



TECH AND DIGITAL ADVANTAGE

PEOPLE AND ORGANISATION

Ambitious goals need world-class delivery: Building your organisation's performance culture

By Andrew Arcuri, Bailey Hand, Chris Matthey and Admiral Bill Lescher (Ret)

Ambitious goals are essential to tackling competitive pressure, customer and shareholder expectations, and stakeholder complexities – but many leaders struggle with the gap between their organisation's ambitions and delivery. We share our proven approach to building a performance culture, adapted and refined from leading organisations that have lifted their performance to deliver outcomes faster and with greater confidence.

“

If I've ever seen something go from zero to hero, it feels like this

– *Executive*

Addressing the underlying barriers to performance

Too often, performance is poor or highly variable across an organisation. Complex, cross-functional interactions can mean no leader or team feels sufficiently accountable to deliver an outcome, and tightening timeframes, budgets and competition for talent mean the course can't be corrected with more time, money or people.

Many large organisations struggling to deliver ambitious, complex outcomes or projects encounter the same challenges:

- **Fragmented ownership across teams and functions.** Ambitious strategic objectives typically do not rely on just one team or function, but too often, teams and functions don't work together. In one large technology delivery program, we saw stovepiped responsibilities between business owners, technology program leaders, architecture, engineering and procurement functions.
- **Performance reporting that obscures challenges.** Teams in organisational cultures that prize self-sufficiency are often reluctant to report off-track performance. Instead, they self-select metrics that are insignificant to the overall ambition and give the picture that everything is okay, while trying to solve issues without asking for help until it's too late.
- **Proliferation of activity without outcomes.** The typical response to a new goal or problem is to create detailed reports, complex action plans and additional lines of effort, without first seeking to understand what will most consequentially drive results or solve the root cause of the problem. This leads to requests for more inputs (funding, people or time) rather than changing how inputs drive success.

A playbook for high performance

Organisations need to create a performance culture that catalyses leaders and teams to think, act and operate differently to achieve their organisation's ambition.

In 2017, the US Navy faced a seemingly unachievable target: after years of mission-readiness at around 50% for a critical program, the Secretary of Defense gave the Navy a target to increase that mission capability to 80% in one year. And yet, the Navy not only met, but exceeded, the target and sustained it over the years that followed.¹

How did the organisation do it? It radically reshaped the culture, behaviours and practices of the leaders and teams working on that program, drawing on best practice from global private sector organisations. Its success led to the creation of *Get Real Get Better* – a cultural framework for collaborative problem-solving it then scaled across the organisation.

Building a performance culture in your organisation

BCG has refined the Navy's approach with practices of other leading organisations and adaptations for an Asia-Pacific government agency and applied it to other large, complex organisations that face similar challenges.

Whether delivering large technology programs, building complex capital projects or operating diverse business units across a global footprint, the approach has helped organisations deliver outcomes faster, enhance the transparency and collaboration of their teams and build lasting capability.

“ What we achieved in three months for our organisation was unheard of
– Program sponsor

¹ Lescher, B (November 2023). [Lessons from the U.S Navy on Building a Culture of Learning](#). The Harvard Business Review

The simple, sector-agnostic approach is designed to scale and combines four reinforcing elements:

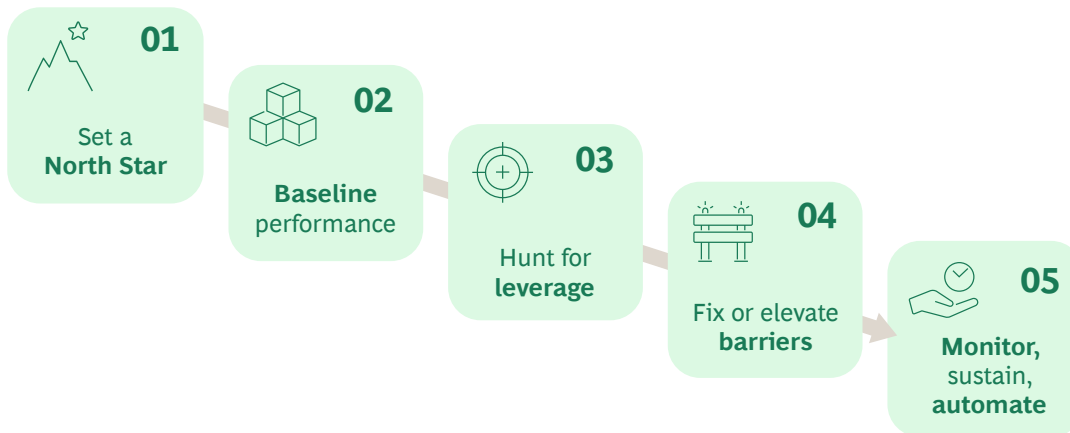
1. A rigorous, collaborative problem-solving process
2. Leadership behaviours that drive learning and performance
3. A Build-Operate-Transfer model to embed capability and ownership
4. A learning organisation that benchmarks itself against world class

1) A rigorous, collaborative problem-solving process

This process is built on five steps – and while they may sound simple, it is their relentless practice done to a high standard that translates into significant performance improvement (Exhibit 1).

