Creating a strong leadership team

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1. Introduction

Creating a genuine leadership team takes time, effort, skill and sometimes an outsider – a consultant. The consultant, not bound by the past, has the capability to envision possibilities, and provide both the structure and the environment to make a hoped-for vision into a reality.

In creating a genuine team, the first factor that must be developed is trust. Trust occurs (for adults) through open communication. Oddly enough, many organisations have unwittingly fostered a closed system of communication. Fear of losing control and the repercussions that might occur with that loss lead to a lessened openness; yet people long to say what is on their minds, to call things as they see them, and to help make changes that will make their own and others' working lives better. Thus, when setting the stage for genuine teamwork, the first step is to create an environment in which people can talk openly to one another. This includes the participants being willing to take some risks in terms of self-disclosure, as well as having some fun in the process. This first step is often the most difficult.

The process of becoming an effective and genuine team often has an unexpected and unanticipated effect: hope is created or, in some cases, recreated. New and powerful energy is released, and people find themselves reaching to attain goals that they had earlier never believed they could reach; collectively and individually they find a sense of creativity and yearning to go beyond the limits they have previously achieved. Often these limits have become feelings that have been buried under the weight of the demands of daily work and life, and the return to the uninhibited openness that was experienced early on in life is a joyful occurrence.

2. The leadership team, and creating a new organisational structure

One of the most effective tools for making positive change in any organisation is the creation of a strong leadership team, whether in a family-owned business or in a corporate-led enterprise. The difference between working with a leadership team in a corporation and one in a family-owned business is the potential added encumbrance of family dynamics. Family dynamics are, of course, very powerful; they are also deep-seated.

While the dynamics in a family-owned organisation may be complex and, indeed, daunting, the same kinds of interpersonal dynamics tend to occur in a corporate-led organisation. These dynamics often include the perception that others

are stuck in their ways and not capable of change. Passive/aggressive behaviour, as well as dependency, control and competitive issues, are often at play. Family dynamics issues are often entrenched and so are played out at work as well as in personal lives. Within corporate structures, such dynamics are often quickly created because people bring their personal needs and wishes into their working lives. Work itself often comprises three-quarters of individuals' waking lives and, accordingly, any individual's needs and hopes may be easily played out within the business enterprise.

In building a strong leadership team in the midst of these dynamics, a consultant who is engaged to assist would seek to help the leadership team to:

- build trust among the members of the team;
- create team goals that support the mission of the organisation;
- use team members' voices and perspectives to understand the reality of what faces the organisation;
- develop effective means of resolving conflicts;
- create effective communication processes within the team and with the organisation;
- be innovative and thoughtful in all problem-solving processes;
- create an environment that will promote intrinsic motivation among the team members; and
- become adept at anticipating changes in the larger environment and responding successfully to these changes.

In the best of situations, the consultant would also work with multiple groups and teams in the organisation, using a similar process, until the entire organisation is embedded in a newly created organisational future. Once that is established, the company is more likely to use teamwork appropriately to sense the environment, plan, create and implement strategy, and ensure its future.

3.   An instructive case study

3.1   Overview

In working with a family-owned manufacturing facility, we found that the leadership team members were set in their ways as well as in their belief that nothing could change. However, competition in the industry was forcing the company's leaders to consider ways of becoming more effective in their leadership. Clearly, a pivotal factor in their success or lack thereof would be to change their beliefs in their ability to work together and to be able to act on this understanding.

The senior leadership team was composed of seven men and included the company's chief executive officer (CEO) (who was also the founder of the company), one son who headed the finance function, and a younger son who headed up manufacturing. The company produced spectacle frames and sold to various distributors that carried brands from the lower end of the market to the designer end. The founder owned 50% of the company while the two sons each owned 25%. The company itself was located in the mid-west of the United States, had been in

existence for 32 years and employed approximately 500 people in manufacturing and sales, many of whom were long-term employees due, in part, to the fact that getting another job was very difficult in that area of the US.

