Building High-Performing Product Teams in a Changing Landscape

Champion. Create. Cultivate. Build better product teams with the 3Pillar Global performance playbook.

SEJAL AMIN CHIEF TECHNOLOGY OFFICER, SHUTTERSTOCK

In an era of rapid technological advancements, shifting market demands and a growing emphasis on remote and distributed workforces, the need for high-performing product teams has become paramount. As Chief Technology Officer of Shutterstock, I have witnessed firsthand the incredible value that such teams bring to an organization.

The traditional approach to team building and management no longer guarantees success. We find ourselves in a world where adaptability, agility and resilience are key attributes for thriving in the face of constant change.

This report explores strategies designed to address the challenges that many modern organizations encounter when building high-performing product teams. It delves into the nuances of team dynamics, talent acquisition and retention, leadership styles and the role of

technology in optimizing team performance. By examining these key elements, leaders and practitioners can be equipped with actionable insights to foster high performance, regardless of the variables in the workplace environment.

High-performing product teams are not the result of chance or luck. By understanding a few core principles and applying the recommended approaches contained in this paper, organizations can cultivate an environment that empowers

individuals, encourages collaboration and fosters innovation, ultimately leading to exceptional product outcomes.

With that, I am thrilled to share this report with you, knowing that its contents have the potential to spark transformative change within your organizations and beyond.

Together, let us navigate this changing workplace landscape with confidence and empower our teams to reach new heights of excellence.

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DESIGNING **THE FUTURE OF WORK** FOR PRODUCT TEAMS

In the wake of the pandemic, digital product development leaders have been grappling with how to effectively navigate remote and hybrid work environments. Over the last few years, there has been a lot written on this topic, illustrating its importance to leaders across all functions. However, we at 3Pillar Global feel the real issue has been misidentified.

Yes, there are novel challenges to overcome in this new era of work, but the core issue has been and should remain the same: how do leaders build high-performing teams? More than ever, we need to cultivate top-performing teams that can thrive even when work location and time are highly variable.

Since 3Pillar's founding in 2006, we've become adept at building high-performing product development teams. After all, the foundational premise of our organization includes the belief that high-performing product teams elevate individual contributions from team members and, ultimately, drive business results.

Currently, 3Pillar has over 200 product teams across nine countries and six time zones, working with clients across a myriad of specialities. Most firms providing software outsourcing services focus exclusively on the talent of individuals, but 3Pillar has consistently emphasized that value comes not just from the skill of individual workers but also cross-functional team members collaborating on a business opportunity.

Having honed our expertise in building high-performing teams across diverse locations and time zones, we believe the focus should shift from the in-person vs. remote debate to the core principles that drive team success.

More than ever, we need to cultivate top-performing teams that can thrive even when work location and time are highly variable.

Building product teams for the future necessitates both structural and cultural shifts, compelling leaders to rethink traditional management practices. To address this need, we have identified three key focus areas that can help digital product leaders build teams that thrive in a changing workplace landscape:

1 Setting the foundation for high-performing teams through strong leadership and alignment

2 Building high-performing teams by hiring and cultivating the 'right' team members

3 Fostering a work environment where high-performing teams can flourish

Adapting current strategies and practices to the evolving work landscape is essential for digital product teams. By prioritizing these three key areas, leaders can more successfully build high-performing teams that excel in this ever-changing environment.

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SETTING THE FOUNDATION FOR HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS THROUGH STRONG **LEADERSHIP AND ALIGNMENT**

6 Build unified purpose through an aligned product vision and strategy

7 Build a culture of solving customer pains while driving business outcomes

9 Celebrate diversity of thought while building lasting trust and human connection

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As a leader, your role goes beyond mere task management; it is the bedrock of exceptional team performance. Equipping your teams with the essential ingredients for success is paramount. **High-performing teams thrive on shared purpose and unity among members, with aligned objectives, values and goals and supported by an environment where diverse perspectives are embraced.** By fostering a unified purpose, leaders create space where collaboration, communication, motivation, engagement and understanding flourish. Leaders who establish this strong sense of purpose position themselves to drive innovation, productivity and growth. Embracing these fundamental components allows them to create an environment where excellence becomes the norm, empowering teams to achieve extraordinary results.

BUILD UNIFIED PURPOSE THROUGH AN ALIGNED PRODUCT VISION AND STRATEGY

As a product leader, your first critical responsibility is to align with the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) on the organization's product vision and strategy. This foundational step sets the stage for cultivating high-performing product teams, as it establishes a shared purpose and aligns team objectives with the broader organizational goals. Collaborating closely with the ELT ensures that your teams' efforts resonate with the company's long-term vision, helping them understand their crucial role in driving the organization's success.

