



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

Teamwork at the Top

– A Recipe for Success or a Reason for Failure

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With mergers, acquisitions, redundancies, resignations and routine transfers forcing team changes at the top, how are leaders able to increase their team's capacity to perform? What new skills do top teams need to survive and thrive? Despite these disruptions, do top teams in Asia really practice teamwork? Can they afford not to?

In the current economic crisis, organizations need to re-evaluate their business strategy and deploy their resources quickly and efficiently in response to changing challenges and opportunities. This involves a high-risk element because they must operate properly and promptly. Failure is not acceptable but nor is inaction. Coasting along at a low risk speed is not a viable option for corporate survival. Risks must be taken and more radical change is needed. This requires cohesion and cooperation at the most senior levels, or *teamwork at the top*.

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While teamwork is an established business concept and some 90 per cent of managerial work is claimed to be carried out by teams, teamwork is often talked about more than it is practiced. This is especially true of teams 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.

There are many factors working against effective teamwork at the top. Most members are completely incapable of yielding power, resources and responsibilities. Each member has 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.



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A Losing Team demonstrates a tendency towards internal competitiveness.

| <i>What they are thinking</i> | <i>What this shows</i> |
|---|-----------------------------|
| “Those people do not work for me so I cannot control what they do” | Rejection of responsibility |
| “It’s safer for me if I don’t do anything to stand out” | Risk aversion |
| “I did my job, I’m okay” | Independence |
| “I want to succeed – my teammates are my potential competitors for advancement” | Competition |
| “If I help that teammate, he will get the recognition not me” | A win-lose mindset |

A Winning Team channels competitiveness externally to the challenges of the marketplace and the individual’s viewpoint becomes flipped around.

| <i>What they are thinking</i> | <i>What this shows</i> |
|---|------------------------------------|
| “I can influence the team, I have control” | Acceptance of impact and influence |
| “If I sit back, I won’t get what I need” | Risk-taking |
| “If a team member doesn’t do their job, I won’t get what I need/want” | Co-dependence |
| “I want to succeed, my teammates are my potential allies and helpers” | Collaboration |
| “I want the others to succeed as well!” | A win-win mindset |

What gets paid, gets done

Look no further than Asia to see the truth of the old adage – ‘you get what you pay for.’ Executive rewards in Asia have traditionally been tied to budget performance, revenue growth, and to some extent annual profits. In a high growth economic environment expansion begets company expansion, and incentives are paid for expanding in tandem with the market, regardless of the risks assumed, the sustainability of the growth, and the long-term health and well being of the organization. Over-expansion, over-lending and overly high risk-taking were key contributors to the severity of the current

Asian economic crisis - fueled by overly leveraged and misdirected executive incentives.

While companies seek to rebuild, reposition or just to consolidate their position in the market, it is ironic to note that for most executives, the fundamental characteristics of their incentive schemes have remained unchanged. If we are asking our executives for new behaviors and new results in a new environment we must reset their incentive schemes accordingly lest we raise the risk of under-performance even higher.

Under a highly leveraged incentive plan, there are two extreme risks: either executives come to feel that the rewards promised are not commensurate with the required energies and risks they must take, hence lowering their motivation to perform; or they will seek to take higher risks in an almost desperate move to maximize their own returns. After all, when one has little to lose and lots to gain, risk-taking behavior increases, especially if the company is taking on the risks and not the individual executive.

Top teams can refocus their roles by re-opening a discussion on their own individual and team reward schemes in order to identify the potential risks and misalignments with achieving the new performance goals. These discussions will also help to clarify the team’s performance expectations of each other, the entire team and the team leader. At the very least, teams should be clear on what they are getting paid for, while top leadership must ensure that the right behaviors and results are receiving the rewards.

How can top teams change?

How then can top teams re-evaluate their roles and learn to change? For teamwork to succeed, an organization has to establish a common framework and assimilate the language of teamwork. The critical points to examine for optimum team performance include goal setting, measurement and tracking (assessing performance and not just results), restructuring roles and risks, team resourcing and team maintenance.

There are a number of management techniques available which can provide the means to expedite a team learning process: teambuilding, systems thinking, etc. Such techniques provide the tools with which to facilitate the transition from individualism to teamwork but are not a solution in themselves.

