



# What Makes Teams of Leaders Leadable?

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## WHAT MAKES TEAMS OF LEADERS LEADABLE?

Ruth Wageman and J. Richard Hackman

SOME SEVENTY years ago, telecommunications executive Chester Barnard (1938) wrote *The Functions of the Executive*, a classic book explaining what senior leaders must do to help their organizations succeed. The core idea is in the second word of the title: that leadership is a matter of seeing to it that certain necessary *functions*—establishing direction, creating structures and systems, engaging external resources—are fulfilled so that members can accomplish shared purposes. Barnard demonstrates that getting people to collaborate to pursue collective objectives depends on getting those general functions accomplished.

Some two decades later, Joseph McGrath (1962) picked up Barnard's theme and applied it specifically to groups. The leader's main job, he said, "is to do, or get done, whatever is not being adequately handled for group needs" (p. 5). If a leader manages, by whatever means, to ensure that all functions critical to performance are taken care of, then the leader has done well. Thus, a functional approach to leadership leaves room for a wide range of ways to get key functions accomplished, and avoids the impossibility of trying to specify all the particular behaviors or styles that a leader should exhibit in given circumstances (Hackman and Wageman, 2005).

For both Barnard and McGrath, the conceptual focus is identification of the core functions that must be accomplished to promote social system effectiveness—not who gets them accomplished or even how that is done. In this view, anyone who helps get critical functions accomplished in any way they can is exercising leadership. Yet most of the writing in the functional approach, like scholarly work on leadership more generally, has focused mainly on *individuals* who occupy leadership roles (see, for example, Hackman, 2002, chap. 7, and Hackman and Walton, 1986, for a functional analysis of the team leader role). Little attention has been given to leadership *teams*—that is, groups of leaders who are collectively responsible for exercising leadership of a social system, and each of whose members is himself or herself a significant organizational leader.

The oversight is worrisome, because executive functions increasingly are fulfilled in organizations not by a heroic individual working alone but rather by leadership teams of various kinds (Ancona and Nadler, 1989; Hambrick, 1998; Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008). At the top of organizations, for example, the increasing complexity and interdependence of organizations' environments may well have made the top leadership role too large for any one person to accomplish, no matter how talented (Bennis, 1997). Moreover, it is insufficient for individual senior leaders to merely operate in parallel these days; instead, their activities must be well aligned, well coordinated, and executed with reference to each other (Henderson and Fredrickson, 2001; Thompson, 1967). Top management teams appear to be not merely common in contemporary organizational life but are, for many enterprises, a necessity.

Yet, as our own research has shown, teams of leaders routinely underperform their potential (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008, chap. 1). Are teams of leaders inherently poor at collaboration and in fulfilling key leadership functions? Some treatments of the subject suggest so. Popular press writings such as those of Lencioni (2002) and management writer Katzenbach (1997a, 1997b) underscore the poor processes that characterize most leadership teams and even suggest that the term “team” is something of a misnomer for many of these entities. Scholarly findings reinforce these pessimistic views of the forces acting on teams of leaders and their consequent tendency to fragment (e.g., Berg, 2005; Hambrick, 1995; Li and Hambrick, 2005).

In this paper, we explore the reasons why leadership teams have such difficulty in fulfilling even those functions that are most critical to the effectiveness of their organizations. We show that teams of leaders are characterized by an overriding irony: They have everything they could need to facilitate their performance—the legitimacy to craft team purposes as they please, ample information and resources at their command, talented members who have track records of leadership success, and more. Yet these teams, as we will show, generally perform *less* well than many far-more-constrained teams in their own organizations. Drawing both on the scholarly literature and our own research findings, we analyze four specific ironic features that lie at the root of leadership teams' difficulties. We then identify a number of strategies that can help leadership teams circumvent—or even transcend—these pervasive ironies. We conclude by drawing out the implications of our analysis for how leadership teams themselves can most effectively be led—implications that suggest a final irony that must be dealt with by those who are charged with leading teams of leaders.

We begin by defining what leadership teams are, and then briefly describing the two empirical studies that we draw upon most extensively in our analyses.

## Leadership Teams

A leadership team is a group of individuals, each of whom has personal responsibility for leading some part of an organization, who are interdependent for the purpose of providing overall leadership to a larger enterprise. The most commonly written-about kind of leadership team is the one at the top—the top management team. Typically composed of the CEO and his or her direct reports, each member of a top management team has a separate, individual leadership responsibility. In a global for-profit company, for example, that responsibility might be for a geographic region, or for a set of major customers, or for a particular function. But members of such teams also have *collective* responsibility for aligning the various parts of the organization into a coherent whole and fostering its overall effectiveness.

There is a long research tradition examining the influence of top management teams on organizational performance (e.g., Barnard, 1938; Gupta and Govindarajan, 1984; Hambrick and Mason, 1984;

Smith, Smith, Olian, and Sims, 1994; Szilagyi and Schweiger, 1984). Established by Hambrick and Mason (1984), this research stream has focused mainly on the effects of the demographic characteristics of senior team members on organization-level outcomes, on the assumption that a firm's strategic choices are influenced by the backgrounds and preferences of its top managers. Although not focused on teams per se—upper echelons of organizations often are not bounded entities, but rather loose collections of titled individuals at the top—this line of research nonetheless has provided compelling insights about the impact of the senior leaders' characteristics, individually and collectively, on their firms' strategic choices and subsequent organizational performance.