However, as any product development leader knows, in the realm of digital products, continuous evolution is a must, and that entails continuous planning. Understanding the market's demands, including the target audience's pain points and desired features, becomes the cornerstone for product development.

As a product leader, it should go without saying (although you'd be surprised by how often we see that it doesn't!), you must always be taking in new information and using that information to adjust plans in a way that is in consonance with product vision and strategy. This adherence to organizational direction cements a product development team's ability to ensure they are unified in a common pursuit of overarching objectives and goals.

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BUILD A CULTURE OF SOLVING CUSTOMER PAINS WHILE DRIVING BUSINESS OUTCOMES

If you look at many product development teams today, you will notice a lack of curiosity, ownership and commitment to what they are building. It's a repetitive process of pulling a ticket, writing code in a vacuum, checking it in and repeat. That's not a winning formula for success.

Instead of this hamster wheel of mindless product development and focus on "tickets" (or their equivalents), high-performing product teams need to be curious and motivated to solve customer challenges while also understanding how their work generates business impact and outcomes. This shifts the focus from "tickets" to the impact of the shipped product.

Something deeply embedded in the philosophy and culture of 3Pillar is focusing incessantly on the *why* and not just the *what*. We call it the Product Mindset. This view was codified in the book *The Product Mindset: Succeed in the Digital Economy by Changing the Way Your Organization Thinks*, written by 3Pillar's Founder David Dewolf and our then-VP of Product Strategy and Design Jessica Hall. As they wrote,

" The Product Mindset cannot develop if teams don't understand the big picture, but lack of context is a common problem—it's not unusual for each member of a team to have a very narrow view of the product in development. They rarely understand exactly what it is they are building, let alone why they are building it.

Understanding context requires that teams understand this "why"—that they have a clear ultimate objective in mind—but that's only half the battle. The other key comes from understanding the market and the customer. Only when product teams understand where business outcome and customer outcome meet can a company build a profitable product, not merely an IT asset.[1] "

Building teams that know and care about the problems you are trying to solve is partly about hiring team members with the disposition to care and partly about organizing teams in a way that they can connect with the problems they are seeking to solve.

As Viral Kadakia, VP of Product at Indeed, notes, "building an organizational structure that connects individuals to the users of the product, that puts those individuals' work in context, that demonstrates their impact on the company's success, and that helps them measure their success in a quantifiable way, can often lead to benefits similar to those of a mission-based company."[2] Kadakia stresses the importance of answering the following:

AUDIENCE: Who am I building the product for?

PURPOSE: Why does the product that I'm building matter to this audience?

IMPACT: How does what I build impact the company's mission?

OUTCOME: How am I doing on that mission?

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Key focus areas for leaders to build teams that **geniunely care about solving customer problems** and making a business impact:

FOSTER A CULTURE OF CURIOSITY

PROVIDE CONTEXT AND TRANSPARENCY

EMPOWER OWNERSHIP AND AUTONOMY

FOSTER CROSS-FUNCTIONAL COLLABORATION

Encourage teams to delve into the underlying reasons driving their tasks. Curiosity fuels innovation and empowers teams to seek superior solutions. Promote open dialogue, knowledge sharing and experimentation within your teams to nurture a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

Context helps teams understand the problems they are addressing and how their solutions align with larger goals. Leverage customer feedback, user research, videos and market analysis to identify and empathize with customer needs.

Grant team members a sense of ownership and autonomy over their work. Encourage them to make decisions and be accountable for the outcomes they drive. When individuals feel empowered, they invest wholeheartedly in understanding their work's impact and strive for excellence.

Break down silos and promote collaboration across different roles and disciplines. Encouraging diverse perspectives enriches problem-solving, fosters a broader product understanding and creates a shared sense of responsibility among team members.

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CELEBRATE DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT WHILE BUILDING LASTING TRUST AND HUMAN CONNECTION

In addition to instilling a sense of ownership and curiosity amongst team members, it is imperative for product leaders to foster an environment where diverse thinking, opinions and experience are celebrated, as diverse perspectives serve as the core foundation for teams focused on innovation.

Product team leaders should leverage team rituals and debates to highlight and praise unique ideas and hypotheses even if they are later rejected. This will build trust and encourage individuals to voice their ideas even if they aren't sure how they will be received, and it will condition the team to appreciate divergent thinking. By creating a culture of trust where all ideas are valued and appreciated, team members will feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions, which can lead to more innovative and effective solutions. The absence of this trust dynamic often poses a significant threat to progress and success.

