Senior Executive Teams: Leading in Complex, Fast Environments

I have worked with at least 30 senior executive teams over the past twenty years, and have conducted over 200 confidential one-on-one interviews with members of these senior teams.

I am left with two favourite quotes….the first one, which led to lots of work, and the second one which indicated to me that my work was done with this client. This paper outlines my view of what is critical in the Top Team development journey, to get from the reality of Quote #1 to the reality of Quote #2.

Quote #1 came from a question I had asked. *What is the biggest barrier to teamwork on your team?* Greg responded:

> *"We protect each other's asses too much. Saving face in front of Jim (the CEO) has become the most important value we have. We have grown up together in this organization. Our wives are friends. We have subordinated the work to our superficial relationships. We don't challenge each other. We don't ask each other for help. We have an unwritten norm…you stay out of my turf, and I will stay out of yours. We are not a team.*

At the other end of the spectrum, was a team that I had worked with on and off for five years. They would bring me in annually for a "tune-up". During the interviews, I asked one of the members, how he would rate the functioning of the team today? This question elicited **Quote #2**

> *"I knew we were a high performing team, when I was heading to the boardroom and realized that the work we were about to do together, was more important than my individual leadership work for my function…..our team work had become clear, consequential, and we were all committed to it."*

Closing the gap between these two experiences of team effectiveness involves two fundamental strategies. One is to design the structure and processes of the senior team appropriately, so that all are clear and aligned on the framework for team leadership success. The other is to decide on how we will operate as a team. The following, **Top Team Design**

Principles and **Top Team Operating Model**, are the evolution of thirty years of study and working experience with senior teams.

Top Team Design Principles

Highly Effective Senior Teams

YES	NO	Would say "yes" to each one of these checklist items
		Clarity of the top team role and purpose
		The right membership to enable the fulfillment of that role and purpose.
		Commitment to a set of strategic priorities, of which the team feels *responsible* for, and the CEO is *accountable* for.
		Clarity of individual leadership accountabilities for each members unit, plus any enterprise initiatives they are leading. These have been shared and agreed upon by the rest of the team.
		Meeting agenda is the right balance for solving technical operational problems (discuss, decide, and delegate) as well as the longer term adaptive challenges the team must work on together.
		Specific norms of behaviour that lead to the demonstration of character, trust, candid dialogue, and collaborative decision making of the team.
		Candid acknowledgement and sharing with each other of our individual strengths, weaknesses, and improvement plans.
		Continuously sensing and addressing the environmental and organizational signals in order to adjust and realign with strategic priorities.
		Clear expectations and role modeling for a culture of highly productive social interaction and collaboration within and across organization boundaries

If you didn't check "yes" for all of these, then what is your strategy for getting there?

Top Team Operating Model

There **can't** be a generic prescription for how a senior leadership team should operate with each other. However the following is a framework **(4-As)** for defining and guiding your particular team toward high performance in a complex, quickly changing environment. The behaviour and actions appropriate for your team will be decided upon, by you as a team, informed by your unique context, and unique mix of members. This can be accomplished by your team addressing these "key questions" at each stage in the 4-A model,

Align (on strategic intent and team processes)

You will need to engage in a series of discussions to establish and agree on what you intend for the future, in terms of strategic priorities, team norms, and practices. This is about setting the context for teamwork. There is a requirement, at this stage, for the CEO and team members to have a broad enough perspective, and to be willing and capable of actively listening to each other, in order to ultimately align this context (strategic intent and team processes).

Key Questions to Address

- **What is our target(s)?**

- **How would we translate that target(s) into our strategic intent (priorities and plan) for approaching the target?**

- **What should our agreed upon team norms of behaviour be?**

- **Are we clear on our individual accountabilities and cross-unit authorities with each other? Have these been shared and agreed upon?**

- **How will we structure and run our meetings?**

- **How will we make decisions?**

- **How will we communicate to each other and our teams?**

Attune (to our immediate experience of ourselves, each other and the environment)

To be in sync with each other and the organizational environment, by being aware, acknowledging, and voicing our experiences of these personal, team and environmental signals. This active awareness enables us to make sense of and respond quickly to emerging opportunities and issues, as they pertain to our leadership and organizational capabilities, and our strategic intent. Unlike the "align" phase, which is primarily a rational discussion, this phase has a more relational and emotional orientation and tone.

Key Questions to Address

- **What is our felt experience of:**
    - The unpredictable and emerging faint signals that are likely bits and pieces of the future, which might have arrived early? (e.g. mobile phone purchasing)
    - Our organization and its capability to deliver on what matters?
    - The team dynamics that are impacting our ability to lead.
    - Ourselves, individually, right now, in this particular situation…that needs to be addressed?
- **How can we express and make sense of these experiences with each other?**

Attend (a form of dialogue, moving from shared experience to new sense making)

Through the team deciding what is important to *attend* to, we act as the translators or sense-makers for change, within the organization.

Key Questions to Address

- **Based on our dialogue of shared experiences and sense-making, what are the key themes, patterns, and insights that we need to make new decisions and take new action on?**
    - Changes in our environment and its impact on our strategic intent?
    - Our organization's capability and resources?
    - Ourselves and our leadership?

Adjust (our strategy to new experiences and understandings or vice versa)

This is about committing to actions and behaviour to either re-align the strategic context with the organization or vice versa. Having decided on this as a team, communicate and mobilize the organization around the adjustments we need to make, to either the organization or aspects of our planning.

Key Questions to Address

- **How should I/we adjust our own team leadership behaviour to better lead us toward our strategic intent?**

- **How should we adjust our organizational resources to better adapt to and deliver on our strategic intent?**

- **How should we adjust the strategic context and plan that we originally set in the "align" phase to better fit with today's reality?**

Conclusion:

What I have just outlined above is the ideal design framework and operating model required for a top team to navigate and adapt through speed and complexity. Laying it out is the easy part. Living it is hard. ☺