Senior Leadership
Team Coaching

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"In this work, we have to be prepared to be fired at any moment. The riskier the approach, the more satisfied senior leadership teams seem to be."

—Candice Frankovelgia, Psy.D.

The senior leadership team is arguably the most important group in any organization. They have the most overt power. Their decisions have implications for everyone else in the organization as well as for the future of the organization itself. Many people strive for admittance to that elite table. And yet the executive leadership team is often poorly resourced to accomplish its tasks. Members are selected because of their functional responsibilities or included because they "must not be left out," so the assurance that they are really equipped to operate as the "Enterprise Team" cannot be assumed. In this brief, we will review what these groups have to do and what they need. We will consider why senior leadership team coaching might be important for their success and raise some cautions for those who would like to work in the field.

It may come as a surprise to some that the use of leadership teams at the top of major organizations is a relatively new phenomenon. The way top leadership is organized is a product of strong cultural patterns. The hegemony of U.S. and western European business models has shaped the forms that this has taken. A more typical U.S. structure is the strong CEO with a supporting Chief Operating Officer who is responsible for the internal operations of the organization. In organizations across the globe there are a variety of forms, often diverging based on the extent to which the company is family-owned or owned by an individual, the state, or the public. However, in the last decade, we've seen a rise in the use of senior teams for top leadership as the complexity resulting from globalization, increased diversity in both the marketplace and the organization, and similar factors has increased.

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This increase in the utilization of teams at senior levels has not been matched by an increase in the ability of CEOs and other leaders to make good use of teams. We are being approached daily by organizations who have bravely embarked on this model, but are finding it is difficult to ensure the effectiveness of these teams. There are problems with the purposes, membership, operations, and achievements of many senior leadership teams. Noel Osborn of TEAM International (a CCL Network Associate) said recently, "Usually, by the time I get there, things are pretty messy; and if they weren't, I wouldn't be called in. There are conflicts, some lasting for years; jealousies; reservations to participation; and various kinds of back- (and front-) stabbing." In spite of the difficulties, we do not believe that senior teams are going to go away. On the contrary, the tide seems to be running in the direction of greater use of senior leadership teams. The complexities faced by organizational leadership are requiring the involvement of larger, more diverse kinds of leadership teams. Our experience is that more and more of these teams are seeking the support of experienced team coaches to improve their effectiveness.

Roadblocks for the Senior Leadership Team

What are the roadblocks to successful operations of a senior leadership team? There are several sources of difficulty that are unique to these groups.

1. First, the spotlight is on them. Everyone in the organization scrutinizes their every move for signs. So does the competition. This does not encourage an environment of reflection or open disclosure.

2. The power dynamics are central to the operations of the group. Every choice and every decision are affected by the outcomes sought, but also by how they affect the influence and future plans of each of the members. Contributing to the complexity of power and influence is the fact that the CEO is both the leader of the team and the head of the organization.

3. Tension exists between the cooperation needed to work as an enterprise team and the implicit competition of people who are crowded around the door to the CEO's position. Once an individual is on the senior leadership team, the only way forward is through that door or out of the organization, so the stakes are very high.

4. The individuals on the team are typically stars in their own fields and practices who have been rewarded for outstanding individual contributions. In most cases, they are currently assessed on the success of their function in delivering desired results and seldom rewarded in any substantial way for contributions to the success of others. They have an excess of overconfidence about their abilities coupled with poorly managed anxiety about how to deal with each other and the challenges they face jointly.

One thing not unique to senior leadership teams is the absence of a forum to talk about the challenges they face and their personal roles. Common to most teams is the difficulty of establishing a climate that encourages adequate transparency with each other to enable joint work. As a result of the factors mentioned above, the pressure to avoid addressing these issues is significant in senior leadership teams.

Perhaps the biggest difficulty is that each member of the team is required to play multiple roles simultaneously and some of those roles have implicit conflicts. For example, each head of a function is expected to maximize the effectiveness of that function. At the same time, the enterprise strategy requires that resources be allocated (money, time, attention, promotion, etc.) in a way that maximizes the benefit to the organization as a whole. To be a good enterprise player requires some functions to experience restriction for a time for the benefit of the whole organization. This kind of complexity needs to be managed in a strategic way, not haphazardly. Certainly, the most dangerous way of managing it is to allow the most forceful individuals on the team to drive the choices about resources. This can be the fall-back position when concern about succession becomes central. Every person begins to calculate the way their choices will affect their curriculum vitae. A scarcity mind-set can easily emerge and dominate the hidden dynamics of the team.

