The Myth of the Top Management Team

by Jon R. Katzenbach

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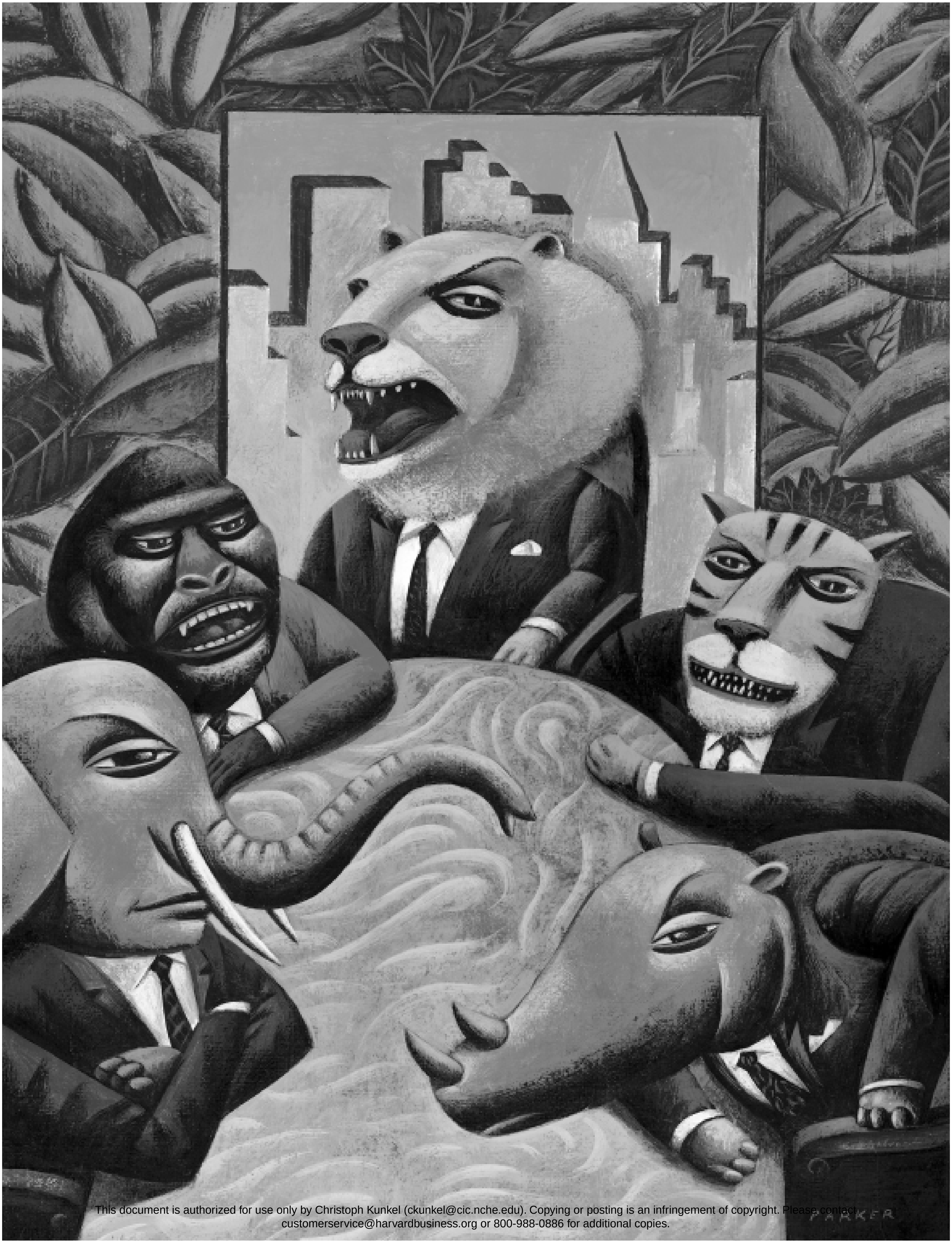
PARKER

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COMPANIES ALL ACROSS THE ECONOMIC SPECTRUM ARE making use of teams. Self-directed work teams, product design teams, sales account teams, cross-functional teams, process redesign teams – you name it, you are likely to find it. And you are just as likely to find the group at the very top of an organization professing to be a team.