Other research on top management teams has focused more directly on the typical patterns of behavior, both functional and dysfunctional, that occur in such teams (e.g., Ancona and Nadler, 1989; Berg, 2005; Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins, 2001). Although we draw heavily on findings from previous research on top management teams in this paper, we also extend our analyses to address the challenges faced by leadership teams more generally, not just those at the very top of organizations. In fact, teams of leaders are found throughout most large organizations. For example, one of us recently studied leadership teams in a grassroots environmental organization (described in more detail below). Each member of those leadership teams had personal responsibility for engaging volunteer members in conservation activities and for executing specific roles (e.g., chair of the energy committee, treasurer). But members also *shared* responsibility, as a team, for setting overall direction and for allocating resources across organizational groups and functions. We intend our analyses to be applicable to teams such as that one—indeed, to *any* team whose members all are leaders and who must work together to accomplish the collective leadership of an enterprise.

### ***Two Studies of Leadership Teams***

The two recent empirical studies that provide much of the data on which we draw in exploring the dynamics and performance of leadership teams are briefly described below.

#### TOP MANAGEMENT TEAMS

Our first data source is a study of influences on the effectiveness of 120 top management teams of businesses around the world, all of which

headed entire organizations or major business units (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008). The focal teams led entities ranging from small, focused organizations to large, multinational conglomerates. Our sample represented a variety of industries, from financial services to retail, natural resources, and consumer goods, as well as some not-for-profit and public sector leadership teams. Teams chose to become part of the research sample for a variety of reasons. Some were led by CEOs who explicitly sought help with ineffective leadership teams; others had undertaken strategic and structural changes to their organizations and sought advice about the implications of those changes for how their leadership teams operated. Some were poor performers, whereas others were fundamentally sound. We assessed the overall effectiveness of every team in providing effective leadership to its enterprise, drawing on the analysis of sixteen expert observers who used an array of archival, survey, and observational data to rate each team on Hackman's (2002) three criteria of effectiveness: (1) how well the team serves its main constituencies, (2) the degree to which the team shows signs of becoming more capable over time, and (3) the degree to which the net impact of the team is more positive than negative on the well-being and development of individual members.

We also assessed the purpose, structure, and leadership of each team to identify those features that most powerfully differentiated superb from struggling leadership teams. Members of all teams completed the Team Diagnostic Survey (TDS) (Wageman, Hackman, and Lehman, 2004). The TDS captures, through a series of descriptive items, a team's main design features, the quality of its work processes, the behavior of team leaders, and the quality of members' relationships.

#### ACTIVIST LEADERSHIP TEAMS

We also drew on a longitudinal study of leadership teams in a U.S. civic association whose purpose is to mobilize volunteers to protect the natural environment (Ganz and Wageman, 2008). Civic associations have volunteer members, they are governed by elected leaders, and they pursue a public voice as a core organizational outcome. The volunteer leaders in civic associations fulfill essential functions by mobilizing others both to devise and to implement organizational strategies. Leadership tasks include motivating people to work together, dealing strategically with a range of external threats and opportunities, and adapting to the novel and challenging circumstances that accompany the work of advocacy. The leadership of civic teams is challenging, in

part because organizational objectives typically are less clear than those of for-profit firms and in part because leaders must do their work without having as much formal authority to require compliance as is available to leaders in other kinds of organizations (Campbell, 2005; Day, 2001; Morris and Staggenborg, 2004).

The unit of analysis for this research was local group or state chapter leadership teams, which in each case was an elected executive committee (ExCom). Chapters and groups engage in local fundraising to support their activities and projects, and chapter leaders decide how to allocate collective resources to their local groups. Our findings about leadership team dynamics were obtained in a longitudinal action research project on leadership development that involved four chapter ExComs and twenty-four local group ExComs. The overall objective of this Leadership Development Project (LDP) was to enhance the structures, skills, and practices of state and local leaders while simultaneously generating research data about what it takes to foster individual and collective leadership competencies.

Our approach to leadership development included structuring interdependent leadership teams, building the relationships necessary to sustain those teams, grounding the teams in shared values, and working with the teams to develop creative organizational strategies that would orient and engage volunteers in advocacy work. In the course of the project, both individual-level and group-level data were collected, including survey assessments of individual motivation for participation in the LDP and in the activist organization, self-evaluations of leadership skills, assessments of the leadership skills of their peers in the team, and analysis of goals set and accomplished by individuals and teams in the course of the project. Members of each participating ExCom also completed the TDS at the beginning of the project, allowing direct comparisons between these activist teams and other types of leadership teams we have studied on their design, leadership, and social dynamics.

### **Four Ironic Features of Leadership Teams**

Our analyses of teams composed of leaders, both in these two research streams and as described in the existing scholarly literature, identified four ironic features that undermine their effectiveness. We describe these ironies below, with special emphasis on their implications for



what is needed to transcend them in collectively fulfilling key organizational leadership functions.