Historically, there had been a consistent pattern of difficulty in the relationships of all three family members in their roles within the company. There was little trust between them, and they were often suspicious of one another. They could not provide a sense of safety, either for one another or for the entire team. Modelling the behaviour of the controlling family owner/managers, the company executives acted towards one another in ways that reflected their suspicions of each other – they felt little safety in the team and lived with a concern that things might become chaotic at any moment.

The beliefs and behaviour of the leadership team were reflected throughout the organisation. Unknowingly, the team members were demonstrating the concept of isomorphism – that is to say, those below the leadership team members replicated the tone and behaviour of the leadership without a conscious knowledge of why they were doing so – and the consequences were damaging. This phenomenon of isomorphism is seen in many companies, and the majority of leaders of those companies do not know that it is occurring.

This particular leadership team could not resolve conflicts between its members. The sons were afraid of displeasing their father, who was perceived by everyone else in the organisation as very powerful. The sons themselves did not see eye to eye about a number of organisational issues. For instance, the head of manufacturing wanted some additional plant machinery and associated training to accompany the new machinery, while the head of finance strongly believed that with sales falling because of growing competition, no extra expenditures should be approved. Both positions were reasonable under the circumstances, and even appropriate for the executives advocating conflicting positions, given the explicit responsibilities of these two owner/managers.

The conflicts between the owners were easily seen by other members of the team, who had over the years grown fearful about expressing their personal views. Of course, since conflict avoidance was itself an implicit core value of the business enterprise, it is hardly surprising that the entire team was generally uncommunicative.

The team firmly believed that the controlling family shareholder's personal traits were unchangeable and that other team members were also incapable of change. In social psychology, this belief is identified as a 'fundamental attribution error'. By definition, this error is the tendency for people to place an undue emphasis on personality characteristics to explain someone else's behaviour in a given situation, rather than considering the situation's external factors. In an enterprise where fundamental attribution error had become a way of life, all the team members assumed that others could not change.

The leadership team members' reactions to one another were consistently negative. In reality, they were somewhat depressed and angry, and either did not know or could not acknowledge the depths of their despair. This reality was their past and unfortunately their present, so change did not seem a possibility.

At the same time, the outside factors affecting the company were having an increasing impact; in particular, new competition in the industry was growing. Company sales continued to decline, and the company was not innovative, consistently failing to think of new products or of efficiencies for its current product lines. From the human perspective, the reality that their employees' lives and abilities to provide for their families were at stake affected all the leadership team members. They were, however, too stuck in their ways to be able to effect changes that could ease their concerns.

It was at this point that we were asked by the manufacturing head – who had gained the tacit agreement of his father – to step in as consultants and begin working with the leadership team to "make things better". The specific remit was to work with the leadership team and the organisation to change the situation for the better.

We based our consultation work on the following principles:

- Successful teams coordinate individual efforts so that their results are greater than the sum of these individual efforts. Attaining such results requires attention to the team process and its growth; such attention requires time and effort.

- It is all too easy to approach team development as though the managing of relationships within the team will create success. Many team-building efforts are devoted to building stronger bonds among the team members. While this effort is valuable, it is important to understand other factors that are critical to the development of a successful team. An overriding critical component is that team members accept that that they must all pull in the same direction, and do so consistently. This analogy suggests that the fulfilment of the mission or vision of the team and its organisation is the ultimate goal around which all members are united. In order to attain the mission or vision, the team members must be united in their own goals and the performance needed to achieve these goals. Team members must also understand who needs to do what to ensure that the team will achieve its goals, and they must agree on what procedures will be needed for the team to do its work.

- It is imperative to recognise that when things go wrong in some way, the difficulties are often not due to individual members' characteristics or to difficult interpersonal relationships. If all team members agree on the organisation's mission or vision, the leadership team goals, the team members' roles and responsibilities, and the required changes of procedure and approach, then differences among team member personalities are less consequential.

