

High Performance Leadership Teams

Would you like a quick diagnostic on how well your organization is performing? Watch the interaction patterns in your leadership team meetings, and you'll quickly see your company's DNA in action. The patterns that show up in your meetings replicate themselves over and over again throughout the whole organization.

Where's the high leverage place to intervene? . . . *In those meetings.*

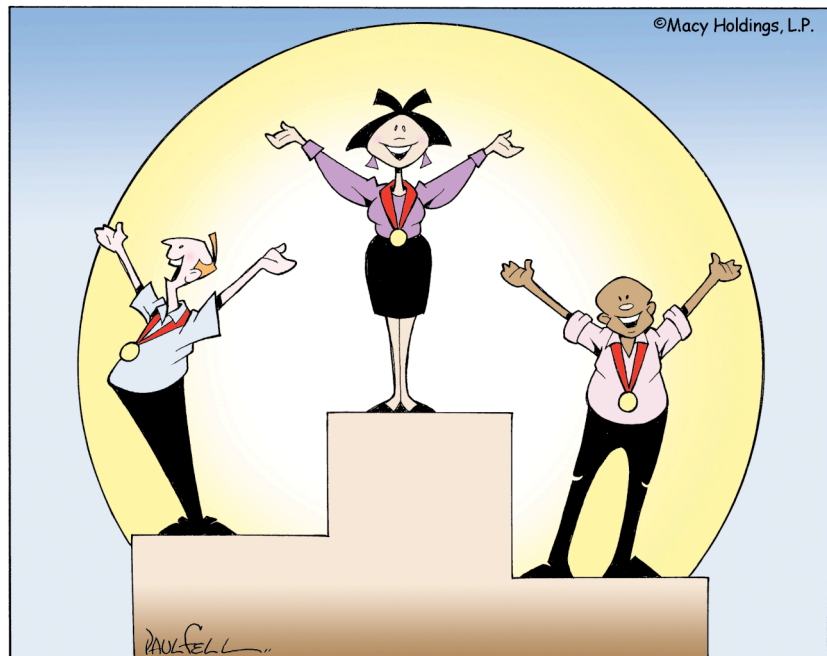
Huge sums are spent each year assessing and trying to improve organizational performance, yet the least expensive, easiest, and most impactful diagnostic and intervention point is right under our noses and rarely recognized.

The patterns of interaction that occur at your leadership team meetings are the patterns of interaction that replicate throughout the organization. Leadership meetings are a microcosm of the whole.

A scary thought for some of us, and especially in those quarters where the "M" word (Meeting) is an unspeakable. *That's not good news.*

Of course, it starts with the boss. What does s/he expect, model and tolerate in behaviors at leadership team meetings? Subordinates often don't discuss these implicit directives but are acutely aware of them. It's much like my small child memory of Grandma saying, "We don't say that word in this house!" I still cringe when I hear one of "those" words. In much the same way, the leader conveys "*Do this and don't do that or else!*"

There's an edge of danger when one of "those" issues or topics come up in the leadership team meetings, and we all form our ideas about how to interact around avoiding or enticing them. And then, those *do's and don'ts fan out through us* into the behavior patterns of the whole organization.



A former client of mine used to ask me to organize his leadership team agendas and then facilitate so that the meetings would be efficient and productive. That was a great idea, but in truth, he was a random thinker who didn't like structure. Many times I came to his leadership team meetings having spent a considerable amount of time preparing, only for him to throw out the agenda and wing it on his own.

As a result, his leadership team meetings were often chaotic and meandering on and on without a coherent track. Frequently no records were kept of decisions made, if there were any, so no basis was laid for accountability. Sometimes follow-up happened, more often not.

How did that randomness fan out into the organization? Managers down the line assumed that the occasional directives issued from the leader or the leadership team represented "advice." Because the managers weren't held accountable, they thought that the leaders "didn't really mean it!" On the outside, customers complained that the overall organization didn't deliver.

Another leader I worked with had a very compartmentalized way in which he structured his life. He never took work issues home or talked about them with his wife, and he rarely included his wife or family in company social activities. His private life was also very compartmentalized ...this morning of the week for golf, this morning for church, this time to help kids with homework, etc. The people and the activities rarely overlapped.

His leadership team meetings were very structured and non-interactive. Each of his direct reports had a period of time to provide an update, with little time or expectation to interact, respond, offer suggestions, or collaborate. He ran his leadership team as a federation of divisions, not as a union of interactive, interdependent groups seeking to optimize their joint operation. Because of his extreme focus on compartmentalizing, he missed the awareness that performance could have been greatly enhanced by leveraging the points of interdependence.

The organization was structured in a very "siloes" manner. Rarely did people from one division connect with someone outside and when they did, permission was generally needed from above. Employees jokingly called the leaders the "czars" and treated colleagues from other divisions with suspicion.

As an organizational consultant, I like to start working with a new client by observing the leadership team in action. I know that if I identify the significant interaction patterns of the team, I will have the key to coaching the boss on his/her own patterns that are being broadcast across the organization. As well I will have the most significant intervention points with the leadership team.

Some of the questions I ask while observing the leadership team are:

- How do the boss and team members express themselves during meetings?
- Where does the real conversation happen? In the team meetings? Between members outside the meetings?
- How do team members listen to each other? What do they seem to be listening for? Data for refutation? Data for understanding?
- What are the hot buttons for the leader and the team? What happens when the leader the or team hits one of these hot buttons?
- How much tension can the team tolerate?
- How do the leader and the team tend to deal with difficult issues? Do they tiptoe around the difficulty? Are they willing to delve into touchy territory?
- What level of the organization do team members tend to lobby for? The whole organization, their departments, other?
- How does the team know when it has enough information to make a decision?
- How does the team evaluate its own process and does it learn from its self-observation?
- Is something accomplished by the group together that couldn't have been accomplished by a simpler means?

By observing several meetings I start noticing similar types of interactions showing up time after time. Noticing an interaction repeat itself several times means I'm starting to get at a pattern. Often, I'll then have individual conversations with the members of the leadership team, checking to see if my hypothesis about a pattern fits with theirs. I want to know how the pattern replicates throughout the organization and what the implications are of the replication.

Bringing those patterns back to the leader and then to the leadership team usually results in a sigh of "ahhhhhh." That's it, you just hit the nerve! *Recognition* is a significant part of what allows a shift in the pattern. Once the leader and the team are conscious of the pattern and have named it, they begin intervening with each other when the pattern pops up. Of course, some patterns are more entrenched and need a stronger intervention, but not usually. Naming and keeping the pattern conscious with the intention to shift to a higher form of interaction are most often the precise prescription needed.

These interaction patterns vary for specific leaders and teams, but the meta-pattern I have observed describing the high performing leadership teams is this: The leader sets the tone for open consideration of these significant interaction patterns. With that focus and permission, the team actively reviews its own patterns and how they are replicating throughout the organization and impacting business results. They openly discuss and intervene upon themselves – including the boss – to consciously select and institutionalize the desired patterns.

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