



human interest

insights

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of Elite Teams**

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FOCUS ON

elite teams



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Assess culture, climate and engagement levels and design and implement interventions to address identified gaps.

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introduction

Teams exist in almost every organisation and most people will work as part of a team at some point during their working life. A team is by definition "an interdependent group of individuals who share responsibility and a common goal". The focus, however, is shifting towards high-performing or elite teams. Elite teams are enhanced teams that outperform standard teams.

Based on the definition above, an elite team would be "an interdependent group of **stable, role-defined** individuals who share **mutual trust, values**, responsibility and a **clear focus** on a common goal, **who outperform in anticipated productivity**".

Up to 50% of the variance in organisational performance can be attributed to the top team. – Peterson, 2003 and Thomas, 1998

The value of a high-performing team has long been recognised. There is a 1.9 times increased likelihood of having above-median financial performance when the top teams are working together toward a common vision. It is known that elite teams have the ability to outperform other teams. However, they do more than that. Elite teams also have the potential to lift both the performance of other teams within their organisation and other teams within the competitive market space.

What sporting teams and business teams have in common is the human dynamic. In an organisational context, we choose to work together in order for the combination of skills to drive an outcome in the form of a "collective dividend". In a sporting team context, this is not so much a choice as a requirement of the rules of the sport itself. However, in both cases it is clear that some teams are able to work more effectively together and create a much higher "collective dividend".

Leicester City is a good case study. They made an incredible turnaround after a 14th place finish for the 2014–15 season, their first season back in the Premier League since 2004, when they won the Premier League in the 2015–16 season. So, what can we learn from this? How did the team come back to defeat the odds and win?

How did they move from being a team to being an elite team?

One of the many factors that had a huge contributing impact was leadership. We often hear stories of a dynamic leader going into an organisation and changing everything to achieve success. But what happens when, as is much more often the case, the leader has to work with what is already there? In Leicester City's case, they won the Premier League.

To do this, the new manager, Claudio Ranieri, prioritised building a culture of trust, both in each other and in him, and diligently stuck to that formula for the duration of the campaign in order to get the victory that he needed. As ex-military, he applied some of the principles of war, such as:

- **Concentration of Force:** To concentrate your greatest strengths at the right time to achieve the objective.
- **Simplicity:** Simple plans and clear concise orders minimise misunderstanding and confusion.
- **Maintenance of Morale:** Morale is a positive state of mind derived from inspired political and military leadership; a shared sense of purpose and values; well-being; perceptions of worth; and group cohesion.

While preparing Leicester City for their season, Ranieri devised the team's systems and tactics perfectly with each individual player's strengths and weaknesses in mind, optimising the talent they already had.

Despite having a much lower budget than their competitors, they won because of the following factors that had been instilled in the team

- RELATIONSHIPS - CULTURE
- A DEEP UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN PLAYERS AND COACHES OR MANAGEMENT
 - TRUST - SHARED RESPECT - MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING
- A FUNDAMENTAL CONFIDENCE IN THEIR OWN ABILITY AND THAT OF THEIR TEAM MATES WHEN PULLED TOGETHER

This ultimately enabled Leicester City to transform from being a team to being an elite team.



Character -istics OF ELITE TEAMS

Based on vast experience and extensive research, we have developed an Elite Team Profile™ that comprises key components necessary for a team to be elite or high performing.

Elite Teams are made up of three pillars

- Sense of purpose
- Clear and achievable goals
- Clear roles and responsibilities
- Focus on delivery
- Open communication

Shapers

1

Shapers are components that are non-negotiable in an elite team. Without these aspects, a team cannot become high performing.

ELITE TEAMS

- Shared commitment
- Joint accountability
- Psychological safety
- Diversity
- Adaptability

Drivers

2

Drivers are the components that need to be present within the team in order to attain top achievement.

3

Accelerators

- Empowerment
- Recognition
- Talent optimisation
- Continuous feedback
- Collective leadership

Accelerators are the components that will accelerate teams towards optimum performance and ultimate success.