Consider, for example the results of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of a typical organization in Singapore. A top leadership team was asked to evaluate their organization. The words they chose to describe themselves are presented in the table below. Many of these observations are typical of top teams in Asia. Perhaps you can recognize elements of your team organization. For years everyone has recognized the weaknesses and threats to organizations' performance. Why haven't most changed?

ASIAN TOP TEAM SWOT ANALYSIS

Could this be your organization?

| <i>STRENGTHS</i> | <i>WEAKNESSES</i> |
|----------------------------|--|
| Accommodating | Conforming |
| Cheerful | Lack of critical analysis |
| Able to generate new ideas | Lack of values upholders |
| Diversity | Lack of continuous improvement |
| Willing to try new ideas | Insufficient communication/listening |
| Organizing | 'Kiasuism' |
| Working hard | No time to enjoy life |
| High motivation | Lack of succession planning |
| Cohesive | Inability to prioritize and say no |
| Shared vision | Not enough follow-through |
| Committed | Sub-optimal leverage/synergy |
| Some risk taking | Lack of openness |
| Good welfare | Lack of business acumen/negotiation skills |
| Learning and growth | Lack of role clarity |
| Networking | Not working smart |

| <i>OPPORTUNITIES</i> | <i>THREATS</i> |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Career advancement | Trust level not high enough |
| Job rotation | Succession gap |
| Areas of strategic emphasis | Too many projects – burn out |
| A vision to be world class | Meeting overload |
| To be able to live out value system | Tendency to flip flop |
| Self-renewal | Lack of open communication and feedback |
| Excellent product and services | Becoming too large |
| Effective high energy team | Complacency |
| Draw talent from next level | Managing change process |
| Strong networking | Internal competition and working cooperatively |
| Globalization | Staff skill mix not enough to deliver |

Top teams need to see the results of their learning efforts in terms of business benefits or they will tend to hold back their full commitment to learning new skills. Integration with the business is essential and business team leadership coaching provides the means and the expertise to achieve this.

Team coaching provides the leadership team, just like the professional athletic team, with access to a dedicated resource that is solely accountable for preparing, training and urging them to higher performance. The coach helps the individuals succeed within the context of helping the team succeed. Everyone wins.

A business leadership coach is an expert observer. He is on the sideline observing the process that is leading to the results. His detached view focuses on identifying aspects that work well and can be built on as well as on weaknesses that must be strengthened. He links team success to the achievement of business and organizational goals while meeting or exceeding individual members' needs and expectations.

Is it possible for the team leader to be a proficient

coach as well? From my vantage the answer is no – or not without an incredible ability to stay detached while getting immersed. Either he loses his sideline perspective by playing in the match or he relinquishes his control on the field by staying on the sidelines. A top team leader is more akin to the player-captain than the player-coach. The captain is the leader during the match play and can be a leader off the pitch as well, usually establishing the goals, roles, rules and code of conduct. On the other hand, the role of the coach is to improve the team's performance to fulfill its potential to perform.

The team leader must make the best configuration of roles and assignments against individual strengths and weaknesses - playing to strengths and covering weaknesses. The coach can then help to keep the focus of assessment on how the team is performing.

Team goals need team commitment and team performance. What should the team do differently to perform better? What must individuals do to support this? Can we expect better performance with these actions and behaviors in place? How long before we see results? A coach can help ask

these questions and mitigate a team's natural tendency to individualize.

A well-equipped team has a range and balance of complementary skills: planning, assessing, progressing and concluding. An experienced team leader will recognize the strength of skill diversity on the team. Weaker team leaders will tend to seek out team members with familiar make-ups and, often, similar skills. While recruiting people with similar values is fundamental, recruiting team members with similar skills is debilitating to say the least. A coach can assess the range and mix of skills represented on the team and can advise the leader of missing or linking skills needed.

A team coach or team trainer can play a key role in helping top teams achieve their goals. The coach also plays a vital balancing role with that of the team leader - ensuring that the team leader is training the team to team success and not individual success. The coach is, therefore, a mentor or personal coach for the team leader, offering development advice and consultation to help the leader grow.

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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