But walk into almost any organization and ask anyone about the "team at the top." The immediate response is likely to be a knowing, skeptical smile, followed by a comment along the lines of "Well, they are not *really* a team, but…" Even in the best of companies, a so-called top team seldom functions as a *real* team. The fact is, a team's know-how and experience inevitably lose power and focus at the top of the corporate hierarchy. And simply labeling the leadership group a team does not make it one.

ARTWORK BY CURTIS PARKER

The idea of a team at the top still remains a seductive notion. There are very few CEOs who do not refer often – both privately and publicly – to their "top team." New CEOs shape their own version of a team at the top to fit their idea about the support they will need from their leadership group. And the business press perpetuates the view that CEOs of large organizations put together a top team of executives to spearhead their enterprises.

Team at the top is a badly misused term that obscures both what teams can accomplish and what makes them work.

But *team at the top* is a badly misused term that obscures both what teams can actually accomplish and what is required to make them work. The terminology is important: when we are undisciplined in our language, we become undisciplined in our thinking and actions. Real teams must follow a well-defined discipline in order to achieve their performance potential.

And performance is the key issue. Not long ago, the corporate world was victimized by an army of gurus proclaiming the virtues of such "team values" as involvement, empowerment, and sensitivity. The focus on performance was lost temporarily, and in many companies, it still is. The *team-based organization* became a dangerous idea – if not a dirty word – in the minds of those who saw it lead to the undiscriminating pursuit of new teams everywhere. But in well-managed enterprises today, the notion of performance is central to team efforts. And the closer a team is to its marketplace, the easier it is to maintain that critical focus on performance – because customers and competitors energize a team's natural instincts more than any other source. As one moves up the leadership ladder, however, one can easily lose sight of the collective results that differentiate real teams from pseudoteams.

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It is critical to be precise: A real team is a *small number* of people with *complementary skills* who are committed to a *common purpose, performance goals,* and an *approach* for which they hold themselves *mutually accountable.* Each phrase in that definition represents an explicit element of a discipline – what I've referred to in the past as the *discipline of team basics* – that is absolutely essential if a group at any level is to obtain the extra measure of performance results that real teams can deliver.

There is little doubt that many senior executives and CEOs become frustrated in their efforts to form teams at the top. Too often, they see few gains in performance from their attempts to become more teamlike. And they recognize that the rest of the organization knows that the senior group doesn't really work together as a team.

My message, then, might come as a welcome relief to those who have been struggling with their frustration over top teams. Indeed, trying to shoehorn a group of top-level executives into a team *can* be frustrating. More important, it can be pointless. But it's also true that when the conditions are right, a team effort at the top can be essential to capturing the highest performance results possible. Good leadership requires differentiating between team and nonteam opportunities, and then acting accordingly. (See the insert "The Myths That Hamper Team Performance.")

Why Nonteam Behavior Prevails at the Top

The typical pattern of behavior in the top leadership group of all kinds of enterprises is familiar and well established: The CEO designates his or her direct reports as some kind of executive council. That council's primary purpose is to shape strategic priorities, enforce operating standards, establish corporate policy, and develop management talent; its members set the direction, mission, and policies for the business. The group meets at least weekly to discuss operating matters; individuals also come together periodically to discuss major strategy and policy matters. The CEO chairs the meetings, controls the agenda, and gains support for decisions from members. Agendas are circulated in advance, allowing only modest amounts of time for unscheduled subjects. In short, the executive council functions as an efficient, effective working group with a single leader. It seldom applies the discipline of

The Myths That Hamper Team Performance

Among top-level executives today, there is a set of strongly held beliefs about the importance and potential value of teams at the top. Ironically, these myths hamper the very team performance they are designed to stimulate.

Teamwork at the top will lead to team performance. This myth argues for more attention to the "four Cs" of effective teamwork: communication, cooperation, collaboration, and compromise.