Shapers

- **Sense of purpose:** A high-performing team shares a strong sense of purpose. They are clear about what their work is and why it is important. The purpose is what focuses energy and drives interdependence and performance. It is from purpose that mutually agreed upon goals are derived, roles are defined and strategies are developed. If their purpose is not clear, the team will falter.
- **Clear and achievable goals:** Clear and achievable goals are essential. To have multiple people work toward a common goal, objectives must be clearly understood by all team members. Research shows that, if goals appear to be unrealistic, the likelihood of individuals simply giving up increases substantially.
- **Clear roles and responsibilities:** Each team member must have clearly defined responsibilities within the team, and these team roles must be assigned based on strengths and preferred behaviours when working within a team. Each person must know exactly what their responsibilities are in relation to the achievement of team objectives.
- **Focus on delivery:** The ability to focus on getting a single project to completion is the key to high performance. There is a commitment to high standards and quality. High-performance teams take great pride in meeting deadlines, achieving goals and getting the job done swiftly.
- **Open communication:** Team members need to feel free to express their feelings on the tasks and on the group's operation without fear. These communication channels need to be open and constant. A 2012 study by the Harvard Business Review revealed some interesting facts about communication on high-performance teams. By tracking and analysing the interactions of teams in a wide range of workplaces, the researchers found that, per hour, around 12 communication exchanges between members of the team seems to be the optimal number.

Drivers

- **Shared commitment:** The commitment of every team member is key — to each other, to the organisation and to their goals. Leaders can foster this by ensuring everyone understands the importance of their role to the team and how their specific strengths and skills contribute to the success of the organisation. It's not just about individual impact, it's also about how each team member positively impacts the group. Shared goals provide the reason for collaboration.
- **Joint accountability:** Being accountable means you are responsible for addressing your problems directly with others rather than avoiding them or asking others to handle them for you. Joint accountability also means that you share responsibility for a situation, including the consequences it creates.

- **Psychological safety:** Psychological safety refers to the belief that you will not be punished when you make a mistake. This speaks to trusting others. Studies show that psychological safety allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off — just the types of behaviour that lead to market breakthroughs. It is the ability to be yourself and knowing you have the team's support.
- **Diversity:** Effective teams are composed of members with a wide range of skills, strengths and differences. One such an important difference is diversity of thinking styles. According to a study by Deloitte, cultivating "diversity of thought" at a business can boost innovation and creative problem-solving and guard against the phenomenon of GroupThink. Elite teams leverage a wide range of backgrounds, experience and perspectives for the potential for unpredictable insights and linkages. High-performance teams actively seek out divergent views because of what they offer to the decision-making process.
- **Adaptability:** A high-performing team needs to be agile in terms of learning quickly from past mistakes and adapting their style according to changing conditions and demands. If a team does not adjust, the same mistakes will continually be made.

Accelerators

- **Empowerment:** Team members need to be fully empowered through effective delegation. This ensures that individual speciality and strengths are utilised. The team should have unhindered access to relevant information and resources.
- **Recognition:** Recognition and appreciation are the responsibility of all team members and the leader. The organisation must recognise and value the team's contribution. Individual and team accomplishments must be recognised and celebrated in order for team members feel highly regarded in the team.
- **Talent optimisation:** Team leaders look at individual strengths and place people in roles where they are likely to thrive and provide the most value.
- **Continuous feedback:** Members of the team ask for regular feedback on their work and leaders provide continuous feedback. Feedback aids in two ways: Positive feedback enables the team to learn and engage quickly, while constructive feedback allows team members to change and optimise their ways of working. This also allows teams to review their objectives and whether they are being met timeously.
- **Collective leadership:** Collective leadership is not where the team leader is one person in charge while the others follow. In elite teams, leadership is more than a role; it is an influence process that requires leadership from team

Case study

THE ALL BLACKS RUGBY TEAM

Teamwork, both in the elite sporting arena and the business context, involves the engagement and interaction of individuals to achieve an outcome that is, ideally, greater than the sum of the efforts of the individuals.

One undisputed elite team is that of New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team. They have a success rate of 77% of all games played in 125 years of rugby, three Rugby World Cups including the inaugural tournament, and they are the first Rugby Union nation to win 500 test matches. No other team has had such consistent success. Using the All Blacks as a case study, we will demonstrate how the Elite Team Framework applies to an elite team that has created a high-performance culture.

