

Improving the Performance of the Top Team

George Levy

One of the key tasks of the chief executive is to build an effective top team that will provide corporate leadership and will ensure the team's decisions are implemented throughout the organisation.

Most chief executives believe their team is an effective one. Interestingly, a recent paper in Harvard Business Review suggests that chief executives' estimation of their team's performance is higher than that of the other team members. On average chief executives scored their team's overall effectiveness as 5.39 on a scale of 1-7, while members' scores averaged 4.02.

(It would be interesting to learn the scores that would be given by those who report to the members of these teams.)

What are the symptoms of a top team that is underperforming? They are many, including: decisions that are unclear or poorly thought through; failure of team members to act on the team's decisions; and team members putting their individual or functional interests before those of the organisation as a whole.

Within the team what is happening can include failure to debate things fully because of too much or too little conflict, lack of buy-in to decisions, demotivation, cynicism and resistance to meetings.

So what can you do about these problems? Frequently chief executives turn to one of two approaches. They attempt to improve the structure of meetings and of decision-making processes so that thinking will be more rigorous and decisions clearer. This is good so far as it goes, but as it doesn't get to grips with the reasons why team members are not bought in, many of the problems often remain.

The other approach is to engage in some form of team-building activity. Again this may bring benefits, but too often those benefits prove to lack resilience once the team comes together again to grapple with real issues.

So what can you do? Much of the problem lies in how the team works together in meetings – regular meetings, strategy meetings, planning meetings, whatever – and that is where it needs to be addressed.

Two elements are worth pursuing: treating inappropriate behaviour as an indicator of team members' concerns, and creating a 'thinking environment'.

Inappropriate behaviour

The general expectation in meetings is that participants will express themselves calmly and that discussion will be rational and focused on the issue in hand. In practice, other forms of behaviour often manifest themselves, such as:

- aggression, even bullying, to override others' arguments and force through one's own
- attacks on individuals rather than their arguments
- disengagement, so that the individual simply doesn't participate
- sulking – sometimes also described as passive aggression.

Depending on the organisation, one or more of these will be frowned upon. Aggression may be tolerated as 'normal' – particularly in a male-dominated environment – while sulking is considered childish. In other organisations, aggressive behaviour will be the one thing that is considered unacceptable.

What these behaviours have in common is that none of them helps the team to think an issue through effectively.

These behaviours are also all expressions of an individual's unhappiness about something. Unfortunately, because the concern has not been expressed openly, others in the team cannot be aware of it or respond to it.

One response to these behaviours is simply to rule them out of order – after all, senior managers are all adults and are expected to act as such. Another response is to recognise that the behaviour has a reason, to draw attention to it and to ask the individual to explain their concern.

In one team I worked with, one member periodically withdrew and appeared to be sulking. Others in the team were inclined to be irritated with the behaviour, but the chief executive chose to treat it as a signal that the person had an issue to bring out. On virtually every such occasion, it turned out the 'sulk' was a signal that something important needed attention and the discussion it prompted proved fruitful. The individual concerned also re-engaged in the general discussion.

So one thing a chief executive – and all team members – can do is to notice inappropriate behaviours and, rather than just reacting to them, treat them as a signal that there is an issue to address.

(These ideas were well described by Eric Berne, the inventor of Transactional Analysis, and others working in this field. Stephen Karpman's 'Drama Triangle' is a particularly good illustration of what happens when people express their concerns in inappropriate ways.)

Thinking Environment

Nancy Kline describes a 'thinking environment': a set of conditions that enable people to think effectively and to make good decisions. She describes nine guidelines for the chair of a meeting to follow to create such an environment. Here, I want to discuss two of those guidelines:

Throughout the meeting

- give attention without interruption during open and even fiery discussion
- periodically go around to give everyone a turn to say what they think.

The idea that people will be listened to without interruption is at the heart of Kline's ideas. In most settings, people interrupt each other all the time. They are bursting with their own ideas and feelings, and as soon as something triggers a thought they want to express it. (This is well encapsulated in the saying: 'People don't listen, they reload'.) The result is that people don't get to explain their thinking properly and consequently, Kline says, they don't think as well as they could. In contrast, when everyone knows that they will have a turn to speak and that when they do they won't be interrupted, the quality of their thinking – and hence that of the meeting – improves dramatically.

The technique of going round the group to give everyone a turn to talk about a particular issue reinforces this effect. (This technique is sometimes called a 'thinking round'.)

These two elements alone have a huge impact on what happens in a team. When people have no choice but to listen, they generally do. The discussion that follows is quite different from the wrangling that happens so often. People feel liberated by the opportunity to talk without interruption; and those listening almost always hear something that changes their views, something that otherwise would not have emerged.

The thinking round can be very powerful. In the senior management team of a well-known charity, one member was consistently quiet. When invited to take part in a thinking round, he would always cite what he considered his lack of management experience (he led a technical function) and then frequently proceeded to produce gold dust. Without the thinking round, his ideas would have been lost and the decisions reached would have been that much poorer.

Conclusion

These two elements – treating inappropriate behaviour as a signal and creating a thinking environment – are remarkably powerful.

People do behave inappropriately at times, no matter how reasonable we all try to be. If we can respond to that constructively – challenging it and looking for what lies behind it – everyone gains. And there is something very special about an environment where you know you will be able to think things through properly and will be listened to.

Some people find adopting such an approach awkward; some will resist it. Many people enjoy the 'cut and thrust' of normal debate, and some will think of this as too 'touchy feely'. It is worth persisting. Those that do will find that meetings become more productive and more enjoyable – and the team's performance will improve significantly.

References

1. CEOs Misperceive Top Teams' Performance by Richard M Rosen and Fred Adair, Harvard Business Review September 2007. [Available free at the HBR website.](#)
2. This is the [Wikipedia reference on the drama triangle](#). It contains links to more in depth articles.
3. Time to Think by Nancy Kline, Ward Lock 1999.

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