The reality is that *teamwork* is not the same thing as *team performance.* Teamwork is broad-based cooperation and supportive behavior; a team is a tightly focused performance unit. By concentrating all its attention on teamwork, the senior group is actually *less* likely to be discriminating about when and where it needs to apply the discipline required to achieve real team performance. Members of the group may improve their ability to communicate and support one another, but they will not obtain team performance without applying the discipline.

Teams at the top need to spend more time together building consensus. This myth assumes that time spent together will lead to team performance and that decisions built on consensus are better than those handed down by individuals. In addition, it assumes that building consensus is synonymous with reducing conflict – and that less conflict somehow leads to more teamlike behavior.

The truth is that most executives have little time to spare, and the idea of spending more time struggling to build consensus simply makes no sense to them. In fact, many decisions are better made individually than collectively. Moreover, spending time together seeking consensus is not the same thing as doing real work. Most important, real teams do not avoid conflict – they thrive on it. And conflict is virtually unavoidable at the top.

The senior group should function as a team whenever it is together. This myth suggests that every task to be tackled by the executive leadership group qualifies as a team opportunity.

In fact, most senior-leadership interactions are not real team opportunities. A lot of time can be wasted attempting to apply team behaviors to situations that require approaches driven by a single leader. Nonteam efforts can often be faster and more effective – particularly when the value of the collective work-products is either difficult to identify or less than compelling.

team basics either to the full group or to its occasional subgroups. Why, despite the increasing value of team performance down the line, do nonteam behaviors continue to prevail at the top? There are a number of reasons for this apparent paradox.

First, a meaningful purpose for a team at the top is difficult to define. A real team must be deeply committed to a purpose that not only provides a sense of direction to its members but also justifies and clarifies the kind of extra collective efforts required for the team to achieve its performance potential. A frontline team on the plant floor can relatively easily articulate a meaningful purpose – for example, one that might involve making full use of a machine's capacity or improving a product's quality. A team effort at the top, however, cannot be tied to a machine or a single product line. And abstract goals – such as "improve the company's performance" or "implement the company's strategy" – are much too broad to provide the appropriate focus or mutual accountability that is necessary for a real team effort.

Second, tangible performance goals are hard to articulate. The goals of frontline teams are clear, specific, recurring, and measurable. They cover, for example, downtime, changeover speeds, yields, costs, and outputs. At the top, however, team goals are much harder to determine. Appropriate goals must be culled from targets for corporate and business-unit objectives, long-term finances, market share, and executive performance. As a result, goal setting for a so-called team at the top is often vague, and the process is rarely compelling to results-oriented senior executives.

Third, the right mix of skills is often absent. The extra performance capability that a real team provides comes largely from a complementary mixing of its members' skills. As a result, team members should be selected primarily on the basis of the set of skills they will bring to the group. But that's not how it usually works at the top, where team assignments are often based more on members' formal position than on actual skills. (See the insert "The 'All My Direct Reports' Fallacy.") And although any group of executives can bring a good mix of skills to a team, it is simply wrong to presume that a senior leadership group will possess the right skills for *any* given project.

Fourth, most teams require a heavy time commitment. Each team needs to shape a working approach that takes into account its members' available time, as well as their different skills and roles.

The "All My Direct Reports" Fallacy

Many CEOs tend to think of their group of direct reports as a team. But shaping collective work of high value that fits the group's mix of skills is difficult. It is analogous to searching for a market after a product has been designed, rather than first identifying what the market needs and then designing the product to fill that need.

Top-level executives are chosen because their individual capabilities and experiences qualify them for extremely demanding primary responsibilities. Team challenges at the top seldom require the particular mix of skills represented by a CEO's direct reports, and such challenges do not usually take clear priority over the individual executives' formal responsibilities. In other words, it is hard to find collective work-products that justify top-level executives doing real work together. As long as senior leaders instinctively hold to the "all my direct reports" assumption about team composition, their experience with teams at the top will remain disappointing.

Consider the case of a large multinational company that recently confronted a disaster in its management-information-systems function. Years of inept leadership, misallocation of resources, and procrastination had produced an intolerable situation. When senior managers finally acknowledged the magnitude of the problem, the company was in critical condition. Without a major transformation in the MIS function, there was little doubt that the company would lose its competitive edge and would either go out of business or be acquired by another company.