Shapers

SENSE OF PURPOSE

The purpose of the All Blacks team is "to leave the jersey in a better place than where you found it". Values are very important and there is a strong alignment between team and personal values. When Richie McCaw got his first All Blacks shirt, he spent a minute with his head buried in the jersey. They live by the Maori quote: "The person with a narrow vision sees a narrow horizon. The person with a wider vision sees a wider horizon". The All Blacks also believe that better people make better All Blacks and understanding "why" identifies the purpose of being an All Black. A key factor in the All Blacks' success was the development of the new haka, Kapa o Pango. Rituals reflect, remind and reinforce the belief system to reignite their collective identity and purpose.

CLEAR AND ACHIEVABLE GOALS

The All Blacks set clear goals that are known to the entire team. At the conclusion of the 2011 World Cup, they set the objective of being the first team to win back-to-back World Cups. To meet this goal, they set several milestones that charted their path to success along the way.

CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The All Blacks are very big on both empowering and enabling. They ensure that everyone knows where they fit into the team and that they know the end goal - which is, of course, winning.

FOCUS ON DELIVERY

There's a Maori saying, "the way the sapling is shaped determines how the tree grows". All foundation for success on a rugby field is built in training. In order to ensure a focus on delivery, the All Blacks set their watches 10 minutes fast so they are never late. This is because they believe in total accountability. Focus is vital for the All Blacks, and there is no paradox - play to win, don't play not to lose. Don't be a good All Black, be a great All Black.

OPEN COMMUNICATION

The All Blacks have strong and regular communication, so, everyone knows what is happening every step of the way. This even extends to include those people on the fringes of the team, whom may be called upon in the future. They also debrief immediately after each game.

Drivers

SHARED COMMITMENT

In Maori, whanau means "extended family". It's symbolised by the spearhead. Though a spearhead has three tips, to be effective, all of its force must move in one direction. The All Blacks select on character over talent, which means some of New Zealand's most promising players never pull on the black jersey - because they don't have the right character, their inclusion would be detrimental to the whanau. Like all the great teams, the All Blacks seek to replace the "me" with the "we". No one is bigger than the team. The team always comes first.

JOINT ACCOUNTABILITY

The All Blacks have long had a saying: “leave the jersey in a better place”. Their task is to represent all those who have come before them and all those who follow suit. Understanding this responsibility creates a compelling sense of higher purpose.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In rugby, an offload is when you pass the ball behind you knowing someone will be there to catch it. Sonny Bill Williams is well-known for his offloads. They are so well-known that to “Sonny Bill” someone is to offload. Although this is a highly risky move, he had the trust and psychological safety within the group to try something risky, that could very well have failed but didn’t. The All Blacks have the ability to be true to themselves. So, they have a personal as well as a collective identity.

DIVERSITY

The All Blacks have effectively harnessed the diversity of skill sets and personalities in their team to make their “star performers” into a “star team”.

ADAPTABILITY

It is the philosophy and focus on continual improvement and the continuous learning environment that are at the core of All Black culture. When you’re on top of your game, change your game. Adaptation is not a reaction but an everyday action. Even failures (for example, the 2003 Rugby World Cup) are seen as learning opportunities.

Accelerators

EMPOWERMENT

Central to the All Blacks’ belief is the development of leaders and the nurturing of character off the field to deliver results on the field. This involves a literal and metaphorical handing over of responsibility from management to players, so that, by game day, the team consists of one captain and 15 leaders.

RECOGNITION

The All Blacks are internationally celebrated; however, the team believes in remaining humble. After games, all players “sweep the sheds”, meaning they themselves clean their own locker rooms. No player is better than another.

TALENT OPTIMISATION

Each player has their individual player profile. This profile has, amongst other things, their strengths, weaknesses and ways to develop their development areas.

CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK

The All Blacks believe in a philosophy of “stabbing in the front not the back.” They have developed a culture where there is no blame and players actively seek criticism and feedback. Because they are empowered, they trust. Because they trust, they take feedback constructively. The coaches also use empowering performance feedback, whereby feedback is given on improving strengths and not only on reducing weaknesses.

