RETHINK HEALTH

Building Great Leadership Teams for Complex Problems

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership functions increasingly are fulfilled not by a heroic individual but rather by leadership *teams* (Ancona & Nadler, 1989; Hambrick, 1997; Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008). Leadership teams appear to be common in contemporary life and, for many complex enterprises, a necessity.

At the top of organizations, for example, the rapid changes and increasing complexity and interdependence of organizations' environments may have made the top leadership role too large for any one person to accomplish, no matter how talented (Bennis, 1997). At the same time, *cross-organizational* leadership teams are increasing in prevalence in public life. Multi-stakeholder leadership teams are frequently formed, for example, when community and societal needs require the resources and capabilities of multiple, independent institutions to solve them. Many observers have noted that these kinds of societal problems are increasing in frequency in the world (Sayles & Chandler, 2009). In the public sector and in civic life, for instance, we are seeing an increase in climate-related crises like flooded cities, droughts, severe wildfires, oil spills, and epidemics, which are creating the requirements for cross-entity and cross-sector collaborations, bringing together leaders from municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local businesses. All these entities hold critical leadership roles in bring about a sustainable solution. These multi-stakeholder collaborations benefit from shared authority and broad resources held by members appointed from relevant stakeholder groups (Mendonca, Beroggi, & Wallace, 2001; Sayles & Chandler, 2009; Leonard & Howitt, 2006). Leadership teams of many kinds thus have considerable potential compared to individuals fulfilling leadership functions independently. They have more resources, more diverse perspectives, broader networks of key constituencies, and the potential to develop context-specific strategies to solve unique local problems.

While the great strengths and potential of leadership teams are compelling, it is also the case that such teams struggle with significant challenges to their effectiveness. The purposes of this article are to: (1) draw upon everything that is known about leadership teams to identify the key challenges teams face whose core purpose is to provide

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leadership, collectively, to complex systems. I summarize these as a set of "tripwires" that cause leadership teams to stumble (Hackman, 1994). Throughout, I provide illustrations of why these potential tripwires are so common for leadership teams, especially those that operate across organizations. (2) For each tripwire, there is a parallel positive condition that can be put in place to increase the chances that leadership teams will avoid the pitfalls and develop into fully effective teams that provide all the leadership that is needed by the complex undertakings they govern. These conditions can be put in place from the beginning of the life of a leadership team to establish a positive trajectory for their work, but, as will be seen, also need considerable monitoring and adjustment throughout the unfolding of a complex undertaking (See Table 1 for a summary of tripwires and conditions).

Table 1: Tripwires and conditions for great leadership teams

TRIPWIRES	CONDITIONS
Unclear Purposes • Differences in individual interests • Conceptual challenge • Teams are poorer than individuals at defining purposes	**Compelling Direction** • Use narrative to find shared values • Identify interdependencies • Authorize an individual
The Wrong People are Convening • Representing institutions • Too senior • No teamwork skills	**Convene the Right People** • Look for systems thinkers • Recompose over time • Assess empathy and integrity
Meetings Are a Waste of Time • Avoiding conflict • Different cultures • Assume "we're all grownups"	**Create Enabling Structure** • Create interdependent tasks • Establish ground rules • Do midcourse reviews and revise norms

LEADERSHIP TEAMS

A leadership team is group of individuals, each of whom has personal responsibility for leading some part of a system but who also are interdependent for the purpose of providing overall leadership to a larger enterprise. The most commonly written-about kind of leadership team is the one at the top of an organization—the senior management team. Typically composed of the CEO and his or her direct reports, each member of a top management team has a separate, individual leadership responsibility. In a global for-profit company, for example, that responsibility might be for a geographical region, or for a set of major customers, or for a particular function. But members of such teams also have *collective* responsibility for aligning the various parts of the organization into a coherent whole and fostering its overall effectiveness.

Less frequently studied and less well understood are leadership teams that bring together the resources of multiple enterprises for purposes of solving difficult problems or for leading major change in complex systems. Yet these kinds of leadership teams are both increasingly critical and especially difficult to design, launch, and lead well. And the consequences of their successes and failures have lasting impact on the communities in which they operate…for better or for worse.

A pair of examples from two different U.S. communities illustrates. Note that in each case, key aspects of the composition, origin, and challenges they faced were quite similar in many respects. Yet the results of their convening were radically different.

TEAM 1

In a town in the Pacific Northwest, a group of leaders convened to address the healthcare needs of citizens in four surrounding counties who lacked adequate health insurance. These patients were often unable or reluctant to seek care when they needed it and lacked the resources to engage the kind of primary and preventive care that promotes good health over time. As a consequence, their care was usually urgent and typically sought in emergency rooms, creating burdens on the hospitals, the community, and the patients themselves.

Convened by a senior leader from one major hospital in the region, a leadership group formed to include two senior leaders from major local employers, senior leaders from both hospitals, from two primary care practices, and from one major health insurer.

In the course of their work, this team of leaders from a range of institutions mobilized volunteer health care workers to support this underserved population and eventually created a new community health center to meet the needs of the underinsured.

Since that time and over the subsequent 20 years, different configurations of leaders from these institutions have undertaken additional problem-solving collaborations. For example, they created a single sleep lab jointly owned by both hospitals, thereby preventing the overinvestment of funds in redundant and competing resources; they have conducted a community-wide health needs assessment with over a hundred institutional partners; and they have identified a set of health priorities for their region. The pattern of configuring and reconfiguring different groups of leaders from these institutions to address health and health care challenges in the area continues, and this community has, unusually, a governance body composed of members from many institutions, including the citizenry, that collectively tackle problems and set future priorities for health.

TEAM 2

In a small city in the Northeast, eight leaders came together to address how to provide care to the underinsured in their community. Convened by respected leaders from the public health department, the leadership group that formed ultimately included three hospital CEOS, one senior leader from a mental health provider, one from a children's health center, and one from a major private health care insurer in the region. This leadership group met monthly over two years, but was unable to agree on an approach to solving the problem for which they had initially convened. Significant conflicts arose among members about just what their purposes and approach should be, and how to take action together. While they produced a high quality assessment of local health care needs in the region, at this writing they have enacted no significant changes in access to care for the uninsured. Their sense of efficacy as a group to tackle the problems of their community is very low. The group members still meet but some individuals report that they largely attend so that no decisions get made behind their backs.

