

**“High-performance teams fuel success.  
Steph’s book is a teamwork blueprint”**  
Nick Bell, Shark on Shark Tank

# **CURIOUS, CONNECTED & CALM**

**HOW LEADERS ARE BETTER TOGETHER**



# **STEPHANIE BOWN**

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**STEPHANIE  
BOWN**



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# Preface

*Curious, Connected and Calm* shows how high-performing teams work together better, to achieve consistently outstanding results. My aim is to demystify team dynamics and show leaders how the distinct roles and behaviours of all the individuals in a team can either help or hinder overall team performance. I want to empower leaders and aspiring leaders to build better teams, and equip them with the tools to bring talented people together in ways that ensures the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

I am a behavioural scientist, a psychology graduate, and a high-performance leadership coach. In my practice, I work with leaders and their teams every day. I am infinitely fascinated by human behaviour, what drives it, and how to leverage it, to create the optimum conditions for thriving and succeeding at work.

This is my second book on how to achieve high performance at work.

My first book, *Purpose, Passion and Performance: How systems for leadership, culture and strategy drive the 3Ps of high-performance organisations*, was published in 2020. My goal then was to define *what* leaders and leadership teams need to work on to build high-performance organisations. It highlights the systems, processes and high-performance habits that leaders can adopt to enable long-term, sustainable success for organisations regardless of size, function and industry. *Purpose, Passion and Performance* evolved from 20 years as an organisational consultant working with leaders and leadership teams to put best practice, into practice.

In subsequent years, as I've worked with leaders and their teams to apply these practices, what I've observed is how these leadership teams interrelate. *How* they work together has an enormous impact on whether the strategies they devise are ultimately achieved. Culture takes root when leaders and leadership teams walk the talk. We take our cues from our leaders – how they behave determines whether the values of the organisation are lived. Their example sets the tone for the rest of the organisation. It is most important that positive team dynamics are role-modelled in the 'top' team, for this is where the dynamics of teamwork begin.

**We take our cues from our leaders – how they behave determines whether the values of the organisation are lived.**

While the principles and practices in *Curious, Connected and Calm* can be applied to any team, I focus on leadership teams in this book, precisely because of the special nature of their impact on culture and performance. Leadership teams are the ultimate cross-functional unit. Organisations cannot achieve consistent high performance without a strong positive dynamic of teamwork and collaboration established in the top team.

CEOs who make it a regular habit to ask for feedback and admit mistakes make it safe for their executives to do the same. They foster an open dynamic of trust that results in shared accountability for results. Conversely, CEOs who make it a habit to 'blame and shame' their executives create environments of avoidance and mistrust. This is not an environment where teamwork can thrive – it is an environment in which every person must fend for themselves.

It's not just what leaders do, but what they say that drives culture. CEOs who espouse that culture is important, and yet spend 90% of executive meetings talking about sales, signal not that they care about people, but about profit. Conversely, CEOs who start meetings on safety, culture or customers, signal that they put people first, then profit.

If my first book was about high-performing organisations, this book is about high-performing teams. It highlights simple steps business leaders can take to dramatically improve the dynamic of their teams and increase their chances of achieving their strategies.

As with *Purpose, Passion and Performance*, my challenge with writing this book was turning complex theories on human dynamics into simple tools that busy people can digest and use in practice. I knew *Curious, Connected and Calm* was to be about the dynamics of high-performing teams, but it remained little more than a collection of ideas until I experienced two sparks of inspiration.

The first spark happened during a session with one of my mentors, Matt Church. Matt is a leadership expert and popular corporate speaker. He's also the founder of Thought Leaders Business School, an academy that trains thought leaders in getting their message out to a broader audience. Matt is known for motivating leaders and helping them get to the heart of what lights them up so they can share their message and inspire others.

If you've ever had a great coach or mentor, you'll know their power is in asking exactly the right question at exactly the right time. On a Friday in mid-December, during what was literally the last meeting of the year for both of us, Matt asked me a single, deliberate question: 'What is the primary example you are setting for your kids?'

In considering my answer to Matt's question, I discovered the first of two central ideas of this book. 'I am showing them how to be independent thinkers, to work hard, and to create the life they want. I want to show them that they are in control of their own lives.'