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The All Blacks’ management believes that if it is up to leadership to take responsibility for managing what happens on the field, they are doomed. There is a personal responsibility for own performance. Former head coach, Graham Henry, made pre-match time the team’s own, as part of his devolved leadership plan. He left the players alone as a group to do what they had to do.



Creating Elite Teams

In 1964, psychologist, Bruce Tuckman developed the Stages of Team Development model. He theorised that these four stages (Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing) are all necessary and inevitable in order for the team to grow, face up to challenges, tackle problems, find solutions, plan work and deliver results. Once a stage has been passed, it is still possible for the team to move back and forth between stages.

The model explains how a team develops over time, which consists of four key stages:



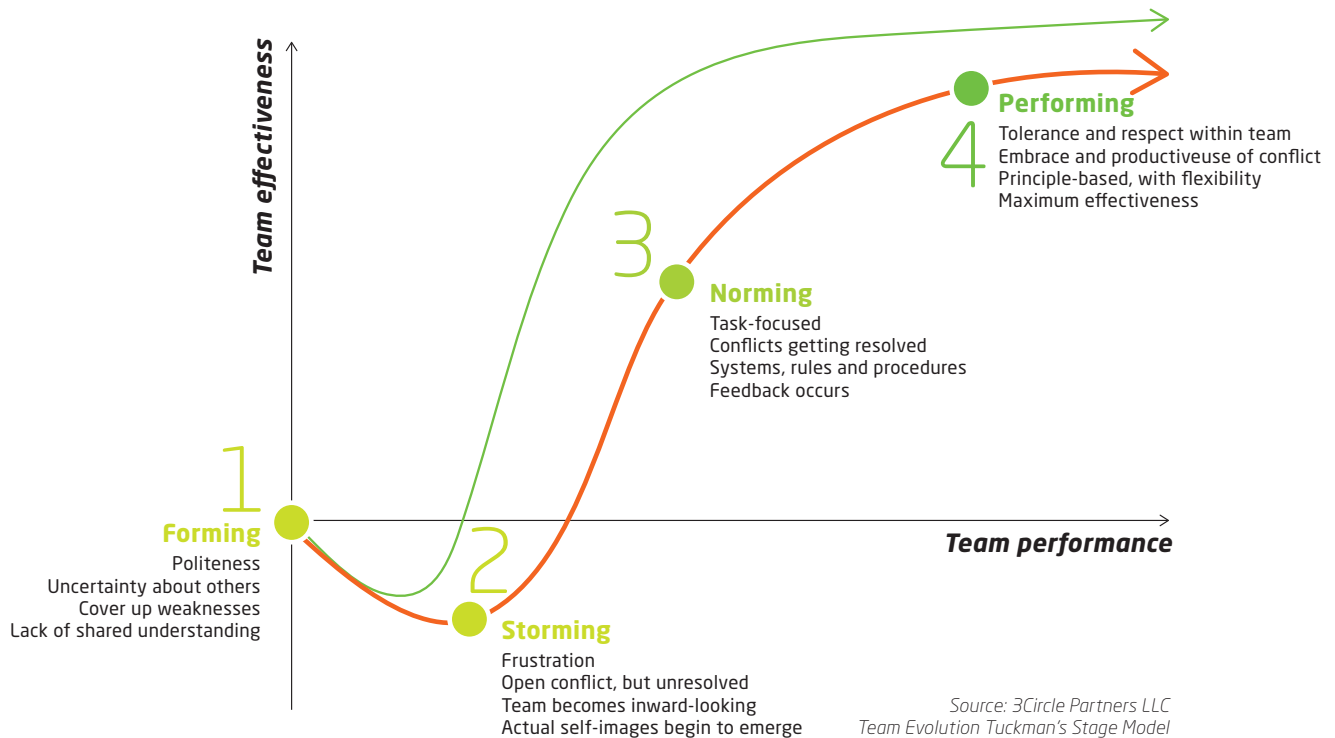
- Group members learn about each other and the task at hand.
- Indicators of this stage might include: unclear objectives, uninvolved members, uncommitted members, confusion, low morale, hidden feelings and poor listening.

