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DEVELOPING HIGH- PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Lynda McDermott

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HUMAN CAPITAL

DEVELOPING HIGH-PERFORMANCE LEADERSHIP TEAMS



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WHAT IS A LEADERSHIP TEAM? 1

LEADERSHIP TEAM DEVELOPMENT 4

LEADERSHIP TEAM CORE COMPETENCIES 9

MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF LEADERSHIP TEAMS 10

TRAINING AND COACHING LEADERSHIP TEAMS 13

CONCLUSION 15

REFERENCES & RESOURCES 16

JOB AIDS

New Leadership Team Jump-Start Agenda 17

What's Our Need for Teamwork? 19

Measuring Internal Leadership Team Effectiveness 20

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During the past couple of decades, organizations have increasingly become enamored with the power of teams. The world has grown too complex to assume that a single individual leader is smart enough or has the bandwidth to meet all of the challenges and market realities organizations face.

It is assumed that if you can “get the right people on the bus,” point them in the right direction, and give them the appropriate resources and incentives, they will have the potential to achieve real teamwork, high performance, and add significant value to their organizations.

However, here is a warning: If the team you are working with is a *leadership team*, composed of “leaders of leaders,” those same great results are still achievable—but not without hard work. Our experience tells us that the most difficult teams to work with have team members who hold leadership roles and who are not naturally skilled at building collaborative, team-oriented relationships with their peers.

This *TD at Work* will show you how to develop and sustain high-performance leadership teams in a wide variety of organizations, whether in corporations, government agencies, or nonprofit organizations. While the content will be helpful for leaders of such leadership teams, there is also information and tools that trainers, coaches, and facilitators can use to launch and develop leadership teams.

In this issue, you will learn:

- how to define what leadership teams *do* and how to ensure you have the right leadership team structure
- the challenges and benefits of leadership teams
- how to launch a new leadership team
- how to measure the success of a leadership team
- how to support a leadership team’s development as a trainer, coach, or facilitator.

WHAT IS A LEADERSHIP TEAM?

Let’s start by defining a leadership team.

A leadership team is a group of two or more people who lead organizations that represent diverse functions, geographies, or areas of expertise, and who are committed to collaboratively serve some significant organizational purpose for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

By definition, these leaders hold such positions as senior vice president, department or division head, country manager, business unit leader, brand leader, or executive committee member. They are leaders of their own functional or geographic organizations who have been asked to join and work together to add value beyond what they and their organizations respectively provide.

Who should be on a leadership team? In my experience, form follows function. What that means is that if you are contemplating forming a leadership team, you first need to define what the leadership team will be expected to work on—that is, what will it do?

One CEO with whom my company worked had been reluctant to formally establish a leadership team. His small company, which he founded with two other executives, was growing, but he was more comfortable conferring with his direct reports one-on-one or in small groups. His staff meetings were where he and his direct reports received updates on various departments’ progress or issues. However, with the addition of seasoned professionals to the leadership ranks it became apparent that the CEO was not fully leveraging their experience and expertise. The CEO decided to form a leadership team.

In addition to key executives from medical, research, marketing, and sales, all whom directly reported to him, the CEO decided to add managers from staff functions—such as human resources, finance, and legal—to his team because he wanted their perspectives to be heard for key leadership team decisions. As he began considering who should be on his team, we reminded the CEO that if they were truly going to be a real team that had open discussions and made joint decisions, he needed to keep the number of team members close to 10 or fewer.

IF YOU ARE CONTEMPLATING FORMING A LEADERSHIP TEAM, YOU FIRST NEED TO DEFINE WHAT THE LEADERSHIP TEAM WILL BE EXPECTED TO WORK ON—THAT IS, WHAT WILL IT DO?

There are some key questions you should consider when contemplating whether you need to or want to form a leadership team and who should be on it:

- Will the organization receive value-added benefit from holding the individual leaders who will be on the team mutually accountable for the team's results?
- What will be the work of the leadership team? What will they collaborate to do that will have clear performance value for the organization?

Components and Characteristics of Leadership Teams

Let's examine each of these in more detail. *Mutual accountability* means we hold each other accountable for our joint results; it does not mean I hold myself accountable, or that the boss holds us accountable. Because the leadership team is made up of members who are leaders of leaders, each team member has already mastered the art of individual accountability and holding his team responsible for achieving results. Mutual accountability means that we are all in this together. If you don't deliver your results, we all will help you find out what you need to achieve the desired outcome.