These two teams convened functionally similar groups to respond to similar local pressures, yet they differed widely in effectiveness. Let me begin our analysis by establishing what we mean by an **effective leadership team**. Effective leadership teams:

1. Meet the needs of the *constituencies* they serve;

2. Grow in *capacity* to solve increasingly challenging problems over time; and

3. Are on balance, such teams contribute to the *development of individual leaders* (Hackman, 2002; Wageman & Hackman, 2009) rather than undermine their commitment and effectiveness.

Team 1 above showed markedly positive signs on all three criteria of effectiveness, spawning increasing success and offering many leaders opportunities to tackle significant societal problems. Team 2, by contrast, not only failed to address critical community problems but have burned out collaborative capacity in the process. Without significant turnover among the leaders in this latter community, it may never build the kind of collaborative leadership capacity needed to address the challenges faced in the region. The continuing ineffectiveness of the leadership group is in no way trivial for this community.

What are the conditions that increase the chances of outcomes like that of Team 1 and help to avoid the pitfalls that undermined Team 2? The focus of this essay is to draw upon research about leadership teams, as well as field observations of multi-stakeholder leadership teams in practice, to identify what most gets in the way of leadership team effectiveness, and, more practically, what leaders operating in such teams can do about it. To do so, I draw upon an array of field studies of leadership teams, my own and others (Ancona & Nadler, 1989; Berg, 2005; Ganz & Wageman, 2008; Gerencser, Kelly, Napolitano & Van Lee, 2008; Hambrick & D'Aveni, 1996; Li & Hambrick, 2005; Wageman & Hackman, 2009; Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008), to make sense of these challenges and pose potential solutions.

TRIPWIRE 1: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS LEADERSHIP TEAM

Every team needs a compelling purpose. For team purposes to engage members' motivation and to orient them in a common direction, those purposes must be *consequential*, *challenging*, and *clear* (Hackman, 2002; Wageman, Nunes, Burruss & Hackman, 2008). These three ideas are straightforward in concept, but must be brought to life in unique ways for every team.

For example, team purpose must be challenging enough to engage members' capabilities, but not so impossible as to be demoralizing. To achieve the right degree of challenge, someone must identify what a particular team of leaders is ready for at a given point in its life. Early on, when leaders are undertaking their first collaborative initiatives, the level of challenge they can handle may be much lower than when they have matured significantly as collaboration. We have seen, for example, that multi-stakeholder leadership teams who undertake a clear task such as collectively building a shared model of the causes of their local problems, or designing a forum for interchange with a broader set of leaders are able to build the collaborative "muscle" they need to later undertake the greater challenges involved in addressing problems that raise significant conflicts among the interests of the institutions—such as deciding that the community served by two competing hospitals needs only one cancer center, not two.

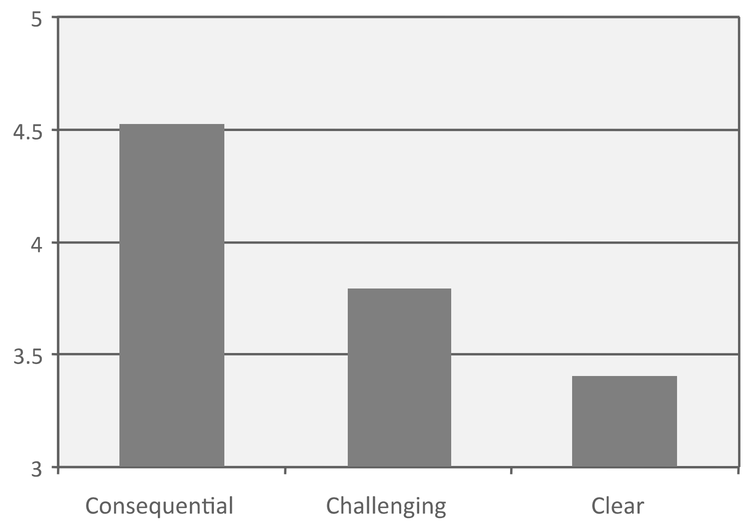
A team purpose must also be consequential: crucial enough to be treated as a significant priority of the individuals on the leadership team even when their institutional responsibilities demand a lot of them.   And, finally, a leadership team purpose must be clear. Members must be able to imagine what will be accomplished as a consequence of their work and above all what the role is that only this team of leaders, of all people in this community or organization, can play in bringing that about.

Teams of other kinds—front line production teams, or quality teams, or task forces—often suffer from a lack of consequentiality in their purposes. Considerable research has demonstrated that for such teams, the work they do often is inadequately connected to larger, more meaningful objectives, to the lives and work of others, or to the effectiveness of the organization as a whole. Not so with leadership teams. They tend to experience their purposes as highly consequential for the well being of others or of the shared enterprise. And they typically do experience their shared leadership work as a significant challenge to their capabilities, a meaningful stretch. It is *clarity* of purpose that is the most difficult feature of compelling team purposes to establish for leadership teams.

Leadership teams are no less in need of clarity than any other kind of team. Indeed, they may be *more* in need of explicit attention to defining clear purposes than other teams. As Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins (2001) point out, leadership teams tend to face highly unstructured task streams: continuously changing flows of overlapping problem-solving and decision-making situations. Moreover, teams of leaders have a greater need to deal with unpredictable events in the external environment than do many kinds of teams (Berg, 2005; Ancona & Nadler, 1989). The very amorphousness of their work makes the team purposes difficult to specify.

Data from a study of leadership teams across nations and sectors illustrate (Wageman, Nunes, Burrus, & Hackman, 2008). These data show the average scores for consequentiality, challenge, and clarity across more than a hundred leadership teams of many kinds, on a scale from 1= very poor to 5= excellent (see Figure 1). As one leadership team member described his team's purpose: "So, our team purpose is really important, and it's going to be very tough to pull off…if only we knew what it was."

