

# Become a High-Performing Team

by Soren Eilertsen, Ph.D.

*Many executive groups act as committees that reinforce functional silos in the organization and thereby encourage dysfunctional behavior. Becoming a high-performing executive team that genuinely collaborates to reach shared goals takes real intent and serious work. A strong and high-performing team significantly raises the likelihood of business success and may be the most important competitive advantage. This paper gives you seven principles for how to overcome the most common obstacles to becoming a high-performing team.*

## Introduction

As our client, the CEO of a mid-sized firm, described his senior executive group in our first meeting, he was clearly frustrated. “They communicate through me and not with each other,” he said. As the conversation proceeded, a laundry list of his issues with the top leadership group emerged. The executive group members:

- worked individually and did not share information, let alone work together on assignments
- were not seen in the organization as top leaders, except by a few of their own people
- did not build critical relationships across organizational boundaries and in industry
- spent most meeting time reacting to problems and yesterday’s issues
- had vague goals and avoided accountability for results
- lacked clear role definitions, and some were not the right people for the roles
- were too tactical, not engaged in understanding and developing company strategy
- did not appear to like each other; some openly despised each other

Although the list looks ugly in print, these are not atypical issues in organizations. Frankly, most executive groups we encounter suffer from one or more of these. For this CEO, the pain level reached the point where he needed things to change. Opening up to us was the first step in a process of change that started with him taking responsibility for the status quo. As we worked with this group as external coaches over the next 18 months, the group transformed. As a few members left and new ones were brought on, the group became more proactive and focused. They collaborated inside and outside meetings, and the bottom-line results improved significantly.

Aside from taking responsibility for the executive group’s situation and his own role in this, the CEO eventually needed to decide whether they should function as a committee or a team. As we will examine in what follows, this decision is not always as easy as it would appear.

## Committees versus Teams

The Encarta Dictionary defines a committee as “a group of people appointed or chosen to perform a function on behalf of a larger group.” Committee members represent a constituency or larger group and negotiate to make decisions on issues such as resource allocation, policy creation, and application of governance rules. Committees are not structured to win competitive battles and complete important missions. This requires teamwork where members collaborate across boundaries and seek to develop the team’s performance. Members on teams are not concerned with representing a particular constituency or functional area inside the organization. Team members are concerned about the strategy and execution of their mission.

### Management by Committee

*When Cisco Systems reorganized earlier this year, The Wall Street Journal labeled the new governance structure “Management by Committee.” In total, 59 internal standing committees – with names like “council” and “board” and each with 14 people – report to a top operating committee of 15 top executives and John Chambers, the CEO. Mr. Chambers replaced the top-down decision making with these committees, expanding the number of senior employees involved from 750 to 3,000 in order to continue growth and expand the number of new businesses entries. Small temporary teams of two to ten people work on individual projects and bring business opportunities to the committees. It is too soon to judge whether this new structure is successful. Cisco’s reorganization raises the question, when should leadership groups organize as a committee and when should they organize as a team?*

Executive committees have a place in larger organizations. Not every group in a business needs to perform as a team, and a team should not perform every business task. When a company operates multiple businesses with different offerings and target customer groups, it becomes necessary to create a governing structure that allows for policymaking, prioritization, and resource allocation. However, in smaller to mid-sized businesses and in business units inside larger corporations, where collaboration to decide and execute on strategy is essential, the leadership group ought to operate as a team.

It takes deliberate attention and hard work to build an executive team that can win in the game of business. Even in situations where a collaborative team would be the obvious structure, most executive groups function more as a committee or a review board. Frankly, in too many organizations, we see leaders work as separate islands, each creating a silo<sup>1</sup> around his or her functional area. This may lead to pockets of excellence but most often creates a lack of collaboration and communication resulting in mediocrity or worse.

Executive team or executive committee: the choice must be made given the situation because each has a function, and a committee cannot accomplish what a team can. We rarely see committees as a competitive advantage, but a high-performing team differentiates you from your competitors.

