



Teamwork at the Top

By Dr. Jim Beaubien

Fostering senior management level teamwork is a major challenge. Recent research suggests that few organizations actually are successful in achieving this goal. If you are interested in developing a strong senior management team, attending to the following factors will improve your odds of success.

CEO commitment is a critical factor in the successful development of an effective senior management team. Although many executives profess a strong belief in teamwork, few are willing to provide the leadership or take the time required to develop a team culture in their organizations. Don't try to implement a senior management team approach unless the CEO's is strongly committed to supporting this direction.

Help the team develop a shared set of strategic intentions for their organization. For best results, keep both the process used to develop the framework and the resulting framework itself simple. Don't get bogged down in detailed analysis. Have the team members lead the process. Encourage them to consult broadly with people throughout the organization. Don't turn the process over to staff 'experts'. When it's completed, the team must have a full sense of ownership. The final document should describe the Senior Management Team's five to seven strategic intentions for the organization and it should fit on an 11x17 sheet of paper.

Help the team develop a shared set of core values for the organization. Values signal what is important and what is desired. They serve as 'behavior guides' and tell people how to approach their work and their relationships. They make what is implicit explicit. As an organization learns to live its values, they become an enduring part of the core ideology and provide people with a sense of constancy in a world of change. Although many organizations develop value statements, few actually put them into practice. If the Senior Management Team is not committed to walking its talk, publishing values is likely to have a negative impact, resulting in a decrease in teamwork and increase in cynicism. Yet, without a shared value base, the team is likely to flounder.

Establish a pattern of quarterly Senior Management Team retreats. Focus on results; make decision and initiate actions to move the organization towards its strategic intentions. Develop a common set of shared short and long-range goals; allocate resources as required. Establish a clear set of outcomes for the team to work towards within the next 90 days. Make sure these meetings are always productive. The team must leave them with a sense of past accomplishment and future challenge. Make the meetings so good that team members leave looking forward to the next one.

Prepare team members for dealing with the political undercurrents that are an inevitable part of the senior leadership environment. Encourage them to table their issues and openly confront colleagues with their concerns. Make it a norm to bring the hallway and back room talk into the meeting rooms. Constantly reinforce the need for open and honest team communication. Help team members develop their communication and conflict resolution skills. Reinforce the organization's values as you work through this process.

Encourage team members to develop good working relationships among themselves. Relationships are the glue that hold good teams together. Team members need to spend time getting to know each other. (They do not need to become close friends or spend time together socially). They need to become familiar with each other's roles and develop an understanding of how they can help each other achieve their goals. Adding social components to the quarterly meetings can help with relationship building. Activities such as golf and eating out together can help the team members bond.

Develop their knowledge base. Challenge them to think differently. Expose them to books, articles and other educational materials they would not normally read. Select the material carefully. Avoid trends - they'll do enough fad surfing on their on. Support them in their personal and professional development. Provide individual coaching, as required.

Gradually make accountability a team norm. Help them find ways of holding each other accountable. This can start with following up on objectives at the quarterly retreats. Over time, increase the focus on measurement and evaluation. Make it clear the underlying intention is to learn and improve performance, not to assign blame.

Get results. Constantly focus on helping the team make the whole organization more successful; strengthen operations, improve people practices or create value for shareholder. Helping them win will establish an escalating cycle. Good results make the team stronger and as the team becomes stronger, it does a better job of getting results.

Be patient and give the process time. In my experience with senior leaders, it often takes three to five years of continuous effort to develop an effective senior management team. Cultural change of this magnitude takes a long time.