Figure 1: Leadership team purposes lack clarity



OBSTACLES TO CLARITY OF PURPOSE

There are three main reasons why the purposes of leadership teams can be especially unclear:

1. Differences among the interests and priorities of the individuals prevent alignment of purpose at the team level;

2. Articulating purpose for a leadership team can be an extraordinary conceptual challenge; and

3. In teams of peers, defining purpose is a joint task—and teams are notoriously poor at articulating purposes collaboratively.

I elaborate on each of these obstacles, below, and then turn to the question of what leadership teams can do to address them, drawing on examples and illustrations of real teams facing these challenges successfully.

DIFFERENCES IN INTEREST

A significant challenge to purpose clarity for leadership teams is that when a group of leaders convenes, the tacit assumption that all are "signed on" to a shared enterprise, or that members view themselves as a leadership group may be excessively optimistic. In leadership teams at the top of an organization, for example, members often construe themselves as representing their own unit, they are in the team to gain what they can and protect what they can for their own constituents, even at cost to other leaders at the table. In multi-stakeholder leadership teams that stance is even more likely. Members of such teams do not operate within the boundary of a single enterprise with a clear organizational purpose. Rather, they gather typically because they have been convened by someone from outside their own organization who perceives a problem that is beyond the scope of any one institution to solve. Often, members have responded to an invitation to such a leadership team because their institutions, too, have an interest in seeing that problem solved. For example, Gerencser, Kelly, Napolitano and Van Lee (2009) describe an inspiring example of how one senior leader from Hewlett Packard, out of great personal sorrow and determination, eventually convened a group that drew in members of UNESCO, engineering educators, the World Bank, and the Nigerian Society of Engineers, among others to radically transform the quality and availability of science and engineering education in Africa. This shared perception of a problem is, as will be seen, a vital resource for establishing clear purpose for the leadership team. Nonetheless, the primary construal of individuals' roles in the group is generally that they are there to represent the well-being of their own institutions or organizational units in the joint work.

Finding a clear, shared purpose that is largely congruent with the interests of the individual institutions is important for a novice multi-stakeholder leadership group to have any chance of accomplishing something together (Berg, 2005; Gerencser, Kelly, Napolitano & Van Lee, 2009; Hemmati, Dodds, Enayati, & McHarry, 2002). But because decisions about purpose always involve choosing *not* to do some things as well as what the team *will* do, articulating a direction for the leadership group may require members to forgo goals that some deem personally valuable (Hackman, 2002). That necessity poses significant emotional challenges to a newly formed group whose impulse may be to include all individual motives in the interests of initial harmony—resulting in very little focus for the team. The expression "a camel is a horse designed by a committee" is about this very issue: the tendency of peer groups to sand down the sharpest edges of a single vision or values in the interest of including all their personal goals. The challenge, then, is to find purposes that both reflect the values that are common across the individuals and institutions and at the same time not to overemphasize the satisfaction of individual motives relative to the shared ones. That is a tough balancing act for any group of leaders to navigate gracefully.

CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE

Defining a compelling team purpose for leadership teams is also an extraordinary conceptual challenge (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008, Chap. 3). Specifying just what a team composed of leaders shares responsibility for, and doing so in a way that is clear, tangible, and motivating, poses special problems compared to other kinds of teams. Because leadership tasks can be amorphous—just what tasks does a team of leaders do together?—the transition from imagining the outcomes of their work to specifying the unique role of the leadership team in bringing that about takes considerable abstract conceptualization skill (Wageman & Hackman, 2009; Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008). Although individuals' leadership responsibilities within their organizations generally are very clear indeed, just how a collection of leaders together can provide something more than the sum of individuals' responsibilities is difficult for many leaders to articulate. For example, many leadership teams have loosely defined purposes such as, "providing the leadership to improve the well being of our community" or "leading the development of a solution to our problems." This lack of specificity about what the team does together—what leadership functions they fulfill to bring about the desired change, whether that is setting collective priorities, seeking resources, or launching and guiding an innovation—impairs their ability to orient themselves and to engage with each other on key issues. When members have little clarity about why they convene as a leadership team and what they expect to accomplish together that no other team can do, they may sporadically meet and discuss a variety of issues – some important, others less so – but gain little traction and experience no progress. This pattern, which characterized Team 2 described in the beginning of this essay, meant that the only thing coming from the team was frustration and increasing pessimism about their ability to accomplish anything meaningful.

TEAMS ARE POOR AT ARTICULATING PURPOSES TOGETHER

Leadership teams can struggle to arrive at a sharp enough direction statement to guide collective action. Defining and clarifying a purpose drawing on multiple perspectives and different interests is often a particularly difficult challenge for very diverse groups like the multi-stakeholder leadership teams described above. Articulating purpose is not a function that is well-executed by groups, but is rather done more effectively by individuals with excellent conceptual skill and dexterity with language (Hackman, 2002, pp. 224-225). Hackman (2002) describes, for example, a small cooperative newspaper, in which members of the cooperative were personally committed to the values of democracy and wanted to enact those values by involving all members in setting aspirations. In spite of considerable time and energy invested in the debate, they were never able to reach agreement on a sharp collective purpose concrete enough to guide behavior.

Similarly, in a study of activist teams (Ganz & Wageman, 2008), clarity of team purpose was significantly lower for self-governing leadership teams than for any other kinds of front-line task performing teams we studied, or for senior leadership teams, all of which typically have purposes established by an *individual* with authority to call others to a specific set of actions.

Much has been written about how leaders can go about creating clarity of purpose for teams that report to them, and the crucial role of authority in creating clarity (Hackman, 2002; Podolny, Khurana & Besharov, 2010 ; West, Borrill, Dawson, Brodbeck, Shapiro & Haward, 2003). But multi-stakeholder leadership groups are typically composed of peers under the aegis of no one institution, and members hold no authority over one another. As a consequence, there is no natural designate to articulate purposes for the team. Such leadership teams may be convened by an individual who has some vision for what the team may accomplish and yet hold no particular legitimacy for calling others to that purpose except their own personal qualities. Multi-stakeholder leadership teams thus have to navigate yet another tricky balancing act between engaging the members in defining purposes that are meaningful to them and their institutions, and avoiding the sanding-down process and messy compromises that tend to characterize purposes articulated by groups.