Why Team Coaching?

Why is coaching a valuable resource for a senior leadership team? Good coaching helps a group move toward becoming a real team by bringing the hidden dynamics out so they can be managed. As long as the critical challenges of creating a team remain "not discussable" they cannot be managed. Full team member engagement won't occur unless each member of the team can trust that the conversation will not result in harm to their objectives or to their future prospects. While some CEOs can do this by the rules they establish for interaction and the way they model transparency, many top leaders recognize that this is not something they want to tackle on their own.

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Good team coaching also helps the group take charge of their key team functions: setting direction, creating alignment throughout the organization, and building the commitment of everyone needed to accomplish organizational objectives. The team *will* do this work. Do they want to do it under the control of the strongest individual on the team or in the way that is most effective for the whole group? If the latter, some key questions must be brought into the group discussion. Typical questions are these: How does the group gather and synthesize the information on which it bases its decisions? How does the group decide what kind of decisions are required about strategy, policy, practice, and communication? In the absence of conscious choices about these processes, they tend to become dominated by the power relationships among the members and the personality patterns of each of them.

Competencies for Coaches

Who should do this work? We have already mentioned that this work is not for the faint. If coaches do not provide adequate, clearly understood value from the beginning, they will be terminated, quite rightfully. So coaches must be people who can gain the trust of intelligent, sceptical leaders and be able to engage the individuals and the whole group immediately. It goes without saying that those who are overly conscious of authority or sensitive to criticism will not find this work friendly. One of our colleagues, CCL Coaching Practice Leader Candice Frankovelgia, frames the question in a colorful way: "Do I hit them between the eyes with hard truths or cater to their sense of infallibility?"

There are several critical competencies expected of senior leadership team coaches. It is hypothesized that these competencies contribute to the coach's ability to foster a climate of trust, safety, transparency, and commitment to the group formation. The most prominent coach competencies are these:

1. The ability to read in the moment the multiple levels of dynamic occurring in the team and raise only the productive elements to the surface for conscious consideration. At every moment there are exciting interactions within each individual, between individuals in their relationships, within the group itself, and in the various external forces playing on the thinking and operations of this group. An awareness of these dynamics is based on a deep theoretical and practical understanding of group dynamics and team development, as well as significant coaching experience with individuals and groups. However, that awareness is only as useful as the coach's ability to decide on the fly what really matters and to draw attention to it properly.

2. An awareness of power and its movement within groups and comfort at intervening to affect the ways power is used in the group. Who has what kinds of power and how are they using it?

3. An ability to put into simple, jargon-less language what is observed and the stature to raise any issue with the team or its members at the right moment.

4. A firm grasp of the ethical and practical dangers of working with a group and the individuals on it. In particular, the coach should be aware of the consequences of being overly identified with one person (even if it is the CEO) or with any particular "side" to a given issue. Also necessary is the ability to respond appropriately and judiciously in the moment.

5. A keen sense of business acumen, of how businesses make money. Coaches gain the trust of client leadership teams because they know group and team process, but more because they understand the business of that leadership team. The coaches who do not know the market conditions in the client's industry, the structure of the organization, its competitive advantages and its challenges, its labor and organizational circumstances, and much more are not going to be credible as persons who can assist the leadership team.

Developing the Capacity to Coach Senior Teams

How does one come by these competencies? Most are developed in the doing of the work. Because of the relative recency of academic programs with this work in mind, there is little evidence that a particular academic background would be particularly useful. This work is firmly embedded in the stream of systems theory and research, but it owes its models and practices to a variety

of sources. A basic understanding of the history of systems thinking is essential. Key elements would include rudimentary knowledge of Bertalanffy's general systems theory and the ways that Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson applied interdisciplinary perspectives to these questions. Kurt Lewin's frustration with behaviorist approaches to psychology is mirrored in the frustration that many organizational thinkers feel about individualist approaches to organizational change. A decent education would include understanding of Peter Senge's organizational applications to the learning organization, the growth of the OD field, current thinking about change management, transformational leadership, complex adaptive systems, and the dynamics of multiple interacting systems. Many of our current practices have come from group psychotherapy and from solution-focused and narrative therapy approaches to family and group process. It can be assumed that a couple weeks of some training seminar will not equip one with this background.

