

## **Worried about your top team? Focus on the five issues that matter**

*We often sense when something isn't quite right with our management teams. But it's sometimes hard to diagnose exactly what is wrong. In the latest of a series of short articles on aspects of people and organisations, **Dr Tony McNulty** sets out five key areas for attention in top teams. Experience shows that if you can get these five right, most of your anxieties should disappear.*

There are endless reasons why top teams don't always work as well as they might. Down the years we have worked with a large number of senior teams. Our experience suggests that whenever there appear to be problems you should review, in sequence, the five areas below.

### **(1) Vision and strategy**

Interview the members of a senior team in difficulties, and it is remarkable how often you find a divergence of opinion about what the organisation is trying to do. Sometimes it is because the strategy was never really clear. As a result, people have been working to slightly different agendas. In other cases the strategy was never really agreed: some people had doubts but rather than raise their concerns they went along with the majority. Occasionally we find a firm in which the cause of the confusion is that they are not responding fast enough to marketplace or technology changes.

Organisations without a coherent vision and strategy to which everyone is working are heading for trouble. There is the potential for confusion and wasted effort. You have to get the vision and strategy right. So highlight the conflicts, listen to each other, and agree a way forward. As Scottish philosopher David Hume put it: "Truth springs from argument amongst friends."

### **(2) Goals**

A clear vision and strategy must translate into a set of goals, each with an owner. Self-evidently, taken together, these goals need to encompass the entire strategy. It is important to check that this is in fact the case. Again, any divergence of opinion about the goals needs to be flushed out. Within some teams we have found the need to root out targets and activities which may have been important at one time but are no longer required.

Even when the strategy and goals of the organisation are clear and agreed, watch out for functional or departmental goals in opposition. For example, Software Development's desire to invest in new research facilities will clash with the Finance Department's aim to reduce short-term borrowing at the bank. Similarly, Marketing want to delight customers by meeting every technical need, and as a consequence, increasing product variety, whilst Manufacturing's concept of delighting customers involves reducing costs, which is helped by reducing product variety.

### **(3) Roles**

“Roles” refers to primarily to “who will do what”. Basically people need to know what is expected of them. It can be very useful for team members to share openly what they expect from each other, as well as what they will need from each other in order to meet their respective objectives.

Sometimes disputes about ‘who is responsible for what’ can be a source of difficulties within teams. Unintended overlaps, duplication and even gaps can also be points of contention. Mature conversations between consenting adults usually resolve these role conflicts in a positive way.

### **(4) Processes**

By “processes” in this context we mean the various activities involved in ensuring the smooth functioning of the organisation and in helping to achieve certain tasks. With regard to the top team some questions might be: How often should the team meet and who sets the agenda? How is progress against our goals monitored? How do team members communicate with each other and with the rest of the organisation?

Problems with the processes, for instance when they have not evolved to meet changing circumstances, can cause inefficiencies and lead to poor performance and conflict. Check that your list of current processes is complete, and that those you have are both necessary and fit for purpose.

### **(5) People**

Under this heading the two main issues are: team composition; and team relationships.

Regarding team composition you need to ask yourself constantly whether you have all of the skills and know-how you need in your team in order to deliver your strategy. Are there any gaps and do you need to recruit new blood or develop existing people in order to fill these gaps?

With regard to relations between team members, we have found that most difficulties are the result of issues not being dealt with in the previous four areas. Generally if the strategy, goals, roles and processes are all satisfactory, conflict and relationship difficulties between individuals are reduced. Nevertheless, personal chemistry between some of the team members can sometimes get in the way, as can their different working styles. Simply giving the warring parties a deadline for establishing a working relationship or sorting out their differences will often work, without the need for external mediation.

Occam’s razor (“hypotheses are not to be multiplied without necessity”) warns us against over-complication. The simplest solutions are very often the best. If you can sort out the aforementioned five areas, most of the problems with and within teams do disappear.

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