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# White Paper – High-Performing Teams and Leadership NEOM and Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team

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## Context to this White Paper

For the last year, two NEOM secondees have been working as part of the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team. The secondment represents an invaluable opportunity for early career talent to experience being in a high-performing team environment and culture, supporting their development as future leaders at NEOM. The intention of the programme was for the secondees to:

- Develop technical skills and expertise
- Through immersion in a high-performance sport (HPS) environment, build an understanding of high-performing teams and leadership in a high-performance environment
- Have the opportunity to ‘practice’ being a high performer and a member of a high-performing team – i.e., start to think, behave and ‘be’ a high performer
- Develop personally, as well as professionally, through the experience of moving to a new country, culture, organisation, team and role

There are also clear ‘value additions’ to NEOM as a result of this programme – not only in developing two ‘rising stars’ who have the potential to play a key role in the future of NEOM, but also in the transfer of technical and high-performance knowledge and practical expertise back to NEOM. For the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team, the opportunity was not just to further the partnership with NEOM, but to benefit from the input of two talented, innovative and motivated individuals from a similar high-performance and fast-paced organisation. As such, the intention was that the secondees would be fully and quickly integrated into the team, filling essential roles in the overall programme.

The synergy between high-performance sport and business is well established – much of what we know about human potential and team performance has come from research in the high-pressure, high-stake environment of elite sport, and that insight and practice can be readily applied to the business world. The concept and practice of providing high-potential employees with an immersive experience of working in an HPS environment has been proven to be a highly effective method of both developing them as future leaders and transferring insight and expertise back to the business environment. In a similar vein, athletes transitioning from their career in sport are often sought-after as employees and potential leaders by the business world.

This White Paper reports on how the year with the Mercedes-EQ Formula E team has developed the two NEOM secondees. It will focus in particular on how the secondees will use their high-performance insight and learning as they progress in their careers, return to roles at NEOM, and further their leadership aspirations.

## Personal and professional development

A secondment experience provides opportunity for personal as well as professional development, particularly when it involves a significant change in culture and environment. This was true in this case; the secondees were not only moving into a new team and role, but they were also leaving their home and regular working environment and adapting to a new country and culture. Although both secondees had spent time during their education outside of Saudi Arabia and therefore had experience of other cultures, both were clear that the experience living and working in the UK had developed them in a social as well as professional context. They highlighted that they had developed new skills through assimilating into a new culture and professional team and had established a new social network and routine. One commented that it was “good to be pushed out of my comfort zone – it’s developed my confidence to deal with new professional and social situations which I don’t naturally find easy.” Support from the NEOM team, as well as the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team, was critical for both as they made the transition and had to quickly settle into their roles and life in the UK.

An initial challenge was assimilating into the team midway through the racing season – the onboarding process was fast tracked, and the team and secondees had to quickly establish how their skill sets could be best utilised in their respective sub-teams (Tech & Digital and Design Engineering). Both reported that their time with their teams had developed not just their technical knowledge and skill – they had been exposed to different tools, software and innovative ways of working – but also their social and communication skills, all of which will benefit them as they return to their roles at NEOM.

## High-performance insight

Both secondees reflected on their experience of working in a high-performance environment and as part of a high-performing team, concluding that this formed the majority of their learning and development. As one secondee said, “I’ve developed my technical skills and knowledge, but that’s only 20 or 30% of my development from this experience”. Although working in different areas of the team, they both highlighted the same three key high-performance insights from their experience:

### 1) One team with clear and compelling purpose

The Mercedes EQ Formula E Team has a clear and simple objective – to make the cars as competitive as possible. Although made up of various sub-teams and departments, this very clear purpose unites the team and there is an all-encompassing sense that each individual’s role is in service to the organisation’s overall goal and mission. Both secondees felt that this was a cornerstone to the high-performance culture by

underpinning a shared passion and focus. It also drove a clear set of values and high-performance behaviours across the team, including high attention to detail, an understanding that the “1%’s matter and a commitment to working hard to get things right, particularly at key points in the race season. It provided a very strong sense of ‘one team’ that was visceral and experienced by all – and the secondees talked about their own passion, enjoyment and fulfilment at having been part of that culture. As one said: “It’s easy to say attention to detail matters – but until you’re in sport and racing, you don’t understand what this truly means.” The presence of one compelling purpose helped everyone be clear around priorities at any single time and meant that there was a remarkable absence of individual agendas and drove high levels of cooperation as people across the team worked together towards this common goal.