EXHIBIT 1

A rigorous, collaborative problem -solving process



Step 1: Set a North Star

Start by articulating an ambition (or North Star) that matters, then quantify it, set a deadline and make one leader accountable for delivering it. For example, the Navy set an ambition to ‘increase mission-capable aircraft by 30%’ rather than ‘improving aircraft readiness’. For another organisation, it was to have ‘all staff using interoperable, secure cloud-based tools by June 2026’.

Step 2: Baseline performance

Before looking to the future, understand your current performance to quantify the gap to your ambition and what to expect if historical performance continues. No matter how poor your organisation’s baseline performance may be, treat it as a prediction to be tested each cycle to keep leaders honest about whether moves are shifting the curve. For one organisation undergoing a complex technology program, this meant acknowledging its poor status quo performance that needed to dramatically change to meet expected timelines.

Step 3: Hunt for leverage

Don't try to solve everything; apply your resources to what will move the needle. Break down the gap between your baseline and ambition into its most consequential drivers, visualised in a driver tree, and focus on those. High performance teams use proven problem-solving tools (e.g. fishbone, 5 Whys) to identify which drivers offer the highest performance change leverage and the root cause for why drivers are off track, before coming up with solutions. For the Navy, half of the improvement in mission capability readiness came from just two process changes that came from leading organisations outside of the defence industry. For another organisation, over \$250 million in savings came from getting just one key design choice right. The lesson: learn what matters most and focus your efforts on closing that gap.

Step 4: Fix or Elevate Barriers

Leaders should be measured on the barriers they remove for their teams. When progress to an organisation's ambition is off-track, teams must be empowered to address barriers or escalate them rapidly. To make this happen, teams need regular reviews with leaders to remove barriers at pace. The US Navy routinely asked five key questions in these reviews.² In a recent technology program turnaround, leaders drew on the Navy's questions:

- Where did we predict we would be by now?
- Where are we today?
- What did we learn from any gap between those two?
- What is the most consequential barrier to meeting the goal, and how do we know?
- Who owns the decision rights on that barrier?

“ Because we were executing in such an organised manner, things that would have cropped us late and thrown us off course were coming out early [and getting fixed]
– Executive

Step 5: Monitor, sustain and automate

Sustained performance improvement is only possible if progress is rigorously measured using real, automated data.

² Lescher, B (November 2023). [Lessons from the U.S Navy on Building a Culture of Learning](#). The Harvard Business Review

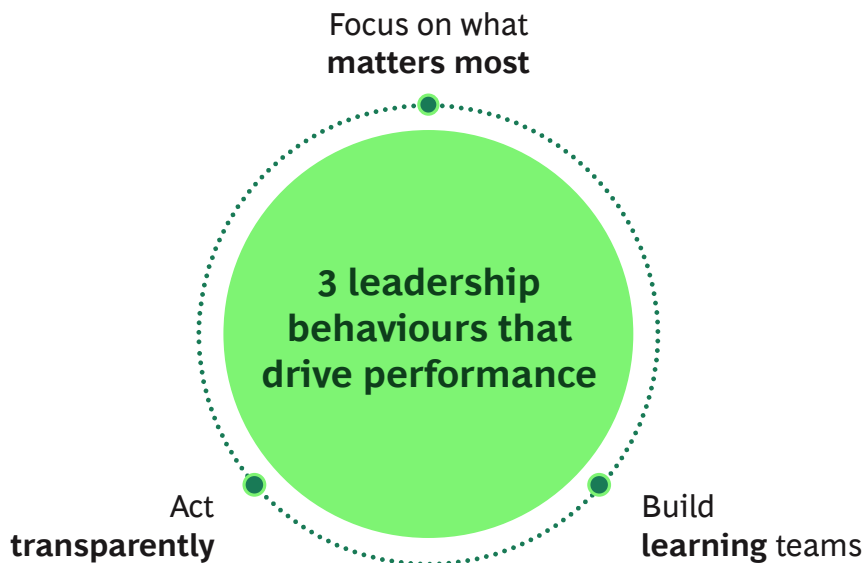
2) Behaviours that drive learning and performance