3.2   Initial assessment

We started with an assessment of the situation we found. Each leadership team member talked confidentially with a consultant about being a member of the team. These interviews provided room to express frustrations. Some members talked quite openly and others were more guarded. Based on what the consultants were hearing from the leadership, we then delved deeper into the problems by talking with a cross section of the organisation's members. The interviews included open-ended

questions about what the employees or management were experiencing in their work, and the responses allowed us to develop the significant themes that were impacting the organisation.

3.3   Guiding leadership team development

We presented the organisational diagnosis to the leadership team candidly without reference to any individual. Rather, we identified the themes that were expressed, such as "It is very difficult to trust/communicate/make decisions around here" or "I believe (or don't believe) that the leadership team cares about the organisation and its workers." The team was then asked to explore what these themes and comments meant for the organisation and its ability to thrive. The leadership team members expressed some surprise at how the consequences of their own behaviour were perceived throughout the organisation.

In order for the leadership team members to gain perspective about their situation, the consultants guided the team members in analysing the factors that were affecting their teamwork, the organisation and their industry. These factors included individuals, groups and organisations both inside and outside their own organisation (see Figure 1). Soon, they began to understand how these factors affected their team's ability to be a strong and resilient leadership team.

Figure 1: Factors that influence teamwork
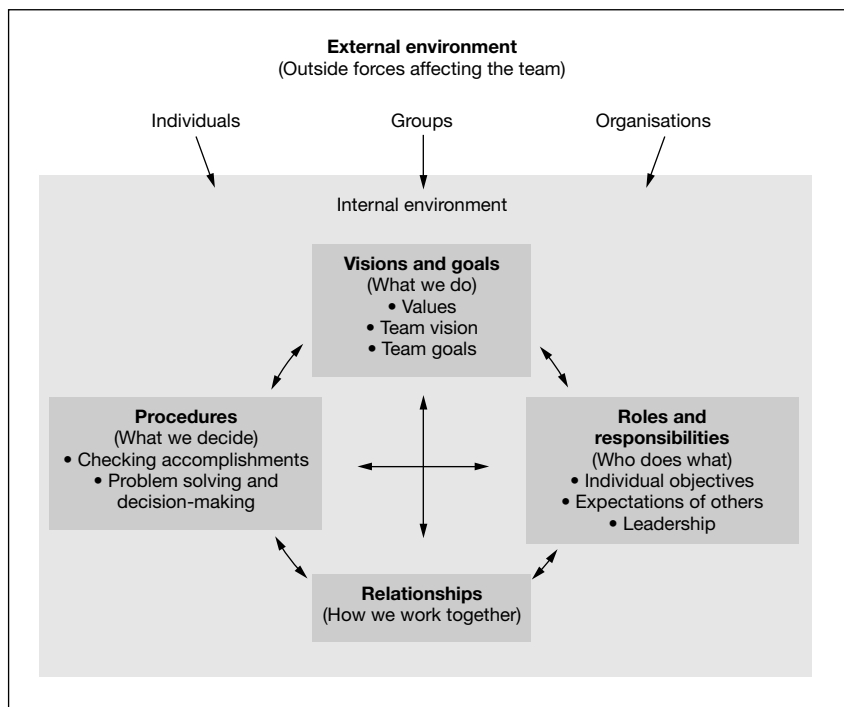
Next, we explored with the team the characteristics of ideal leaders and, by comparison, ineffective leadership teams, and we also discussed the consequences of each kind of leader for the team and for the company. We examined how ineffective leadership teams affect an entire organisation, and how their shortcomings can dramatically impact the members of the organisation as well as the organisation's own survival.

The next step was to effectively bring the leadership team back to its core mission as leaders of this company. The team members were asked to explore more concretely what their mission was (in other words, what their job was, what they were there to do, and what they could do to be more successful than they had been in the past).