- As group members continue to work, they will engage each other in arguments about the structure of the group. These arguments are often significantly emotional and illustrate a struggle for status in the group.
- These activities mark the storming phase: lack of cohesion, subjectivity, hidden agendas, conflict, confrontation, volatility, resentment, anger, inconsistency and failure.

- Group members establish implicit or explicit rules about how they will achieve their goal.
- They address the types of communication that will or will not help with the task.
- Indicators include: questioning performance, reviewing/clarifying objectives, changing/confirming roles, opening risky issues, assertiveness, listening, testing new ground, and identifying strengths and weaknesses.

- The group reaches a conclusion and implement the solution to their issue.
- Indicators include: creativity, initiative, flexibility, open relationships, pride, concern for people, learning, confidence, high morale and success.

When using Tuckman's model for high-performing teams, it is necessary to look at what is imperative for a team to become elite. Looking at the diagram below, the red line indicates development of a team, whereas the green line represents an elite team's accelerated performance. One of the main tasks of a leader of a high-performing team is to shorten the Storming phase and to prolong the Performing stage.



Below are some pre-requisites that need to present at each stage in order for this to occur, using our Elite Team Framework as a guide.

Forming → **Storming** → **Norming** → **Performing**

- | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader as "co-ordinator". • Purposefully pick the team. • Establish clear and achievable goals. • Clearly articulate individuals' roles and responsibilities. • Assist in creating a shared purpose. • Create a shared team mental model. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader as "coach". • Establish processes and structures. • Build trust and good relationships between team members. • Resolve conflicts swiftly if they occur and leverage diversity. • Learn about different work styles and strengths in order to optimise talent. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leader as "empowerer". • Provide continuous feedback. • Foster a sense of shared commitment and joint accountability. • Allow for the transfer of leadership. • Set time aside for planning and engaging the team. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage a focus on delivery. • Delegate tasks and empower individuals. • Celebrate successes. |
|--|--|--|---|

New World of Work and Elite Teams

In the new world of work, there is an increase in the presence of virtual teams. This is due to the gig economy as well as the sophistication of technology that can connect people beyond borders. In a 2015 Gallup study, 84% of people work in virtual teams at least part of the time. Their research showed that the average person in complex organisations is a member of four virtual teams at any one time.

Virtual teams create different kinds of distance: physical and emotional. Distance affects how people perceive others. It creates a sense of “social distance” with a perception of an “us versus them” mentality. There is a lack of shared identity.

