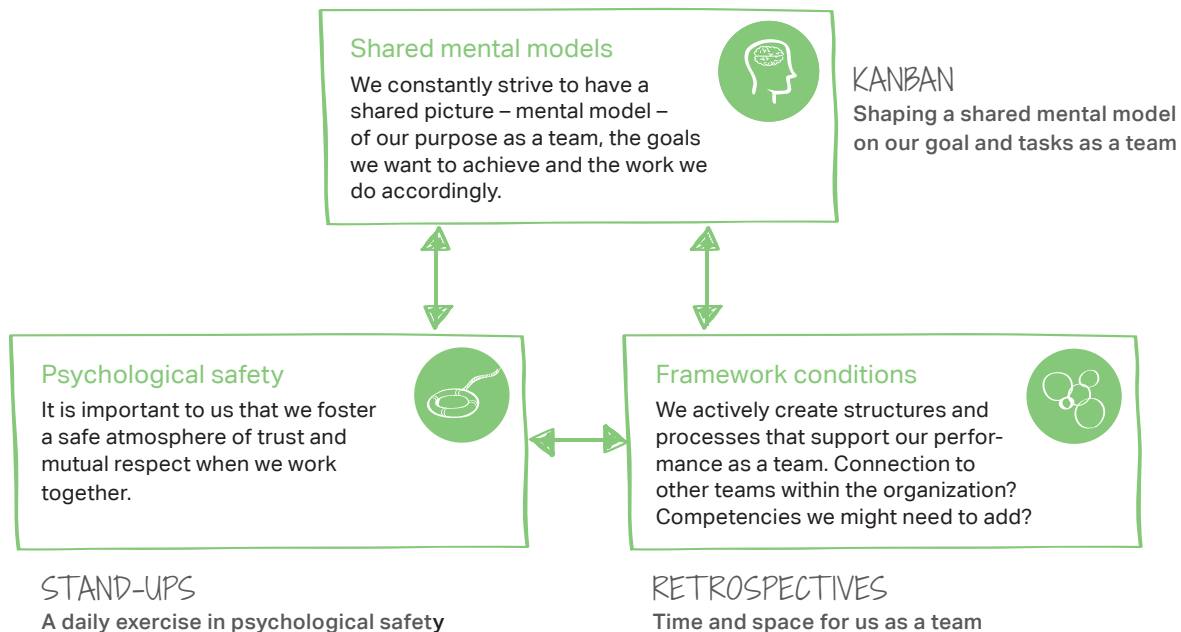— What did we do well (and why)? What did not work well (and why)?
— How well are we cooperating in this team?
— What do we want to do to perform better as a team in the future?

From a team development perspective, retrospectives are a very valuable format to work on the team (and not only in the team). Why is that important? Research shows that one aspect to make a team better is a shared understanding among members about the desired quality. This includes performance requirements and goals as well as the important aspect of how the team should work together (cf. DeChurch and Mesmer-Magnus, American Psychological Association 2010b). These »shared mental models« are not to be shaped once and fixed as long as the team exists – they need an ongoing dialogue around individual expectations and perspectives, as interests and focus may change over time. In a well-facilitated retrospective, these aspects are explicitly put into the focus of attention.

Stand-ups – a daily exercise in psychological safety

Another element used in agile frameworks such as SCRUM or Kanban is the daily stand-up meeting. It is a ▶

Dimensions for the development of high-performance teams

Shared mental models

We constantly strive to have a shared picture – mental model – of our purpose as a team, the goals we want to achieve and the work we do accordingly.

KANBAN

Shaping a shared mental model on our goal and tasks as a team

Psychological safety

It is important to us that we foster a safe atmosphere of trust and mutual respect when we work together.

Framework conditions

We actively create structures and processes that support our performance as a team. Connection to other teams within the organization? Competencies we might need to add?

STAND-UPS

A daily exercise in psychological safety

RETROSPECTIVES

Time and space for us as a team

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short, compact meeting taking place every day where a team comes together to have a look at the progress made. The goal of the meeting is to have everyone on the same page and facilitate an overview of what everyone is currently doing as well as how the team/project as a whole is progressing. The team usually works around these three questions, answered by every team member:

— What have I achieved since our last stand-up?
— What do I want to achieve by our next one?
— What is currently getting in my way to progress as planned in my work?

What makes the daily stand-up an especially interesting learning field is gained from togetherness. Research has shown that high performance teams are characterized by a feeling of »psychological safety.« Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as »a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.« In psychologically safe teams, team members feel confident to speak up if they have a problem, doubt decisions or share open critique. In our experience, leaders often struggle to foster psychological safety. In this context,

a daily stand-up can be an excellent starting point to practice openness by talking about personal achievements and struggles. Realize equal speaking times and let everyone participate in a time-boxed manner to create »visible« signs of psychological safety in your team.

Kanban – shaping a shared mental model on our goal and tasks

This is about our purpose as a team, the goals we want to achieve and the work we do accordingly. Only if all of these aspects are constantly transparent to all team members can coherence and high performance develop. A Kanban board (see page 70) helps a team visualize the progress on the joint work. It shows all currently important activities and helps identify the highest priorities and achieve the team's common goal. The board is updated on a regular basis (at the latest at the daily stand-up) and constantly reminds all members of the upcoming tasks. The board supports the reprioritizing of tasks, and what is most important, allows every fulfilled task to be jointly »celebrated« as a little success. Every visit of the Kanban board is also a revisit of the shared mental model in action and a shared identity. ●