



Developing a Highly Successful Leadership Team

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Early in my career I was an active participant on a senior leadership team that was reluctant to call its struggling executive director to task. After several painful months that left the organization on a treacherous downward spiral, the chairperson of the board of directors finally made the correct call and the executive director was dismissed. It took the organization years, not months, to recover and regain its footing. When the new executive director came onboard, his first comment to me was, “Let’s talk about what happened and how all of you on the senior leadership team had a role in the downfall of the former executive director.”

Initially I was irritated by this comment but in thinking about things, I began to appreciate his wisdom. It is what Patrick Lencioni refers to as “Dysfunction 4,” the avoidance of accountability, in his classic work, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Personally, I prefer to think of senior leadership teams not as inherently dysfunctional but rather as extremely complicated and specialized groups that can easily lose their direction, especially when confronted with very challenging circumstances.

In working with senior teams, I steer away from the term “dysfunctional” and focus on motivating the team members in a more positive fashion to embrace the essentials of effective communication. Here are three of those essentials:

Developing the discipline of focused listening – Teamwork demands a consistent focus on communication and a lot more active listening than most senior leaders care to acknowledge. Most senior leaders are better at talking than they are at listening. They are more accustomed to being the center of attention and having others listening carefully to their points of view, rather than the reverse.

Embracing feedback without becoming defensive and/or anxious. Members of senior leadership teams need to learn how to accept constructive feedback without feeling like it is an attack on their credibility or competence. In the words of Jim Whitehurst, CEO of the software firm Red Hat, “The idea is to build a sense of accountability so that people watch each other’s backs, not look to stick a knife in them.”

Letting go of big egos and valuing the contributions of fellow team members. This is likely the single biggest challenge in working with senior leadership teams. You don’t get to the table without having an outsized amount of ambition and competitive drive. How do you persuade senior leadership teams to dial back on their competitive nature in exchange for the big wins that will come from a more collaborative approach?

It’s all about finding the right balance between the excess of confidence that senior team members often have with respect to their own abilities, and the often poorly managed anxiety they may have about working collaboratively. They can have unspoken concerns about the abilities of their equally competitive and driven colleagues to solve big, mission critical issues in a truly effective and timely way.

So why should senior leadership teams care about increasing their ability to work together cohesively? As a starting point, compelling evidence and a growing number of anecdotes point to the need for effective teams as the present and future building blocks in contemporary organizations.

And then there’s VUCA. Coined by the military to describe the increasingly Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous nature of today’s highly competitive, global environment, the acronym is shorthand for why it has become almost impossible for any leader to single handedly solve the complex business issues that are now commonplace in any global organization.

Under the right conditions, team-based structures have been shown to deliver superior business results, but the road to success can be bumpy and treacherous unless senior teams are taking full advantage of the emerging best practices in the field.

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Right Management is the global career expert within ManpowerGroup (NYSE: MAN), providing tailored global workforce solutions that identify, develop and transition talent to optimize business performance. As career experts, we enable companies to win by helping employees build successful careers in the Human Age.

We drive better outcomes through our expertise in organizational effectiveness, career management and individual development. Right Management has offices in more than 50 countries and partners with companies of all sizes, including more than 80 percent of the Fortune 500.

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