Both talked about how they would take this insight back to NEOM – in terms of how they were thinking about their own performance and commitment to excellence and in how they would influence and ultimately lead teams. A key takeaway was around the power of a meaningful purpose – they felt NEOM had a compelling and potentially uniting goal, but in a project with the complexity and enormity that is being undertaken, there was a risk that the overall objective can get forgotten as individual project components and agendas get prioritised. Both secondees also spoke about how the immersion in the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team environment had shifted their mindset and behaviour around being their best, every day. As one said: “It’s taught me how important it is to not just look for improvements, but of improving yourself every day. The habit of being my best every day, learning, and trying to be better the next day has become second nature.” Both were looking forward to taking this practice back to NEOM and applying it to their new roles and teams.

## 2) A culture of relentless and continuous improvement

For both secondees, the relentless learning and improvement culture at the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team has made an indelible and lasting impression. At the heart of this is an ongoing and exhaustive cycle of evaluating performance, identifying areas for improvement and then working collaboratively, innovatively and at pace to address those areas. Failures and mistakes are seen as an opportunity to learn and improve and there is a collective commitment to share opinions and give feedback in the quest of seeking improvements. Creativity, rapid problem solving, experimentation and calculated risk taking are also part of this continuous improvement culture – with a high premium on capturing and acting on the learning that comes from these activities.

Both talked about the safety created in the team to voice concerns, take responsibility when something wasn’t good enough and be collectively curious and innovative in solving problems together. This ‘growth mindset’ is often a core feature of high-performance environments and is a typical difference between HPS and business environments. The secondees talked about how NEOM shares the same fast-paced, innovative continuous improvement culture, but could have something to learn from the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team in how relentless, timely, focused, and forensically detailed reviews to learn and feed forward were constantly carried out. Being part of this had helped the secondees take and seek feedback in a different way than previously – they had learned to question and

be curious in a constant quest for improvement and to work with others to do so. Balancing challenge and support is what sits at the heart of this – both secondees observed that meeting high levels of challenge is possible when accompanied by support – and that is what underpins psychological safety. They noted the role of leaders in creating and sustaining this environment. As one said: “Leaders trust, delegate and support. They challenge people to find solutions, trust them to do that as experts, provide them with support and allow them to do their role. There is never any blame, just a desire to find better solutions.” They were both clear about how to take this back to NEOM – how to share with teams, how to role model this, and behaviour and – when in a leadership position – how to maintain NEOM’s continuous improvement environment.

### 3) Clear and focused communication

The final high-performance insight that both secondees mentioned was the precision, timeliness and relevance of communication. Meetings at the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team are conducted efficiently – those who need to be there are invited; it is clear what the meeting is for and what outcome is desired; they are structured and concise and there are established ‘rules’ for communication – voices are listened to, everyone is expected and invited to contribute, there is a solution focus, and there are clear actions and owners at the end of each meeting. Decisions and essential information are communicated clearly with relevant parties – there is no ‘over-communication’ (i.e., the tendency, often seen in the corporate world for everybody to be informed, or worse, copied in to emails when not necessary), but equally, rarely are individuals or departments not kept in the loop when they need to be. Information is shared and cascaded down in different ways and everyone takes responsibility for listening/reading with the understanding of the necessity of this. One secondee mentioned the excellence of communication between teams within the wider team, saying: “Teams think about who else – other individuals and teams – need to be involved and know. They think about the discussion or the problem they’re trying to fix and include the right people, not just who’s in the team.” Both mentioned this as an insight and value-add to bring back to NEOM – in a complex organisation and a fast-paced environment where there are many simultaneous projects and priorities, efficient communication is paramount. They were identified that this required good meeting ‘hygiene,’ clear decision-making, involving all key parties, and communicating out the essentials – simple habits but ones that are easy to neglect. The secondees were clear how they could apply this insight to their own performance, to their teams as they moved back to a role at NEOM, and in a future leadership position.

## Summary

The positive development impact of their experience in the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team was clearly evident for the two secondees who took part in this programme. There was a personal aspect to this development, and their professional technical skills were also furthered through their year with the team. But the greatest development came from immersion in the high-performance environment. Both secondees told a similar story of how their own mindset and behaviour as a ‘performer’ in their role had been indelibly influenced. Their understanding of the need to continually improve as a high performer

was matched by their passion to take this approach forward as they continued their careers back at NEOM. They were also clear about how best they could influence their teams and the culture at NEOM, and through the opportunity to observe and reflect on how leaders were operating in the HPS environment, were starting to shape their vision of how high-performing leaders operate, and how to create and sustain high performance in teams.

The support they had received from the NEOM and Mercedes-EQ Formula E teams throughout their year's secondment was critical in ensuring that they maximised the opportunity presented to them. They spoke of individual mentors and supporters as key and expressed their own desire to provide mentoring support for future cohorts. Role clarity was also important – the fact that they were playing specific roles on the Mercedes-EQ Formula E Team and expected to contribute to the mission (rather than just in support or observation role) – was also important in challenging them to step up, developing their confidence and ensuring that the experience was an optimally developmental one.