### Common Group Developmental Stages

A better understanding of the common stages of group maturation helps group members work together more efficiently. These stages were first proposed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965, and they have become the basis for other models.

1. Forming                    An “ORIENTATION” stage characterized by tentative interactions, polite discourse, and concern over ambiguity. Activities include information exchange and identifying commonalities.
2. Storming                    A “CONFLICT” stage characterized by criticism of ideas, hostility, polarization, and coalition forming. Activities include disagreement over procedures, expressions of dissatisfaction, or even resistance.
3. Norming                    A “COHESION” stage characterized by agreement on procedures, reduced role ambiguity, and increased “we” feeling. Activities include establishment of roles, standards, and relationships.
4. Performing                    A “PERFORMANCE” stage characterized by good decision making, problem-solving, and mutual cooperation. Activities entail high task orientation with emphasis on performance and production as well as on team development.

Both teams and committees evolve through these stages. We contend that the nature of committees prevents them from fully entering the performing stage. A deliberate decision between the committee and team structure will be required in order to reach the full potential of a group.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the word “silo” to describe how vertical organizational entities – typically functional areas – frequently become islands inside the larger organization. Invisible walls between the areas prevent communication and cross-functional collaboration.

## Why Become a Team

A high-performing executive team that has moved through the initial stages will:

- Align around a clear business goal that takes the business to the next level
- Be the most important competitive advantage for the business
- Make much better decisions
- Spend time effectively – move from urgent to important issues
- Free top leaders from day-to-day decisions
- Invigorate the organization by behaving as a model
- Engage in transparent decision making so people in the organization want to follow
- Create followers that effectively execute and embrace change
- Overcome dysfunctions and limiting assumptions
- Keep self-centered performers in check so they function on the team
- Eliminate difficult people who sabotage team performance
- Keep top performers from leaving
- Increase happiness for the team members

## What a Real Team Does

High-performing leadership teams have overcome several of the following seven barriers. They have done so by engaging the practices that characterize successful team behavior.

### 1. Getting beyond silos – shared commitment to team vision and goals

It requires commitment and personal identification with the team's vision, mission, and values to become a productive member. This typically happens through an ongoing inquiry and deepened understanding of the team's role and strategic intent.

Executives serving on the top team make this role their number-one commitment. Dueling commitments will eventually lead to conflicts. Consequently, responsibilities in the executives' functional area becomes secondary because *there can only be one number-one commitment*. For the leader of a functional area to make an authentic priority commitment to the top team sends a strong signal in organizations with deep functional silos that communicate little across organizational boundaries.

A team works toward shared goals and completes important missions together. This differs from what happens in executive groups where the goals emerge from functional areas and members work independently on a goal. In such cases, silos are reinforced and do not support the development of an interdependent organization.

Most executives want to spend less time in meetings, and with good reason. Poor facilitation and lack of engagement cause attendees to tune out. Without the engagement and commitment as real team members, everything that falls outside one's functional silo becomes uninteresting.

By committing to become a team, you will not necessarily spend less time in meetings, but most groups will spend it very differently than they do today. Meetings tend to become more proactive with time spent on what is important for the future of the business.

Top leaders become more involved across horizontal organizational lines instead of retreating to their functional area (the silo). Team member collaboration enhances the outcome of mission-critical initiatives.

A high-functioning team is the best competitive advantage any business can have. Increasing likelihood of business success is the most salient reason why your executive group should become a team. Interestingly, top performers will want to be part of a successful team and consequently will tend to stick around.