CONDITION 1: CREATE A COMPELLING AND CLEAR PURPOSE FOR THE TEAM

Clarity of purpose is possible even for multi-stakeholder leadership teams. The set of actions involved in establishing compelling purposes is a short list, and we will address each in turn:

1. Identify key interdependencies among team members' institutions.
2. Use personal narrative to locate deeply held and shared values.
3. Authorize an individual to articulate the purpose on behalf of the group.

IDENTIFY INTERDEPENDENCIES

The work of leadership for members of any leadership team involves making collective decisions on behalf of a larger whole, while simultaneously acting on behalf of their individual constituents. Multi-stakeholder leadership teams convene because of a specific problem to solve that is not under the control of any one of their institutions and will benefit from a combining of resources across these entities. They may also convene, as in the example of Team 1 at the beginning of this essay, believing that some long term cross-institutional entity will be needed to address future problems and make community-wide decisions.

Therefore, articulating shared purpose begins with explicitly engaging both these questions:

1. What *resources* do each of us bring that can make us more able to solve the immediate challenge we face

2. What *capacity* do we need for the future?

The answers generated in a discussion of these questions can point to specific leadership activities that this group can undertake as a team. Those specific activities begin pointing the way to a larger definition of team purpose. For example, one multi-stakeholder leadership team perceived that with a hospital CEO, a senior officer from a major local employer, and the regional private medical insurer at the table, they had the resources together to undertake an experiment. They construed their purpose as creating, testing, and learning from an innovative way of providing health care and benefits to a significant local population. They undertook to engage together in a local action experiment, the lessons of which might be applied and expanded throughout the broader community. Other members of this group served, for this experiment, as a kind of advisory council. Over time, different configurations of leaders engaged in other innovations, and the group built additional collaborative capacity in their own leadership team and throughout their community by engaging in consultative work to each other around key institutional challenges.

The example above illustrates three of the four kinds of leadership teams we have observed in our research. These different ways of operating as a team—collective decision making, coordinating a single initiative together, consulting to one another—are all legitimate uses of a leadership team. The greater the interdependence, the greater the impact of the team (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008). The four types are as follows.

1. Least interdependent is the information sharing or alignment team. These teams do not make, decide, or perform anything together; rather, their purpose is to exchange information in ways that enable the individual leaders to do their independent leadership activities more effectively. Many coalitions are such teams, engaging in information sharing in the hopes that informing each other of their own activities may create alignment across related undertakings.

2. More interdependent still is a leadership group in which members actively consult to one another, enabling the individual leaders to act more effectively based on advice and counsel from other members.

3. More interdependent still is the coordinating team—a team that collectively manages the timing, sequencing, and interdependencies in implementing some change or innovation.

4. Finally, most interdependent of all is the decision making group, which establishes strategic priorities and allocates resources together by some joint decision-making process.

The team described above discovered for itself a range of ways of operating as a leadership team that involved most these activities at one time or another. But it was their insight about combining resources and undertaking the coordination of an experiment together that developed their capacity to operate with a high degree of interdependence, taught them critical lessons about how to work together, and launched the other forms of activity that supported those purposes. They went beyond the mere information-sharing that is the simpler and less impactful purposes of most coalitions (as compared with decision making teams), creating a platform for accomplishing not just their initial undertaking but building the capacity for further action.

USING NARRATIVE TO IDENTIFY SHARED VALUES

Both In our work with self-governing activist teams (Ganz & Wageman, 2008), we found that engaging individual leaders in developing their public narratives enabled groups of leaders to articulate to themselves and to others what called them, personally, to take on leadership of the particular challenge before them. Drawing on choice points in their personal histories, participants illustrate for others the values that underlie their motives to lead.

The function that engaging individuals in public narrative can serve for leadership *groups* are two-fold. First, developing one's narrative enables individuals to clarify for themselves as persons, not just as representatives of their institutions, why this team's purposes may be consequential for them and deeply connected to their own values. Second, it enables the leaders as a group to identify the *shared* themes in their values and experience a deep and genuine connection of purpose with each other even in a highly diverse group. Those shared values can begin building a platform of trust among members that will serve them well when the challenge of dealing with different interests among their institutions inevitably arises.

AUTHORIZING AN INDIVIDUAL TO ARITICULATE A PURPOSE

Having an individual in the team given the authority to set direction helps with clarity. For senior leadership teams at top of organization, the chief executive can identify key decisions that the team makes together and lift up the themes in those decisions to establish an overarching purpose. Doing so requires first conceptualizing what a leadership team can do *as a team* to provide essential leadership to the larger entity. That kind of cognitive work requires creative conceptualization, something that comes best from an individual rather than from a team (Hackman, 2002).

For teams of peers, no such authority exists naturally. But teams that have articulated shared values through public narrative, and who have identified the key activities and interdependencies at least for their initial undertakings, have excellent raw material from which to generate their overarching purpose in ways that make it possible to imagine just what it would look like for them to accomplish it—and to see their unique role in bringing that about. We have seen that one particularly effective way of going from raw material to clear purpose is by iterating between individual purpose statements and group reflection. Once a group has generated its shared values and its interdependencies, for example, they can authorize one member of the team who is particularly articulate and has high levels of conceptual ability to shape a purpose on behalf of the team. That individual can then bring the creative work she or he has done back to the team for their reactions. A designated individual may then do some additional modifications based on the group's responses. The trick is not to get caught up in group editing, or worse, group writing, something that easily captures an opinionated team of leaders (Ganz & Wageman, 2008).

This iterative process—the group generates shared values and activities, an individual uses his or her creativity to sharpen those into a shared purpose, the team responds and ratifies—uses the best of what both teams and individuals are uniquely suited to do well on behalf of a leadership team.