The leadership group convened in several intensive sessions to evaluate the options and decide on a course of action. None of the group's members had any MIS experience, yet the group proceeded without any changes to its composition. The members simply assumed that the CFO would be able to provide the necessary MIS knowledge and judgment. Early on, they concluded that they should retain outside consultants. Soon after, they entered into a five-year contract for nearly $100 million to reengineer the function. Several months later, the CEO had to bring in a hired gun to straighten out the mess. By that time, the company was practically at a standstill.

Who is to say that top management might not have resolved the issue differently had it consulted the company's own MIS experts? Skeptics will argue that the internal experts were precisely the people who had created the mess, so they could hardly be counted on to decide how it should be cleaned up. But the organization's MIS professionals knew what "the mess" consisted of and realized that a consultant-intensive solution would meet with crippling resistance.

The company's actions reflect the prevailing mindset in many top-leadership groups: somehow the collective judgment and experience of those on the so-called top team will make up for a lack of more specific and relevant skills. All of a CEO's direct reports can seldom, if ever, constitute an ongoing real team. Nor should they be trying to become one in their quest to build and maintain a high-performing enterprise. It simply does not work that way at the top.

The members must become as committed to that approach as they are to the team's overall purpose and goals. Most frontline teams have the advantage of full-time members, whereas most top teams consist of busy executives who have trouble making the kind of time commitment that real teams deserve and who therefore devote only part of their time to the team's assignment.

Fifth, real teams rely on mutual accountability. By the time executives reach top management positions, they have mastered an *executive leadership discipline* that is grounded in the principle of individual accountability. They believe that individual accountability is essential to maintaining control over performance – and they can point to results over time to back up that belief. Mutual accountability, by contrast, is much harder to develop and is not as battle tested. In fact, most executives distrust the entire notion.

Sixth, nonteams fit the power structure. The single leader approach fits the expectations of the hierarchy that governs most organizations. Top-level executives are natural overachievers who master the art of working within an orderly hierarchy early in their careers; at the same time, they are uncomfortable collaborating in amorphous groups with overlapping accountabilities.

In any hierarchical organization, a "power alley" exists that consists of the individuals who have the most clout, make the critical decisions, and are expected to align the decisions and actions of others with corporate priorities. Working groups and organizational units with a single leader fit within this model much better than real teams do because of their clarity about leadership and accountability. In this situation, such groups tend to be formed at random – not by design. And when they do become visible, they usually are seen as forums for communication or for building morale rather than as true performance units.

Seventh, nonteams are fast and efficient. The unit or working group with a single leader can be energized and aligned relatively quickly. A seasoned leader usually knows what the group's goals and basic working approach should be. As a result, the group hits the ground running. It can rely on the experience and formal position of its leader to make individual assignments clearly and wisely, to protect it from unfriendly outside elements, and to keep its members on track. The group is likely to make few mistakes, because of the leader's knowledge and experience regarding the task at hand. Moreover, the members seek out and rely on the formal leader's know-how. By contrast, real teams, especially during the initial phase of shaping goals and brainstorming about working approaches, need more time to develop. Many executives have little patience for the time-consuming "forming, norming, and storming" activities that team efforts commonly require at the start.

Executive Leadership Discipline Versus Team Discipline

For all the reasons just cited, "teaming at the top" is an unnatural act. Rather than seeing nonteam behavior as a failure, however, wise leaders recognize the inherent value of both behaviors, and the fundamentally different disciplines required for strong executive leadership on the one hand and for true team performance on the other. Top-level executives can and do learn to integrate the two instead of replacing one with the other.

The best CEOs apply an executive leadership discipline that places a premium on individual accountability for profit, market results, speed, and growth. The business press expects it, Wall Street rewards it, and boards of directors demand it. Consequently, CEOs organize senior executives in a group in order to take full advantage of their experience and skills. They establish efficient processes and forums that bring their best leaders together to contribute their experiences, insights, and judgments to shaping the company's strategy and policy. And they set high standards of performance – and expect executives to meet them.