***Irony I: Leader teams are composed of powerful people—yet they tend to be underdesigned, underled, and underresourced***

The basic designs of the leadership teams we studied—both in the international sample of top management teams and in the activist organization—were remarkably poor. Table 17-1 shows the mean scores of the activist teams and the top management teams on overall quality of direction, structure, contextual supports, and coaching as measured by the TDS. Leadership teams, as compared with other kinds of task-performing teams we have studied, are especially likely to have unclear purposes, to work on poorly designed tasks, to suffer from a lack of information and material resources, and to receive insufficient hands-on coaching that could help with their work processes. These findings are not what one would expect, since such teams have unusually high levels of authority to shape their own working contexts.

In Hackman's (2002) terms, these leadership teams are typically *self-governing* teams: they have the authority not just to manage and execute their own work, but also to design their tasks, to alter team composition, to define their purposes, and to commandeer the resources needed to accomplish those purposes. Leadership teams can directly influence their own team designs, whereas teams that perform frontline organizational work often have to exercise deft and persistent upward or outward influence to improve how they are set up and supported.

Top management teams, for example, can simply lay claim to the space, time, information, and material resources that they need to accomplish their work. Yet Ancona and Nadler (1989), consistent with our own observations, note that top management teams generally are "underdesigned" relative to other teams in their organizations. The activist teams similarly can define for themselves precisely which threat to the health of the natural environment will become their core strategic focus. These leadership teams can create a shared purpose that is clear and personally compelling to every individual on the team. Yet, perversely, they show *less* compelling purposes overall than do other kinds of teams that we have studied.

What are the consequences of such poor designs on the functioning of leadership teams? In identifying the most critical functions served by

TABLE 17-1

**Quality of design of leadership teams**

| Type of power                | Activist executive committees | Senior teams | Nonleadership teams <sup>a</sup> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|
| <b>Real team</b>             | 3.75                          | 4.11         | 4.10                             |
| Bounded                      | 3.91                          | 4.51         | 4.50                             |
| Interdependent               | 3.64                          | 4.02         | 4.09                             |
| Stable                       | 3.71                          | 3.80         | 3.91                             |
| <b>Compelling direction</b>  | 3.48                          | 3.99         | 3.84                             |
| Clarity                      | 3.28                          | 3.64         | 3.99                             |
| Challenge                    | 3.23                          | 3.83         | 3.99                             |
| Consequentiality             | 3.95                          | 4.50         | 4.45                             |
| <b>Enabling structure</b>    | 3.63                          | 3.67         | 3.78                             |
| Team composition             | 3.47                          | 3.83         | 3.70                             |
| Task design                  | 3.89                          | 3.82         | 4.00                             |
| Group norms                  | 3.49                          | 3.36         | 3.65                             |
| <b>Supportive context</b>    | 3.11                          | 3.41         | 3.32                             |
| Rewards/<br>recognition      | 3.38                          | 3.73         | 3.53                             |
| Information                  | 3.13                          | 3.43         | 3.25                             |
| Education                    | 3.03                          | 3.48         | 3.43                             |
| Resources                    | 2.88                          | 3.02         | 3.08                             |
| <b>Coaching availability</b> | 2.98                          | 3.06         | 3.18                             |

Note: All scales have a minimum of 1 (poor quality) and a maximum of 5 (high quality).

a. Taken from a sample of task-performing teams that also completed the Team Diagnostic Survey in ongoing online data collection.

members of teams, we draw on the model of team performance proposed by Hackman and Morris (1975; see also Hackman and Wageman, 2004). Specifically, we posit that team effectiveness is a joint function of three performance processes: (1) the level of *effort* group members collectively expend carrying out task work, (2) the appropriateness to the

task of the *performance strategies* the group uses in its work, and (3) the amount of *knowledge and skill* members bring to bear on the task. Any team that expends sufficient effort in its work, deploys a task-appropriate performance strategy, and brings ample talent to bear on the work is quite likely to achieve a high standing on the three criteria of work team effectiveness specified earlier. By the same token, teams that operate in ways that leave one or more of these functions unfulfilled—that is, if members expend insufficient effort, use inappropriate strategies, and/or apply inadequate talent in their work—are likely to fall short on one or more of the effectiveness criteria.

Associated with each of the three performance processes is both a characteristic “process loss” (Steiner, 1972) and an opportunity for positive synergy, which we refer to as a “process gain.” That is, members may interact in ways that depress the team’s effort, the appropriateness of its strategy, and/or the utilization of member talent; alternatively, their interaction may enhance collective effort, generate uniquely appropriate strategies, and/or actively develop members’ knowledge and skills.

Our own research and that of other scholars suggests that many leadership teams typically suffer process losses on all three key functions—and show few or no signs of process gains. As is seen in table 17-2, the survey scores of the activist leadership teams and the top management teams show that both have problems in managing their performance processes. Although leadership team members often show intense effort in their *individual* leadership roles, for example, they often are detached, distracted, or not in attendance at leadership *team*

TABLE 17-2

**Quality of performance processes**

|                         | <b>Activist executive committees</b> | <b>Senior teams</b> | <b>Nonleadership teams</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Process criteria</b> | 3.65                                 | 3.58                | 4.03                       |
| Effort                  | 3.67                                 | 3.87                | 4.05                       |
| Strategy                | 3.52                                 | 3.44                | 4.10                       |
| Knowledge and skill     | 3.82                                 | 3.43                | 3.93                       |

*Note:* All scales have a minimum of 1 (poor quality) and a maximum of 5 (high quality).

meetings. The work strategies of leadership teams are plagued with mindless routines; as will be seen, these teams habitually disaggregate team tasks into individual activities that members conduct mostly on their own. Finally, leadership teams show few signs of mutual teaching and learning. Instead, they typically rely on individuals providing their expertise in one arena only, and they place heavy emphasis on status in the team as a determinant of whose voice wins the day.

