

Executive Team Performance:

Leadership cohesion provides an overlooked competitive advantage

Second in a four-part series



The high-performance team is the last competitive advantage that organizations have. It is truly the “X factor.” And if that team is at the top of the organization, it’s even better. When an executive team is performing at optimal levels, it cascades down through the rest of the organization.

However, that’s not usually what we find when we start working with a company around issues of executive team performance. Many groups of workers seem more likely to resemble recreational bowling teams. If the team wins that evening, they are pleased. If they lose, it’s not a big deal. The primary concern is trying to increase their individual average.

Yet our consulting work convinces us that people at all levels of an organiza-

tion yearn for more. For example, most people work in the healthcare field because they truly want to help others. Yet being a vital part of a high-performing team in healthcare is critical too.

In fact, companies that are able to build high-performing teams find that they are better able to retain as well as attract top employees. People want to do meaningful work as part of a leadership team built with purpose.

What are the hallmarks of a top-performing executive team?

Clarity. Team members know what their roles and responsibilities are. They have clear assignments and accountabilities.

Trust. With clarity comes trust. Team members know that if they fail in their role, others will fall short in their own

assignment. There is an interdependence that is unmistakable. That trust breeds a confidence that team members have each other’s backs and can be counted on.

Strength. The hallmark of a highly effective team is that the team knows individual strengths around the table and leverages them at every opportunity. The strength of this team truly is greater than the sum of the parts.

So how does an average team truly become a force to reckon with?

A high-performance team reaches its goals by answering some key questions:

- *What is your purpose? Why does this team exist?*
- *What is your value to the organiza-*

tion? What is your contribution?

- What does the team want to be known for?

Here, an example is helpful.

We'll change the names and other details. Chris was a vice president leading a major division of a health system. He was good at it. But one particular Friday, he was told, "When you come in Monday, you have a new job leading a new division."

Chris was completely ill-prepared and had not been the beneficiary of

feedback about their performance. This began with Chris, who demonstrated a remarkable level of coachability and ownership for the results. He refused to blame anyone except himself for the results – not his lieutenants, not the competitive environment, not the economy, not the regulators.

Chris' commitment to his team was this: We are all under construction, and we all have areas where we have to continually upgrade. But we are not going to rest until we have made inroads to transformation, and we will not rest

of how the members view themselves as a team. What do they think are the team's strengths, weaknesses and obstacles?

Write a leadership declaration.

This is the road map for change. What is the team willing to commit to in order to see performance improve and change occur?

One team we worked with came up with this list: 1) Listen more, talk less. 2) Give each other the benefit of the doubt. 3) Identify and leverage strengths. 4) Keep the commitment you make to each other. 5) Celebrate victories.

Effective teams develop a scorecard. They measure their effectiveness quantitatively and qualitatively.

onboarding for his new role. He had not been set up for success.

For two years, Chris and his division floundered. When we encountered him, he was near the end of his rope, emotionally and vocationally. To his credit, he took responsibility for his team's failures, and vowed to turn his leadership team and the division around.

The key question that Chris and his leadership team answered was, "What does the team want to be known for?" Assessments with our team, one-on-ones and coaching led Chris' team to the realization that they wanted to be known as the talent factory of their organization. They would identify, cultivate and provide opportunities for leadership development. Their workers would become highly sought after within the organization. Other leaders would look to send their talent into Chris' division for development.

To achieve this goal, our work with Chris' team included getting them to agree on a commitment to truly risk

or plateau once those changes have been set into motion.

His team did become a leader in the company. It did become known as an incubator of talent, and it has stayed there to this very day.

Getting started

There are many ways to begin improving executive team performance but, like Chris' team, the process often begins with some form of the following building blocks:

Individualized assessments. While we prefer to use the Hogan assessment, the first step often is knowing the strengths and areas for improvement of the various team members.

A look in the mirror, Part One:

Everything begins with the leader. He or she must lead the change and take responsibility for the success or failure of the team performance.

A look in the mirror, Part Two: Perception often is reality in a business setting, so we do a second assessment

Keeping score

The last thing that effective teams do is develop a scorecard. They routinely measure their effectiveness quantitatively and qualitatively. So if they have agreed to certain behaviors as a team, they will vigorously monitor themselves. They also will take periodic surveys on how they have done with those agreements. Have they seen some slippage, or are they hitting it out of the park? Every successful team wants to light up the scoreboard. So they continue to inspect what they expect around their behaviors, and evaluate what they need to be as a team. The transformation of executive team performance is possible. In fact, it's a necessity in today's competitive environment.

For more information on our integrated talent management practice in these areas, please contact:



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