

There's no 'i' in team, but they all have some 'me, me, me'

At many companies, the group of executives that report to the CEO is often referred to as "the executive team," but in my 30-plus years of coaching executives, I've found that true teamwork at the top is notoriously rare.

The lack of said teamwork can be disastrous. One colorful leader summed up the problem by saying, "If a fish smells at the head, it smells at the tail."

My coaching clients frequently ask me to help build teamwork. When they do, I



Perspective on People

Richard McKnight

ask, "Which of the following best describes your so-called 'team' right now?" I describe four common patterns:

Debating Society: Members come together to try to display their brilliance to one another.

Information Exchange: Members go around the room and put everyone to sleep with their updates.

Royal Court: Members gather to worship you and your brilliance.

Inquisition Panel: Members gather to work underlings over the coals.

The Debating Society and Information Exchange are the two I see the most often.

Obviously, none of the four is a true team in which members share accountability for successes and work together collaboratively to create and execute strategy.

While rare, true top teams do exist in business settings. Where might we look for them? Answer: At the top of the best companies. Name a company you really admire and it is almost certain to have a true team at its top. Is it an industry leader or a Best Place to Work? Then a safe bet is that the top executives function as a harmonious stewardship group. In true top teams, there are no shrinking violets and there is often vigorous give and take but, crucially, there is much more: compromise and breakthrough-fostering dialogue that transcends functional loyalties and ego-based interests.

As I was coaching a CEO last week and urging him to forge better teamwork among his direct reports, it became clear to both of us that he had no concept of a true business team. But he got it.

Here is what he said: "You're telling me that even though my marketing head has one set of objectives and my supply chain vice president has very different objectives, they have to set aside their individual allegiances at times and make decisions together for the whole. The company is their first allegiance, not their own organizations."

When I affirmed this, the light bulbs really started popping for him. "You would not believe how much in-fighting I have been tolerating between those two. I'm embarrassed to say it, but it never occurred to me that there was another way. I thought strife is inevitable when you bring talented people together."

Valuing teamwork, of course, is different from knowing what to do to make it happen. I have seen many competitive executives maintain their fierce independence all the way to their termination even when the boss has made it abundantly clear that cooperation is what's wanted.

If you wish to build a team, you must tread the same rocky pathway. Get all the leaders into a room as many times as it takes to forge agreement on a common answer to four questions: 1) What is the contribution our organization must make and how will we measure it? 2) How will we get those results? 3) How are we going to work with one another as leaders to get them? and 4) What compromises will we have to make to achieve this?

As the team grapples to answer those questions and work through to real agreements, alignment begins to occur, often for the first time.

I rarely use sports metaphors in business, but I came across a superb quote from Mia Hamm, the highest-scoring player in soccer history, which sums up a deep understanding of teamwork. Hamm said, "I am a member of a team, and I rely on the team, I defer to it and sacrifice for it, because the team, not the individual, is the ultimate champion."

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