Not only does trust yield tangible benefits for both the financial performance of an organization and the overall well-being of its employees, it also acts as a catalyst for productivity. Google found that "teams that index the highest on trust and psychological safety are 40% more productive than those who are low on these areas."[3]

Here are several techniques leaders can use to build trust.

Intentionally build relationships

Sometimes all that is needed is simply chitchat. Research from Michael Morris, Janice Nadler, Terri Kurtzberg and Leigh Thompson shows that personal conversations lead to greater rapport and stronger trust.[4] Hybrid work unintentionally removes some of the informal interactions that help build trust, so leaders have to deliberately work to make them part of their culture.

Managers should hold at least one meaningful conversation per week between themselves and each employee. Effective team leaders ensure that team members feel heard, especially if they disagree with a decision. Regular check-ins can improve employee engagement

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and help foster a stronger sense of trust and collaboration between managers and their team members.

Actively foster employee engagement

Many remote teams lack the sense of community and connection that is necessary to foster collaboration and creativity. Recent research from Gallup found only 32% of workers feel engaged with their work. Since the start of the pandemic, the share of workers "actively disengaged" has also risen. The recent decline in engagement follows a decade of rising employee engagement.[5]

Perhaps most alarming, younger workers are experiencing a bigger dip in engagement than older workers. Fewer Gen Zers and young millennials (those under the age of 35) feel they have someone at work

who encourages their development and they also feel they have fewer opportunities to learn and grow.

To bridge this gap, leaders need to prioritize creating a culture of trust and transparency that encourages open communication and collaboration. This can be as simple as scheduling regular one-on-ones or taking the time to recognize their accomplishments. It might involve team-building activities that bring people together. Additionally, consider providing opportunities for teams to learn and grow, such as

offering training or mentoring programs. This will not only enhance their skills but also demonstrate your investment in their professional development.

By prioritizing the human connection, you will create a more positive work environment that will ultimately lead to higher engagement and productivity. Remember, the more engaged your team is, the more likely they are to be creative and innovative, which will ultimately benefit everyone in the long run.

By prioritizing the human connection, you will create a more positive work environment that will ultimately lead to higher engagement and productivity.

Gallup's research finds the engagement elements that declined the most from the pre-pandemic record-high engagement ratio in 2019 to 2022 were:

1. Clarity of expectations

2. Connection to the mission or purpose of the company

3. Opportunities to learn and grow

4. Feeling cared about at work

5. Opportunities to do what employees do best
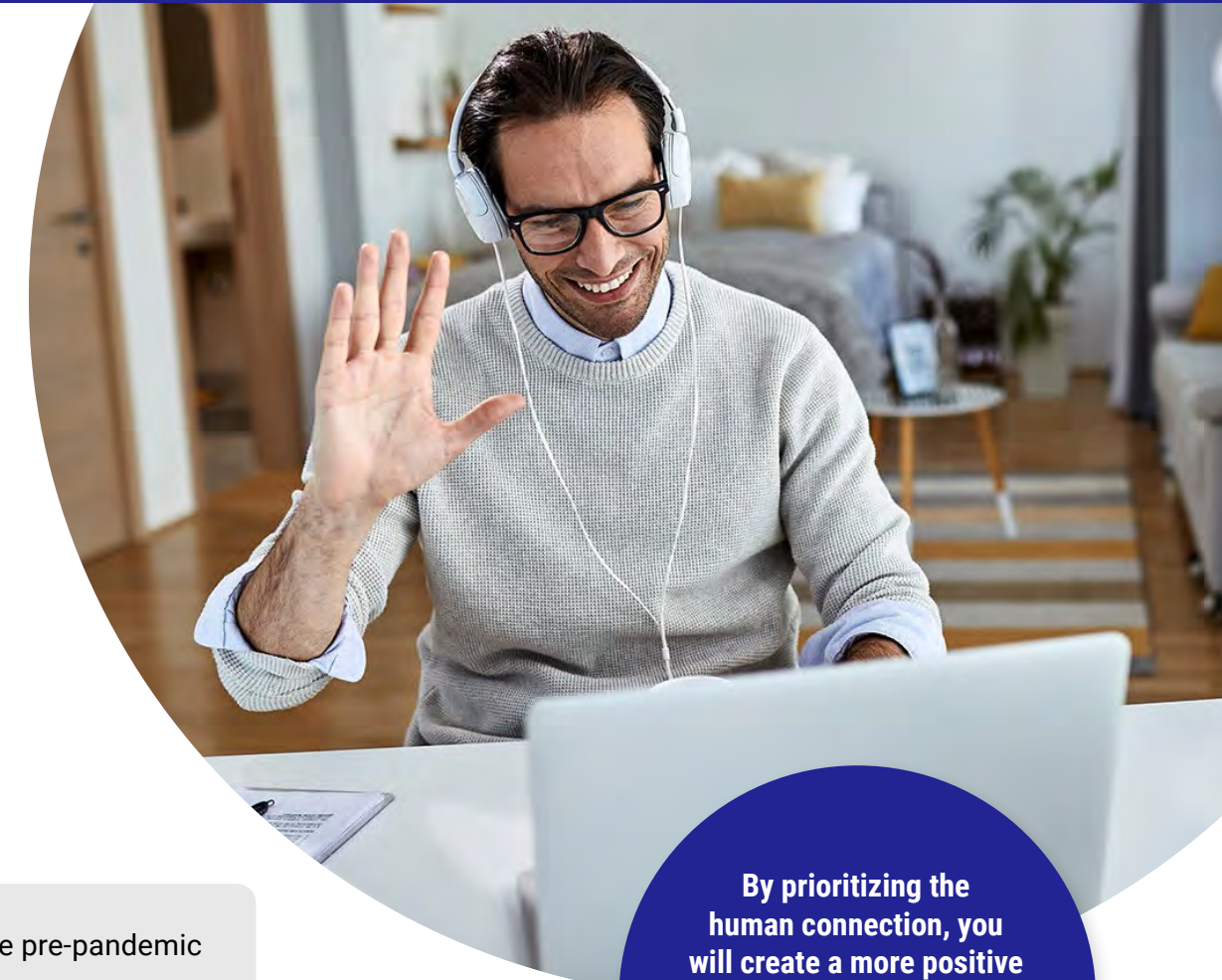
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Support your team by reducing obstacles

