# BUILDING HIGH PERFORMING AGILE TEAMS

## TOM HOYLAND

SKY BETTING & GAMING'S
AGILE/DEVOPS LEAD

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# INTRODUCTION

Eight North West CTO's joined us on Friday 25th September to discuss and elaborate on how to build high performing agile teams, lead by Agile and DevOps Delivery Lead, Tom Hoyland who shared his expertise in building, coaching and leading multiple delivery teams, complex programmes and suppliers across the private and public sectors to success, within rapidly changing environments. He has a proven track record of transforming product and service delivery through clear, authentic leadership, mentoring and cutting-edge approaches including digital, agile and DevOps.

### During the session Tom and our panel covered topics including:

- What makes a High Performing Team?
- The Importance of Being 'Data Driven and People Led'
- Calms Framework in Teams
- Scalability
- Introducing Slack into Delivery Teams

## WITH THANKS TO:

### TOM HOYLAND
### SKY BETTING & GAMING'S AGILE/DEVOPS LEAD

In addition to this whitepaper, you can also listen to our Trusted Tech Talks Product Podcast with Tom, who builds on initial ideas explored in the roundtable session. Contact Riana for more info on what platforms you can listen in on.

# WHAT IS A HIGH PERFORMING TEAM?

High performing teams don't have to be Agile. Agile just tends to get nestled in there. This is because an Agile mindset often brings a high performing culture, and the engrained investment in inspection and adaptation means teams quickly find ways to improve how they operate to better meet user or business needs. But a high performing team and a high performing agile team, both share the same core foundations:

## STABLE AND CONSISTENT

High Performing teams have stability and consistency in operation and approach. Events will always happen that are unexpected, but a team should be robust enough to be able to deal with any event. Every reaction to a past event should be understood, assessed and reviewed to improve performance, consistency, and allow better practice and preparation for the next occurrence. This preparation means that a team's response becomes more consistent, stable and capable of dealing with even the most infrequent and unique events. But stability and consistency can only truly be achieved if a team stays together for a long period of time, as this allows a team to bond and develop sustainable relationships. .

## SUSTAINABLY PACED

A sustainable pace doesn't mean sedentary, it means that a team can make progress at a healthy pace that avoids burnout and promotes collaboration. To reach this state, leaders should be aware of a team's optimal performance, conscious of warning signals, but be unafraid to exercise a team to create resilience and develop pace. A high performing team should be able to sprint when needed and drop down to a jog as required. It's therefore essential that leaders create an environment where this is possible, through effective capacity planning to provide stability, but with a foundation of psychological safety. Together these things create a safe space for reflection and improvement, where everybody feels comfortable to provide suggestions, ideas, and feedback, but continue to deliver against business objectives.

## CONSTANT STATE OF READINESS

High performing teams have robust psychology, but they can't always operate on 'full power' back to back deliveries, as this eventually leads to burnout, and attrition. Therefore, leaders should ensure enough room and flexibility exists within roadmaps so that when new needs emerge, teams can accommodate these. This can be achieved by introducing slack into delivery pipelines to allow time for decompression between projects and allow innovation. This provides flexibility, enabling teams to remain nimble, capable of responding to late changes and jumping on new opportunities.

## DATA DRIVEN, PEOPLE LED

Data is a fundamental part of understanding how teams are operating and essential in making informed, effective decisions to improve performance. Data can come in the form of:

- KPIS
- Monitoring
- Observability
- Metrics
- OKR's

It can be easy to fall into the trap of trying to monitor every team data point all of the time, but really valuable reporting comes from the team themselves. An example of this, might be asking

> "what signals did we see when we were in this scenario and how did we respond?"

Understanding how a team is operating and how they cope with unexpected situations can be used as a key indicator in process improvement plans. But data doesn't make changes, people make changes, so team input and guidance are critical to evolving and improving processes.

Good teams are data driven. Data is essential, not in the form of vanity metrics, but in the form of actionable metrics. These key metrics will be different, depending on the company, industry, product, or project and it's therefore important to establish what your key metrics should be in advance. Leaders and practitioners need to ask themselves how important or relevant certain metrics are, and not be afraid to discard these if they are no longer relevant.

Teams shouldn't be afraid to comment on or disagree with data, or correct a narrative – after all they're the ones who are the closest to the work. It's therefore essential that leaders work closely with teams and build a learning culture to explore and deep dive into signals and determine which of these are the most important. Better teams are driven by better data, and improvement must be people led.

> People, not data, have insights into how things can improve.

