

Developing Senior Management, Teamwork Impacts Bottom Line

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There are several key ways for organizations to unite a senior management team and help an organization perform at full potential. Keith Ayers, president, Integro Leadership Institute, and an expert in organizational change and management issues, names four essential components necessary to ensure that your senior management team works effectively and strategically under a unified vision that will trickle down to all employee strata and create bottom-line impact:

- Being a team member for senior management is a part-time role.
- Developing behavioral adaptability is an essential skill.
- It is important to get motivated to be a team.
- Understand that team development is a process.

In order to align a senior management team, each member must learn that their presence on the team is a part-time role. C-level executives are hired for their functional responsibility and often view the need to sit on a senior management team as an activity that takes away from their primary function, said Ayers. “They often don’t give the commitment to being a member of the team that it really needs because they don’t see it as being their primary role. In a sense they’re right, but it doesn’t mean that their role as a member of the senior team is less important than their functional role. In some ways it’s more important because if they don’t get their act together, the organization can’t achieve what it’s capable of.”

Therefore, each team member should come into the team situation with all of his or her expertise and experience as well as a keen desire to make decisions on behalf of the organization as a whole, and their behavior should be adjusted accordingly. “When they’re back in their department, they’re the chief. They have people reporting to them and they have decisions to make and people to manage and coach and so on. They go into the senior team, and now they’re in a peer role with the other members of the team. The behavior needed for them to function effectively isn’t significantly different, but it certainly needs more collaboration. There needs to be more willingness to give and take, and listen to other people’s input on decision-making,” Ayers said.

Developing behavioral adaptability is also an essential skill. If an executive is to be effective in a dual role as a department head and a senior team member, he or she must adapt behavior to what’s appropriate. Ayers uses the DISC behavioral model to help people understand the differences in behavioral style. The four dimensions are dominance, influence, supportiveness and conscientiousness. Everyone is a mixture of all four, but most people tend naturally to be stronger in one or two of these behavioral traits. For instance, “People who are high on dominance like being in control,” Ayers said. “It’s not unusual to find on a senior management team where more than 50 percent of the members have dominance as their strongest trait. That’s fine when they’re running their functional departments, but if you’ve got seven or eight people with high dominance sitting around in a team meeting trying to reach agreement, if they don’t adapt their style and do more listening than telling, you’re going to have a pretty ineffective management meeting where everybody’s arguing for their own agenda.”

To combat dominance or one of the other behavioral traits from taking over team-

building activities, members must rely on emotional intelligence. “It’s really about self-awareness and self-management—two of the primary competencies of emotional intelligence,” Ayers said. “If they’re aware of what their behavioral style is and they’re aware of the behavior that’s appropriate when they’re part of a high-performing team, then they can adapt their natural behavior to use the style that’s appropriate.”

Ayers frequently employs a profile to help senior team members identify their style as part of the training to get a team aligned with its organizations purpose, values, vision and goals. “Self-awareness is extremely important, but so is awareness at the team level,” Ayers said. “Where is our team? How much in alignment are we as a senior team? In many instances, senior management teams are really not as clear as they need to be on the organization’s purpose, values, vision and goals, and they don’t necessarily support them. But they don’t speak up. If the boss comes up with a new vision statement for the organization and shares the vision with the senior team and says, ‘What do you think?’ What are they going to say? Inside they’re saying, ‘It’s not really that exciting’ or, ‘I don’t really think we can achieve that, I think you’re dreaming,’ but they don’t say anything. So the CEO thinks that he has the support of the senior team, that they are aligned, and yet, when you look at the behavior you can see that they’re not. They don’t really agree with what’s been established or they’re not even clear about what’s been established.”

If the senior management team can’t agree on the vision, there’s no way they can significantly impact the bottom line. To create alignment, the team must build a high level of trust, which is difficult unless the CEO has created a safe environment where senior team members feel comfortable being honest and perhaps disagreeing with the boss. Without trust, the senior team essentially become yes-men, nodding and agreeing to work together to achieve the organizations vision, said Ayers. Worse, these fractured senior team members create the work environment for the rest of the organizations employees. “I’ve gone into organizations where the CEO is talking about the importance of teamwork and has been talking about it to all of the employees for a year,” Ayers said. “And when you talk to the employees they say, ‘Well, how do they expect us to work as a team when they can’t work as a team?’ They’re setting a bad example, and if the trust isn’t high within the senior management team, you can be sure that the trust for the senior management team is not high either. Trust is the first thing that’s going to disengage people. When they don’t trust their leaders, they’re not committed. They’re not going to be as fully engaged as they could be and give their best to the organization, and that’s got to have an impact on the bottom line.”

To build that all-important trust, Ayers uses a team-alignment questionnaire to establish an open, honest and frank debate about the organization’s vision, values, goals and purpose. The questionnaire measures a team’s alignment and trust levels, and there are four levels of trust that must be present in an effective, aligned senior team: congruence or honesty, openness or a willingness to share thoughts and feelings and being open to others ideas and opinions, acceptance or a high level of respect and reliability. Integro offers a two-day retreat to help increase the four levels of trust. Activities include sharing profile results and discussion and measurement of clarity and approval of an organizations purpose, values, vision and goals.

Next, a well-aligned senior team must get motivated to actually be a team. “There’s a lot of effort involved in being a team,” Ayers said. “Experts in their departments may

not have the same level of expertise in being a team member. They need to put their egos aside, but there's got to be a real reason for them to want to put the effort into creating this high level of trust, to risk conflict. The only thing that can really succeed in that way is for them to have something really important to achieve. It's got to be something really compelling. What is the performance challenge that the team is facing? What are we really facing as an organization? Only through trust can you get people really engaged and committed to the organization and to the senior team. If we could achieve that and get all employees really working for us and with us to achieve our vision, what would we be capable of as an organization? Most senior teams that I've spoken to say, 'Wow that would be incredible. The sky's the limit.' That's the motivation for the senior team. If it's not significant, then why bother?"

Lastly, a senior team must understand that team development is a process. "When I joined the training industry 27 years ago, team building was something you did one or two days of and that was it," Ayers said. "It was an event. A lot of team-building training hasn't changed. You can't build a team as the result of a two-day program." A team should go through a process of increasing self-awareness, building trust and employing refreshers to keep what they've learned actionable. This process could take from 12 to 18 months, said Ayers, adding that the misalignment of a senior team usually results from lack of commitment. If efforts are diligently applied, team-building activity will significantly impact an organization's image, morale and bottom line because senior team alignment can help change an organization's culture and encourage team members and those under them to perform at high levels.

"Every organization wants their people to be responsible," Ayers said. "The key is to create a responsibility-based culture, and that is the whole focus of the senior team alignment process, to help the senior team create a responsibility-based culture where everyone in the organization is willing to be responsible for what they do. You can't do that without a high level of trust."

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