#### **When Silos Rule**

*We recently assisted a client where the sales, service, and human resources departments were proceeding with three different solutions and three different vendors on a mission-critical learning management system to train employees and retail partners. The walls between the functional areas were gigantic, and the lack of communication was appalling. Fortunately, we were able to build bridges and bring the functional leaders together around a common goal and solution. In the process, we saved the client millions of dollars and illustrated for many the huge dysfunction in the organization. It worked to resolve the immediate problem, but unless the client's executive group changes behavior, the essential dysfunction will continue.*

## **2. Facing the shadow side – willingness to engage and build trust**

The fact that most groups – whether organized as a committee or a team - display some form of dysfunction should not be surprising. No human is perfect, and we each have our shadow side that shows up particularly in interpersonal relations. We have all been in dysfunctional groups and seen issues such as fear and distrust, passive-aggressive behavior, lack of willingness to speak up, cliques that appear to ignore team members, people isolating themselves, and attempts to play it safe or to please the powers that be. These are all problems that can plague a group and impact its performance. When you commit to forming as a team, you agree to examine your individual issues (your shadow) and to share your observations of the dysfunctions that impair the group. For many, it becomes a discovery of new aspects of themselves that they may like or dislike, and either way, it becomes material for personal growth. Remember that awareness precedes change of behavior.

Few of us have experienced high-performance teams except when watching sports on television. We have no idea of what is possible when you get people working together in the “zone” of team creativity and performance. This limited personal understanding of what is possible with exceptional teams makes it difficult for leaders to take the sometimes painful steps that are required to move the executive group forward. Engaging with people to develop the commitment and trust that a true team embodies requires a lot of individual soul searching and potential change.

Each member is challenged emotionally through the interpersonal engagement that team work requires. To overcome the impact of dysfunctional behavior, a team must build a crucible of trust that allows open dialogue, full inquiry, and constructive feedback. The crucible expands consciousness for all the team members. For most, this will require a shift in behavior. An experienced coach holds the crucible and supports the team members in making the required behavioral shifts.

### 3. Undo big egos – it is about serving the team

If as a leader you want to be part of a powerful executive team, you must be ready to become a servant to the team. Frequently, so-called successful business leaders base their success on their personal power and not on their ability to develop and serve a team. It requires a more than rudimentary level of individual development to function on a team and some top leaders are stuck in a relatively low state of ego development. Their “I/me” perspective is the mark of a narcissistic personality. Given time, willingness, introspection, and guidance, a person can develop and form broader perspectives.

Having difficult people on the executive team who behave in dysfunctional ways will sabotage team performance. The old saying that “one bad apple spoils the bunch” has some truth to it when it comes to team behavior. Unfortunately, the difficult person frequently holds the organization in a grip by having key knowledge or powerful skills. If you want to become a high-performing team, you must confront or eject the difficult person or saboteur.

#### When Egos Clash

*The Lakers won the NBA championship this year after resolving team issues. First, the team management resolved to remove Shaquille O’Neil, and second, Kobe Bryant realized that serving the team was more important than his ego. These types of team and individual decisions are difficult on both sports teams and on executive teams. However, status quo will not make you a winner.*

### 4. Role confusion – top leaders must be players on the team

In many groups, the top leader takes on multiple roles as team leader, team facilitator, and team coach. This is an untenable situation since the leader must be able to engage in and reflect on content discussions. Facilitation and coaching responsibilities take away from the leader’s attention and conflict with being a player on the team. Surprisingly, the top leader is not always the best team facilitator or team coach.

The top leader with a high-performing team is no longer the hub of all decisions. When members come together as a team, they take on new accountability for decision making and delegation of work in the organization. We are not talking about democratization of decision making. The top leader retains the power to make decisions, but an effective team looks to that person in critical situations and important decision making, not for day-to-day guidance. This frees up the top leader from reacting to everyday events and provides more time for important work on future strategy.

### 5. No kumbaya – team development takes place in real time

Building an effective team has little to do with singing kumbaya around the fireplace. Many executives understandably view team-building endeavors with skeptical eyes because many unskilled and inexperienced coaches have given coaching a poor reputation. Some have taken executive teams on bizarre off-site exercises or put on disconnected seminars. While these activities may have some value in certain times and places, mostly they are a waste of time and have no lasting effect. They are too difficult to integrate into the work situation.

In our experience, team building takes place when you work on critical business problems and not in a laboratory. Team interventions and education are so much more powerful when they happen in real time as real issues arise. We refer to this as just-in-time training which seeks to develop the skills when they are needed. With an experienced executive team coach, the team members will

learn effective behavior and approaches while solving business problems or formulating their next strategies.