## UNDERSTANDING TEAM MATURITY

When building and scaling teams, it's important to identify where they are in their journey and what kind of support they need. Do you need to be teaching, advising, or coaching? If you get this wrong, there can be miscommunications, a lack of cohesiveness, and delivery consequences.

When you bring everyone together for the first time, it's a great idea to start from the beginning and go back to the basics of agile delivery to establish the team, the process, and the pipeline. But the pipeline is made up of more than just the technology, it's about the constraints, experiences, and knowledge too (i.e. the people). This is why organisation and the right leadership approach is key to high performing teams and great delivery, even if these evolve as a team does.

## CALMS FRAMEWORK IN TEAMS

The CALMS framework is great for teams. It helps to frame what you're doing and how you'll work together to get there. It consists of; Culture, Automation, Lean systems thinking, Metrics and Monitoring, and Sharing.

## CULTURE

A strong culture makes a team more resilient and should encourage transparency, inspection, and adaptation. It's key to make everything visible to the whole team as this helps to drive better relationships and cohesiveness.

When going into a new team, a leader should understand what that teams silent and implicit rules, values, and behaviours are, as well as considering what the consequences of breaking those rules are. To maintain this open culture, teams should be encouraged to constantly reflect, listen to each other, and ask questions, but hold each other to account.

## AUTOMATION

Many teams see automation as a priority and end up optimising prematurely, so it's fundamental to know when and where to automate. Whilst the focus of automation changes from business to business, advice suggests that teams should avoid automating pipelines prematurely as these are often still evolving. Instead, teams should focus on automating learning first and defer automating delivery pipelines until the last responsible moment. Learn fast and automate last.

## LEAN

Quality is key to the lean conversation, but teams can sometime obsess over building high quality into every component or feature, even though quality can be relative to context. It's entirely permissible for teams to release products at a low level of quality if it serves a learning goal but are prepared for the consequences of that decision. The most important consideration here is to make sure your level of quality is consistent, sustainable, and effective throughout your pipeline.

But remain conscious of early optimisation and when to apply lean approaches. Highly effective teams 'lean out learning', but also 'slacken delivery' to achieve rapid learning but with a constant state of readiness.

# METRICS & MONITORING

Remember to find the right metrics for your journey and for where a team is right now (i.e. talking about 'outcome' metrics at the start of a journey can sometimes be unhelpful).

Metrics can help a team understand what they need to alter in order to improve product delivery or process, which is why it is always important to keep discovering better metrics by creating an environment where questions are encouraged, and better measures are found.

Remember though, the 'exhaust isn't the engine'. If you take a car for an MOT, the exhaust gives an idea of what's going on in the engine, but not what is happening in the engine. The same can be said for teams and metrics. Metrics provide a rough idea of what has gone on in the team but doesn't explain the exact behaviours or events that happened within that team.

You could use a model, like in Image 1, to look at different metrics and outcomes. After an event, some of the metrics below might be able to provide information on how that event can be recreated or avoided moving forwards. But it's the people within a team can implement new ideas, processes, and ways of working to influence change in outcome. Arguably, the most important performance metric is happiness, or the health of a team, as without them, a state of sustainable delivery cannot be achieved.