Many of the obstacles for a team's work can come from outside the team. To clear the path, effective team leaders need to look beyond just their team and build bridges with other leaders across the organization. This involves understanding the dependencies that connect and sometimes tangle different teams.

Three common roadblocks stand out:

1. Upstream dependencies

Upstream dependencies involve weaknesses or gaps in the team's inputs or reliance on another team, such as infrastructure requirements like a new server. When your team relies on another team for something critical, delays from that team can stall your progress.

Instead of waiting passively, reach out to the other team leader. Offer to help manage their workload during peak times, creating a win-win situation. Your team gains control and stays on track, and the upstream team gets support when they need it the most.

2. Downstream dependencies

In product development, compliance checks, extra verifications, or release management teams can cause bottlenecks. While approaches like "shift left" and DevOps aim to streamline these processes, true progress requires trust and collaboration. Show the leaders responsible for these checks your

team shares their commitment to quality and security. This partnership can work wonders to overcome dependencies and push deadlines forward.

3. Disruptions

Disruptions are the most subtle and self-destructive for high-performing teams. While agile methodologies are often criticized for being unstructured, agile is all about a structured approach to change.

That said, agile as ritualized change management only works if everyone respects it. Meaning, constant interruptions during this time can frustrate the team and stakeholders,

> Team leaders must forge relationships with peers to drive systemic solutions, which demands an understanding of team dependencies.

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impacting task completion, quality and thoughtfulness. Constant interruptions during these critical periods sabotage progress, quality and team morale. As Cal Newport, author of *Deep Work:* Rules for

Focused Success in a Distracted World[6], found, switching from one task to another has real and measurable costs. On average, it takes 10 to 20 minutes to fully switch from one task to the next. Frequent disruptions undermine not only completion of tasks, but the level of quality and thoughtfulness the person is able to put into it. As a leader, working with your team to agree on "deep work"

periods when they are not expected to be on any email or instant messaging tools can be transformative to their productivity. If you can protect three hours a day, five days a week for deep work, you'd be amazed at the productivity and quality gains, especially as team members improve their own deep work habits. In our experience, we've found that stakeholders tend to adjust their expectations for team access when we effectively communicate the potential costs of disruptions.

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Rebuild the onboarding process

Developing human connections at work often begins on day one with the onboarding process. With the rise of different work modalities, the onboarding process needs to be rethought to accommodate new organizational structures.

Researchers at Microsoft, the Haas School of Business and the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy analyzed the communication practices of over 60,000 Microsoft employees. They found that shifting to firm-wide remote work during the pandemic caused collaboration networks to become more heavily siloed and include fewer ties across business units. The collaboration networks they examined also became more static, adding and removing fewer individuals.[7] These results are especially concerning for teams that are growing because it

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suggests remote work can inhibit new members from being fully integrated into the organization's collaborative networks.