As a consequence, the collective decisions and actions of leadership teams can be ill-chosen, misaligned in execution, or entirely unimplemented. An example from one top management team illustrates how a good team decision can go bad. The CEO of a consumer goods firm asked his team to jointly manage the leadership succession pipeline for the whole firm, rather than division by division. At a meeting, members agreed that corporate human resources would have a hand in the assessment of anyone being considered for one of the leadership jobs identified in the succession plan. One high-status regional business head, however, deliberately complied with the letter of the team's agreement but violated its spirit. When he had a position to fill in his business, he deliberately called corporate human resources only a couple of days before a candidate was scheduled for a final interview. Because his business was headquartered a plane ride away, it was difficult (and on at least two occasions, impossible) for the human resources manager to arrive in time to play a role in the hiring.

Without good design, leadership teams flounder. Why do leadership teams so often fail to use their significant control over resources, and their authority to define team purposes and structure their work, to foster their own effectiveness? One explanation stems from the fact that leadership teams invariably have stewardship responsibilities (Berg, 2005; Jensen and Murphy, 1990). It may be that leadership teams underresource themselves in part because they view their responsibility as guarding resources and providing them to others when a real need can be demonstrated. As highly visible models for other organization members, there is significant pressure on leadership teams not to appear unduly generous to themselves.

Moreover, defining a compelling *team* purpose for leadership teams is an extraordinary conceptual challenge (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008, chap. 3). Articulating just what a team composed of leaders shares responsibility for, and doing so in a way that is clear,

tangible, and motivating, poses special problems for such teams. Although individual responsibilities generally are quite clear, how a collection of leaders together can provide something more than the sum of individuals' responsibilities is difficult for many leaders to articulate. Our data show that many chief executives either leave team purposes unspecified or loosely define them, as, for example, "providing the leadership to accomplish our strategy." This lack of clarity about what the team does together—what leadership functions they fulfill collaboratively rather than individually—impairs the ability of leadership teams to orient themselves and to engage with each other on key organizational issues.

Leadership teams are no less in need of clarity than any other kind of team. Indeed, they may be *more* in need of explicit attention to creating helpful structures than other teams. As Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins (2001) point out, leadership teams tend to face highly unstructured task streams: continuously changing flows of overlapping problem-solving and decision-making situations. Moreover, teams of leaders have a greater need to deal with unpredictable events in the external environment than do other teams (Berg, 2005; Ancona and Nadler, 1989). The very amorphousness of the work makes the team purposes difficult to specify—but clear purpose, ironically, is one of the most critical ingredients for effective leadership team functioning.

***Irony II: Membership is important and coveted—but members often don't know who is on the team, and they do not really want to come to team meetings***

Leaders value their membership in leadership teams. Evidence that individual leaders covet membership pervades both our own observations of senior teams and the research literature on their dynamics. In the activist organization, for example, leaders put themselves up for election and volunteered the additional personal time that the demands of the leadership team placed upon them. Business leaders are just as eager to be designated as top team members.

Individuals seek membership on leadership teams for a range of reasons, but most common is the power and status that membership brings (Finkelstein, 1992; Ocasio, 1994). The status of membership often is underlined by the very names of such teams (e.g., the "Executive Committee," the "President's Cabinet"). Moreover, being on a

leadership team brings direct access to the leadership team's leader, who invariably has substantially greater power than any other member. Finally, membership is desired because, as a body, such teams have control over resources that can be highly consequential for each member's individual leadership responsibilities.

Ironically, the boundaries of these select teams are unusually porous and blurred. Indeed, members often don't even know that they *don't* know who is on the team. According to their scores on the Team Diagnostic Survey, members have great confidence in their knowledge of leadership team membership. The survey measure of team boundedness included items such as "Team membership is quite clear—everybody knows exactly who is and is not on this team." Members of both the senior leaders and the activists scored in the upper regions of the 5-point boundedness scale ( $M = 4.51$  and  $M = 3.91$ , respectively). But we also asked individual members to report the *number of members* in the team, and these data tell a different story. Of the 120 top management teams we studied, only 11 (9 percent) were in agreement about the number of team members. Of the 25 activist teams, only 10 were in agreement. Moreover, reports of team size were independent of organization size and often high in the double digits, in many cases much larger than the size reported by the chief executive who had formed the team.

Why are leadership teams underbounded and overlarge? One answer to this question has to do with how such teams are composed. Members often are included in leadership teams not because of their capacity to contribute to a *team* task but because they hold particular leadership roles in the organization—roles that bear little relationship to what it takes to perform a team task well. Typically, top management team members are all the direct reports of a CEO and/or are the leaders of major organizational units. In the case of the activists, the individuals are elected by the general membership to fill out a roster of particular roles (e.g., chapter chair, political committee chair, and the like). By contrast, selection to other kinds of task-performing teams more typically begins with an assessment of the team task and the number, skills, and capabilities needed of members to accomplish the work.