### **6. Eliminate groupthink – question everything**

Groupthink is a dysfunctional state that occurs when a leadership group fails to form adequately and therefore is unable to engage in healthy conflict. Members attempt to minimize conflict and reach consensus without critical evaluation of ideas. For a variety of reasons, group members avoid expressing viewpoints that may upset the group's balance.

It takes deliberate action to build the trust required to overcome the dangers of groupthink, and it requires deliberate practice for group members to share viewpoints that cause conflict. Through conflict, individuals gain new awareness and learning.

Most leadership teams spend far too little time identifying and challenging the assumptions that go into their strategy and decision making. Whether unspoken or treated as facts inside the organization, assumptions become difficult to challenge.

There is a distinct difference between groupthink and a group in passionate pursuit of its vision. You want your people to practice and defend the values of the organization. Sometimes individual value systems or emotions get in the way of objective thinking and productive inquiry. It takes as much effort to create an organization with virtue values, as it does to create one with vicious values. We need look no further than Nazi Germany and Enron to understand that.

### **7. Beyond closed doors – open up, the organization needs you as a model**

One of the main jobs of leaders is to inspire the organization and create followers. The executive team serves as a model for the rest of the organization, setting the tone for the intended culture and demonstrating how values turn into behaviors. An aloof executive group that shows little collaboration will set a negative tone for the organization. You want your executive team to be a positive example of how your organization works together to get results.

By becoming an open and transparent team, you will invigorate the organization and set a model of behavior. When an executive team becomes transparent in its decision-making process, it allows the entire organization to take part in examination of the brutal facts and evaluation of alternatives. This promotes a collective understanding of how decisions come about, paving the way for successful execution and change. People are more likely to view decisions as fair when they understand the process by which they were made.

Clearly, not all the work an executive group entertains can happen with open doors. However, where you can find ways to show collaboration and process transparency, it engages the organization in new ways and impacts behavior throughout the ranks.

## **How to Get Started**

Becoming a high-performing team pays off in significant ways for a business and its individuals. But the decision to become a team in pursuit of high performance should not be taken lightly. It

necessitates hard work. The leader and team members must be willing to face personal issues and to learn and adapt in the process.

To begin with, every executive group should strive to do three things impeccably:

1. **Establish Roles and Goals** - Set demanding targets that inspire next-level results and continually renew the organization
2. **Challenge Assumptions and Strategy** - Formulate a vision and establish a framework that guides the organization to marketplace success
3. **Collaborate and Grow** - Collaborate across functional boundaries as a role model for the organization and seek to continuously improve team performance

Groups that don't make a decision to form as a team typically get stuck at some point in one or all of these activities. Determine to become a team, and with a little help from a coach, you can pursue and achieve all of these objectives.

## About the Author

As President of Kollner Group, Soren Eilertsen has helped numerous clients in different industries activate and align leadership teams around business results and innovation. Clients praise him for his ability to guide business leaders and teams to insights and new levels of success.

Soren works as a business consultant, educator and leadership coach specializing in strategy and organization development. He helps clients build effective leadership teams, create winning strategies, and obtain success with change initiatives.

Since establishing Kollner Group in 1999, Soren has helped shape the strategic directions and create results for numerous businesses and non-profits in both Europe and the United States. He has worked on world-class endeavors and been fortunate to engage with leaders in great organizations such as AECOM Design, American Suzuki, McKesson, Mission Critical Technologies, MK Sound, Motown Museum Project, Nordisk Film Biografer, Pacific Coast Producers, Pacific Theatres, Polar Air Cargo, Rand, System Simulations, UC Health System and Vulcan (Paul Allen).

Combining his education as a psychologist with years in corporate executive roles, Soren takes a unique integral approach that enables him to examine a business from the perspective of its internal leadership, systems, and culture as well as from the market-, business value-, and external customer perspectives.

Visit [www.kollnergroupp.com](http://www.kollnergroupp.com) to find out more about Soren Eilertsen and the Kollner Group.

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