In the past, organizations would onboard new employees with a number of human-centric activities like company-wide bagels in the morning or a series of welcome lunches with key team members. Relevant co-workers might stop by a new employee's desk to greet them and welcome them to the organization. Now, onboarding for many organizations consists of sending new employees a gift package that includes a company t-shirt and their laptop. Furthermore,

some companies are bypassing cross-functional onboarding cohorts, and opting for onboarding new employees directly with their core team, so they can immediately jump in and start interacting.

In this instance, the challenge for leaders is how to plug new employees into the broader organization, including getting them acclimated to the company culture, values and collaborative networks. It's critical for leaders of new employees to model desired behaviors and actively participate in initiatives aimed at developing human connections. Be accessible, be transparent and demonstrate the

importance of building relationships within the organization.

As part of our onboarding experience at 3Pillar, we teach both the Product Mindset and our Core Beliefs. Both are taught workshop style so that new employees get to work through challenging situations and think about how they would apply the principles. Our practice leaders meet with new team members and share how to get involved in their respective practice and communities, as well as include them in practice-specific communication channels. Lastly, team leaders help new team members understand team norms and client facets. This gives team members several options for who to turn to for coaching or guidance when they are uncertain about a certain situation.

Leaders must actively plug new employees into the organization's culture, values, and collaborative networks. Modelling desired behaviors and fostering human connections are critical aspects of onboarding in the remote work era.

Be accessible, be transparent and demonstrate the importance of building relationships within the organization.

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BUILD HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS BY HIRING AND CULTIVATING THE 'RIGHT' TEAM MEMBERS

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In a post-pandemic world, many companies have seen remote work as an opportunity to widen the geographic boundaries of their recruitment and hire the most talented people they can find regardless of their location. They search for specific technical skill sets over any other attribute. But building high-performing product teams — that is, teams that create value for customers and benefits for the business — requires much more.

Too often, managers want to build teams of superstars, and leaders set out to assemble dream teams of the most skilled individual workers they can find. Instead, organizations need to focus on building properly blended teams.

As Mike Hahn, SVP of Product Development at 3Pillar Global, notes, "when you build engineering teams, you don't need a team of all superstars. You need a properly blended team. You need a team that is competent in the skill sets needed for the project. And then it's incumbent on leaders to deliver them clarity, so they can do their job. Sometimes, companies will try to cover their bad product planning by thinking they can just build a team of superstars. So now your pool of available people becomes smaller and smaller as many other organizations are trying to hire those same people."

CHARACTERISTICS OF A
PROPERLY BLENDED PRODUCT TEAM

Instead of evaluating potential employees on their individual skill sets and experience, leaders need to evaluate employees on their ability to positively contribute to well-formed teams. Here are a few characteristics leaders should focus on when building and leading high-performing product teams:

Hire missionaries, not mercenaries

Seek differentiated problem solvers

Find independent decision makers who are also strong team collaborators

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HIRE MISSIONARIES, NOT MERCENARIES

Famed venture capitalist John Doerr often distinguished between companies led by mercenaries and ones led by missionaries.[8] Doerr pointed out that there are stark differences between missionary employees and mercenary employees.

Mercenaries are driven by paranoia, think opportunistically and focus on their competitors and financial statements. On the other hand, missionaries are driven by passion, think strategically and focus on their customers and value statements. Missionaries also take a long-term approach and prioritize mentoring and coaching their teams, while mercenaries are more concerned with their own personal rewards and entitlements.

Marty Cagan propagated this concept further. He noted, "teams of missionaries are engaged, motivated, have a deep understanding of the business context, and tangible empathy for the customer. Teams of mercenaries feel no real sense of empowerment or accountability, no passion for the problem to be solved, and little real connection with the actual users and customers."[9] Over the long run, product teams made up of missionaries will be more successful and have greater impact on results than teams of mercenaries.

Identifying missionaries in your recruiting process

Building product teams of missionaries in the sense that Doerr and Cagan are referring to must be an explicit focal point in your hiring process. Too often, organizations hire primarily for current levels of technical skill. One of the key traits of a missionary-style employee is a strong desire to be part of something greater than themselves. Mercenaries often want to highlight what they can do, while missionaries will highlight how they want to build something that matters as well as make a meaningful contribution.

Teams of missionaries are engaged, motivated, have a deep understanding of the business context, and tangible empathy for the customer. Teams of mercenaries feel no real sense of empowerment or accountability, no passion for the problem to be solved, and little real connection with the actual users and customers.