We found that leaders of leadership teams were extremely reluctant to alter or to clarify just who is—and who is not—on the team, and when they err, it is on the side of inclusiveness. While that fact may not be surprising for the activist teams—they are, after all, members of

a democratic institution with powerful core values about citizen participation and equality—we saw similar tendencies in top management teams as well. Many chief executive officers in our study, for example, assumed that they must have someone from every part of the organization present at the table in order to have adequate information and representation of the whole enterprise.

Moreover, both the activist teams and the top management teams often had “guests” at team meetings, people invited to comment on a specific issue or decision facing the organization. The activists might, for example, invite a member of the broader conservation organization to share her knowledge of mining. Or a top management team might have multiple advisors from the financial function present to provide analysis of a potential acquisition. Sometimes these visitors return for repeat performances—and return again, and again, along with still more guests, gradually both expanding and blurring team boundaries. In one national security organization, for example, crucial policy and operational decisions were made by a very small and high-powered executive team whose name was the time it met every day: “The five o’clock meeting.” Over time, attendance at that meeting became so large that the senior executive began to use other, more informal groups for consultation about the most critical decisions.

The high desirability of membership also contributes to the blurring of leadership team boundaries. Leaders of such teams recognize that disinviting a member can result in a loss of face for that person, and may engender motivation losses, underground hostilities, or even departure from the organization altogether. The leaders of activist teams, whose purposes often included engaging new volunteers in conservation activities, felt especially irresponsible if they took actions that risked losing from the organization any active participant in the collective work.

The consequences of underbounded and overlarge membership for the work of leadership teams are powerfully negative (Alderfer, 1980; Mortensen, 2008). The more people at the table representing different interests or functions, the harder it can be to define a shared purpose for the team. Leaders of large teams—those with more than a dozen members, for example—struggle hopelessly with questions such as: For what are these individuals interdependent? What work can all of them do together that represents a meaningful leadership function for the organization?

There are four possible answers, not mutually exclusive, to these questions. Figure 17-1 shows four kinds of leadership teams, in increasing order of interdependence from bottom to top. Least interdependent are *information-sharing*, or alignment, teams. These teams exchange information about various organizational matters and bring together in one place external intelligence that may be useful to other parts of the organization or to the enterprise as a whole. They also hear about direction and initiatives from the team leader, which helps make the individual leaders on the team better informed, better aligned, and more able to do their individual jobs well.

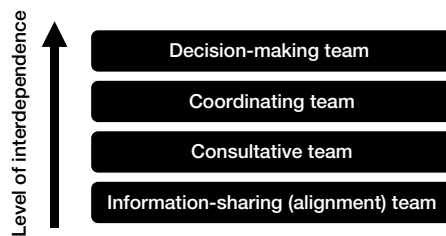
The purpose of a *consultative* team is to make the team leader better informed and better able to make his or her own decisions. In contrast to informational teams, consultative teams actively debate key issues, giving members the chance to learn from one another—but the final call is made by the team leader.

*Coordinating* teams are those whose members come together to coordinate their leadership activities as they execute strategically important initiatives. For example, a top management team at an airline might meet to work through the launch of service to a new country. A successful launch would require coordination across facilities, logistics, marketing, sales, partners, and government affairs—entities that usually operate relatively independently. Members of coordinating teams are highly interdependent, have shared responsibilities, and must work together frequently and flexibly to accomplish their shared purposes. Coordinating teams also serve information-sharing and consultative functions.

Finally, as their name implies, *decision-making* teams make the small number of critical decisions that are most consequential for the enter-

FIGURE 17-1

**Four kinds of leadership teams**





prise as a whole. Although we have seen many leadership teams that are merely information-sharing teams, we have not observed teams that are *only* decision-making bodies. Decision-making teams tend to act at different times as any one of the four types of teams. A decision-making team also tends to serve as the coordinator of core initiatives, as an advisory group for the leader's decisions, and as a vital source of information exchange and learning for the top leaders of the organization (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008, chap. 2).

In an underbounded and overlarge group, the question "For what is this group of people interdependent?" becomes nearly impossible to define except in highly abstract terms such as "organizational effectiveness." As a consequence, the work of the team typically devolves into mere information sharing among individual members. Each leader presents updates and data about the progress in his or her own individual leadership activities—how things are going in the South Asia region, how the campaign against development near our local wetland is proceeding. Little of what any one member presents is vital or even relevant to any other leader's responsibilities. And nothing is accomplished, debated, or decided *together*.

Thus the least interdependent—and least vital—form of leadership team becomes the most common of all. It may be that this state of affairs contributes substantially to the pessimism of some writers about whether leadership teams ever can function as real interdependent teams at all (Hambrick, 2000; Katzenbach, 1997a).

***Irony III: Members are overloaded—but they tend to waste enormous amounts of time in team meetings***

Members of leadership teams typically have significant responsibilities as individuals for fulfilling leadership functions in their own parts of the organization. In both settings we studied, many of these leaders were even at serious risk of burnout. The potential to *share* leadership functions with peers and colleagues—thereby reducing the cognitive, emotional, and effort-related strains on individual leaders—is among the compelling reasons to create leadership teams in the first place. Indeed, Andrews et al. (2007) found that civic associations whose leaders worked as interdependent teams were better at strategizing and better able to engage others and to sustain their own energy in accomplishing shared purposes.

