

Boost Your Project Team Performance

Sometimes you really need to boost your team performance and get more from your team. Maybe things have gone wrong. Or maybe you're just partway through your Project and everyone is feeling exhausted. So what can you do to re-energize a team that has been stretched and strained and wants a rest - yet still has work to do.

In this article, we review a wide range of practical strategies. We'll divide them into sets of 'hacks'. Each of them works on a different aspect of what contributes to the highest levels of team performance.

Four Sets of Team Performance Hacks

Here are the four sets of hacks we'll be looking at:

1. Physiological Hacks
2. Relationship Hacks
3. Motivational Hacks
4. Management Hacks



Table of Contents

1. Physiological Hacks.....	3
1.1. Take a Break	3
1.2. Early Night.....	3
1.3. Shape up Your Demeanor.....	3
1.4. Move People Around	3
2. Relationship Hacks	3
2.1. 'Good Morning'	4
2.2. Questioning.....	4
2.3. Listen	4
2.4. A Problem Shared... ..	4
2.5. Good News.....	4
2.6. Refresh Team Meeting Format	5
2.7. Learning Reviews	5
3. Motivational Hacks.....	5
3.1. Remind Your Team Why they're Doing it	5
3.2. Gratitude	5
3.3. Roll up your sleeves	5
3.4. Celebration	6
3.5. Optimism	6
3.6. Greater Authority	6
4. Management Hacks.....	6
4.1. One-to-ones.....	6
4.2. Hold an Event	6
4.3. Strategy 20. Recognise and Reward	7
4.4. Strategy 21. ... and Tackle Under-performance	7
4.5. Strategy 22. Review Milestones and Schedules	7
4.6. Strategy 23. Swap Roles	7
4.7. Strategy 24. New Blood	7
4.8. Strategy 25. Reboot.....	7

1. Physiological Hacks

Physiological hacks are approaches to re-energizing your team performance by focusing on their bodies. Now, of course, our minds and our bodies are connected. So, it's just a matter of emphasis in choosing to put these four hacks here, rather than in the more psychological sections that follow.

1.1. Take a Break

Your team wants rest: give it to them. Often, a short, organized break from work for a team activity will re-invigorate your team to the extent that the increased productivity afterwards will re-pay the lost hours within days, rather than weeks.

It doesn't have to be expensive (a slap-up lunch, picnic in the park, early finish and afternoon in the pub), and it can be work - just a very different kind. Volunteering or community service works well and for many teams, the physical nature of decorating, mending, or cleaning marks a genuine shift from the type of work they do in the day-job.

1.2. Early Night

Okay, you're not going to be there to tuck them up! But for a team that has got into the habit of working late, try this. Set a day to finish work early and push everyone out of the door with day to spare.

Often team performance suffers when you get into the habit of long hours. Not only does hourly productivity drop, but you achieve less in 12 hours than you used to in eight. Use this as a chance to reset expectations and create a 'good eight', rather than a 'poor twelve' culture.

1.3. Shape up Your Demeanor

How you carry yourself around the office, factory, warehouse... It will have a big effect on how your team feels. This was one of the earliest lessons I learned as a Project leader:

Never under-estimate the impact your mood has on your people and therefore, on your team performance. We take our emotional cues from the people around us. And the more we like, trust, and respect someone, the stronger their signal is. As a leader, your team will disproportionately take their emotional mood from you. So stand and sit upright, Project confidence and enthusiasm, smile, and take an interest in everyone.

1.4. Move People Around

'A change is good as a break.'

Sometimes if you want to change a mindset, you need to move the body. So refresh your team by addressing their environment. And one of the easiest ways is to reconfigure who works where. It creates a fresh start and, notably, triggers new communication patterns.

This is important, as we'll see in the next section. So, as your Project moves into a new phase, it's a good time to think about the new links that will strengthen your team performance. Use seating arrangements and office locations as a lever to reset some new communication and relationship links.

2. Relationship Hacks

Relationships are one of the strongest workplace motivators. After all, if you work full-time, you will be spending more of your waking hours with your colleagues than with your friends, family, or chosen partner.

As a result, anything you can do to improve working relationships among team members is bound to have a positive impact on team performance.