TRIPWIRE 2: THE WRONG PEOPLE ARE CONVENING

The leadership teams often suffer from the consequences of poorly considered choices about just who is at the table. There are three main errors most frequently made about the composition of leadership teams. First is convening people who will represent the key stakeholder groups in the community or organization. When people are invited as representatives, they act as representatives of their particular interests, and not of the whole. Second is convening very senior people under the assumption that the most senior people will have the authority to make decisions on behalf of their institutions. The logic of that choice is not in itself faulty, but the consequences are more often that these individuals are impossible to convene or chronically designating replacements at meetings, killing the momentum of the leadership group. Third is convening a group without any assessment of the individuals' collaborative abilities, resulting in minimal competence to work together, or even including dangerous "derailers" in the team.

CONVENING PEOPLE TO REPRESENT THEIR CONSTITUENCIES OR ORGANIZATIONS

The logic of choosing individuals who collectively represent the constituent parts of the system and who can bring the resources of those parts to the table is sound. Solving complex problems in communities and organizations and bringing about a new state of the system requires broad perspectives, significant authority, and considerable resources. The cost of issuing invitations solely on the basis of who can represent a key group or entity, however, is convening a group that, ironically, suffers from an inability to act on behalf of the whole system when they convene. When the individuals are invited as representatives, they will construe themselves as being on the team for the purpose of representing their own institutions' interests. Ironically, the very breadth of composition can result in myopia that prevents them from seeing the whole.

Moreover, leaders' legitimate roles as representatives of their particular organizations or constituents can cause them to make negative assumptions about other team members' motives (Berg, 2005). Members interpret the meaning of each others' statements as primarily being about serving the interests of the group they represent. Thus, leadership team dynamics tend to embody and express the intergroup relationships—positive and negative—that pervade the larger community, especially when those relationships are inherently competitive (e.g., for investments, for clients, for recognition or credit). Finally, the most compelling personal motives of leadership team members often are historically more about being individual leaders than about being team members. Most senior leaders do not construe themselves as team members, but rather prefer to operate independently and to exercise considerable authority over others. Together, personal motives, role definitions, and the incentives in the system create a natural tendency for the dynamics of leadership teams to shift from trying to make the best collective decision possible for the whole to trying to win decision contests with other team members (Lewicki, Saunders, & Minton, 2000).

CHOOSING THE MOST SENIOR PEOPLE

As noted above, the logic of convening senior leaders—because they have considerable authority to act on behalf of their institutions and bring to bear their resources—has merit. The problems arise when two aspects of the leadership team's work intersect with this compositional choice. First, senior leaders typically have jobs that already require more of their time than many can manage, resulting in leaders who are generally unavailable. And when they come from different institutions, the rhythms of their personal calendars are almost certainly different. It becomes a significant challenge even to convene such a group at all. Keeping any kind of momentum going or coping with the need to revisit and refresh memories of prior work becomes a constant struggle.

Second, when teams continue to struggle to define clear purposes or engage significant leadership tasks, the motivation for senior leaders to attend meetings declines. Up against demanding and consequential leadership responsibilities in their own institutions, the work of a multi-stakeholder leadership team has a significant hill to climb. It must be compelling enough to claim the attention of persons who have little to spare—and often the work of these teams fails to achieve that degree of significance, as will be seen. What often results as a consequence is that the members of such groups make unilateral decisions not to attend any given meeting, a matter we will return to with the next Tripwire.

PAYING NO ATTENTION TO DEMONSTRABLE TEAMWORK SKILLS

I do not mean to insult senior leaders, but it has been my observation that people do not become CEOs, or Mayors, or chief Ministers because of their ability to work well with peers. The typical leadership habits and routines of senior leaders may, in fact, militate against effective teamwork. Among the characteristics frequently admired and reinforced in senior leaders are: decisiveness (the ability to choose a course of action and stick with it); personal vision (the tendency to have strong views about how things ought to be); and dominance (the inclination to impose one's point of view) (Glynn & DeJordy, 2010; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks 2001).

None of these characteristics in large quantities is helpful in the work of a leadership team, especially one composed of peers. The challenge for such teams is to co-create vision, to sift through complex options and make choices that move toward both a shared goal and to minimize harm to the individuals' institutions, and to experiment with new ways of proceeding, learn with others, and take actions in concert with others. Those collective leadership functions require quite a different set of leadership characteristics, among them, systems perspective, empathy, and integrity. We will return to these particular capacities shortly in addressing the process of composing a multi-stakeholder leadership team effectively.

KEEPING KNOWN DERAILERS IN THE TEAM

Many team members can, with determination and appropriate coaching, expand their self-images beyond that of individual leader, and develop the kinds of teamwork competencies needed for work with peers. But there is another type of characteristic that poses a serious risk to the success of any team, which we term team "derailers." These are characteristics that undermine the effectiveness of any team.

According to our research (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss & Hackman, 2008), derailers often display at least one of two characteristics that are relatively rare among top leaders. The first manifests as a victim mentality. When asked about their career history, one hears a story dominated with occasions when the individual felt unfairly treated, his or her work unfairly assessed and contributions unrecognized. Years later, the bitterness is still fresh, and one hears no recognition that the individual had in any way contributed to the problem. And there is no sign that he or she has taken any constructive lessons from those past challenges.

The second observable characteristic of derailers is their negative perceptions of other people. Their descriptions of others are filled with sweeping judgmental statements: "He's a bad leader. She's a fool." They apply disparaging adjectives applied to other people, efforts, or strategies. While there is no simple test that will identify every derailer, there are some symptoms one can readily observe. These include individuals who:

- Frequently complain about others, including publicly;
- Bring out the worst in other team members;
- Attack people instead of critiquing ideas;
- Raise disagreements outside the team, but decline to say them in the room;
- Contravene group agreements when acting independently;
- Claim to understand the impact of such behavior, but show no change.

In my ten and more years of studying leadership teams, I have observed that the single matter that most keeps senior leaders awake at night about their teams is the challenge of removing a destructive individual, especially if that individual is in control of critical resources or is a powerful individual in other respects. While some courageous leaders do take the risks of removing these individuals from the team, many seek alternatives that enable them to have a functional leadership team without risk of losing this individual's support altogether.