**Tom Hoyland, 2020**
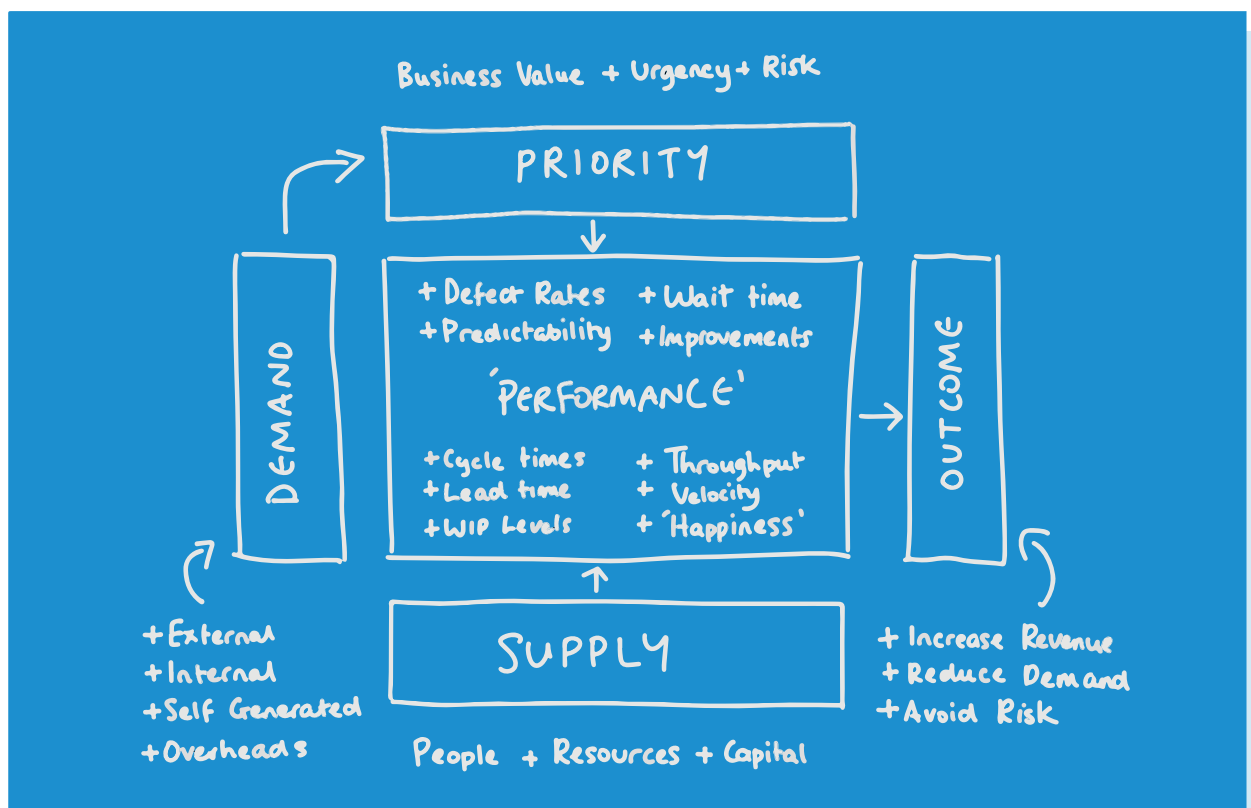
## SHARING & COLLABORATION

It's often quoted that "Feature teams win every time", but this is not necessarily the case. A more appropriate phrase might be "Domain teams win every time." This is because Feature teams often come together and then disband, and as previously discussed high performing teams stay together, get to know their customer, optimise the customer journey and grow to meet demands. By staying together over a long period of time and owning domains (by embracing concepts such as Domain Driven Design), team members develop empathy with customers, really gain understandings of user needs, which means that they can meet those needs more efficiently and effectively.

Teams are complex systems, they are not simple or predictable. And that's because at their core, they are
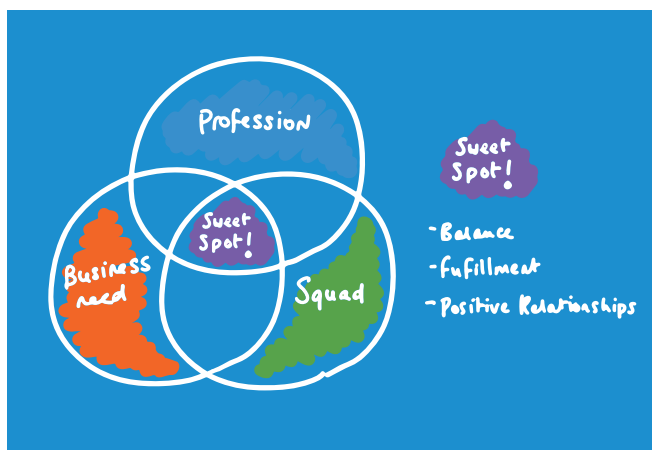


human, not machine, and are therefore influenced by many factors and interactions which will impact them in ways we cannot predict. It's therefore essential that we accept and support this reality but help individuals within teams reach a state of balance between the different constraints and pulls they face in a modern product delivery environment, as illustrated in Image 2.

When individuals and teams are in a state of balance, they often experience greater fulfilment, more positive relationships whilst also meeting business needs.

**Tom Hoyland, 2020**

## WRAPPING UP

In order to create high performing, scalable teams it's important to consider what metrics drive your business now and will do tomorrow – and select these very carefully.

Remain conscious of the metrics you publish, as these not only articulate the impact of your business and whether it's achieving its goals, but also change the behaviours of your teams, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Keep reflecting on your journey and the journey of your teams, and provide them with the right environments to grow, develop and deliver product experiences, based on where they are. Avoid forcing maturity or imposing ways of working, metrics and process. Instead let teams lead these changes, as when they do the changes will stick.

But never take your eye off the pipeline. Know and understand how your team is operating at all times and whether they feel valued and rewarded for their contributions.

Remember, it's the humans that make a team what it is now and what it can be in the future, and if you don't nurture a team, and it's relationships then eventually this will have an impact on the products you create and the customers that use them.

# CONTACT US

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