

Making It Stick at the Top

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Do not underestimate the power of a leadership team's culture. Leadership teams—typically the CEO and her direct reports—make decisions that set direction for their organizations. Through their behavior and interactions, both among themselves and with others in the organization, they establish powerful standards for how the work of the organization gets done.

Because of this power, leadership teams that intentionally build a team culture that supports performance and execution can generate positive business results for the entire organization. Successful leadership teams examine their own culture (often at off-site retreats) in order to identify the assumptions and behaviors that make the difference between a powerful leadership team culture and one that wastes energy and potential.

Culture change

Talking about the culture of your leadership team is one thing, changing it is another—and that can only be done over time. After an initial discussion, there must be ongoing attention to not only the issues that are raised, but also the specific behavior changes to which team members commit as part of the culture change. The success of a leadership team culture change effort lies in the effectiveness of the post-retreat follow-up.

An example of a successful culture change process comes from the Young Entrepreneurs' Organization, Alexandria, Virginia, a nonprofit organization representing more than 5,000 successful entrepreneurs from 38 countries around the world. The senior management team at YEO convened a retreat specifically designed to uncover ways to improve team performance.

At the retreat, they identified specific areas that needed improvement in order to manage the rapid growth of the association. For example, they were frustrated with the way the team typically dealt with conflict. At the retreat they agreed on some ground rules for engaging in future conflict, such as being more specific about agreements and commitments at the end of conflict discussions.

They also agreed to “push back” against each other. Their assumptions about what it meant to challenge one another, as they were leaders of their own departments, prevented them from engaging in healthy dialogue. Leaving the retreat they had an understanding of how to push back—against coworkers and their CEO—in ways that generated learning, new ideas, and organizational effectiveness.

Making it stick

Clearly identifying areas for culture change is important, but the most powerful aspect of the YEO example is that they ensured the change identified at the retreat happened. Too often, a senior team will invest time in a retreat to identify areas of its culture that need to change, only to abandon progress once back in the office.

The senior team at YEO used several different methods to avoid that fate. First, the CEO made the culture change a priority, setting aside blocks of time at regular intervals to address the team culture after the retreat. He also asked one of the senior team members to be personally responsible for monitoring progress.

Second, each senior manager met individually with the other managers to identify ways in which they could be resources to one another. Through that process they improved their individual relationships and better understood how to push back in more supportive ways. This individual follow-up to the group meeting proved beneficial. “We identified areas that we as individuals and managers needed to focus on that would enable us to take group performance to another level,” says Courtney Shafer, vice president, World Entrepreneurs’ Organization, YEO’s graduate organization.

Finally, the team used a simple *team assessment questionnaire*, developed by author Patrick Lencioni (included in his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*), to

benchmark and track progress on key areas of the team's culture change. The 15-question survey identifies components of effective team behavior, including several areas that were specifically identified in the retreat. Each team member rated the questions shortly after the retreat, and six questions were identified as needing the most attention including "team members call out one another's deficiencies or unproductive behaviors" (related to pushing back) and "team members leave meetings confident that their peers are completely committed to the decisions that were agreed on, even if there was initial disagreement," which correlated with their need in the area of conflict management. They also committed to more consistently "ending discussions with clear and specific resolutions and calls to action."

After three months, they each answered the questionnaire again, noting the progress they had made on many of the items, particularly ending discussions with clear resolutions and calls to action.

"In past management meetings we have tended to let tough decisions be tabled and potentially go unresolved," says Jason Tate, vice president, finance. "We are now able to hold each other more accountable to a time frame and a resolution."

Peter Monroe, vice president, business development, and the manager put in charge of monitoring the process, recalls a recent confrontation he had with another senior manager. Last year it might have been a contentious discussion marked by a territorial debate and ending with a vague resolution. This time, however, the discussion was respectful, direct, and efficient, and the two left with a clear understanding of what each would do to address the problem.

Some issues, of course, still require continued attention, but as Monroe notes, "This is an evolutionary process. It takes time, but we're making progress." They will continue meeting quarterly to review the team assessment questionnaire and make clear commitments to specific issues that emerge from those discussions. As some of the issues identified at the first quarterly meeting were addressed, they began to identify new areas to work on.

"Usually, I'm known to be pretty skeptical about some of these touted leadership improvement techniques," says YEO team member Karen Seidman, vice president, communications and marketing. "But being involved in the process

from the start, understanding the CEO's commitment and support of these initiatives, and witnessing, firsthand, the measurable improvement that these methods have already garnered, has made me a believer."

Leadership teams that challenge their assumptions about team culture, confront their issues, and stick to their commitments to change their own behavior can bring themselves and their organizations to new levels of performance. Sticking to commitments, however, will not happen without dedicated time and effort. It may only require 30 minutes every three months—hardly a big sacrifice—yet that time and effort is what ensures a decent return on the team's investment to identify areas for change.

Build this kind of follow-up activity into your planning to ensure that the potential of a successful senior management retreat is not wasted.

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