Executive Teamwork:  
-- Why senior staffs must play well together

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“Teamwork” has forever been a buzzword in our business world. It seems that the importance of having employees work as a team has been promoted in every available piece of management literature. Nevertheless, we at the top have frequently had a hard time “playing well together,” despite the fact that the need is more pronounced now more than ever.

And when I say “Executive Teamwork,” I really mean any homogeneous group of leaders who would be better served by linking arms in effort than by lobbing grenades over the departmental or functional “wall.”

I used to work for a CEO who believed that the definition of a "team" was “a group of people doing things my way.” It’d be funnier if it didn't apply so well to so many...

Who cares?? Why does it matter, as long as I do my job and am good at it?? Some arguments for effective executive teamwork:

1. **External Demands.** Worldwide competition and changing financial markets make it necessary for the organization to be on the alert at all times – the pressure to innovate, apart from the company's organizational health, are no longer the CEO’s sole purview.

2. **Internal Demands.** Diversifying businesses require differently-skilled managers leading varied business units. We can no longer be "all things to all people."

3. **Succession.** An executive team is usually – and naturally – the best selection pool for future executives, as individual members would have first-hand knowledge of the essential competencies of a potential top leader within our current organization.

4. **Exemplary Behavior.** In addition, top executives working well together sends a potent signal down the line. 'Nuff said.
So why, then, if we understand the need, do top executives often fail to form a real, working team?

Consider the source: Managers who have climbed the ladder’s upper rungs are typically strong-willed, ambitious and are experts in their own right.

These characteristics, though obviously allowing them to successfully rise within an organization, may also pave the way for an unwillingness to show weakness, overprotective behavior for their functions, and viewing other executives as "competition" in their quest for the Holy Grail: Another Promotion.

Personality and behaviors can be difficult to change once they are really entrenched, so forming a true executive team becomes a difficult undertaking.

Ultimately, the CEO (or appropriate senior leadership) must establish a climate that is favorable to developing an executive team. S/He can do this by:

* **Selecting discriminately.** Normally, "upper management" can be a big group, consisting of the CEO, COO, CFO, various heads of important functional areas, and other political savvy or otherwise valuable individuals. Limiting the number of members to 8-10 enables all to develop healthier relationships, to say nothing of the success of subsequent meetings.

* **Communicating unequivocally.** The CEO must ensure that all executive team members understand the vision, mission, strategies and goals of the organization in no uncertain terms. There can be no "highway" option here.

* **Ensuring Commitment.** If there is no involvement, there is no commitment.

* **Clarifying Roles.** The CEO must clearly set the mandate for each executive team member. This involves defining strategic responsibilities (not operational), areas of cooperation, interdependence, information-sharing and decision-making processes.

* **Ensuring Safety.** Establishing an atmosphere where members can show their weaknesses, disagree and express their opinions openly without fear of losing face and authority can induce team creativity. It also promotes increased trust among the members.

* **Emphasizing Shared Accountability.** Rewarding solely individual performance undermines the formation of a cohesive executive team whose performance is supposed to be assessed collectively. Collective measures of profitability and other gains are crucial.

* **Having Courage to weed out non-performers.** It's perfect, of course, if all executives would deliver on their responsibilities – but, nobody's perfect. If an executive hinders the team's progress or is disrupting the team's process, then it might be
time to let that member go. Make that decision as certain as it would be if s/he were functionally incompetent.

I worked with the CEO of a large services company. A VP member of his senior staff was a brilliant P&L manager -- but entirely destructive to the team. We coached, cajoled, taught, pleaded and begged. This senior manager would not be swayed -- he was clearly "on the dark side," and wanted to stay. He wielded his P&L performance as a Kevlar vest.

The CEO fired him, and you could hear the air being sucked out of all the collective guts of the senior team. The boss was serious, and now the team was, too.

Creating a synergistic team of top leaders in an organization is tough work. Selecting, managing personalities and relationships, establishing and enforcing norms, and developing executive team members is a complex process – but it can be done.

The payback is huge. You know that, of course, if you took the time to read this whole article. Stop looking for a magic bullet -- it takes effort and commitment, and in all likelihood, some tough decisions...

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