The 5 Practices of Highly Successful Leadership Teams

Is your leadership team as powerful as it could be?

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Extraordinary leadership teams have extraordinary habits and practices.

Basically the formula goes like this:

* Poor habit and practices = poor results
* Mediocre habits and practices = mediocre results
* Extraordinary habits and practices = extraordinary results

**Let’s explore some of the defining practices that lead to high performance leadership teams:**

1. **Team Alignment** – The number one influencer of extraordinary teams is the alignment of the team members. This means not only clarity and alignment on Vision, Values, Goals and Strategies but also on ***how*** ***we are going to work together*** as a team toward the fulfillment of these things. What are our practices and agreements as a Senior Leadership Team?

It is important to craft a clear set of Leadership Team Agreements that everyone on the team commits to. This identifies the way you agree to work together toward the fulfillment of our Vision and Strategic Intent. These are your Rules of Engagement. What agreements do you need to make with each other about how you will work collaboratively, communicate and interact as a team? What behaviors, practices and quality of interaction will support the kind of company and the kind of results that you want to create?

*Examples…*

* *I agree to support the decisions that the SLT makes*
* *I agree to ask for help when I have challenges beyond my capability to readily solve*
* *I agree to be open and receptive to new ideas and be willing and open to be coached by other members of the team when I’m not*
* *I agree to accept 100% responsibility for all my actions, as well as the actions of our team and our company. I will focus my energy on solution rather than problems or excuses.*
* *I agree to clear up anything in the way of my full support for every member of this team.*
* *I agree to not gossip and instead go directly to anyone I have an issue with.*

There is a difference between a “team of champions” and a Championship Team. The defining factor is the teamwork – how well they play together – not how skilled each team member is. A team of champions is often defined by arrogance and ignorance. In business this translates as competition between team members and silos or lack of disclosure or sharing of relevant information. This has proven to be true again and again in athletic teams as well as organizational teams. To create a Championship Leadership Team, define your Rules of Engagement and your Credo for working together.

**2) Inclusion.** One of the biggest killers of an effective plan is a lack of appropriate inclusion. The concern for inclusion needs to be present at every step in an organizational plan. This begins with the decision making process all the way to execution of the plan and celebrating the results. It means being attentive as events unfold for *who does and does not need be included, and in what way.*

Inclusion addresses both an *emotional aspect* - a sense of being valued and belonging on the team, as well as a *practical aspect* of using inclusion to facilitate more effective or efficient solutions.

**Questions to consider:**

*Ex: Who needs to be included at the level of gathering information and ideas?*

*Who needs to be included at the level of making the decision?*

*Who needs to be included in carrying out the decision?*

*Who needs to be informed of the decision after it has been made?*

When we operate with a concern for inclusion, the power of collaboration and the collective intelligence of the group begin to replace the power of position and authority.

Appropriate inclusion increases alignment and the likelihood that a course of action will be successful. It reduces the possibility that agreements will be undermined or disempowered. Decisions and actions arrived at through inclusion are often more creative and effective because they represent a multiplicity of views.

Learn to act with a concern for inclusion and to ask the question: Who needs to be included in this project, idea, etc.? Whose participation and support will empower this project? Who will be impacted by this project?

In order to do this, competition between team members must end. That is putting competition in the wrong place. The team needs to be aligned and competitive with “the competition”, not each other! Competition among team members will undermine even the most effective players. It’s pure arrogance and ego and has no place on a Championship Team.

1. **Willingness to challenge thinking and openness to feedback.** One of the hallmarks of successful leaders is their willingness to be coached. Can you imagine a star athlete who was unwilling to be coached? The power of a team is that it represents a multiplicity of views and knowledge. When you are willing to advocate your point of view ***and*** be influenced by your team members, you will always move toward the best possible idea or solution. The alternative is to be narrow-minded and short-sighted.

Being an effective team member means giving up wanting to “be right.” The drive to “be right” is ego-based and does not serve the interest of the best possible solution even if it isn’t “your idea.” For example, you may think “I’m traveling North.” If you are unwilling to find out that you are actually traveling South – simply because you don’t want to be wrong - you will end up somewhere other than where you want to be! Be willing to have your ideas challenged as well as to challenge other people’s ideas and assumptions. When we can openly challenge ideas and the underlying assumptions of the ideas, we can support each other in being successful in our efforts. Openness to feedback supports learning, leadership development and personal mastery. Interacting with empathy, humility, and personal efficacy are vital first steps to help leaders move away from static, risk-averse patterns of behavior to proactive, risk-taking and learning. Do you invite feedback to your ideas or do you discourage it by being defensive and not interested in opposing viewpoints?

1. **Continuous improvement of leadership skills**. Great leaders are also great learners who continually uplevel their capabilities and knowledge.

As John F. Kennedy wrote in a speech he was to give the day he was assassinated, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other." Learning opportunities should be built in to the organizational structure. Leaders often view “taking a break” as a chance to chew on information newly acquired, and to ingest more new information. Given the fast pace of technology and change, leaders need to be able to learn and experiment with a host of different approaches. Today’s pace of rapid change requires leaders to become fast and aggressive learners. The process of “un-learning” previous mindsets and methods is a challenging task in itself. Integrating learning into the time that leaders spend together and individually is crucial for creating your leadership team as an organizational competitive advantage in and of itself.

*“In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.” Eric Hoffer*

Organizations that advocate for learning as part of their underlying reward system and culture are able to improve their sources of competitive advantage because mistakes are translated into valuable learning experiences. This begins at the leadership level.

1. **Relationship development and handling relationship breakdowns.**

The Wall Street Journal identified that the five main reasons why managers fail is due to poor interpersonal skills, not technical or cognitive abilities. In most cases non-productivity, project failures and lack of results can be traced back to a relationship breakdown or multiple breakdowns. These can be misunderstandings in communication, inaccurate assumptions, withheld communications, broken or unclear agreements, alienation or retaliation. In general, breakdowns can often be attributed to lacks in the following areas: alignment, inclusion, collaboration and communication.

The jump from ordinary to extraordinary relationships is the jump from good to great results. Extraordinary relationships happen when there are high levels of trust, integrity, real communication and uncharacteristic levels of support within an organization. Taking the time to get to know each other’s values, interests, dreams and challenges is not just “feel good” therapy, it is core to creating relationships that have substance and that can influence each other. You cannot influence or support anyone when you don’t know what really matters to them. Listening in a way that opens communication and allows you to understand and speak to one another honestly is paramount. Identifying and getting free of listening filters, defenses and blocks is key to creating a “Listening Organization” - one that can listen in all directions and fully hear its leaders, employees, customers and stakeholders, all contributing to its own organizational intelligence.

What is the quality of listening on your leadership team? Do people listen deeply into each other’s communications or “just enough” to be able to make their own point? Problematic relationships are often characterized by a lack of effective listening. Great leaders are also great listeners.