



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

Management and Teamwork

Do you practice what you preach?

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According to the preliminary findings of The Best Place to Work Survey*, being conducted by Steve Morris Associates in Singapore, employees want their bosses to demonstrate the qualities of good team players but say that they are not doing this sufficiently. Leaders, managers and supervisors are failing to provide good role models for their staff when it comes to being good team players.

Employees are not saying that their bosses are bad team players but that they can't see any evidence that they are good team players. They are not demonstrating the qualities of good team players such as listening, sharing, accommodation, cheerfulness, generating and trying new ideas, commitment and learning.

Teamwork is an established business concept and some 90 per cent of managerial work is claimed to be carried out by teams. It is the one constant at the center of all efforts to improve performance. This is

especially true of businesses in trouble: the appeal for teamwork increases in proportion to the degree of frustration and fear of losing, while winning teams talk little about teamwork as they improve their execution. Are people in your company talking about the need for teamwork?

For teamwork to succeed, an organization has to establish a common framework and assimilate the language of teamwork. For this to happen the leader has to set the tone and become a role model for those below him in the organization. Similarly top level management teams set the tone for departmental and front line teams beneath them.

It is not good enough for leaders to be neutral, to allow individual members' to put their needs and expectations before those of the team. This gives the message that this behavior is accepted even when the leader has spoken against it being acceptable. This contradiction ultimately destroys the leader's credibility. Leaders must act as they say and, more positively, walk the talk – be seen to be acting as they say. Still, some leaders are reluctant to intercede as the 'value enforcer' for fear of 'upsetting' performance.



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There is a simple way to test whether yours is in fact a top team and not a loose confederation of strong-willed individuals. Ask the CEO to list his three most important goals and then ask each of the top team members to list theirs – if the answers align you have a team in action, but the probability is that they will all give very different answers, hence, you have individuals at work, not truly a team. Are the agendas of your top teams aligned? How can you be sure?

There are many factors working against effective teamwork at the top. Many senior team members are reluctant to yield power, resources and responsibilities. Each member brings with him his own agenda and seldom, if ever, do they work together across departmental boundaries to share knowledge and resources. The degree of politicking is high. Individual team members have a natural (human) predisposition to self-preference. In team terms they tend to want to know how they are performing as individuals rather than as a team and thus have a tendency to internal competitiveness. It's no wonder that we see little team effectiveness with such a preponderance of individual-focused incentive schemes. People tend to be motivated to achieve their individual top-down goals, not team goals.

The economic situation in Asia has brought about a high turnover of both local and expatriate staff through transfer, redundancy and resignation, which has further weakened many a top team. New team members replace old team members in a haphazard way, often without regard to the need to complement the strengths and weaknesses of the existing team, nor even replenishing diminished skill sets. Managers aren't given ample time to collaborate with rapidly changing and unknown quantities so they insulate and isolate themselves by withdrawing from the team.

An additional challenge facing leaders in Asia is the shortage of people who have the experience to cope with change. Until 1998 top managers in Asia had enjoyed nearly a decade of continuous growth. Many of them do not have a mindset that

encompasses teamwork and are completely unwilling to yield power, resources and responsibilities. The more senior the manager, the more ingrained are his attitudes likely to be and the less easy it is to change his behavior. Most Asian managers admit that they were raised with 'I say, you do' leadership role models – hence they are unsure of how to model what they have not seen.

For all the above reasons, I would argue that teamwork at the top is more honored in the breach than the observance. Organizations tend to be set up divisionally and hierarchically and have little or no flexibility. Matrix-managed organizations tend to the other extreme, with many cross-competing teams. Individuals have absolute control and do not share resources, because each manager regards his resources as exclusively his and there to get *his* job done. Team goals suffer with this me-first mindset.

For global organizations there is an increasing need to get groups of managers from different nationalities to work together effectively either as enduring management teams or to resource specific projects addressing key business issues. Mergers and acquisitions, an important option to reduce costs and acquire capital, also force together managers who were likely to have been business rivals previously.

Many organizations have found that bringing such groups of managers together can be problematic and performance is not always at the level required or expected. It can take years of work to build team spirit and create a harmonious work environment. The sooner cultural integration is initiated, the sooner it is likely to take root.

The first order of business for leaderships in Asia is to strengthen their teams. Performance follows. Performance without true teamwork fails to continue the team's knowledge and skills. Without group learning, value erodes despite performance. Top teams must do both – develop themselves and perform. This has to be viewed as the leader's value-added role.

3i plc, Europe's leading venture capital company, established its South East Asia headquarters in Singapore in May 1997 with a mix of expatriate and local professionals. Their top management recognized that a key potential limiting factor was how fast and efficiently a good transfer of learning and wisdom could be established between managers from different cultures with varying levels of experience. The key factors they addressed were the skills and abilities of the entire team to work together to improve communication and develop trust and understanding and how new team members could be brought up to full competency. Achieving increased learning speed plays a large part in 3i's growth strategy in South East Asia.

A full program of individual leadership coaching, team leadership skills training and personal feedback sessions was introduced. A key part of the new approach was a program of team development workshops, which aim to address specific team effectiveness issues critical to the company's business success. Team coaching additionally provided the leadership team with access to a dedicated resource that was solely accountable for

preparing and training them to achieve higher performance. The Business team coach shares accountability for team performance, increasing the team's rate of achieving success.

In a growth situation there is no shortage of resources and little obvious need for organizations to be concerned about lack of cooperation at the top. But when things are tight, this becomes a limiting factor on progress and hence is a problem. Even companies doing well can do even better if they take teamwork on board. The key prerequisite is that individuals must relinquish their absolute control to the larger team. This naturally leads to an initial feeling of risk and insecurity and so managers react with apprehension and must be coached into an appreciation of the benefits for themselves and their organization. A Business coach's role is to help team members focus on their goals while developing their skills to perform even higher.

About the author

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to assist leaders in Asia to respond to new economic and organizational challenges. Steve coaches and inspires chief executives and their teams within a multitude of cultures and industries to develop themselves and those around them to achieve personal goals, job satisfaction and business performance. He is one of a handful of coaches in Asia that specialize in helping leaders nurture and refine their command of the softer skills of people development and motivation.

About the company

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, assists leaders in Asia to respond to new economic and organizational challenges by forging stronger teamwork at the top of the organization and fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

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