



On Teams and Optimum Senior Team Performance – For Thought

Research shows that most senior teams are underperforming. Performance in this instance is measured against both hard business/performance and softer quality of life and wellbeing targets. Harvard/Hay research that looked at 120 senior teams in 11 countries found that;

- 1 in 5 were outstanding
- 1 in 3 were mediocre
- 42% were poor

All too often senior team meetings were very time-consuming, energy-sapping, frustrating, poorly facilitated or managed, lacking in focus and failed to add any value to the overall business agenda. The conclusions of the research are that it is not possible to make a top team 'great,' but it is possible and hugely desirable to create the conditions that greatly enhance the likelihood that it will be effective.

These conditions include ensuring the team is defined with a very clear and challenging remit; that responsibilities are defined rather than a loose collection of individuals; that members are interdependent; that they are paired for peer support and practice review in a loose way that allows for rotation in partnering every 6 months at minimum. Lastly, that the right people are on board. This means shared core values and attitudes; as the research states, 'you cannot afford to have team destroyers on the senior executive team.' Mutuality and willingness to fully engage are critical attributes at a senior level.

The research puts forward 3 enablers:

1. The right 'organisational' support in terms of reward, organisation, on-going education and development.
2. A clear structure with clear norms of conduct
3. Team coaching
4. A manageable number of members, plus the awareness that more than 7 will impact process decisions while lower numbers (eg; 4) will produce other dynamics that need consideration.
(Consider the issue of linkages, for example. A team of 2 has 1 link; a team of 18 has 169. The number of problems that a team faces is to a large extent the number of links that have to be managed.)

Thinking about the 'right people'

In an ideal world we might choose to build senior teams from scratch, but this is not possible except in the new project or start up situation and even then there are usually many contingent factors. Getting the right people on the team, developing people into a role or a set of responsibilities, or into changing circumstances that

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demand new or different ways of working – even thinking - will always be a huge challenge. There are a number of things to consider, some of which are routinely overlooked.

1. Social Style

Personality and associated social style, influences attitudes and the atmosphere that surrounds individuals. The result is that they are either pleasant to have around, or an irritant.

Social style preferences matter a great deal in personal relationships; these preferences are linked to the affect or emotional aspects of human endeavour. Social style preferences, however, usually forecast problems if they are or become the drivers of business decisions. Why? Because when the emphasis has to be on performance, productivity, and results, personal likes and dislikes, feelings, emotions, and specific wishes that could take a leader-manager off course, need at best to be overcome or, at least to be managed.

Any manager who has had to make a friend redundant, pass them over when recommending a promotion, or a business owner/entrepreneur who has had to turn down a business deal with a family member, or a team member who either is or aspires to dating a colleague who is underperforming, will agree it is challenging to draw the line between the affect and conative or “doing domain;” but we do it all the time because our work requires it. Consider the following statements:

“I really like XXX, but...”

“You know I really value our friendship, but business is business.”

“People like that drive me crazy at times, but I know we need them on the team.”

These statements begin with an affective attitude, which is then negated when the word “but” makes it clear that personality or social style is not the determining issue when something needs to be done. In the workplace, such statements reflect the need to make a clear distinction between the recognition of social style, even a preference regarding it; they value the higher importance that must be placed on instinct-based, performance contributions.

2. Conation - Actions taken by Instinct

Learning to distinguish between natural abilities, actions (the conative contribution) that people take by instinct and intuition and personality, is a significant part of taking responsibility for team actions and performance delivery.



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When you “get conative,” you move past the intellectual awareness that something has to be done, and beyond any emotions you may have about doing it. By getting conative, you focus instinctive energy on an effort. When you do this, you will “have something to show for yourself” – in short, accomplishment.

Conation is the third part of marketing triad that researchers in the 1950s found essential to the buying decision. They said that a successful sale was dependent upon the presence of 3 things in a customer.

1. conative knowledge of a product's benefits
2. affective preference to own it
3. conative drive to buy it

Recognition of the three aspects of decision-making ties back to the three mental faculties, the triune brain of human beings. Success will come easier for you, however, and for the team you put together, because you can now manage this energy, directing it more specifically towards career planning, problem solving and decision making. You can now take charge of your natural ability and you can coach others to better utilize their talents. You can direct your own energies and that of others to achieve more predictable success.

Maximizing the Mind

It would be just as wrong to overlook the importance of intelligence (learned behaviours and skills) and personality (social styles and preferences) in this process, as it was to have ignored the impact of our instincts.

The **Trillium Effect** comes into play when we maximize our mental abilities. Trilliums are wonderful woodland wildflowers that have three petals on each flower, three leaves on each branch, three stamens, and three of every other natural element of their beauty. The trillium has prevailed and multiplied despite having become so rare in many places that they were given the status of a protected species. They have endured and flourished in the right conditions.

The three elements of the mind in a similar way can be just as persevering; they will ‘thrive’ under the right conditions. You do not just have a “left” brain for logical, linear thinking, and a “right” brain to give you emotion; there is a centre brain (one neurophysicist has referred to it as the “executive brain”) to manage the conversation of thought and feeling into action. By reflecting on the three parts of the mind from a discrete perspective - cognitive, affective and conative, (the conative being the actions taken by instinct) - allows us to gain a clear understanding of each, plus, the criticality of how they all interact in everything we do.

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