2.1. 'Good Morning'

Yeah, yeah, I know. You need to check your email, see your boss, or prepare for your first meeting. No, you need to get your first coffee.

Wrong. Make your first task to wander round and say 'good morning' to your team. It's a bit like turning up at a party... The way your host greets you (or not) when you arrive, can have a big impact on your mood. No, it won't always make or spoil the whole party. But it can affect how much you enjoy the first hour. And one hour a day represents anything up to 12 per cent of your team performance.

2.2. Questioning

I am forever advising leaders at leadership development training and workshops that questions are a magic bullet to leadership effectiveness. They contribute to gravitas, executive presence, problem-solving, decision-making, and... team performance.

Your job isn't to have all the answers. It's to ensure all the questions get answers. And questions are the way you do that.

They tell your team you value their opinions, and they access thinking from more people with wider cumulative experience and different perspectives to your own.

2.3. Listen

Listening attentively requires more than just hearing words. Instead of focusing on oneself, it's essential to eliminate distractions and internal chatter. When training individuals in the art of attentive listening, emphasis lies on silencing the internal dialogue. Paying full attention entails:

- Remaining open to the speaker's words without preempting their message.
- Abstaining from formulating immediate responses or questions.
- Avoiding mental distractions such as planning future tasks or meetings.
- Especially in today's digital age, it's crucial to disengage from mobile devices to fully engage with the speaker.

2.4. A Problem Shared...

The next step once you have nailed your listening skills is to take them out for a spin. Act as a sounding board for your team members' problems, frustrations and disappointments.

You rarely need to offer solutions - they can do that for themselves. But they will value you most when you can listen uncritically and provide absolute support. And where necessary, a sensitive, generous response can be a great help and really improve this one team member's performance.

Better to have 100 per cent of my attention for half a day, than 20 per cent of it for a whole day.

2.5. Good News

Make a real effort to identify good news items you can report to the team. And provide a stream of honest updates that highlight real progress of the team and the contribution their work is making.

Good news from outside, in the form of novelty items from the web can also lighten the mood and create a shared, fun experience. Here's the general principle: 'one or two cute dogs, epic fails, or astonishing feats per week is good'. More of them will hurt team performance.

2.6. Refresh Team Meeting Format

You already have a set of team meeting. But when you need to re-invigorate your team, it's time to review them. Re-assess what meetings you need. And for greater impact, re-think how you conduct each one. As Projects progress, communication needs change, so reset the meeting formats to better serve your Project and your team performance.

2.7. Learning Reviews

One of the biggest motivators you can harness is our pride in developing ourselves and growing as individuals and as professionals. Create slots for team members to chat with a mentor about what they are learning and how they are developing.

Often, when we realize how much we've grown, we get a renewed sense of commitment. And when you learn how much I have developed, you can re-allocate me to new work that will stretch me further and encourage a boost in my performance levels.

3. Motivational Hacks

In the section on Relationship Hacks, we have explicitly identified two big motivators: relationships and learning, or growth. Here, we'll see how other powerful motivators can also provide the key to enhance your team performance.

3.1. Remind Your Team Why they're Doing it

When we forget the purpose behind what we are doing, it's easy to lose our motivation. So find a chance to remind people about the goals and what they mean to your organization, clients, and other stakeholders. The more people are able to see that their work is worthwhile, the easier it will be to motivate them.

3.2. Gratitude

Team performance often takes a dip when things go wrong. And when this happens, people tend to fixate on the problems, setbacks, and disappointments. This can mean performance will drop further. Any sports performer knows the experience of 'choking' - which often happens when we drop out of 'automatic' doing mode and start to get stuck in our heads.

One powerful way to reverse this is to refocus your team's attention back onto its successes and its strengths. On a personal and team level, focusing on the things we can be grateful for, will be a big help in resetting the mood.

3.3. Roll up your sleeves

In times of adversity we want our leaders to lead us. And we may know that they need time to think, either alone or with a few trusted colleagues. But more viscerally, we want to see them on the front line of the Project with us. So it's time to roll up your sleeves and help out. Indeed, the concept of servant leadership suggests that you need to do whatever it takes to make you team successful. If this means doing the menial, dull, laborious tasks while your specialist team members do the interesting stuff, then so be it. Go to where your team is struggling and get your hands messy.