We were then ready to have the leadership team create their operating philosophy or principles about how they would agree to treat one another going forward. We asked the team members to identify the values and characteristics that were important in creating a work environment in which people would feel intrinsically motivated to do their best work. These would form the basis for their operating principles.

An operating philosophy for any team includes a set of guiding principles that say:

- how team members will treat one another;
- what motivates the team;
- what quality of life the team members want; and
- how team members will treat others with whom they interact in their work, both inside and outside the organisation.

3.4 Commitment to change

After the operating principles were created, we asked each member to sign them as a pledge to abide by them in their work with one another, with company members and with those (such as suppliers) with whom they interacted on the outside.

The operating principles that were created read beautifully, but no one on the leadership team was convinced that it would be possible for them to follow through on their words, even with their pledges to do so. However, the leadership team recognised that it would be important to own the new philosophy. They also knew that if they used their former techniques of intimidation and control, they would likely negate their own efforts on behalf of their new operating philosophy.

They were also clear that they had a most difficult time confronting one another constructively. Having acknowledged the difficulty of their situation, the leadership team developed a simple approach of reminding one other of their (many) regressions in behaviour. Whenever any team member saw another team member behaving in a way that was not in accordance with their new operating principles, the observing team member would take a printed card from his pocket and hold it up to the other team member. The card had a simple question: "Are you Y'ing me?" Whatever the "Y" meant it was theirs to keep to themselves. We never knew, although we had our surmises.

In any event, the result was a good many instances of cards being pulled from pockets and held up in the eyes of the often unsuspecting yet offending team

member. No words were ever spoken, no criticism was given, and no relationship was undone in the process. However, over time, this method led to a remarkable change in the actions and behaviour of the leadership team members. In fact, the head of manufacturing decided to take on a change management role. He began to read books about leadership and over time became very active in implementing important steps for positive change in the company.

In their actions, then, the leadership team had begun to create an environment in which they felt some sense of safety. An important outcome of the development of the operating principles for any team is the containment that begins to be established. People start to feel that they can disagree with one another without things coming apart. Tensions can be expressed and resolved and people believe that they can move through difficulties and come out with solutions. They begin to have a foundation for hope about the future.[1]

3.5 Development of team goals and roles

At this point the leadership team was ready to undertake the development of their team goals, with performance measures and time lines to accompany those goals. They then moved to developing their roles with regard to their work as a leadership team. Doing so meant that team members had to explore how each could contribute to the team and its goals. Additionally, each team member had to take full responsibility regarding his role in meeting the team goals.

The team members had to look specifically at how the leadership team got things done. They had to decide on and agree to procedures for various things such as making their leadership team decisions, resolving their conflicts, holding their meetings, negotiating (where necessary) with one another, including new team members when they came on board, and checking on leadership team accomplishments.

When the mission, operating principles, goals, roles, and procedures were developed fully, it became clear that even members of the team who didn't necessarily like each other could indeed work together. Their personality differences became far less important when it was possible to agree on how and what they were going to do.

3.6 Skills development

During and following these team development sessions, we also worked on skills development. There were many skills to understand and develop. Some of the important ones included the ability to listen to others, to give feedback, to resolve conflict, to understand the impact of the system that people are in with regard to their actions, to understand oneself and others, to understand change and using resistance to change to further the change process, and to learn to build an environment in which individuals' intrinsic motivation can be brought to the forefront of their work lives.

Since collaboration is a necessary and valued characteristic among a leadership team, we consultants introduced the following collaboration-building skills:
- practising 'appreciative inquiry' – ie, asking questions without implied criticism, and listening very carefully to the response;

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1   See Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Harvard University Press, 1994.