For multi-stakeholder leadership teams the risk is political. Disinviting from the team a senior leader from another institution, and a significant figure in the community, will likely mean that person becoming an implacable opponent to anything the group undertakes thereafter. The most constructive instances I have seen of dealing with this challenge effectively have involved groups that shaped their activities to reduce interdependence with that individual, engaging them in the team only consultatively and around specific questions. Doing so meant altering the meeting and work pattern of the group, a considerable coordination cost at the very least.

CONDITION 2: CONVENE THE RIGHT PEOPLE

Convening the right people to a leadership team is not just selecting people by position or title or membership in a key institution. It also requires that establishing that these individuals bring the capabilities to work as a team and to think about the system in which they operate as a whole, not just their own institutions. Ideally, a convener should consider three key teamwork capacities.

LOOK FOR BEHAVIORAL SIGNS OF EMPATHY AND INGEGRITY

Leadership teams must be able to engage in robust discussions that explore divergent ways to address a systemic problem or seize an opportunity. Two competencies that consistently enable teams to engage in real and robust discussions of strategic issues that result in shared understanding and a collective decision are *integrity* and *empathy*. There are ways to observe signs of these competencies in potential team members. *Empathy* shows itself in the way an individual deals with the spoken words of other leadership team members, especially when they raise concerns about the direction of a team's movement with respect to the impact it will have on his or her area of responsibility. In our research, empathy manifested itself in three ways in individuals' behavior:

1. Reflecting back understanding of the *content* of a concern another person has just raised;

2. Expressing understanding of the *significance* that concern holds for the *speaker* ; and

3. The ability to respond to the *feelings* the speaker has attached to that concern.

Leaders who are high in empathy can paraphrase their colleagues; they identify the underlying institutional concern that others raise; and they address such a concern directly in their responses, rather than turning the discussion in another direction. Without empathy, teams cannot build trust, reach meaningful consensus, or make tough decisions. When members do not feel that others have understood their concerns, they are unable to assume that a team decision will deal adequately with the ways in which they feel quite understandably protective and responsible for their own institutions and constituencies. Without the belief that their concerns are understood *and taken into account in the decision process,* they will raise and re-raise objections, leading to a team that has consistent trouble arriving at solutions.

Integrity. The team competency "integrity" does not just refer to its popular definition of being generally honest. Integrity in a leadership team involves owning one's opinion and speaking out during the interactions of the team, articulating honest objections and concerns in ways that the team can address together. And it involves undertaking the actions agreed in the presence of others once out of sight of one's fellow leaders. Integrity in our research manifested in four ways:

- Putting on the table for discussion by the group any issues that affect multiple people around the table—even when the implications of that issue are largest for one's own institution or area of responsibility;
- Keeping discussions that take place among the leaders confidential;
- Implementing the decisions as agreed by the team; and
- Holding the team accountable to make decisions that are consistent with the values and precedents the team already has set.

A team composed of people high in both integrity and empathy is protected against a common destructive pattern among leadership teams, especially multi-stakeholder groups. That pattern is a continuing routine of agreements that do not hold, leaders taking unilateral actions that materially affect the work of the team and its constituents, and continual revisiting of matters that members thought had already been settled.

LOOK FOR SYSTEMS THINKING

Another competency that plays a role in making leadership teams successful is **conceptual thinking**, or the ability to perceive patterns and synthesize complex information. At its basic form, it is the ability to identify patterns from divergent sources of data. At its most sophisticated, it is the ability to understand the interrelations among the different institutions, processes, and groups in a community and how they dynamically influence one another to produce current results. The presence of systems thinking in one or two members of the team can raise the level of systems thinking in the group as a whole. When convening a leadership team, look for individuals who naturally think beyond their institution's internal dynamics and reflect on its interrelations with other groups and organizations. When you ask individuals to think about the whole community, persons who are good systems thinkers quickly move beyond their institutional roles and think about consequences for a larger community. It requires a relaxed, reflective time to test for this competency: systems thinking emerges when a leader has the latitude to reflect and not in the heat of fighting fires on one's home turf.

COMPOSING – AND RECOMPOSING – A LEADERSHIP TEAM

If a leadership team is to be effective, the convener must ensure that the members collectively understand and can represent the entire community. That heuristic does not translate into every institution or group having a seat at the table. As needed, senior leaders and specialists can be invited to contribute to the core team's work when it could benefit from their particular expertise or knowledge.

One hypotheses is that to compose a leadership team well that has the full array of capacities—time and authority to do significant work, teamwork competencies, systems perspective—involves iterating the membership. We have seen conveners of multi-stakeholder teams conduct relationship-building conversations with many potential team members before inviting an initial set to the table. That process allows for exploring leadership practices and styles, personal values, and potential for commitment to the team's ongoing work.

Moreover, some research has shown that the right group of leaders to envision collaborative work across institutions to alter a community or solve large problems may not be the best group of people to carry that work forward (Gerencser, Kelly, Napolitano & Van Lee, 2009; Hemmati, Dodds, Enayati, & McHarry, 2002). One possible process for iterating leadership team formation over time is to convene an initial set of very senior leaders from diverse institutions, attending to their values and their vision for change, and engaging them in co-visioning for the future. Those leaders can then ultimately be asked to identify the "right people" for an ongoing collaboration, taking into account the competencies needed to do that work together, and providing the resources and time needed for *this* group to lead the work.

TRIPWIRE 3: MEETINGS ARE A WASTE OF TIME

It is ironic that senior leaders who already are overloaded tend to waste significant amounts of time when they convene. Leadership teams often focus on surprisingly trivial matters. They do make decisions together—but often about issues that are not consequential for the team's core leadership work. When I examined the survey scores for the leadership teams studies, I found that the average meaningfulness of the leadership teams' tasks was M= 3.83, well below the ideal of 5.

There are three main forces that push leadership teams in the direction of ineffective and wheel-spinning meetings.

1. Conflicts among individual interests and an inability to manage that conflict effectively;
2. Variation among members' implicit expectations of how the group should operate; and
3. The tacit assumption that because members are all competent leaders there is no need to be explicit about what effective team processes they wish to employ.