Solving a problem once is useful, but embedding standards and behaviours that foster accountability, transparency, collaboration and high-velocity learning leads to sustained strong performance. Drawing from high-performing organisations, the US Navy set three Get Real Get Better behavioural standards (Exhibit 2).³ These are:

- Focus on what matters most – Fix or elevate barriers; use proven problem-solving methods
- Act transparently – Find and embrace “the red”; share information to support learning and decision-making
- Build learning teams – Encourage learning through a high standard of dialogue and decision-making; model unambiguous accountability for enterprise success with clarity on supported and supporting roles

EXHIBIT 2

Performance culture behavioural standards



These three behaviours are proven to uplift performance in multiple organisations but making them stick can be hard. Leaders need to role model, reward and coach these behaviours to inspire the trust that enables these behaviours and increases change success by orders of magnitude. When leaders build their own capability with coaching and self-reflection, organisations see higher transformation success.

“

I've never seen the amount of engagement and trust we have at the moment

– Program team member

³ US Navy. [Get Real Get Better Behaviors](#). Accessed January 2026

Practically, the fastest way to make behaviours real is to apply them to an existing program of work and coach in context. In recent work with two multi-billion-dollar technology programs in an Asia-Pacific government organisation, BCG combined six months of sustained 1:1 coaching of leaders with day-to-day support for frontline delivery staff. The results were a 5x increase in teams' transparency to their leaders on performance, barriers and issues; a 33–50% increase in speed to deliver program milestones; and a clear shift from sharing activities and status in governance forums, to sharing drivers and barriers.

3) A Build–Operate–Transfer model to embed capability and ownership

Building a performance culture is not a one-off exercise. It's a continuous process of learning and establishing what good looks like for your teams and setting clear, well-understood behaviours and standards that are relentlessly supported and sustained. For BCG clients, this has meant engaging BCG as a partner to work beside their teams and build their internal capability before scaling new practices rapidly across the organisation. Research shows that getting 25% of the organisation to use new practices is the tipping point that takes change from temporary to irreversible.

4) A learning organisation that benchmarks itself against world class

An organisation that wants to deliver the best results can't just benchmark itself against its own industry – it must look to world-class performance, wherever it may be. Instead of seeking exemplars within military services, the US Navy looked to world-leaders in the commercial airline industry and other high-performance organisations.⁴ Similarly, a recent BCG public sector client undertaking a major technology modernisation looked well beyond technology programs and the public sector to change its delivery approach.

⁴ Lescher, B (November 2023). [Lessons from the U.S Navy on Building a Culture of Learning](#). The Harvard Business Review

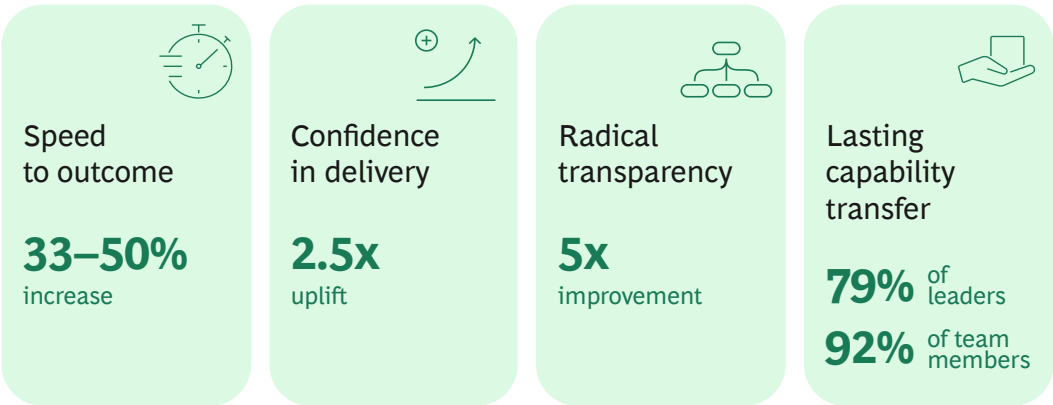
The value of a simple, consistent performance culture approach

Once successfully embedded in an organisation, a performance culture delivers faster, better outcomes; a radical shift in how leaders and teams work; and lasting capability that compounds over time. BCG clients have seen:

- **Faster speed to outcomes:** Consistently delivering milestones 33–50% faster to the same or better quality
- **Increased confidence in delivery:** 2.5x increase in leaders’ confidence that the program will deliver outcomes on time, on budget and to standard
- **Radical transparency:** 5x uplift in leaders’ ratings of their teams’ transparency on performance, barriers and issues
- **Lasting capability transfer:** 79% of leaders said they grew their leadership and delivery skills; 92% saw their teams take ownership and apply tools independently

EXHIBIT 3

Benefits of a simple, consistent performance culture approach



Most large organisations have already undertaken some form of performance-focused change effort in the past. These efforts usually fail – typically because they articulate an aspiration but don’t translate it into practice; they aim either too broad or too narrow; they target only senior leaders or frontline teams; they’re under-resourced; they expire with leadership churn; or their teams simply don’t know what good looks like in practice.