The reality, however, is that rather than sharing the burdens of leadership, leadership teams often spend much of their meeting time in wheel-spinning activities. We already have described the tendency to devolve into mere information sharing. But even when leadership teams attempt to engage in shared decision making, they typically waste inordinate amounts of time—thereby making membership on the team an additional burden rather than a source of help and support in fulfilling members' leadership roles.

Leadership teams waste time in three ways. First, they focus on surprisingly trivial matters. They do make decisions together—but often about issues that are not consequential for the team's core leadership work. Survey scores for both the activist teams and the top management teams illustrate. The averages for the meaningfulness of the leadership teams' tasks were  $M = 3.89$  and  $M = 3.82$ , respectively, well below ideal. It is not uncommon for leadership team discussions to focus for surprisingly long periods on issues such as where to have the holiday party or what kind of food to order—hardly vital leadership functions for the constituencies the team serves.

Second, when they do address important matters, leadership teams tend to become caught up in seemingly irresolvable conflicts. Indeed, the potential for unpleasant conflict may be one reason members wind up spending their time on more trivial matters that are unlikely to become fraught with negative emotion. Conflicts in senior teams often stem from members' views that their main responsibilities are to maximize the effectiveness of the unit they lead (Ancona and Nadler, 1989; Berg, 2005). There is a real risk that making decisions together that maximize *overall* organizational effectiveness will result in outcomes that are inconvenient, costly, or demoralizing to the units headed by certain team members. This understandable concern is reinforced by tangible and intangible rewards of the leadership roles that typically are more closely tied to accomplishments attributable to them as individual leaders than to the performance of the leadership team as a *team* (Siegel and Hambrick, 2005).

Moreover, leaders' legitimate roles as representatives of their particular divisions or functions can elicit negative attributions about other team members' motives (Berg, 2005). Members interpret the meaning of each others' statements in a decision-making process as primarily representing the interests of the group they represent. Thus, leadership team dynamics tend to embody and express the intergroup relationships—positive and negative—that pervade the larger organization, especially when those

relationships are structurally competitive (e.g., for investments, for talented people, for recognition, and for career opportunities). Finally, the most compelling personal motives of leadership team members generally are more about being individual leaders than about being team members. Together, personal motives, role definitions, and rewards for leadership create a natural tendency for the dynamics of decision-making teams to shift from trying to make the best collective decision possible for the organization to trying to win decision contests with other team members (Lewicki, Saunders, Minton, and Barry, 2000).

As one coping strategy, leadership teams often cut short potentially vital discussions by agreeing to disagree and then moving on. Consistent with their personal preferences, they redefine shared tasks in ways that rely more on individual accomplishment than on collective action. The assumption is that disaggregated tasks and competent individual actions ultimately will add up to a good outcome for the whole enterprise. In the case of the activists, we saw repeatedly that the consequence was dissipated power and thinly spread resources (many things done poorly versus a few things done superbly). For the top management teams, the consequence was a focus on maximizing the performance of leaders' constituent units, even if that meant that enterprise outcomes would be compromised.

***Irony IV: Authority dynamics pervade leadership teams and complicate team processes—but members won't talk about them***

Leadership teams have all the authority they possibly could need. As noted previously, they are self-governing teams whose members have full authority to chart their own course and to shape their own structure and context. Also as noted, however, such teams ironically underuse that authority, sufficing with suboptimal arrangements that, in many cases, members would not tolerate in their own frontline production or service teams. Part of the reason why many leadership teams do not fully exercise their collective authority is that authority dynamics *within* the team compromise members' ability to take concerted collective action.

Especially challenging to leadership teams are authority dynamics that involve the relationship between the team leader and team members. Members of senior teams, even though each is an organizational leader in his or her own right, tend not to exercise leadership within the team, instead viewing the leadership group as "the boss's team" and therefore the boss's responsibility. Indeed, Ancona and Nadler (1989)

report a greater power distance between the leader and members of leadership teams than exists in regular work teams in organizations and a concomitant tendency toward passivity and obedience. Our own research affirms that finding. In one top management team we studied, a newly appointed CEO experienced that power distance for the first time in a dramatic way. Consistent with her practice before she was elevated to the top job, she stood in a hallway “brainstorming” with several of her former peers about needed organizational changes. To her chagrin, she discovered some days later that her colleagues—now her direct reports—had taken her remarks as orders and had already begun to implement them.

It is not lost on team members that personally important outcomes, such as remuneration and career opportunities, are likely to be affected by how a chief executive assesses their behavior in the team and their contributions to its work. That reality can result in subtle jockeying for position and other diversionary activities among members who are supposed to be working *together* to provide leadership of the larger enterprise.

The *leader* of a leadership team, by contrast, generally recognizes that he or she is the one who must establish the team’s main purposes and guide members in working together to achieve them. The CEOs we studied did not hesitate to step up to that responsibility; the leaders of the more egalitarian activist teams, however, were more reluctant to specify team purposes and, instead, tended to form committees to generate them or consult extensively about them.

But in both settings, many leaders found it difficult to give the team enough latitude to determine *how* those purposes were to be pursued. Instead, these leaders specified the details of execution, thereby reinforcing members’ views that their responsibilities in the team were mainly to do what they were told to do. One member of an activist leadership team in the Southwest, for example, was continually silent during a team planning session about how to energize local members to help stop abusive wildlife control practices in the desert. When asked about his silence, his response reflected the authority dynamics of that team: “This is her [the team leader’s] thing. I’ll just do what she tells me to.”