CONFLICT BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE INTERESTS

Leadership teams may avoid the critical questions because when they do address important matters, they risk becoming caught up in seemingly irresolvable conflicts. Conflicts in leadership teams often stem from members' views that their main responsibilities are to maximize the effectiveness of the unit or institution they lead (Ancona & Nadler, 1989; Berg, 2005). There is a real risk that making decisions together that maximize *overall* effectiveness will result in outcomes that are inconvenient, costly, or threatening to the institutions headed by certain team members. That kind of discussion requires considerable skill at sustaining and managing tensions without personalizing conflict, or resolving it in premature or suboptimal ways. But it also requires the willingness to engage in the real issues in the first place—and many leadership teams are reluctant to raise the most consequential matters precisely because dealing with them collectively will require a kind of social dexterity that is rare.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURES AND NORMS

Leaders who come from different institutions also bring with them institutional culture and norms that vary—and these differences are seldom overtly noted or addressed. One significant cultural norm that varies across institutions is how to act when there is a conflict between the demands of one's individual job and the work of the team. As noted earlier, senior leaders who find the work of the leadership team less compelling than their own individual responsibilities can often decide independently of one another not to appear at a given team meeting because of demanding responsibilities in their home institutions. In some organizations, that is a normal institutional practice, and sending a lower level leader as a delegate in one's stead is commonplace. When the work of the leadership team is mere information sharing, that may be a reasonable practice. But when the work of the team—as it should be—is decision making, lower level leaders cannot make decisions with the same degree of authority and therefore create a barrier to progress on the shared work of the team. This pattern can result in lengthy delays, lost momentum in the work, and most difficult to deal with, underbounded teams who continually revisit prior work.

We found that the boundaries of leadership teams are unusually porous and blurred. Indeed, members of such teams often do not even know that they do not know who is on the team. According to our findings (Wageman & Hackman, 2009), leadership team members have great confidence in their knowledge of team membership, responding to items such as "Team membership is quite clear—everybody knows exactly who is and is not on this team" in the upper regions of the 5-point boundedness scale (M = 4.51). But when individual members report the *number of members* in the team, the data tell a different story. Of the more than 150 leadership teams I have studied, only 21 (14%) were in agreement about the number of team members, and their estimates of team size were often in the double digits—far too large to accomplish anything meaningful together. Poor boundaries are a significant problem for any team. How can "we" do anything meaningful or learn to work together effectively if we don't know who "we" are?

ASSUME WE ARE ALL GROWNUPS

I have used a lighthearted turn of phrase to convey the underlying assumption that prevents leadership teams from articulating ground rules for their interactions that might enable them to be more effective. Members of such teams do invariably have substantial experience leading and working with others, and they likely have learned many lessons over time about how to lead effectively—and yet those effective practices seldom are what emerges naturally when a new group convenes. Rather, whatever behavior the team tolerates becomes part of the rules of engagement. In the absence of formal team norms, members each assume their own code of conduct, which typically begins a descent into what I call lowest-common-denominator behavior. If one member is late to a meeting and is not confronted—a likely scenario in a team of peers—then the new norm is that being late once is acceptable. Inevitably, another member tests the boundaries and is late to two meetings and also is not confronted, and now the norm is that being late to *two* meetings is acceptable. How long before lateness is itself the norm?

The example above is relatively overt and addressable. More common and less tractable is a tacit norm in which members keep to themselves whatever reservations they have about the direction of group decisions—and conserve, unspoken, their right to act against the agreements of the group.

Yet for all the difficulty poor emergent norms cause leadership teams, members often are hesitant to create formal rules and hold each other accountable to them. It may feel uncomfortable, or be experienced as a violation of autonomy for the individuals involved.

CONDITION 3: CREATE AN ENABLING STRUCTURE FOR THE TEAM

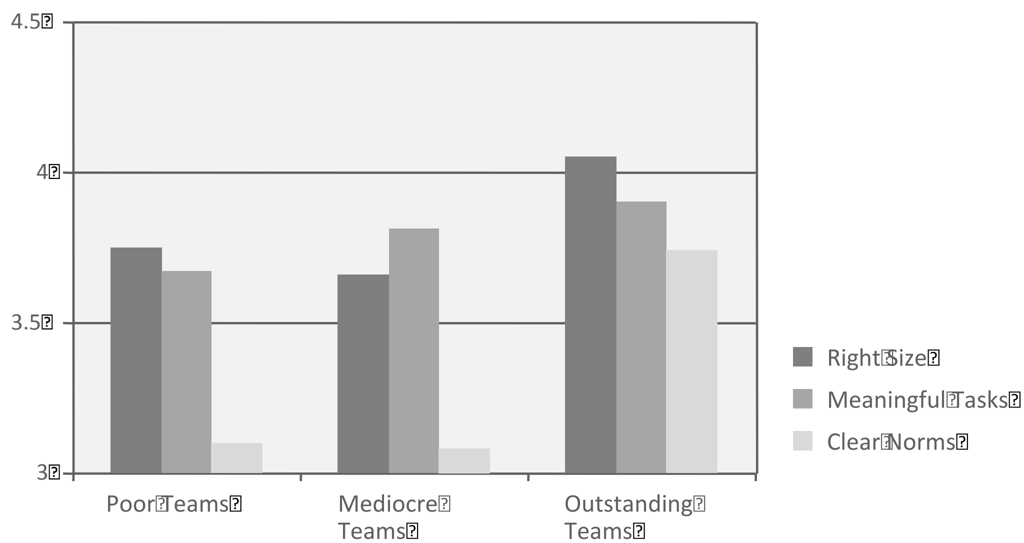
As seen in Figure 2, outstanding leadership teams—those that accomplish their purposes and grow in capacity over time—work on meaningful tasks, are small and well-bounded, and above all have clearly specified norms of conduct. Poor teams—those that meet none of their constituencies needs and develop no capacity over time—suffer from trivial tasks, are overlarge and underbounded, and above all have no explicit ground rules about how they work together.