A leadership team differs from what we call a working group, whose members happen to directly report to a particular leader and who have responsibility for specific functions, geographic markets, product lines, departments, and the like. Working groups interact primarily to share information and perspectives; also, there are no shared performance goals, joint work products, or mutual accountability. One senior leader who believed she had a leadership team of 25 came to

realize after our comparison of leadership teams and working groups, that what she had was really an FYI committee.

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY MEANS THAT WE ARE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER. IF YOU DON'T DELIVER YOUR RESULTS, WE ALL WILL HELP YOU FIND OUT WHAT YOU NEED TO ACHIEVE THE DESIRED OUTCOME.

It is not uncommon for a leader of leaders to choose not to manage her direct reports as a team, preferring to just use staff meetings as FYI forums and to periodically pull some of the team members together to discuss common issues. As one division leader said to me one day, "It's like herding cats" to get them to reach out of their own silos and collaborate with each other. My reply to him was "That's because they're not just cats—they're lions—kings and queens of their own jungles."

What do leadership teams *do*? As I mentioned, one of the first tasks of a leadership team is to decide its *raison d'être*—that is, why it exists. This purpose must provide added value to the organization.

Some of the strategic reasons for forming a leadership team are listed below.

- Create a forum for highly interdependent leaders to collaborate on creating a vision, making strategic decisions, and accomplishing strategic initiatives.
- Identify and resolve strategic issues.
- Share information and expertise.
- Identify and develop top talent across their organization; pinpoint and leverage collaboration opportunities and best practices.
- Oversee implementation or redesign of interdependent management processes.
- Ensure alignment and collaboration among the leadership team members' respective organizations.

Challenges Facing Leadership Teams

People who join teams expect and appreciate that each team member brings unique and valuable assets, such as experiences, knowledge, and skills, to the team. They assume that the results they can achieve together are likely to be greater than what they could achieve on their own. Team members work at open communications, sharing information, dialogues, debates about critical issues, and managing disagreements and conflicts, which are inevitable. They learn to trust each other and to keep their focus on what is best for the team and the larger organization, rather than allowing individuals to run their own agendas, make unilateral decisions, or engage in power and control politics.

However, leadership teams are composed of leaders who have often made it into their positions because of their ability to master individualistic and competitive behaviors. Many of them identify more with their team of direct reports than they do with their leadership team peers. The leaders often are more comfortable leading their own organizations as separate silos and having ultimate authority within their defined areas of responsibility, whether it is a department, division, geographical region, or other business unit.

Our research and consulting with leadership teams suggest that the major impediments to leadership groups being able to function as effective leadership teams are:

- lack of understanding about *why* they need to operate as a team and not seeing the value of collaboration
- absence of tangible performance goals for which the members are mutually accountable to achieve
- wrong people on the team in terms of skills, experience, behaviors, and attitude
- avoidance of difficult dialogues and conflict, in the guise of maintaining harmony
- resentment of the time commitment
- lack of alignment between individual team member recognition and rewards with leadership team performance

- absence of explicit norms for how they should all work together.

What we do know is that whether a group of leaders function together as a team or operate as a siloed working group begins with the beliefs of the leader of leaders—for example, whether he actually believes there is a real need for the leadership team. It also revolves around the willingness of the leader to encourage the leadership team to follow the processes and norms required to effectively function as a real team.

Benefits of Leadership Teams

If guiding leaders as a leadership team is so difficult, why would a leader of leaders choose to do it?

One European sales vice president of a major technology company recognized that if he was going to turn around the European division's results, he needed the best and the brightest thinking of all the regional sales managers. The sales vice president explained this situation to me: "They're all used to leading their own fiefdoms. How can I get them to see that we need to work together to turn around these results?"

I suggested that we take the group off-site to do two things:

- Examine together the question, "Do we need to be a team?" (They had clearly been operating as a working group.)
- What kind of a leadership team do we need to be? For example, "What do we need to team upon?" and "What is the common set of goals we share?"

Prior to the off-site, we had each of the regional sales managers complete our company's "What's our need for teamwork survey?"

In the survey, we ask participants to rate where they feel their team is now, and where they feel they need to be, based on the following percentage scale:

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