Our approach is designed to avoid these traps, with BCG clients consistently pointing to its:

Simplicity and consistency:

Consistently applying the four fundamental elements to a high standard – not dense, complex frameworks and processes

“

I have seen [other] efforts where it's 100+ slides and you don't get past the cover page; the fact it's been focused on practical tools has been really good

– Executive

Support for leaders: Setting leaders up to lead the behaviour change with world-class coaching, grounded in behavioural science

“

Coaching for senior leaders [was critical], not just at working level. If we had come in and said team, we'll put you through this, senior leaders will remain 'business-as-usual', that would have gone down like a lead balloon

– Executive

Embedded hands-on support:

Giving frontline teams a practical understanding of what good looks like and demonstrating the value of change in their daily context

“

[BCG] got in the trenches with us, did the work with us, showed us how to do it... without that approach, it wouldn't have succeeded

– Senior Leader—Program

Persistence: Relentlessly focusing on fundamentals, week after week, to overcome initial change resistance and set the tone for the long term

“

It's the relentless nature of 'we will not accept mediocrity or just excuses' – that very clear and very thorough follow through week after week means [teams] know it's not going away

– Executive

Refinement to context:

Adapting broad principles that can be tailored to diverse sectoral, functional and organisational contexts

“

Important to start it out as a learning experience, deal with [iteration] rather than pretending 'ta-da, this is it...we were prepared to iterate until [tools/concepts] worked'

– Senior Leader

What this requires of you: advice from leaders

Leaders from organisations who have driven performance culture change point to five pieces of advice to peers:

1. **Visibly lead the change from the top.** Senior leaders must role model the behaviours and standards, use the language, inspire trust and create space for people to acknowledge when performance is off track (“embrace the red”).
2. **Be comfortable with being uncomfortable.** Adopting new standards, languages and tools will be hard, and sometimes you will need to say “I don’t know” to your teams. Leaders must remain committed to purposeful, respectful and often uncomfortable conversations with their teams where talk about progress and impact is tested with the five key questions.
3. **Go all in.** Don’t just try short pilots that can be waited out by people who are resistant to change. Commit for long enough to get through the initial wave of early scepticism and realise the benefits.
4. **Know what’s non-negotiable.** Protect the fundamentals of the performance culture approach, including a clear North Star, baseline performance, driver trees and barrier removal, and the three key behaviours. Tailor them to fit your context but don’t compromise them.
5. **Scale intentionally.** Aim to rapidly scale the approach to 25% of your organisation quickly enough (within 12–18 months) to pass the tipping point – but not so fast that nothing sticks.

Conclusion

Catalysing an organisation to think, behave and operate differently is not easy, but it’s a proven approach to delivering truly ambitious outcomes and results that are far superior to those achieved by simply asking your people to work the same way, harder and longer. Our experience shows that creating a genuinely high performing, learning organisation is possible when leaders and teams commit to delivering the most challenging organisational objectives with this proven approach and the right support to ensure consistency and quality.

ABOUT BOSTON CONSULTING GROUP

Boston Consulting Group partners with leaders in business and society to tackle their most important challenges and capture their greatest opportunities. BCG was the pioneer in business strategy when it was founded in 1963. Today, we work closely with clients to embrace a transformational approach aimed at benefiting all stakeholders—empowering organizations to grow, build sustainable competitive advantage, and drive positive societal impact. Our diverse, global teams bring deep industry and functional expertise and a range of perspectives that question the status quo and spark change. BCG delivers solutions through leading-edge management consulting, technology and design, and corporate and digital ventures. We work in a uniquely collaborative model across the firm and throughout all levels of the client organization, fueled by the goal of helping our clients thrive and enabling them to make the world a better place.

© Boston Consulting Group 2026. All rights reserved.

For information or permission to reprint, please contact BCG at permissions@bcg.com. To find the latest BCG content and register to receive e-alerts on this topic or others, please visit bcg.com. Follow Boston Consulting Group on [Facebook](#) and [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#).