3.4. Celebration

Who doesn't love a celebration? When you celebrate your team performance, or the successes of several individuals, you remind everyone of their success, which will make them feel good. And when we feel good, we gain confidence. Confidence leads to better performance and that leads back to more success.

Well-placed celebration leads to a positive feedback cycle, so to re-invigorate your team, re-energize your celebration process.

3.5. Optimism

It is easy to feel down, under the pressures of deadlines and setbacks. As I said above, your team will take their emotional cues from you. So cultivate an optimistic slant: not just shallow 'glass half-full' optimism but a real focus on opportunities and solutions. And always demonstrate your faith in each individual and in the team as a whole.

3.6. Greater Authority

If your team has been working together for a while, consider the development each member has been through. Now review how much autonomy, control, and authority each person has. Can you give them more, to both challenge and refresh them, and to lighten your own load?

4. Management Hacks

Our last section focuses on the more traditional, 'managerial' approaches. These are specific workplace actions you can take that will boost your team performance by creating a sense of rhythm, control, and structure.

4.1. One-to-ones

Renew your efforts to be available to your team members. Schedule a series of one-to-one meetings so you can precisely gauge the mood of your team, and listen to each individual's triumphs and concerns.

Also use this as your cue to review whether you are as easy to approach as you'd like (and as your team would like). I know few of us have an office door to leave open. But ask yourself what signals you send out. Are they 'open door signals', or 'door closed signals'?

4.2. Hold an Event

Yes, we know team-building events can be deadly, expensive, and a complete waste of time. Never ever do an event like this unless you are clear what the outcome is, and equally clear how the activities relate to both the outcome and the work.

That said, do consider whether some form of appropriate event will give the kind of relaunch to your team performance that you need. If it is worth doing, then it is worth doing well. This may not mean investing a lot of money in it, but certainly does mean investing a lot of time in planning it carefully.

And another caution, if I may. By all means delegate elements of that planning. But because this event will be instrumental in getting so much right (or wrong) in the days and weeks afterwards, never take your eye off this. It's your event, and your responsibility.

4.3. Recognise and Reward

Recognise individual and team successes and set up a scheme for making that recognition public, and rewarding them:

- 'person of the month'
- 'innovation of the week'
- 'gaff of the day'

These can all be a reason for the team to get together and feel good about themselves. Token gifts and a round of applause are all you need.

4.4. ... and Tackle Under-performance

Creating great team performance is not all happy-clappy pats on the back. Persistent under-performers can sap a team's energy. When colleagues do not pull their weight, it feels unfair and demotivates us all. So deal with any issues promptly, to ensure everyone feels that all their colleagues are contributing fully.

4.5. Review Milestones and Schedules

Take a time-out to review your plan critically and evaluate your schedule and milestones. Show your team that unreasonable milestones can move or that you are re-prioritising work to meet them.

And let them know you are confident that challenging milestones are achievable. This will renew their sense of optimism and their sense of urgency.

4.6. Swap Roles

Where possible, re-energise individuals by giving them new roles. This can give fresh eyes to a stale problem, and new energy to a tired team-member.

People learn most after a settling in period, and then learning declines. So don't swap too often, but don't leave people to stagnate with little new to learn.

4.7. New Blood

You may also want to go one step further. Maybe it's time for a real change. Bringing in an outsider or two can shake up the team, put them on their mettle, and introduce new thinking. Sadly, this may also mean benching a valuable team member. But if you do it well, this can be their chance to continue growing in a new role, when they have out-grown the role they are in.

4.8. Reboot

What happens when your computer stops running well? There's too many apps open, memory is overfull, and it keeps crashing?

That's right... Turn it off, and then on again. (there's a job for me in IT support if I want it!) It works, and it can work with a very over-stale team. Draw a line under work done so far. Recognise its successes, and also recognise the need for something new. Then package up a whole load of the suggestions above, and carry out a re-launch. Turn your team off, and turn it on again. But now, it's in a new configuration, with some new practices and processes, and (if you get it right) new optimism, energy, and commitment.