It was a blinding flash of the obvious. Up until that point, I hadn't really understood the intent behind the values my husband and I were instilling in our two boys. We were constantly questioning Byron and Lawson, then aged 10 and 12, about their beliefs and understanding of the world. We wanted to encourage them to share their views with us, and to form their own opinions, not to just parrot back what they had seen or heard at school or online. We wanted them to consider the information they received from multiple perspectives. They would



often roll their eyes at us over the dinner table but every now and then we would be staggered by their empathy. Their awareness and capacity for insight is extraordinary, once we encourage them to dig a little deeper. In these moments, it's like discovering the truth of their personalities – who they really are beneath all the layers that we and our society gradually stack on them.

The second spark of inspiration happened a few weeks after that same Christmas when I finally recorded the audio book for *Purpose, Passion and Performance*. Encased in a soundproof studio and reading aloud from my own book, I realised I had already written the central idea for my second book – right there in the first chapter of my first book.

*'These are high-performing teams: teams that effectively leverage collective capacity to achieve team synergy, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.'*

It was another blinding flash of the obvious. Taken together, I had articulated the belief system that had subconsciously guided the way I work with leaders and leadership teams for decades. That is, that it's through a *combination* of high-quality independent thinking by every member of a team, with a shared intent to leverage their collective wisdom, that teams come together to achieve synergy.

Synergy is not a new concept. Human Synergistics – a global company devoted to the research and practice of team synergy (as their company name suggests) – defines it simply as being *better together*. That is, the whole team performs better together than any individual could do alone. And while this is a simple concept to define, it is notoriously difficult to achieve.

That's because we are human. In every human grouping, there exists an underlying dynamic, or natural interaction, that will either elevate members of the group to new heights or slowly, surreptitiously, unravel them. When we synergise with others, the dynamic feels good. We're in a dance, moving together in time to the music. We feel safe to show up as ourselves and challenge others in ways that elevate both thinking and enjoyment for everyone. When the dynamic

is dysfunctional, we resort to defence mechanisms. We retreat – emotionally, mentally and even physically – putting up barriers to success, and even subconsciously sabotaging the performance of the group as well as ourselves.

As humans we are capable of both self-actualisation and self-destruction. My hope is that readers, when empowered with the knowledge and tools within this book, will choose more of the former and less of the latter when it comes to working with others.

Leadership teams are, by definition, made up of high-performance people. But not all leadership teams are high performing, and not all organisations are achieving sustained success. I hope that in this, my second book on performance, I can provide leaders and aspiring leaders with the tools they need to succeed as a team – by overcoming the natural barriers to collaboration and realising the full potential of their shared capabilities. And surely there's some synergy in that!



# Introduction

My goal with this book is to define how leaders and leadership teams can be better, together. To provide simple, proven methods for leaders to find team synergy and avoid dysfunction.

Whether you're a company director serving on a board, an entrepreneur, an established C-suite executive, a middle manager, or an aspiring leader, the tools and techniques in this book will empower you to lead teams to achieve outstanding outcomes that serve not only the business, but the growth, learning and fulfilment of all team members.

As an organisational consultant and high-performance leadership coach, I work with CEOs, founders and executives to help them realise their visions for growth and success. Clients reach out to me because they recognise that they have a great product and great people but there is something missing in the way their people are working together. They have usually done all the right things, ticked all the right boxes, including:

- defined the company purpose and vision for growth
- hired exceptional talent
- created an organisational structure – with leaders responsible for teams
- set clear benchmarks for performance
- communicated consistently.

They have done all of this – but they still feel like they are carrying all the responsibility, accountability and risk. They are still acting like

referees, managing issues between people that should have been dealt with directly. They are still being asked to weigh in on decisions they've already empowered their people to make. They are inviting input and encouraging people to speak up but being presented with lacklustre or 'safe' ideas that don't fill them with confidence that their people 'have this'. They are frustrated, stressed and somewhat disappointed, but fear that sharing their feelings with their peers and colleagues won't help and may, in fact, make things worse.

Just getting the right people in the door does not guarantee they will work well with others and unlock creative potential. The true potential for the organisation lies not solely in the brilliance of its individuals, but in the synergy and collaboration fostered within teams.

At work, while we each have individual accountabilities, it's in teams where the work gets done. Teams are the ultimate performance unit of organisations. In teams, we translate big-picture goals and strategies into daily plans and actions. In teams, we coordinate effort, trial, error, learn, revise and adapt. As Margaret Mead's famous quote suggests, often the innovations that propel organisations forward are rooted within the interactions of a few committed individuals working in teams.