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Successful digital product teams need individuals who not only are experts on the product but also have a deep understanding of the target customers in the market.

At 3Pillar, we have found the following interview question helpful. We often ask this before talking about the details of the role: "If your next role is to be a great one for you, what will be true about it?"

This question is open-ended to give you insight into what the candidate values because there is no right or wrong answer. If you don't get clarity from this answer, a follow-up can be, "Why did you get into this profession, and how have your reasons for doing this kind of work changed since then?"

By getting the candidate to talk about how their views on work have changed, they will give away hints of what their intrinsic motivators are. Those intrinsic motivators are exactly where the difference between missionaries and mercenaries reside.

Missionaries offer "tangible empathy for the customer"

Successful digital product teams need individuals who not only are experts on the product but also have a deep understanding of the target customers in the market. Missionaries play a critical role in ensuring that the product being developed meets the needs of those customers and solves their problems uniquely. These individuals might become market experts through their empathy for the customer journey.

Tangible empathy for the customer goes beyond just understanding the customers' needs. Your team also needs to identify which customer problems are worth solving. Missionaries often help the product team prioritize the most important problems to solve, as well as identify which problems customers are willing to pay to solve.

When a team has tangible empathy for the customer, they are able to identify with the customer's struggles, frustrations and desires. They are able to connect with the customer's emotions and understand the impact that a product can have on the customer's life. This emotional connection helps the team develop products that not only are effective but also delight end users.

When a team truly empathizes with the customer, they connect with their struggles, emotions, and desires, shaping products that are not only effective but also delightful to end users, leading to meaningful impact.

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SEEK DIFFERENTIATED PROBLEM SOLVERS

We know that teams of diverse problem solvers outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers.[10] In other words, a person's value on a team depends, in part, on their ability to provide divergent perspectives that improve the collective decision of the team. A great problem solver might not add any incremental value to a team if how they think is no different from how everyone else on the team thinks. We have long known that diverse teams are smarter and more innovative.[11] Diverse teams question assumptions and focus more strongly on facts.

It is very common for hiring practices to have a homogenizing bias. Recruiters work with department heads to understand how to filter for people who will "fit in." Team leaders, who are typically hiring managers, often undervalue differentiated problem solvers in their team composition. When assembling a high-performing product team, you want a creative tension that is also constructive. When evaluating candidates, take stock of the current team composition and consider how a given candidate will impact the team sub-culture.

At 3Pillar, we identify differentiated problem solvers using a scenario-based question that asks candidates to talk through their approach on how they would solve a common problem. This can be very effective at assessing how they think, how they pull in external information and how they collaborate.

FIND INDEPENDENT DECISION MAKERS
WHO ARE ALSO STRONG TEAM COLLABORATORS

To build successful and high-performing teams in a world of flexible work, leaders need to seek out individuals who are highly autonomous but also value collaboration and teamwork. Team members should take ownership of their work and make decisions independently, without constant supervision. However, they also must be able to work together effectively toward common goals. This requires a culture of collaboration and open communication, where team members are able to share ideas and work together to solve complex problems.

Unfortunately, many organizations have historically stressed individual contribution over team competency. In focusing on what it means to be a great employee, many organizations lose sight of what it means to form a great team. Research from the Greenlight Research Institute finds that roughly three out of every four employees feel their teams do not collaboratively engage on the most important business problems facing their organizations.[12] This lack of collaboration can lead to inefficiencies, missed opportunities and, ultimately, decreased team performance.

In interviews at 3Pillar, we commonly use a scenario-based question that asks candidates to walk through their approach of when to make a decision independently and at what point they'd collaborate with others to inform their approach.

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20 Define a flexible
work policy rigidly

21 Setting core and non-core
collaboration hours

22 Strictly prescribe
in-office days

23 Collaboration in a world
of flexible work

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Fostering an environment where high-performing teams can flourish, especially in this new era of remote and hybrid work, requires deliberate effort and a focus on defining new norms. This means creating an environment where people are able to effectively collaborate, innovate and grow. By taking proactive steps to nurture this type of work environment, leaders can help their teams reach their full potential.

Here are a few ways leaders can foster environments conducive to high-performing teams.

Flexible work is a mindset about how teams work, but it should also include specific rules, policies and guidelines in order to equalize expectations and understandings.

DEFINE A **FLEXIBLE WORK POLICY** RIGIDLY

It might sound counter-intuitive to define flexibility in a rigid way, but part of laying the foundations for a high-performing work environment entails crafting new social norms and shared social contracts within your product teams.