Some leadership team leaders we studied both articulated a challenging purpose *and* clearly signaled to members that it was their collective responsibility to figure out how to get it achieved. The mistake

for these leaders was that they often concluded that their own work was done, that the team would take it from there. When members subsequently failed to work together competently and energetically to achieve team purposes, these leaders eventually lost patience and, in effect, retook control of the process. That is what happened in one activist organization ExCom in the Northwest that was dedicated to preserving local waterways. The chair turned over the design, planning, and execution of a major fundraising event to her team. When she discovered a week later that team members had not yet secured a venue, she created her own plan and began issuing directives to the other team members on all aspects of the event—thereby unintentionally reinforcing members' views that they need not feel personally or collectively responsible for the team's leadership work.

Dynamics of the kind just described are not a caricature, nor are they uncommon. They are documented by the scholars we have cited as well as in our own research. What they show is the power of the *authority dynamics* that pervade leadership teams to shape member attitudes, to complicate team processes, and, not infrequently, to compromise leadership team performance.

Authority dynamics are so powerful that they, more than the demands of the team's actual leadership work, can come to dominate behavior in leadership teams. Members can become quite skilled at keeping behavior in the group smooth and seemingly under control, even when that requires the suppression of strong emotional reactions to what is going on. It is as if a matter does not exist, or at least does not need to be dealt with openly, if it can be kept off the team table. The result is a veneer of courteous and orderly behavior that covers over thoughts and feelings that members are unwilling to personally "own," let alone explore or learn from (Argyris, 1993). When we pressed the activist leader who had remained silent through his team's planning session about why he had not expressed his belief that the leadership team was being harmed by the ExCom chair's dominance, he laughed and said "Why start a fight?"

Sometimes members know what is going on and, like the silent activist, can describe it quite accurately if queried in a private, off-line setting. But other times, authority dynamics operate below the conscious level, as was shown by Wilfred Bion (1961) in his classic analyses of unconscious influences on group life. Bion distinguishes between the *work group*, which is what the group is doing on its manifest task,

and the *basic assumption group*, the nonconscious processes that operate in parallel with the work group but are unrecognized by members. Bion identifies three types of basic assumption groups: dependency groups, fight-flight groups, and pairing groups. In each case, the group is operating *as if* its real purpose were to take care of the members (dependency), and/or to engage in battle (fight-flight), and/or to give birth to a new and better world (pairing).

When dependency dynamics are operating, the group implicitly assumes that the leader will take care of everything—and then tries to depose the leader when it becomes clear, as it always will, that he or she is unable to meet their expectations. The obedience/passivity pattern we described above is consistent with Bion's dependency dynamics. When fight-flight dynamics are operating, by contrast, the group implicitly assumes that it is under attack and that it must either fight back or flee. According to Bion, fight-flight can generate excessive conformity and tests of the loyalty of members, who feel they must stick together or be defeated. Finally, when pairing dynamics are operating, the group implicitly assumes that whatever difficulty the group is having can be resolved by sending off two of its members to find a solution—a solution which, if offered at all by the deputized pair, invariably is found wanting.

We are not psychoanalytically inclined, nor do we find in the research literature empirical studies to confirm the specific predictions made by Bion or by others in his intellectual tradition. But our own research has convinced us that authority dynamics in leadership teams do spawn powerful forces of which members are unaware and therefore unable to correct. As much as members may want to fix what ails their team, they cannot correct something they cannot see.

Even group dynamics problems that *are* visible to members can defy resolution, for two reasons. First, as noted above, the norms of leadership teams generally discourage open discussion of precisely those matters that are most problematic to the team and its members (Argyris, 1969; Berg, 2005). Members are disinclined to express their own emotions or to encourage others to do so, especially when the substantive issue at hand also has significant emotional content. And they are even more reluctant to experiment with alternative, unfamiliar, and risky ways of gaining purchase on the team's most difficult problems.

Second, members of leadership teams generally do not have in their repertoires the full complement of skills that would be required

to deal competently with issues of power and authority even if they were personally disposed to do so, and even if group norms actively supported their doing so. Members usually are selected for membership on leadership teams because of their technical or functional prowess, coupled with a track record of superb accomplishment as an *individual* leader. They may never have had the opportunity to hone through experience their skills in dealing with thorny, authority-driven group process problems.

So what is the leader of a team of leaders to do? What can be done to minimize the degree to which the dynamics described above will undermine the effectiveness even of teams whose members are strongly committed to providing competent organizational leadership? A tempting answer to that question is that the leader should use his or her authority to put on the team's table even those items—indeed, *especially* those items—that members would rather not deal with, and then help the team work through the ones that are most critical to leadership team performance. But the leaders of leadership teams often achieved their positions in the same way as did team members—namely, through extraordinary individual leadership accomplishment. One cannot count on the leader being ready to provide the kind or level of leadership that is required to deal with thorny authority dynamics that members collude to keep off the table.

An alternative strategy is to create a team design and organizational supports that (1) lessen the pervasiveness and perniciousness of the dynamics we have explored here, and (2) increase the likelihood that those difficulties that *do* arise are amenable to resolution by people who are not necessarily skilled or experienced in dealing with team processes. This, then, is one of the key functions that can be fulfilled by the leader of a team of leaders—creating and maintaining those conditions that make it feasible for leadership team members to notice, deal with, and learn from the authority dynamics that so often compromise the effectiveness of such teams.