COACHES MUST BE PEOPLE WHO CAN GAIN THE TRUST OF INTELLIGENT, SCEPTICAL LEADERS AND BE ABLE TO ENGAGE THE INDIVIDUALS AND THE WHOLE GROUP IMMEDIATELY.

At the Center for Creative Leadership, we employ teams of senior coaches to do this work in nearly every case. The most important reason is the need of clients. The challenges of reading and responding to the complex dynamics of senior teams benefit from a differentiated set of team coaches. Often one coach works most closely with the CEO and the team as a whole, and the other coach engages individuals within the team in coaching for improved performance in the leadership work of the team. An additional benefit is that top team coaches are developed through their involvement as the second coach in a senior team intervention. This is still the most important component of preparation for high-impact senior team coaching: learning through doing as part of a disciplined and committed coaching team.

It has been speculated that biological factors can affect one's ability to do this work. Although long experience can help a facilitator or coach know how to "read a room" and the individuals in it, it appears that one must have the capacity to read the micro-expressions of individuals and to feel the mood of a whole group. (It may be that some careers breed this capability out of one, as so many professors have apparently learned to ignore signs of boredom and disconnection among their students as a survival mechanism.) There is significant evidence that some parts of the differences in social intelligence are biologically mediated. If so, there will be important differences in how well different individuals will perform in this role, without respect to the amount of experience or education they have.

That said, what kinds of experience are beneficial for senior leadership coaches? The effective coaches employed at the Center have a broad history in working with organizations across industries and sectors and specific expertise in change management and organizational transformation work. It may be that only in facing the challenges of whole organization change can one learn the rhythms of group change. Several also have deep experience in intensive small-group work or group therapy training. What transfers is primarily the understanding of the complex dance of relationships and hidden agendas rather than the ability to address the concerns of each individual or to fix them (see the work of the Milan group in family therapy, for example).

Whatever the specific background of the coach, the unique aspects of this work suggest that effectiveness will depend on bringing together the knowledge and practices of multiple disciplines. In years to come, we expect that specific academic and training programs devoted to this work will develop, but until those emerge top senior leadership team coaches will come from many backgrounds. All will need to be in continuous learning, not only from their clients, but also from colleagues in disciplines that are not part of their personal histories of preparation. We are still some distance from meaningful credentials for this work, apart from the assurances of the employing firm.

Going Off the Tracks

Before we conclude, it might be valuable to identify the ways that senior leadership team coaching can go awry:

1. It can go pear-shaped before it even begins if the coaching team is not adequately prepared. Kerry Bunker, a Senior Fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership, says, "You need to guard against being thrown in front of a senior team without time to assess their characteristics and their needs." He describes this danger as the "fragility of credibility" with this audience.

2. If a coach cannot simultaneously challenge and support the team and its members, then the trust built on creating a sufficiently safe environment won't be available. For every senior team, the issues that must be addressed "are more comfortably left under the table or voiced only as the team members are walking away from the room," says Bunker.

3. A coach or coaches who aren't clear about their role and the limits of their expertise will disrupt the effective functioning of the client's leadership team. The nature of this work requires that the coach be knowledgeable about the business, about strategic concerns, about the dynamics of leadership and of senior teams, and many other elements. This knowledge is required to shape the kinds of questions and observations by which the coaches provoke the development of whole team leadership. Seldom is a senior leadership team coach the kind of expert to give specific

advice on any business or strategy issue. Coaches who stray outside of their expertise can either be dismissed as quacks (the best outcome of a bad situation) or be influential in the decisions of the team (potentially disastrous in the absence of crazy luck). We don't want coaches running organizations. We want coaches coaching.

In this brief paper we have reviewed some critical elements in considering executive team coaching work. This is by no means a prescription for success, but instead intended as a useful set of caveats for the client organization and for the team coach preparing for this work.

Further Reading

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