Flexibility will be different across different organizations, and potentially across different teams within the same organization. Flexible work is a mindset about how teams work, but it should also include specific rules, policies and guidelines in order to equalize expectations and understandings. Most managers mistakenly focus on where employees work when thinking about building flexible workplaces. But flexible work is less about where you work and more about *when* and *how* you work.

To foster flexibility, leaders must prioritize trust, autonomy and accountability. This means setting clear expectations for productivity, results and deadlines and providing training on how to effectively use technology to collaborate from any location. By balancing structure and flexibility, organizations can create high-performing teams that are productive and engaged.

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TIPS FOR DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL FLEXIBLE WORK POLICY:

UNDERSTAND THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF YOUR EMPLOYEES AND TEAMS. Not everyone works the same way, so it's important to create policies that accommodate a variety of work styles.

PROVIDE TRAINING ON HOW TO EFFECTIVELY USE TECHNOLOGY. This will help employees collaborate and communicate effectively, even when they're not in the same physical space.

SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS AND DEADLINES. This will help employees stay on track and avoid burnout.

CREATE A CULTURE OF TRUST AND ACCOUNTABILITY. This will help employees feel empowered to do their best work, no matter where they are.

SETTING CORE AND NON-CORE COLLABORATION HOURS

One way to ensure flexibility is to define core hours. Core hours are set blocks of time during the day when employees must be available for meetings and/or client calls, with some built-in buffer time to accommodate different working styles and personal commitments. This provides team members with structure while also allowing them to manage their own schedules to best suit their needs.

The mistake many organizations make in defining core work hours is making them too long. Core hours don't need to be seven or eight hours a day. Instead, they might be three or four hours each day. When teams span an array of timezones, it is especially important that this time is well specified.

3Pillar Global teams, for example, are often working across distant time zones that will only allow a narrow window of shared core hours. But these core collaboration hours create a specific, well-defined window for communication. Establishing core hours has ensured a balance between communication and connectedness and the flexibility needed to accomplish deep work. Teams must respect that outside these windows are non-core collaboration hours, and direct messages or texts should be minimized.

THE FUTURE OF WORK

FOCUS #1:
Strong leadership and alignment

FOCUS #2:
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FOCUS #3:
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CLOSING THOUGHTS

FOSTERING A WORK ENVIRONMENT WHERE HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS CAN FLOURISH

STRICTLY PRESCRIBE IN-OFFICE DAYS

How frequently employees should be in the office is a hotly contested topic right now. Employees able to do their work from home report a desire to work from home on average 2.73 days a week. This is higher than the reported employers' plans for permitting work from home of 2.21 days a week, but data also suggest the gap is closing over time with employer plans moving closer to workers' desires.[13] Right now, research suggests hybrid work-from-home schedules are gravitating toward two to three days a week.

In the end, each individual team needs to decide what is the right number of days in the office each week (if any). For some teams, it might be only one day a week.

For others, it could be four days. What is becoming clear is that those days should be the same days each week and they should be the same for everyone on the same team. Depending on your organization, they might even be the same for everyone across the entire company. Hybrid work schedules that result in employees taking a series of Zoom calls from their office will fail to achieve the innovative breakthroughs we need from our teams.

Setting strict office days for employees can help ensure that there's a productive balance between being in the office and working from home. This provides teams enough face-to-face time for collaboration and communication, while still allowing employees to benefit

from the flexibility of remote work. It also allows employees to more easily plan their personal lives and schedule activities around the same days each week.

Ultimately, employers should strive to create a flexible work arrangement that works best for their team members. The right frequency of office visits should be determined by what is most beneficial from an employee engagement and productivity standpoint. Employees should feel empowered to choose the work environment that works best for them, while having a clear and consistent office attendance policy in place. This will help ensure job satisfaction, productivity and trust within any organization.

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COLLABORATION IN A WORLD OF FLEXIBLE WORK

During the pandemic, virtual meetings became a crutch for organizations trying to replicate in-office collaboration. The problem is, in-office collaboration takes many forms, and online meetings together with other digital communication tools try to replicate them all.

Research shows that after the pandemic, remote employees have experienced a 12.9% increase in meetings compared to pre-pandemic levels. These meetings involve 13.5% more attendees but are shorter by about 20%.[14]

As a result of these changes, the time spent in meetings per day has decreased while email activity has risen. The data makes clear that virtual meetings are being

used to replace in-person forms of communication but, in the process, have changed the organic way in which we collaborate. Meetings morphed from collaboration tools to broadcast tools. And at least early on, we likely pulled more people together into the same meeting than we needed to or should have.

