



Getting the Best from Your Senior Team

All leaders need their senior teams to operate highly effectively – what actually enables this?



FREE LEADERSHIP ARTICLE

Introduction

Good leadership requires the ability to develop and maintain a **highly effective** senior team, all the members of which are aligned to **achieving the critical outcomes** for the organisation. The price of getting this wrong is high – distracted executives, lost opportunities, wasted management time and the risk of sub-optimal results. These famous words by the poet John Donne are very relevant to today's leaders:

“ No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. ”

Senior teams generally need to move flexibly between managing current organisational issues and driving strategic initiatives. To do so well, the team needs to be strong, purposeful and directed. Successfully building and leading a senior team should not be 'hit and miss'. It requires careful planning and regular attention.

However, in an already busy environment leaders can find it difficult to commit to investing the time in senior team development. In our experience, investing this time is not only desirable but essential to team and organisational success.

The purpose of this article is to provide leaders of senior teams with a framework for:

- a) Reviewing where the team is currently at
- b) Identifying what the leader and the team can do to further enhance team effectiveness and success

Review Framework for Leaders

Three of the key areas for consideration by leaders of senior teams are:

1. What is the team dynamic and does it support our success?
2. Are our team outcomes linked to the team purpose?
3. Have we a clear path to achieving our longer-term outcomes?

Team Dynamic

As with any group of individuals, a senior team will have its own culture and dynamic, created as a result of the business environment, the nature of the leadership of the team and the personalities and EQ levels of the team members. For a senior team to function at a high level, that dynamic needs to be strong. Whilst there are a number of important building blocks to creating a healthy team dynamic, the most important foundation stone is **trust**.

As Patrick Lencioni (author of "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team") wrote, "***Trust lies at the heart of a functioning, cohesive team. Without it, teamwork is all but impossible***". Lencioni describes trust, in the context of building a team, as "***the confidence among team members that their peers' intentions are good, and that there is no reason to be protective or careful around the group***".

A lack of trust between team members (or some of them) will result in guarded behaviour, a lack of willingness to have robust debate about the tough issues in team meetings and a lack of cohesion in the team's approach to achieving the important business outcomes. When a team is affected by this blight, another of the key indicators may be 'corridor' or closed-door conversations taking place between sub-groups of the team outside team meetings, which are not shared with other members. As Lencioni comments "***Teams that lack trust waste inordinate amounts of time and energy managing their behaviours and interactions within the group.***"

A highly functioning senior team is critical to the success of most organisations. A leader of a senior team needs to be aware of the pivotal importance of trust as **the** foundation for the effectiveness of the team and to be alert to any signs that trust has been damaged. Building (or re-building) trust is a challenging process but one that the leader must address if optimal business results are to be achieved.

Team Outcomes Linked to Team Purpose

Whilst it may seem obvious to say that a team's outcomes should be linked to its purpose, in our experience this is not the case for many senior teams as many of them are hazy on their purpose.

At a senior management and executive level, the purpose of the senior team may be single-fold or many-fold. In "Senior Leadership Teams" (*Harvard Business School Press*) the authors distinguish between four different types of senior team:

1. **Informational teams:** where the team's purpose may simply be to provide a platform for senior managers to keep one another up to date on activity in their functional areas and to get direction or information from the CEO.
2. **Consultative teams:** where members come together as a group of senior leaders to consult on and debate important issues to help the CEO make key decisions.
3. **Coordinating teams:** whose members work in an interdependent cross functional way to deliver on strategically important initiatives for the business

4. **Decision making teams:** whose members make critical decisions for the business

We frequently find that senior teams, such as executive teams, which usually need to be decision-making teams, in reality operate more as informational teams. Team members remain strongly focused on their functional areas leaving insufficient time to focus on the critical strategic issues of the business.

Taking time to clarify the purpose of the team will mean the team members can review the way they operate and build a team agenda and outcomes aligned to that purpose.

A Clear Path to Achieving Longer-Term Team Outcomes

Many teams have a highly operational focus, which tends to mean they focus primarily on current financial year business activities.

Senior teams need to also have a longer term and more strategic focus on the business as a whole. All members of the team should be clear on and engaged with what the team needs to achieve and what success will look like in the longer term.

In some organisations the Board has a strong level of input into setting an organisation's strategic direction. In others, the executive team has a high level of input and influence. In such (latter) organisations, the team leader needs to invest time with the team to debate and agree the longer-term vision and strategies for the organisation. In either case the senior team will need to agree success measures, specific projects and priorities, accountabilities, reporting requirements and, importantly, how the team will retain its focus on longer term as well as shorter-term initiatives.

Investing the time for the senior team to build the agreed path to achieving longer-term outcomes will help keep the team on track with strategic progress as well as achievement of shorter-term objectives.

Key Questions to Ask Yourself

People are complex and therefore teams can be complex too. Rather than deal with issues and frustrations reactively as they arise, it will pay to determine where you can best invest your leadership time and energy to develop a stronger, more functioning and successful team. Here are some questions that will help you decide where to begin.

1. Team Dynamic

- How would you describe the current dynamic and culture of your team? Do you think your team members would agree?
- Does the behaviour of any team member (s) detract from the ability of the team to operate at its highest possible level?
- Do decisions made or issues discussed at team meetings tend to get re-litigated outside the meetings?
- Is most of the time and attention of the team focused on the important issues, not politics?
- Are team members comfortable to have robust debate with one another / give and take feedback constructively in the team environment?

2. Team Outcomes and Purpose

- Do you need your team members to operate at a higher level or in a different way than they currently are?
- Has the team discussed and agreed the core purpose of the team?
- How well does your team meeting agenda and the outputs from team members reflect the core purpose of the team?

3. Longer Term Team Outcomes

- Can you and your team members all clearly articulate the strategic path for the organisation?
- Does the team work with a strategic plan as well as a business plan? How well are the two aligned?
- Are your team members clear on what will enable achievement of the longer-term outcomes and do they place sufficient focus on this?

Conclusion

Building and leading a highly effective senior team takes focus, time and attention. Creating the foundations for the team to operate at its highest level needs careful planning and execution. The costs of not doing that well are high. The benefits of doing it are higher.

If you are ready to take a serious look at where your senior team is currently at and where you need it to be, we recommend you start with considering the above questions to assist you assess where any gaps are and where the investment of your leadership time and energy will produce the required shifts.

If you would like to discuss your situation, please feel free to contact one of our partners. Our initial consultation is without charge or obligation.

About Stepshift

Stepshift Partners facilitate leaders to get the best from themselves and others when improvement is critical. They are highly experienced, professional and absolutely committed to seeing clients achieve fundamental shifts through improved leadership.

Partners



Kevin McMahon

kevin@stepshift.co.nz

ddi: +64 9 473 5054

cell: +64 27 537 2259



Carmel Byrne

carmel@stepshift.co.nz

ddi +64 9 419 9824

cell: +64 27 429 9198



Lynn Humphrey

lynn@stepshift.co.nz

ddi +64 9 372 7832

cell: +64 21 748 846

Stepshift Ltd

PO Box 105-946

Auckland

New Zealand

www.stepshift.co.nz

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