Teams working in sync make magic. Google was the result of two graduate students from Stanford University, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who were looking for better ways of extracting meaning from the mass of data accumulating on the internet. Apple Computer Inc was founded by two college dropouts, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, who wanted to make computers small enough for people to have them in their home or office. The Air Jordan was the brainchild of Nike marketing executive Sonny Vacaro and creative director Peter Moore, who wanted to design a sneaker specifically for the then rookie basketballer Michael Jordan.

Teams are not just productivity and innovation hubs, they are hubs of human experience. Team life is an enormous part of work life. In teams, we forge camaraderie and experience a sense of belonging. In teams, we learn about the company culture, the ways of the

business, and the skills we need to be successful. In teams we set our standards for growth, form career aspirations and take calculated risks. In teams, we celebrate wins and share losses. Our team has the potential to make or break our daily work life.

In my first book, I introduced the 3Ps of high-performing organisations: Purpose, Passion and Performance.

In this book I'd like to introduce the concept of the 3Cs of high-performing teams: Curious, Connected and Calm.

They are three qualities that, once cultivated in teams, allow them to attain and sustain a high level of performance and be better, together.

To be *better together*, leadership is required. Leadership, to my way of thinking, encompasses both self-leadership and team leadership. To lead the self is to be curious – empowering yourself to share your unique thoughts, feelings and experiences. To lead others is to be connected – to form bonds of trust and respect that encourage input and allow for different perspectives to coexist. Leading together requires calm – to unite members with firm trust and unwavering belief in your capacity as a team to respond with confidence to challenges and opportunities as they arise.

This book shows you how to lead a high-performing team. Whether you're a CEO, a team leader, or just starting out, it describes the three key qualities of high-performing teams, and how you can cultivate these to activate the potential of the people you're teaming with.

Let's look at each in detail:

- To be curious – you need to develop independent thinking.
- To be connected – you need to leverage collective capacity.
- To be calm – you need to find team synergy.

High-performing teams are teams in synergy, where independent thinkers come together and leverage collective capacity. Where skilled and talented individuals build their capacity to share, stack and combine their intelligence. Where the goal of teamwork is about thinking and learning together, to influence others and be influenced in ways that build knowledge, awareness and insight for the group.

By learning these skills, you can lead any team in any context to meet consistently high standards of performance, regardless of tenure or positional hierarchy. Leaders can be better together, by applying the principles and practices outlined in this book, to find team synergy.

## Part I

# Why We Need High-performing Teams

‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,  
committed citizens can change the world;  
indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.’

Margaret Mead





## It's not enough just to hire great people. We need great teams.

**W**ith global talent shortages putting pressure on organisations, there is strong emphasis on attracting and retaining the right talent. The value of exceptional people cannot be underestimated. However, just hiring great talent is no guarantee for great performance. Leaders who foster cultures where teamwork is emphasised encourage their people to work together in ways that enable adaptation and innovation – capabilities that are critical in the face of rapid technological advancement.

The human race certainly is racing! As we round the bend at break-neck speed into the era of artificial intelligence, leaders in every context are adapting to a host of macro-economic trends that are changing the way we live and work. Variously known as the era of AI, the fourth industrial revolution, or the era of advantaged digitisation, the current era of technology disruption is increasing the pace of change at a rate that is challenging large sub-sets of the working population to keep up.

The World Economic Forum (WEF) publishes a bi-annual *The Future of Jobs* report on the changing nature of the global workforces. In 2023 respondents from over 803 companies across all world regions reported that over a third (34%) of all business-related tasks are performed by machines. This number is set to double so that by

2030, more business-related tasks will be completed by machines than by humans.

While millions of jobs will be replaced by machines, we are in no danger of running out of work to do! The combined macro-trends of new emerging technologies, the adoption of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards, and the localisation of supply chains are predicted to deliver a net positive impact on job creation. Our challenge will not be in not having enough work for the population, the challenge will be upskilling and reskilling workers quickly enough to meet new job demands.<sup>1</sup>

The skills gap that is emerging is being created on two fronts. The first is the increasing demand for technology-related roles and decreasing demand for administrative and clerical roles, as mentioned in the WEF report. The second is the increasing demand for the type of work that only humans can do.

James Merisotis is the author of *Human Work* (2021) and president of the Lumina Foundation, which exists to improve pathways to learning beyond high school. Merisotis predicts that AI will ultimately lead to automation of virtually all tasks that are repetitive or can be reduced to an algorithm. Preparing for this new era of 'human work' means developing our human capacities such as compassion, critical thinking, ethics and interpersonal communication. He predicts that 'across all occupations (in 2024), half of all tasks are uniquely human, compared to just 30% of tasks in 2000. Projections of these trends suggest this number could rise to 80% in the next ten years' (p. 7).