In the midst of these changes, research also found that remote workers increased communication with close collaborators by 40% while reducing communication with other colleagues by 10%.[15] This decline resulted in weaker ties at work and is especially concerning because studies have shown the importance these relationships have on innovation.[16, 17]

To address these challenges, leaders should design schedules around which environment is best suited for the specific tasks teams need to accomplish. For example, perhaps teams do more generative and expansive thinking when team members are in person, and use distributed team time for evaluating and deciding which steps to take next once the options have already been decided.

There is significant research that suggests virtual communication can hinder effective communication, especially when it comes to expressing authentic emotions.[18] For example, email recipients often perceive email as a low effort communication choice and find it easy to feign emotions in written correspondence. Unsurprisingly, it is best to use the richest communication medium available

Leaders should tailor schedules to match the optimal environment for specific tasks. In-person collaboration fosters creativity, while distributed teamwork excels in decision-making.

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when sharing authentic emotion.[19] Leaders should carefully choose their communication methods.

The real push for asynchronous communication is ensuring all team members have access to pertinent information and each other. It's important to set clear guidelines for communication and collaboration between product teams. It's essential that team members stay in regular contact with each other, both synchronously (through video/phone calls) and asynchronously (through messaging platforms like Slack or email). By doing so, everyone stays informed and aligned with each other and the rest of the team.

Leaders should use the richest communication medium available when sharing authentic emotion.

Make the physical workplace a high-value environment

Leaders can build trust by protecting team time and the time and attention of employees. One way of doing that is making the physical workplace a value environment. Many organizations have failed to do this over the last three years. Some companies have forced employees back in the office only to have them stuck on Zoom calls all day.

According to research from Microsoft, some 73% of employees report they need a better reason to go into the office than just company expectations. Moreover, the research finds that 84% of employees would be motivated to come to the office by the promise of socializing with coworkers, while 85% would be motivated by rebuilding team bonds. Employees also report that they would go to the office more

frequently if they knew their direct team members or work friends were there.[20]

In other instances, leaders can pull together hybrid teams in person to replicate some of the value that physical workplaces can provide. Lindsay Kloepping is the global head of 3Pillar's product management practice and responsible for setting the direction and standards for some 60 and growing product professionals across six countries who are frequently the only product person on a client engagement. But she still finds ways to bring them together and foster community. She notes, "I want to get teams together at least once a quarter to help strengthen community and cohesion. We will run workshops, but social interactions are also a key goal of these events."

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Throughout this paper, our aim has been to provide practical and actionable suggestions to empower product leaders and managers in making decisions that increase the likelihood of creating high-performing teams.

Since the onset of the pandemic, leaders of digital product teams have been struggling to navigate remote and hybrid work environments. As we emphasized in the introduction, while the focus has often been on the debate between hybrid and remote work, the core issue facing these leaders is their ability to build high-performing teams. Despite the variability of work locations and schedules, leaders must prioritize the cultivation of high-performing teams capable of succeeding in dynamic situations.

This requires focus in three key areas, ensuring you, as a product leader, have set the foundation for high-performance teams by:

1. Building unified purpose and trust within your team and alignment across the organization

2. Creating teams of the right types of people who are committed to their work so that teams are purpose-built and blended to achieve goals and

3. Structuring the work environment to be most effective for your teams.

Digital product teams can achieve high performance through a shared framework of principles, values and practices.

Drawing on our research and extensive experience with remote teaming, we have demonstrated that digital product teams can achieve high performance through a shared framework of principles, values and practices. It is imperative for high-performing product teams to establish these new norms for their work, and we challenge all product leaders to begin this transformative process today.

As Google discovered long before the pandemic, "who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions." Similar to the Agile Manifesto and the methodologies that it spawned, while teams may be given a template to start with, they must be empowered to make changes to team norms as long as they adhere to the values and principles that have been established. The role of the team leader is to guide this process of experimentation and hold a mirror to the team regarding their collective performance, which should be both qualitative and quantitative.

Instead of trying to identify the ideal single policy for all employees, product organizations need to do something that is arguably harder: create this framework of values and principles and teach managers how to leverage it to optimize performance and team member engagement. By building a strong culture that supports this, companies can create a more flexible and resilient workforce that is better equipped to adapt to changing circumstances and thrive in the years ahead.

Stay tuned for future research from 3Pillar Global, which will take a closer look at the values and principles embedded in frameworks that drive high-performing teams.

ABOUT **3PILLAR GLOBAL**

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