

Leadership: Going Against the Grain to Get Results

By Jamie Notter

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Organizations are typically led by a team consisting of the chief executive officer (CEO) and a small group of senior managers. When you work within the leadership team (whether you are the CEO or a senior manager), do you and the other team members typically—

- Encourage open conflict?
- Admit you're wrong or talk about your weaknesses?
- Confront your colleagues when they aren't performing?
- Support the decisions that you thought were bad ideas and lobbied against?

You may have answered “no” to the above questions—perhaps with a sense of relief and appreciation. Conflict? Confronting? Supporting bad ideas? As counter-intuitive as they sound, research and literature on both teams and leadership identify behaviors like these as critical to the cohesiveness of senior management teams and the effectiveness of organizations they are leading.

CONFLICT

For example, there is a common perception that conflict is “bad” for a team. In fact, constructively handled conflict is tremendously powerful. What is “bad” is the way people typically deal with conflict—avoidance, suppression, and behind the scenes complaining. The good news is that it takes surprisingly little effort to build the skills needed to effectively deal with conflicts. They include listening, managing your own ego, asking questions, and holding back on quick judgments. Once conflict is handled more directly, it allows the team to efficiently deal with performance issues.

TOUCHY-FEELY

The corporate aversion to anything that can be labeled “touchy-feely” was recently summed up by a government client of mine who disdainfully commented on the recent trend toward “Management by Kumbaya.” Group singing aside, parts of organizational life that have been labeled “touchy-feely”—emotions, values, self-expression, and open exploration of personal styles—are linked explicitly to high-performing leadership teams. Effective teams do not address them merely because it makes people “feel” better. They do it because it helps them achieve business results, and examples from organizations—public and private, for-profit and nonprofit—abound.

TEAMS

Jon R. Katzenbach and Douglas K. Smith, authors of *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, predicate the success of any kind of team on establishing a “common approach to working together.” Unfortunately, this effort is often viewed as extraneous or a waste of time (there is so much we need to do, let’s just start working!). But ignoring the operational ground rules in order to get on with the “business” of the leadership team can be a disastrous mistake. Developing the rules for how the group interacts is the only way to effectively measure and monitor progress in areas like conflict and openness mentioned earlier. This requires careful attention and facilitation—something, for which the team members themselves must ultimately take responsibility.

COUNTER-INTUITION

The counter-intuitive suggestions in this article are based in sound theory, research, and experience in high-performing organizations. They are also different, against the grain, and contrary to conventional wisdom, and for that reason I think they are particularly valuable. Einstein alluded to the power of thinking “outside the box” when he noted that problems cannot be solved using the same level of thinking that was used to create them. If you need to increase the effectiveness of your leadership team, simply trying harder using the same overall approach is rarely the answer. Try doing things differently, and carefully measure the impact of your new approach. You just may see a surprisingly

positive difference in the way you and your leadership team lead your organization.

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