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Build a winner

What a team needs to succeed

Question:

I'm part of a five-person executive leadership team (ELT). There's a lot of tension in our team. This rough patch we've encountered with the recession hasn't helped. We've had two CFOs come and go and it wouldn't surprise me if the one we have now is asked to leave. The president/CEO is very demanding. Nothing is ever done the "right way." Lately, the message has been that people aren't "listening" to what she is saying. My take is they're listening, they're just not obeying her. Both the marketing and operations VPs are competent in terms of what they do, but they're not very supportive of the rest of the team. In my role as VP of HR, I'm caught in the middle. Some days my office is a revolving door as each one comes in to complain about one of the others. Despite some efforts to "talk it out," for every step we take forward as a team, it seems like we take two or three steps in reverse. The truth is we're not a team—we know it, and the rest of the company knows it. Please outline some suggestions before the wheels come off all the way.

Answer:

Given that the work I pursue in my consulting practice focuses on improving organizational, team or work area, and individual performance, I hope you are not surprised when I say that this is not an uncommon situation. Over the years, I have probably seen more leadership teams that operate like what you describe than ones where everything is running smoothly.

The major concern here is with the organization's other bottom line (i.e., its corporate culture). In my experience, when things are toxic in the executive suite, this infects the entire organization. This kind of tone at the top is the antithesis of openness, authenticity, or trust. It moves in the direction of, "I'll take care of myself, you take care of yourself." Or, it might be even worse. I'm reminded of a team of leaders with which I once worked who took perverse pleasure in referring to themselves as the "viper pit." But, that's another story for another time.

Sometimes when you are in the eye of the storm, it is hard to envision that things could ever be different or better. Over time, you might even become so disenchanted that you wonder if there is such a thing as an "effective team." Well, I am here to tell you that effective teams do exist. Even your team has the potential to break loose of its past and move to a higher level of functioning.

Based on my experience working with teams of all kinds, including teams of top leaders, I offer the following criteria for team effectiveness. Perhaps some day your team can set the pace relative to these criteria:

1. Teams must have clearly defined purposes and goals that serve the organization.

Teams have to understand what it is they are attempting to accomplish

and why it is that they are trying to accomplish it. Next, they must have a purpose and goals that are clearly linked to the larger organizational context—the vision, mission, values, goals, and strategies that deliver added value to clients and to the operations of the rest of the organization.

2. Teams need clearly defined parameters within which to do their work.

From the start, the sponsor of the team must define the importance of the team's task in the context of the organizational system. The sponsor must explain what the relative importance of a given task is, what the parameters are, what the expectations are, what the timeline is, what the budget and available resources are, and what kinds of decisions the team is empowered to make.

3. Teams need to communicate effectively within the organization.

The sponsor should help the team define how they are connected to other teams, departments, and clients. It is essential for teams to know how to communicate with the organization, with whom to communicate, and how often, or when. If this is going to be the responsibility of the team leader, then the team leader must make special efforts to make sure that all of the necessary communication channels to the organization are open and operative.

4. Teams need to have people with the necessary knowledge,

skills, and abilities.

Teams must make sure that they have the right individuals to complete the work assigned them. Depending on the team focus, this may mean having access to people with varying talents and points of view. If vital skills are lacking, new members should be recruited, or targeted training should be provided to fill in performance gaps.

5. Teams need to know how they are going to accomplish their tasks.

Teams work most effectively when they have a detailed understanding of how their work will proceed and how the team will accomplish its tasks. A team should be able to clearly identify the steps it will take to complete its work. Process mapping, as an example, is one step-by-step method for problem solving and creating process improvements.

Clearly, the team you describe does not have much in common with these five criteria. What can you do to move in this direction? I suggest you spend some time developing a formal team charter that outlines: (1) what your team does (i.e., purpose), (2) with whom it conducts its work (i.e., partnership), and (3)

how it does its work (i.e., process). While this might seem to be an academic exercise, my experience has been that time spent in formulating such a charter can set a “storming” team (like the one you describe) in the direction of “norming” and, ultimately, “peak performing.”

I urge you to strongly consider engaging an external resource for this endeavor. It is hard to craft a charter on your own, especially with any degree of clarity or objectivity. This is particularly true when the team is not cohesive and when tension is apparent.

Finally, I offer the following caveat: “Trust must come first.” The initial part of the chartering process must involve addressing and working through the underlying suspicions and hostilities that exist. To move ahead, you have to put the past behind you. Each member must make a commitment to each other member and to the team as a whole. For, as the familiar adage reminds us, “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link.”

So, too, with teams. I wish you well in your journey. ■

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