What is involved in creating enabling structures for leadership teams whose members come from different institutions? We find two key activities to be especially useful to creating an enabling structure for such teams:

1. Paying careful attention to how agendas are crafted for the team's work; and

2. Designing a facilitated and iterative process of establishing explicit ground rules for the team's collaborative work.

Figure 2: Outstanding leadership teams have enabling structures



CRAFTING AGENDAS FOCUSED ON MEANINGFUL, INTERDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES

Leading a team of leaders requires that someone pay careful attention to the tasks members do in their work together, to prevent an unintended downward slide to mere information sharing or diversions into long discussions about trivial matters. Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins (2001) point out that there is no single or fixed task list for leadership teams, given the shifting nature of work they perform. What is required, these authors emphasize, is continuous attention by to task demands and team process needs as they evolve over time. Special attention is warranted when a team is choosing an initial collaborative task, as it has strong influence on trust that is built; the team's sense of efficacy that it can handle the challenges and conflicts that arise; and the way the processes of the group will evolve over time (Gerencser, Kelly, Napolitano & Van Lee, 2009; Hemmati, Dodds, Enayati, & McHarry, 2002).

Our observations of leadership teams suggest that having a single individual hold responsibility for the agenda, although that role can rotate over time, helps create genuine interdependence and meaningful collaborative work when the group convenes. Absent explicit attention by one person, a team as a whole typically generates a long list of small items, each of which is relevant mainly for only one or two leaders at the table—which results in predictable negative consequences for member attention and effort. By contrast, having one individual thinking about the strategic work of the group, and creating a short list of key decisions or activities that require robust discussion and coherent action enhances the level of commitment exhibited by team members and their willingness to seek solutions that integrate multiple interests. Keeping the work both meaningful and interdependent requires selecting team tasks carefully each time the team convenes. It is a function fulfilled repeatedly rather than once in the team's lifetime.

GET CONSTRUCTIVE NORMS IN PLACE FROM THE BEGINNING… AND REVISIT THEM OVER TIME

We have observed that establishing effective team norms is an iterative process. Often, a leadership team needs to begin with extremely basic rules in order to get anywhere at all as a team: do not interrupt others; elicit others' views in the discussion; put cell phones away; show up on time. But the norms necessary to enable a leadership group to address complex challenges for their constituencies are often considerably more nuanced. All the outstanding teams we have studied arrived at a set of norms tailored to the unique challenges the team faced and what they learned was most needed to enable their particular work. Excellent norms tended to be clear, few in number, and behaviorally specific.

There are, nonetheless, a handful of widely-shared norms that we have seen across many effective leadership teams. These include making individual leaders' institutional concerns *discussable* in the team. A norm that advocates speaking and acting as if one is *only* considering the collective outcome can have perverse effects. In the absence of explicit discussion of institutional interests, other team members are likely to assume that a position taken by one individual is really intended to promote the interests of that leader's own constituency. They expend considerable energy trying to figure out just what the hidden agendas are. By inviting members to make their institutional concerns explicit, those concerns become part of what the team can deal with in its choices and actions.

Other norms we have seen commonly emerge to support the work of leadership teams include: reliable attendance to meetings (no sending delegates to fuzz the team boundaries); if a decision or event affects more than one entity represented around the table, put it on the table for the team to deal with; if you disagree, say so at the time; consensus is the ideal decision rule, or at the very least agreement among members to test out a course of action and revisit it together; and what members say and agree when in private as a team is what members will say and do outside the team.

Getting effective norms in place for a team is, as noted, an iterative process. The more sophisticated ground rules described above come about not by natural emergence over time, nor by explicit statements at the beginning of a teams' life. Rather, they come about because the team has (usually via the intervention of a skilled facilitator) engaged in active reflection during a natural pause in their efforts, about what is getting in the way of their being more effective together. Active and deliberate reflection on their own experiences as a team is the primary source of insight and motivation for leaders to develop norms of conduct that are meaningful to them, constructive for their work, and likely to be taken up and enforced by the team as a whole.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the natural setup of leadership teams, as well as their emergent processes, can undermine their ability to meet the needs of their constituencies and grow in capacity over time. I have argued that leadership team effectiveness requires identifying the systemic conditions that create obstacles to leadership team effectiveness, and then creating design features that elicit and reinforce effective collaboration over time. Consistent with this kind of systems perspective, I want to conclude by underscoring two overarching lessons about creating conditions for the effectiveness of leadership teams, especially multi-stakeholder leadership teams. These two lessons are:

1. Pay attention to beginnings; and
2. Treat natural breakpoints in the work as opportunities for relaunch.

BEGINNINGS

When in the life of a team do leaders' choices have the most possible impact on the quality of the team's accomplishments? The three conditions underscored in this essay—compelling purpose, the right people, enabling structures—all are best put in place right from the beginning of the life of a group. Groups, like all complex systems, get on powerfully over determined trajectories, for better or for worse. It is considerably easier to establish a leadership team onto a positive trajectory than to attempt in real time to correct a downward course. Indeed, Hackman (2011) estimates that about 60% of the variance in team effectiveness is influenced by the quality of *prework (*identifying the right people, thinking through purposes) done before the team even exists, and another 30% is influenced by the quality of the team's *launch*. If that estimate is right, then paying exquisite attention to the upfront processes of considering different potential team members; engaging the team in well-designed processes for articulating their own aspirations; and putting structures in place to get a leadership team off to a well-executed start is well worth the time and energy it requires.

RELAUNCH

Nevertheless, leadership teams face chronic patterns of team membership change, team dissolution, shifts in the major tasks they undertake, all creating moments when the original team, however well-launched, must be revisited. In the case of multi-stakeholder leadership teams, team membership can change with the cycle of elections, with turnover in institutional leadership teams, with the changing relevance of particular institutions to the collaborative work being undertaken by the team. Moreover, as community challenges shift, the people and resources best suited to tackle those problems may call for a reconfiguration of the key leaders engaged in addressing them.

Each time that happens, a leadership team can usefully be restructured and relaunched all over again. Because of the impact of beginnings, these moments of change can be real opportunities to enhance the effectiveness of collaborative leadership teams, providing the moment for a powerful reshaping of the team onto an increasingly positive trajectory over time.

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