Building Executive Teams that Make Exceptional Decisions
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George Fuechsel was an IBM technician and instructor in the early days of computers. He came up with the mantra “Garbage in, garbage out” to emphasize the fact that computers will unquestionably process the most nonsensical of input data (garbage in) and produce nonsensical output (garbage out).

As an executive, you know that an executive team works primarily the same way. Executive team effectiveness is determined and defined by the quality of its decision-making process: excellent input equals exceptional output.

An executive team is fundamentally and completely different than any other team in the organization. Whereas teams throughout the organization get work done together, an executive team does not.

A high-performing executive team does only one thing together: make decisions. That’s it. They do not create new products and services together. They do not serve customers together. They make decisions together.

Therefore, traditional team building models that draw on principles such as Tuchman’s forming, storming, norming, performing do not work with an executive team. There is only one thing you need to do to create high-performing executive teams and that is enhance their ability to make effective decisions together.

**Typical Decisions an Executive Team Makes**

Executive teams are responsible for setting the direction and solving problems in the following areas:

1. **The Overall Enterprise Strategies**: What are our organization’s long-term strategic goals? What do we need to accomplish today in order to support our long-term strategic goals?
2. **Parent Company Alignment**: How do we meet global (parent company) requirements while ensuring appropriate customization?
3. **The Customer Experience**: How do we continue to meet and exceed customer/client expectations?
4. **The Employee Experience**: How do we provide a supportive work environment for our employees?
5. **Resource allocation**: How do we best allocate resources (funding, people, etc.) to maximize our success?
Stellar Decision-Making Formula

The following recipe ensures that your executive team will together make the best decisions possible.

![Formula Image]

**Trust** – Having the confidence in each other’s competence, communication and character.

**Lively Discussion** - Having the ability to engage in open dialogue and honest consideration of all viewpoints.

**Relevant Data** – Having either the right information or the right people in the room for the topics at hand.

**Using the Stellar Decision-Making Formula to Make the Best Possible Decisions**

You can use this decision-making formula before, during and after meetings to ensure that you have made the best decisions possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparing for the Discussion</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Lively Discussion</th>
<th>Relevant Data</th>
<th>Best Decisions Possible</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Have I resolved any conflict between myself and other members?</td>
<td>• Have I completed assigned or requested pre-work?</td>
<td>• Did I ensure that the right people were invited to participate in the discussion? Did I ensure all relevant data is available?</td>
<td>• Did I ensure my own understanding of what is expected of me?</td>
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<tr>
<td>During the Discussion</td>
<td>After the Discussion</td>
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| • Be honest with ourselves as we go through painful moments  
  • Ask questions to gain clarification (before making assumptions)  
  • What happens in the room, stays the room  
  • Assume positive intent  
  • Go directly to the person who offends you when you have issues | • Did we set up the right environment for all to be heard?  
  • Did we gain genuine agreement or superficial consensus?  
  • Did we follow agreed-upon norms?  
  • Were all members heard?  
  • Do we feel good about assumptions?  
  • Were all the right data points and perspectives represented?  
  • Did we balance all aspects in our decision-making process: customer, employee, and business results?  
  • Does our decision align with our long-term goals and strategy map?  
  • Is the rationale and decision easily understandable for those executing the decision?  
  • Do we have clarity around timelines and responsibilities moving forward?  
  • Do we have agreed-upon message points that are consistent and easily customizable?  
  • Did the process work? How should it be changed for the future? |
| • Demonstrate when someone’s been heard  
  • Talk about the “elephants” in the room  
  • Share real-time feedback  
  • Listen to each other, but not necessarily agree  
  • Consider non-negotiables when discussing issues | • Be overly sensitive when someone brings something up from a different talent perspective  
  • Keep the big picture perspective  
  • Consider the entire entity/global issues when making decisions  
  • Speak highly of leadership team members to others  
  • Vent with each other, no venting down  
  • Check with members before committing them to something uncomfortable  
  • Support decisions once they are made  
  • Take time to celebrate |
| • Be overly sensitive when someone brings something up from a different talent perspective  
  • Keep the big picture perspective  
  • Consider the entire entity/global issues when making decisions |
Additional Tips for Improving the Quality of the Decisions Your Executive Team Makes

1. **Eliminate ongoing meetings.** As executives, you are all busy. There is no reason to meet unless there is joint action to be taken. One company we worked with identified and mapped the one major key process that cut across organizational borders. They scheduled meetings only at the decision points of the process, resulting in holding fewer meetings and improving the decision-making procedure.

2. **Be specific about joint action required.** When your executive team comes together, be succinct in describing the problem you need to solve, the decisions you need to make or the action you need to undertake together. Also emphasize why as a group you need to do this together. One executive we worked with started each meeting with a specific, measurable goal that the team needed to accomplish by the end of the discussion, which tapped into the problem-solving and efficient nature of the typical executive.

3. **Leverage your support organizations and, when appropriate, give them a seat at the table.** It is common practice (as it should be) that support organizations such as HR, Finance and IT have a seat at the executive table. Line leaders need staff organizations to ensure that decisions take into account the realities of money, people and technology. That said, staff shouldn’t have the same input on decisions as line leaders, who are ultimately accountable to carry out decisions made.

4. **Capitalize on each member’s “power alley.”** All executives have a unique set of skills that make them effective in their individual roles. Find out what each of you is great at and use those strengths to drive stronger alliances. For example, we consulted to a major transformation project for a company that was revamping its approach to customer service. All executives needed to be on board with this large-scale change. We considered each executive and his or her strengths, and identified specific change roles that he or she would play in the project. This approach allowed the leadership to be shared, and the project to be jointly owned, while maintaining each leader’s individuality and strengths.

The Top Line

A lot has changed at IBM and in the world of computers and in the business world since Fuechsel’s day. But what hasn’t changed is the need for leaders at the top to make great decisions together. Therefore, maximize your development dollars by enhancing your executive team’s decision-making ability rather than concentrating on any other form of team building. If you do this, your return will be explosive. You will be able to unlock the power of the collective greatness of your leadership team and enable your organization to achieve beyond whatever you dreamed was possible.

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