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How effective is your Senior Leadership Team?

Senior management and executive/board teams in many organizations worldwide do not perform up to standards, according to recent international research. What are the obstacles to effective teamwork and what makes some teams highly successful?

Use of senior leadership teams

In the past ten years we have seen an increase in teamwork at organizational top levels. Senior leadership teams appear to operate as *senior management* and *executive/board teams*.

But according to recent international research¹, not all teams are equally valued and many don't seem to perform up to standards.

In three out of four organizations teamwork is valued most at *senior management level*. This is true for organizations in most countries.

At *executive/board level* the use of teams is less valued. For instance, most CEO's in Australia and Italy prefer an autocratic leader instead of a senior leadership team. This is not the case in countries like Denmark, the Netherlands, USA and Great Britain, where more than 50% of the organizations prefer executive/board teams.

Is this good news? The answer is yes and no. Yes, an increase in senior leadership teams seems to be good news indeed. The complexity of strategic issues is rising and corporate decisions affect more and more people, globally. Teams offer the opportunity to take decisions in a more balanced and deliberate way.


No, this news may be somewhat disturbing when we look at the quality of collaboration within these teams. Only 20% of teams function excellently and 30% don't function at all. The fact that many senior leadership teams don't function properly is also confirmed by other international research²⁺³.

Obstacles to effective teamwork

It appears that there are a number of obstacles to effective teamwork. Interestingly enough, the number one obstacle in almost any country is *rivalry* on the part of individual team members for the most wanted position, that of CEO. Implicit (hidden agenda) or explicit competition between people who are crowded around the CEO's position creates an unproductive tension.

Individuals on these teams are stars in their own field. They are the *prima donnas* who have been rewarded for delivering individual results. They have not been rewarded in any substantial way for collaboration or supporting others in their contributions to team success. For instance, American, British and Indian teams encounter this problem frequently.

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The second obstacle is excessive focus on internal processes instead of on results. This is a problem frequently encountered by Italian and Norwegian teams. Dutch teams are confronted with this problem as well, particularly with efficient decision making when urgently required.

Third in place are other internal problems, such as team composition, team culture, and leadership style of the team manager.

For instance, almost half of the organizations surveyed have up to three foreigners on their senior management or executive/board teams. Differences in cultural background between the members of these (international) teams appear to be a serious obstacle to effective teamwork.

What successful leadership teams do

Successful teams know how to avoid these major obstacles. Or when problems do arise, they know how to solve them.

Take team composition. The most important selection criterion for new team members is *specialist expertise*. This is closely followed by *social skills*, including team working skills.

Because more and more teams are composed of up to three international members, it is generally acknowledged that social and team working skills are essential. Senior leadership teams are becoming increasingly a *collection of cultures* that needs to be managed well.

Successful teams pay a lot of attention to raise cultural awareness and to build bridges between the different cultural backgrounds in their team.

However, this trend is more pronounced in small countries than in larger ones. In a large country like India 42% of these teams are all-Indian, while in a small country like Switzerland there are eight foreigners for every two Swiss citizens in any senior leadership team. In other words, some teams need to work harder at the different cultural aspects in their team than other.

Successful teams appear to have two other aspects in common. The first one is that they create alignment. Team members understand and focus their actions on the larger team purpose and goals. It's a major task of any team manager to create this alignment. India and Scandinavian countries seem to be excellent in team alignment.

Successful teams also show stamina and resilience. They stay together even under severe internal or external stress, and remain effective under those conditions. Anglo-Saxon countries in particular seem to show a high level of resilience.

It is obvious that most senior leadership teams still have a long way to go. When it comes to social and team working skills, especially in teams with up to three foreigners, it seems to us that external support by individual and team coaching can be a valuable tool to make these international teams more successful.

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1. Egon Zehnder International, *Teams, a critical appreciation of a discredited concept*, 7th Int. Executive Panel, November 2009;
 2. Center for Creative Leadership, *Senior Leadership Team Coaching*, 2008,
 3. Patrick Lencioni, *The five dysfunctions of a Team*, Jossey-Bass, 2002;