- maintaining caution concerning any assumptions made, by testing those assumptions by getting more information;
- assuming that others are making sense to themselves – and figure out how, usually by asking;
- sharing your own requirements, needs and hopes;
- not assuming that people and groups act as they do because of their stable characteristics – looking instead at the impact of the system on them;
- explaining your thinking fully to others – they don't necessarily know or understand your thoughts. Be willing to share the thinking process, including the uncertainty that may be involved; and
- focusing on others' strengths and accomplishments, and criticising rarely.

During all of the team development, it was important to shore up the leadership team members' resilience, courage and heart when they or other team members were having difficulty. Their developing capability to remain consistent and contained in their actions and reactions to others was paramount to continuing the foundation that was being built.

4.   Extending the work into the organisation

Over time, our work as consultants extended to all levels of the organisation. We began with off-site sessions comprising the leadership team, managers and cross sections of employees. These off-site sessions helped the leadership team and others learn the importance of listening to and involving others in the creation of a new work environment.

In an off-site meeting devoted to working on a new organisational design, not only was a larger organisational philosophy created, but work plans were looked at for line workers. One worker, whom I remember vividly (as he was a tall, younger and red-headed man), said, "No one knows more about my work than I do." This statement became a model for looking at and exploring individual work, and for growing teamwork among the line workers.

4.1   The learning group process

One of the most important interventions that we implemented was the creation of learning groups, so that all members of the organisation could do their own mini-diagnosis concerning what had occurred in their company over the years. They could then, in their learning groups, begin to absorb new skills into their behaviour and understand what makes a real team.

The initial learning group discussions were some of the most important and more difficult parts of the work. But for me they comprised some of the most memorable times in my working life. People – managers at all levels and plant floor workers – had so much frustration, and were so very hopeless in the beginning, that I would finish a day of listening to and facilitating a given learning group completely spent. I remember one man who cried as he blamed himself for his wife's suicide because of the way he had acted at home as a consequence of the despair and anger that he felt at work. His learning group cried with him.

From these long days of honest discussion and education about how to have a new working life, hope began to emerge for the workforce in general. In my judgement, there would have been no way to move forward without this painful process of addressing emotionally powerful issues that impacted work performance. During this change process, of course, it became clear that as the work progressed, resistance to future change was being reduced and new forces for positive change were being planted.

4.2 The change to a 'new' organisation

During this time of development and change, several events occurred. The founder decided to retire. The manufacturing manager then moved into his place to become the new company CEO. The two brothers became equal co-owners of the company.

We continued to work at all levels of the organisation. This work included selecting and teaching several pairs of individuals (one man and one woman in each pair) to function as internal consultants to various areas of the organisation so that workers and their managers would have a source of help for problems. The efforts of one pair of these internal consultants, Marge and Josh, form a vivid memory for me of two individuals who took on their roles with tremendous initiative and a desire to make a difference for those whom they served. In time, Marge and Josh became the informal leaders of the small internal consultants' group.

Formal structures were also put in place that were advisory in nature. These comprised cross-sectional teams at various levels of the organisation, which served to keep necessary information flowing and to ensue that communication was occurring at all levels. In addition, the teams advised (where appropriate) in critical decision-making for the organisation. One such advisory team even had members ranging from the CEO to plant floor workers.

Plant floor workers were trained cross-functionally, became active members of their teams, and received performance-based pay both for their individual work and for their team's work. This new reward system supported and furthered the change to a collaborative, participatory and highly productive organisation.

When the leadership team became a highly functioning collaborative team and all related processes were successfully in place, our work was over.

5. Conclusion

Working with leadership teams is a process that is often initiated and furthered by an organisational consultant until the goals and goal results are embedded in that organisation. The work is not always straightforward; the process can be long and worrisome, and it is organic at its core. The leadership team itself must create the stepping stones for what it wants to accomplish on its own, as well as with the organisation.

The role of the organisational consultant is to build the containing environment – the safety net – in which the organisation's leadership team and the organisation itself can create the effective enterprise that all desire.

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