Most executives at the top are conditioned to this set of leadership rules. They have proved over time their ability to produce consistently good results. But the discipline of executive leadership is often in direct conflict with the discipline required for team performance. The two are uncomfortable bedfellows. Consider the following differences:

- Top executives are individually accountable for whatever happens on their watch; they enforce such accountability in the organization by rewarding and punishing managers according to how well they meet clear-cut individual objectives. A team learns to hold its members mutually accountable for collective results.
- Top executives are primarily responsible for broad corporate strategy, policy, and objectives. A team's purpose and goals must be tightly focused on specific performance results.
- Top executives must create and maintain a sense of urgency about resolving those issues that are critical to overall company performance. A team mobilizes around a meaningful purpose and a commitment to specific, common goals; a team's purpose and goals may be important without being either urgent or critical.
- Top executives make decisions on their own; they exercise personal judgment about risks, resources, and strategic options. A team makes collective judgments by means of open dialogue, conflict resolution, and collective *real work*.[1]
- Top executives assign people to tasks based largely on their position in the organization. Members of a team are assigned on the basis of the specific skills required by the task at hand, regardless of their formal role in the company.
- Top executives leverage their time and experience by means of efficient organizational and managerial processes; as executives become more efficient and thus more valuable, they are given responsibility for more people and greater assets. A team is seldom the most efficient way of getting something accomplished.

Wise leaders recognize that strong executive leadership and true team performance require different disciplines.

These contrasting disciplines produce conflicts that are difficult to resolve. The fundamental point, however, is that each has its place in the senior leadership of any performance-oriented organization – although it takes perceptive executive judgment to determine when and how each disci-

The leader's mantle falls naturally on the shoulders of the executive with the most relevant skills.

pline should be applied. In fact, the best leaders make a conscious effort to apply both disciplines, recognizing that they will not always make the right call.

Litmus Tests for Teams

Three litmus tests determine whether a group can achieve real team performance. These tests are valid regardless of a potential team's position within its company – at the top, in the middle, or on the front line. First, the group must focus its attention on shaping *collective work-products* of clear value to the company. Second, its members must learn how to shift and share leadership roles. Third, those members must be mutually accountable for the group's results. Let's examine each test in turn.

Shaping Collective Work-Products. A collective work-product for a top leadership group is relatively easy to define: it is the tangible result of the group applying different skills to produce a performance improvement not achievable by the members of the group working on their own. Let me be clear: team performance at the top is not the same thing as open discussion, debate, decision making, or delegation of authority.

Collective work-products are not as easy to come by at the top as they are down the line. A company undergoing major change, however, will invariably encounter some obvious opportunities for collective work at the top. For example, in 1993, executives at Citicorp formed a team to help redesign the company's credit-management process after a collapse in the real estate market created a serious financial crisis throughout the industry. And in 1995, four executives at Browning-Ferris Industries, the second-largest global waste-management and recycling company, functioned as a real team in order to raise several hundred million dollars in new financing – a sum critical to the company's future growth. Those success stories, however, were energized by urgency, if not by a crisis. Without a need for urgent action, a top leadership group can seldom carve out collective work-products that match its mix of skills and also justify the diversion of executives' time from their primary responsibilities. And keep in mind that not all collective work-products constitute a real team opportunity: if the leadership role does not need to shift, collective work can be directed by a single leader.

Shifting the Leadership Role. A real team is never leaderless. Instead, it is able to draw on the leadership ability of each of its members at different times and in different ways.

A working group or an organizational-unit "team" operates under the guidance and direction of its formal leader. Although the leader may opt to delegate primary responsibility for a particular assignment, the formal leader is still accountable for the group's results – and all the members know it. Seldom does a member take an initiative that is not strongly endorsed and supported by the formal leader. This approach provides lines of leadership that are crystal clear, and it is a time-honored way for organizations to maintain order and accountability as they become larger.

Real teams, by contrast, boost their leadership capacity by shifting the leader's role back and forth

among members depending on the task. The leader's mantle falls naturally on the shoulders of whichever executive has the knowledge or experience most relevant to the particular issue at hand. In the major refinancing effort at Browning-Ferris Industries, for instance, the top team was often led by the CFO during discussions with the board, by the CEO in meetings with key investors, and by the COO when crafting events to build cross-organizational support for initiatives.