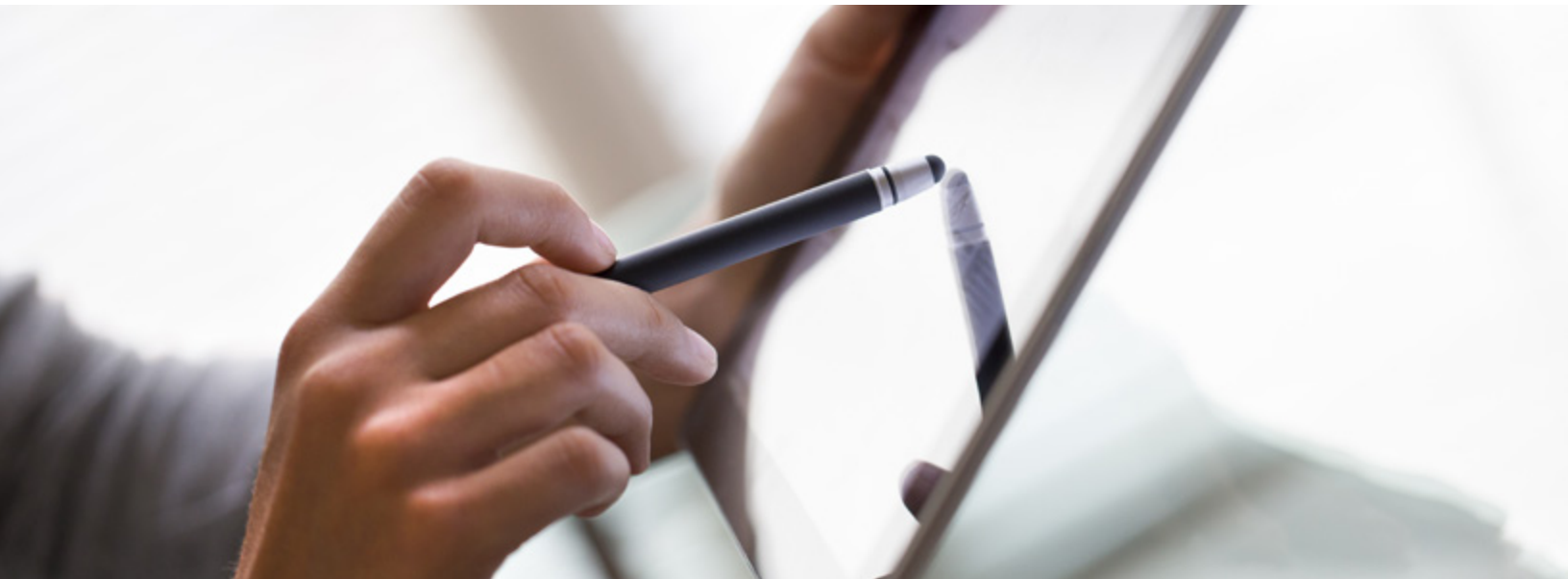
Distance also affects what you know about people. Team members do not know what knowledge the other team members hold. A shared sense of context – a shared understanding of not only what you do but how you do it and why – is a key driver of your ability to coordinate and collaborate.

Both unshared identities and context have been shown to be strong drivers of task-based conflict. However, the same Gallup

study also found that well managed virtual teams can be up to 40% more productive than co-located teams. Although, they do require new skills and ways of working to be successful.

A virtual team will often struggle with Tuckman’s previously described stages due to distance, however, it the manager’s job to assist the team in adapting, in order to create a high-performing team.

The table on the following page discusses the different challenges faced by virtual teams at each stage and potential ways of overcoming them.



Challenges facing Virtual Teams

Forming

Fewer opportunities for informal work- and non-work-related conversations; risk of making erroneous stereotypes in the absence of complete information; trust is lower and more difficult to develop.

Storming

Reliance on less rich communication channels may exacerbate conflicts by provoking misunderstandings; ease of withdrawing behaviours; diversity of work contexts.

Norming

Difficulty in developing norms around modes of communication, speed and frequency of responding.

Performing

Vulnerability to competing pressures from local assignments, frustrations over loafing or non-committed teammates and communication discontinuities due to asynchronous communication.

Potential Solutions

Set specific times purely for teams to get to know each other over a shared video digital platform; ensure the project requirements are very clearly defined.

Request and accept feedback throughout the team, define rules of engagement, such as agreeing on mutual times to discuss things as a group.

Assist in creating a written document that contains all the group norms (modes of communication, speed and frequency of responding).

In order to ensure that team members share a common focus and communicate effectively, schedule regular check-ins where team members have to communicate status updates of how far they are.



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Our Methodology

We follow a phased approach in the development and implementation of tailored solutions aimed at the individual, team and/ or organisational level. All our solutions are supported by integrated change management, effective programme delivery and comprehensive benefits tracking.

6. Embed

Develop and agree on mechanisms to maintain the momentum created.

1. Initiate

Understand the client context, opportunities and challenges.

5. Implement

Utilise proprietary processes and tools and execute activities according to agreed timelines and standards.

2. Define

Co-create and articulate the desired end-goal with associated measurable results.

4. Design

Co-create tailored solutions aimed at moving the individual, team and/ or organisation towards the desired end-goal/s.

3. Analyse

Establish a baseline with our proprietary diagnostic tools and processes.



Change Management: Develop and implement targeted change, communication and engagement initiatives to facilitate the required change and transformation.

Programme Delivery: Adhere to agreed programme governance to ensure successful project delivery, both within time and budget.

Benefits Tracking: Perform constant monitoring of agreed measurable indicators to ensure expectations are met.



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