

Brief

For those too busy:

The latest research, thinking
& news on growth pace and delivery
from around the world

Why top teams are so tough to tame – and what to do about it

Executive teams are uniquely difficult. Everyone has a 'day job' which they think comes first. They are already successful, often have big egos, sharp elbows and strong views. They are very busy and cannot find time to 'team-build'. This centrifugal force reduces any chance of performance. Surveys also show:

- Top teams spend little time together as a team (2 days a month)
- 51% say the agenda is static, adhoc, or based on equal 'airtime' with no process for agenda planning
- On average, teams spend only 3 hours per month on the big strategic issues
- 65% of meetings share information, only 12% regularly produce strategic decisions

Five themes for accelerating top team performance – from the best available research

1. **Build and maintain a shared understanding of direction and goals**

This can be taken for granted. When a top team in a well-known company wrote down their priorities the total was 23, and only 2 were on all lists. There were inconsistent approaches to execution because the practical consequences were not properly discussed and agreed by the team. To create shared long term goals requires focused time together which is protected from short term issues.

2. **Build and maintain trust and team skills**

Two-thirds of top teams say trust is an issue and leads to the withholding of information or agreeing through fear of retaliation. Vulnerability-based trust is where team members feel safe enough to admit their mistakes, weaknesses and need for help is the key to this. This starts with the CEO who can create the right climate and context for this to happen.

The best way to build team skills is to make 'groundrules' explicit, clarify team responsibilities, alongside individual responsibilities, give regular individual and team feedback, and openly celebrate good practice. It is best done not by classic team building exercises, but by using the vehicle of 'the real work'.

3. **Seek constructive conflict and deliver value-creating decisions**

Constructive interaction and effective decision-making require healthy conflict. Artificial harmony means apathy – and unhealthy conflict is poisonous. Constructive conflict requires a shared understanding and team trust. It requires team members to read the papers and understand the issue before a meeting. It requires strong evidence and options so that debate is not focused on opinions. Be clear about the decision-making process – is each decision unilateral, consultative, consensus or delegation based?

4. **Ensure unwavering commitment, urgency and unapologetic accountability**

Once a decision is made, the whole team should be unwavering in its commitment to accept and deliver the outcome – with urgency – even when members started with different points of view. Only 20% of top teams believe they are high performing. CEOs should channel this discontent. And the unity and urgency which results must be visible to the business.

5. **Invest in renewal, fresh approaches and readiness for change**

A quarter of top team members do not feel stretched. Sometimes it is because they self-limit by avoiding information, challenges and tasks that take them out of their comfort zones, and pay little attention to changes in the outside world. Bringing challenging new data and fresh facts into the room regularly prompts clarity, focus and undermines complacency.