Building Mutual Accountability. True mutual accountability is critical to the success of teams. Best characterized by the phrase "We hold one another accountable" rather than "The boss holds us accountable," it demonstrates the high degree of commitment that all members of a real team must share. People at the top of an organization are accustomed to being held individually accountable for whatever happens on their watch; when they are on a true team, they must subordinate that approach in order to pursue a collective result.

When Teams at the Top Make Sense

The contrasting disciplines of team and executive performance help explain why the best senior-leadership groups rarely function as ongoing true teams. But we often see such groups functioning as real teams when major, unexpected events arise – particularly when a sudden change breaks up the natural order at the top of an organization.

Consider, for example, what happens in a merger or acquisition. The opportunity to acquire or merge with another company creates a number of real team opportunities at the top of both companies – not only during the negotiating process but also while the two organizations integrate their operations. Groups of people from both sides come together to exchange information, eliminate duplication, and meld the best practices of the merging companies. The performance challenges of a merger or an acquisition naturally give rise to team acts. Those challenges almost always include

- a compelling sense of urgency throughout both organizations;
- new imperatives to improve performance, including many that are measurable;
- critical issues that cannot be resolved without integrating the skill sets of both organizations;
- overlapping formal structures and processes that require new informal networks; and
- temporary leadership roles that differ from permanent leadership roles.

Given those challenges, it is natural for executives at the top of two merging companies to engage in team behavior as a complement to their usual single-leader approach. Indeed, mobilized by a major change, the right executives often come together to function as a real team. But those who wait for a cataclysmic event to spawn a team at the top are likely to miss important opportunities to exploit team performance. Those opportunities are to be found wherever there is collective real work to be done by the company's top-level executives.

Doing Collective Work at Mobil. Despite the long and successful history of single-executive leadership at Mobil Oil Corporation, in 1994 CEO Lucio Noto believed that it was time to try for more team performance at the top. The company was at a critical juncture in its development: the industry was undergoing significant changes, competitors were modifying both strategies and structures, and growth prospects were becoming more difficult to identify and realize. In short, Noto wanted all the senior-level help he could get to strengthen Mobil's strategic position and leadership capacity for the next generation of the company's senior managers.

The first credible team challenge for Noto's senior-leadership group was to create a new process for accelerating the development of the company's leadership capacity. The members of the executive office began by forming a team to evaluate the company's future leaders. All team members, including Noto, were required to conduct extensive interviews about the candidates assigned to them and to review a new base of performance facts about those they had not worked with recently. This was a real-work role for the team members. Moreover, once they had developed the base of information they needed for their assigned candidates, the members of the top team had to come together and work collectively to complete the evaluations.

During those efforts, Noto functioned as both a team member and a team leader – but seldom as *the* leader. Other members of the senior group also learned how to act as leaders and team players. Noto filled the gaps whenever the group's progress seemed to falter, and he was diligent about subtly reminding the group of the main reason for its effort: to accelerate the development of the next generation of Mobil's leaders.

As these efforts evolved, the team coalesced around a few simple messages that enabled it to improve the balance between collective work and individual tasks. Perhaps the most powerful of these messages can be described in the statement "Our primary focus is development, not evaluation." That message shifted the balance of the team's collective work from evaluation to development. It became clear that the evaluation work could be delegated to organizational-unit leaders and to teams in the organization's formal structure and that the executive office should concentrate on addressing the company's high-level development needs.

The team's collective abilities allowed it to accomplish more than its members could have working on their own.

At the same time, the simple message that helped the team coalesce also enabled it to identify collective work-products that it otherwise might have overlooked. One such work-product was a new leadership-development profile: the executive-office team completely redesigned the criteria and evidence required for evaluating the leadership accomplishments of middle and senior managers.

Another work-product was a more rigorous evaluation process for candidates for the top 100 or so positions in the company. The new process not only included 360-degree evaluations but also required senior executives to conduct intensive interviews and to review fact-based information on candidates that went well beyond the usual human-resources evaluations.