The skills gap is real, it's widening, and it's being felt everywhere – from small regional towns to large metro cities in just about every industry, but particularly in the tech sector where, in Australia, skills shortages are listed as the #1 inhibitor of growth. We are feeling it because we are failing to skill, upskill, or reskill quickly enough.

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1 Fastest-growing roles are technology-related roles: AI and Machine Learning Specialists, Sustainability Specialists, Business Intelligence Analysts, Information Security Analysts, Renewable Energy Engineers, Solar Energy Installation, and System Engineers. Fastest-declining roles are clerical or secretarial roles: Bank Tellers, Related Clerks, Postal Service Clerks, Cashiers, Ticket Clerks, and Data Entry Clerks. (WEF, 2023, p. 6.)

While governments and educational institutions can play their part in closing the skills gap, the onus is on businesses, and more specifically, people in business. For leaders, this means prioritising learning activities and providing workers with ample time for learning and applying new skills on-the-job. It also means embracing more flexible working options and adopting hybrid models where workers can be part of virtual teams, distributed work units or remote workforces that open access to skillsets regardless of geography.

For workers, this means taking a proactive approach to setting and achieving our own learning and development goals, asking for learning support, and being open to changing established ways of working. This is uncomfortable for many – particularly the generations who did not grow up as digital natives.

The place where this change needs to happen is in teams. We need to activate the collective pool of intelligence of our existing workforces and realise their full potential to not just meet the demands of today but prepare for the change of tomorrow. This is not just a government challenge, this is a challenge for the business sector, education institutions and communities everywhere.

**We need to activate the collective pool of intelligence of our existing workforces and realise their full potential to not just meet the demands of today but prepare for the change of tomorrow.**

We need to treat the process of learning and performing at work as simultaneous activities, because the place where adults do most of their learning is on-the-job, in and between teams. While formal education, training and coaching (virtual or otherwise) have their place in transferring bite-sized parcels of skills and knowledge, it's through the daily interactions within our teams where learning actually sticks.

Our capacity to adapt to these changing global market forces comes down to the individuals and teams who are adopting new technologies, implementing ESG strategies, dealing with cybersecurity breaches, addressing supply chain issues, adapting to the rising cost of living and responding to changing customer expectations.

Individual and organisational success depends not just on hiring great people, but on how well those people show up and combine their talents to learn, problem solve, innovate, test and adapt. The place where each one of us can succeed in the current climate of rapidly advancing change is right at work, in our very own teams.

### **SMELLS LIKE *TEAM SPIRIT***

If you've worked in a team, you will have experienced how important the team dynamic is to its overall success.

The team dynamic emerges from the interplay of behaviour whenever people come together in groups to achieve a collective purpose. Each member of the group both influences and is influenced by all other members. This interplay is the sum of its parts and is, itself, the life of the group.

Social scientists working at British non-profit The Tavistock Institute in the 1960s adopted a systems approach to thinking about how humans interact within groups and organisations. They first formed the idea of the 'group-as-a-whole' or a group as having a life of its own distinct from, but related to, individual group members. Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who trained at Tavistock, coined the term 'élan vital' to describe the group's 'vital force' that forms as the sum of its parts. Today, we simply call it team spirit.

While this may sound a little esoteric, it makes perfect sense when you think about it. Different teams just *feel* different – even when they exist to serve the same purpose in the same organisation or context. Anyone who has joined more than one book club in the same hometown, or worked in different teams within the same company, or played in different squads of the same club, will attest to this. Every individual is unique, and each team serves its own unique purpose. The team dynamic is the result of the unique interplay of individual personalities, their roles, and the purpose of the group.

The team dynamic is not something we often stop to observe. Like a shadow, it only appears when we cast light upon it. Through my practice partnering with hundreds of leaders and dozens of teams in

Australia and around the world, I've observed that very few voluntarily stop to look at their dynamic and assess not just what they are *doing*, but how they are *being*.

**ARE YOU A TEAM OR A GROUP?**

In my work as a high-performance leadership coach, I've partnered with hundreds of teams who think they are a team, but really are working as a group. Leadership teams often fall into this trap. They are called the 'leadership team', but they are thinking and behaving as a group.

This matters when it comes to working on the team dynamic, because working as a team is characteristically different to working as a group. There are different expectations that change the nature of the ways individuals work together in a team, summarised in the table below.