A third work-product was a new opportunity-development and assignment-matching process. A group called the Opportunity Development Council was established to uncover development opportunities for leadership candidates of high potential.

Top leadership groups that do real work together, such as the one at Mobil, are much like musical ensembles that sing or play together: as members gain a firsthand appreciation for the talent each possesses, they develop mutual respect for one another and a strong conviction about the value of what they can accomplish together. Unless a group continues to do substantive work together, however, it will lose its ability to shape collective work-products.

Responding to the Marketplace at Texas Instruments. The collective work of teams at the top can be particularly powerful when the direction of the marketplace is hard to comprehend and no single member of the leadership group can clearly see the way forward. Consider the case of Texas Instruments in 1986. A small team took over the leadership of the company's rapidly eroding calculator business at a time when both the market and Texas Instruments itself were rapidly moving away from handheld calculators in favor of personal computers. The market was in such turmoil that few thought calculators would survive at all. Resorting to dark humor amid this doom and gloom, the team referred to its regular Friday afternoon meetings as "window-jumping sessions." Over time, however, the team's collective sense of the marketplace allowed it to accomplish more than its members could have accomplished working on their own. Mobilizing its collective skills in engineering and marketing, the team succeeded in redesigning the product and resegmenting the market. Most important, it persuaded the company that it needed to make use of technology from outside Texas Instruments. Most so-called teams at the top do not immerse themselves in the marketplace the way the team at Texas Instruments did.

Guidelines for Initiating a Real Team

A simple set of guidelines can help any group – at the top, in the middle, or on the front line – find its hidden potential for team performance.

Pick your shots wisely. Operating as a team is not the only way leadership groups can improve performance. Remember: team efforts work only when collective work-products and shifting leadership contributions offer high value.

Avoid the trap of picking hollow opportunities for your top team. Doing so not only distracts the team from the real issues that justify taking up executives' time but also builds skepticism among other employees about the value of the team's efforts. The best leadership groups learn to avoid such situations and focus instead on spotting real team opportunities in advance rather than waiting to be jolted into action by a major event.

Consider your options carefully. Teams go by a variety of different names according to their various purposes and goals. Although many fail to meet the vigorous litmus tests of real team performance, such groups are not without value within a balanced approach to leadership. They may be composed of a unit leader's direct reports, a cross-functional selection of managers, or an entire enterprise. The different types of small-group efforts all have their place within a high-performing organization. The best leadership groups are never wedded to one approach; they make a concerted effort to master and modify several approaches.

Make the critical trade-offs consciously. Executives must grapple with three important trade-offs when thinking about establishing a top team. First, they must consider whether the expenditure of time needed to get real team performance is worth it. Groups with a single leader are fast, efficient, and powerful when the person in charge really does know best. Second, executives must keep in mind that it is more important to a team's performance to choose individuals based on their mix of skills rather than on their formal titles. Projects that do not require a composite mix of skills for collective work-products are best handled by individuals in a working group, each tackling a piece of the puzzle largely on his or her own. Third, executives must consider the leadership trade-off. Real teams – in which the leadership role shifts – can help build an organization's overall leadership capacity by allowing both a number of different individuals to lead and a number of potential leaders to develop their capabilities. In many situations, executives will decide to forgo teams and will instead opt for the clear line of accountability provided by a single leader.

Apply the discipline that fits. It is usually more natural to apply the executive leadership discipline the higher up in the organization you go, simply because that is how large organizations are expected to work. But high-level executives tend to overuse that discipline to the detriment of potential team performance. The right balance is a moving target that is never easy to hit. Once groups at the top experience the power of team discipline, their members can easily start to overuse that approach.

Learn different leadership roles. Top-level executives should be wary of their personal preferences when it comes to leadership approaches. Most people who have attempted to be team leaders in a situation that demanded strong direction will remember the frustration and confusion that resulted. The reverse is equally true. Those who are wedded to what has worked for them in the past will always find it difficult to succeed in a new leadership role.

1. For a discussion of what constitutes real work, see the HBR Classic in this issue, "Real Work," by Abraham Zaleznik.

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