Working as a team	Working as a group
Interdependent	Independent
Collaboration	Cooperation
Shared goals and measures	Individual goals and measures
Shared purpose	Individual purpose

What differentiates working as a team vs working as a group?

Let's consider each in turn.

**1. Interdependence vs Independence**

Teams work in **interdependent** ways – members have shared responsibilities and accountabilities. For example, sales teams are interdependent in achieving revenue targets. Sales and Marketing teams are interdependent in accessing or deepening market segments. Sales and Operations teams are interdependent in meeting customer

expectations. Leadership teams are interdependent in fostering a culture that enables achievement of an organisation's strategy.

Groups operate in **independent** ways – members have independent responsibilities that don't rely on one another to be achieved. For example, support services such as People and Culture, Finance, Legal and Facilities Management are often grouped together and can sometimes report to the same executive but essentially operate independently from one another. Even within People and Culture teams, there can be further sub-divisions based on the size of the organisation. This can include recruiters, industrial relations specialists, learning and development specialists and payroll officers who mostly operate independently, rather than collectively.

## 2. Collaboration vs Cooperation

A team **collaborates** – they seek each other's involvement. A group **cooperates** – they seek each other's support. The difference between collaboration and cooperation is subtle but important. Collaboration involves building something *together* – *with* others instead of *for* others. An example is when a leadership team comes together to build a new strategic plan, the optimal outcome will be achieved if the plan emerges through the interactions of the team rather than through the efforts of one or a few individuals.

Co-operation is about bringing something to the table for which you are seeking buy-in. It may be to support a project you are implementing, or to give you feedback on a new change you're leading. An example is when a People and Culture team proposes a new parental leave policy and seek the cooperation of the business to communicate and implement it.

## 3. Shared goals and measures vs Individual goals and measures

Teams have **shared goals and key performance indicators**. Their performance depends on teamwork. Members of a group have **individual goals and measures**, where individual performance is rewarded.

An example of a shared goal is a revenue and profit target that applies to every executive in the leadership team, rather than separating a revenue goal for the sales executive and a margin goal for the finance executive, and so on. Making both executives accountable for not just the sales but the margin achieved, encourages them to work together to achieve it.

Similarly, setting an engagement target that applies to all leaders in the business, ensures that every people leader shares the responsibility of creating a positive experience for all employees.

#### 4. Shared purpose vs Individual purpose

A team has **shared purpose** – a clear reason for working together. A meaningful cause that aligns the efforts of every member. Without a call to action, or a clear why for working together, individuals remain a group.

A group is a collective of people with their own **individual purposes** that may or may not align and hence there is no clear reason or benefit for working together. Groups come together for many reasons. It may be for learning (like in training and education), for sharing or communicating information (like updates and town halls), or for enjoyment reasons. This is not a reason to work together. This is a reason for being together, because it's of mutual benefit for each person, and each person is taking something beneficial away.

It is possible to be part of multiple teams at once. For example, a single individual can be a team player in:

- **A functional team:** These are teams with tangible deliverables including Sales, Marketing, Digital, Operations, Legal, People and Culture, Technology, Finance, or any of the many sub-teams that sit within those categories.
- **A leadership team:** The people who lead teams at different levels in the organisation. This could include the executive team (those who report to the CEO or 'Big Boss'), the senior team (leaders who report to the executive), or regional leadership teams (leaders responsible for a region or area).



- **A board of directors:** The governing committee of the organisation.
- **A committee:** A team appointed for a specific function.
- **A project team:** A cross-functional team who work together to deliver a specific project.
- **An office team:** A team who belong to a specific geographical location – like the Germany team, Vietnam team, or Albury Wodonga team.

This does not even cover the myriad roles that exist outside the work domain. Sport teams, volunteer teams, book clubs, community groups, and families to name a few. How many roles in how many groups do you play right now?

Most of us move seamlessly in and out of the various roles we play without a moment's thought. However, it pays to be mindful of when you are working as a team versus when you are working as a group, because this changes the nature of the role you play in each context.

Working as a team is especially important for leadership teams, who are the ultimate cross-functional team. They are called a team, but most often behave like a group – a collective of individuals who happen to report to the CEO and mostly operate independently of each other. This is the most common mistake that leadership teams make, and this poses a significant opportunity cost to the business.

**Working as a team is especially important for leadership teams, who are the ultimate cross-functional team.**

Now that we understand the difference between a team and a group, let's explore how the dynamic of the team directly impacts their performance.