### **Leading Teams of Leaders**

Leadership teams have a constellation of characteristics that makes them especially difficult to lead. For all members of such teams, the team role is the second—and lower-priority—job. Typically ill-composed, these teams suffer from amorphous purposes that result

in a default task strategy of mere information sharing. Interpersonal dynamics within the team often reflect the tendency of members to seek greater status and recognition, as well as to personally lead rather than to share leadership. These motives, moreover, are reinforced by reward systems that measure and celebrate individual leadership accomplishments. Every element of this constellation is malleable, from purpose to performance measures. But each requires explicit action to shape them.

We address below the five key functions that must be fulfilled to help leadership teams operate well—that is, to serve the organization better, to become a better-operating team in which real learning takes place, and to contribute to the growth and well-being of individual leaders.

***1. Creating a bounded entity that is defined by a clear, shared purpose***

This first leadership function is basic to any kind of task-performing team. But it has special relevance—and special challenges—for the leaders of leadership teams. First and foremost, it implies that not all individual leaders placed in important leadership roles need be part of the leadership team. A real leadership team with a clear purpose arises when someone defines a circumscribed set of leadership functions to be fulfilled collaboratively, and chooses specific team members whose capabilities will contribute to those purposes.

Fulfilling this function requires first conceptualizing what a leadership team can do *as a team* to provide essential leadership to the larger entity. That kind of cognitive work requires creative conceptualization, something that comes best from an individual rather than from a team. In both research settings we studied, we observed that teams whose leaders—CEOs in one setting, ExCom chairs in the other—attended explicitly to defining their teams' overall purposes made better collective decisions and exhibited higher-quality work processes than did teams whose leaders took a more laissez-faire stance toward team purposes. Fulfilling this first function also requires leadership team leaders to make thoughtful choices about team composition and about ways to keep membership boundaries clear. Defining who is—and who is not—a member of a leadership team is a matter that can pose significant emotional and interpersonal challenges even for experienced leaders.



## ***2. Crafting an agenda so that the work of the team is always focused on meaningful, interdependent activities***

Leading a team of leaders requires that someone pay careful attention to the tasks members do in their work together, to prevent an unintended downward slide to mere information sharing or diversions into long discussions about trivial matters. Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins (2001) point out that there is no single or fixed task list for leadership teams, given the shifting nature of work they perform. What is required, these authors emphasize, is continuous attention by the leader to task demands and team process needs as they evolve over time.

Our observations in both settings confirm that having the CEO or the ExCom chair create a short list of key decisions or activities to address with the team when it convened was significantly related to the level of effort exhibited by team members and to the appropriateness of team performance strategies. Absent explicit attention by the leader, the team as a whole typically generated a long list of small items, each of which was relevant mainly for only one or two leaders at the table—which yielded predictable negative consequences for member attention and effort. Keeping the work both meaningful and interdependent requires selecting team tasks carefully each time the team convenes. It is a function fulfilled repeatedly rather than once in the team's lifetime.

## ***3. Shaping members' construals of their roles***

The work of leadership for members of a leadership team involves making collective decisions on behalf of the enterprise as a whole, while simultaneously acting on behalf of their individual constituents. Members of leadership teams do tend to understand their individual leadership roles—but that understanding does not include overall leadership of an enterprise. Construing the leadership job as taking care of one's individual part of the enterprise almost always causes an overfocus on maximizing local performance at the expense of the whole entity.

As Berg (2005) notes, one job of a CEO is to keep senior leaders focused on *both* overall organizational effectiveness and on their individual responsibilities. Our observations are consistent with Berg's analysis. We have observed some top management teams in which the CEO described first to new team members their expectations about the person's role as a member of the leadership team. Only after that aspect

of the role was well understood did the CEO discuss expectations about the person's role as the leader of an individual unit or function. Similarly, as the ExComs in the activist organization honed the design of their teams, they emphasized to new members that they had been elected not to a specific post but to a leadership *team*.

In both cases, individual responsibilities were construed as an important part, but only a part, of the overall leadership job. The whole job was about providing leadership for the whole enterprise—both as an individual leader and as a member of the leadership team. Members who perceive their roles in this fashion are considerably more likely in decision-making processes to develop shared criteria for decisions that maximize collective outcomes, and they are more willing to make choices that trade off local for enterprise-wide benefits (Ganz and Wageman, 2008).

#### ***4. Articulating explicit norms that promote attention to team strategies and that minimize political dynamics***

Well-designed teams develop norms of attentiveness to changes in environmental demands, and thereby craft and execute task performance strategies that are fully appropriate to their task and situation, rather than fall mindlessly into the execution of habitual routines (Gersick and Hackman, 1990; Wageman, 1995, 2001). Such norms are most likely to emerge when the tasks are meaningful and when team purposes are clear (Wageman, 2001). But leadership teams need additional attention to norms about behavior to help them deal constructively with the political dynamics that, as we have seen, emerge because of members' dual roles.

Berg (2005) makes the paradoxical suggestion that leaders “let people have their groups.” He advocates norms of making group memberships and representational concerns *discussable* in the team. In his view, a norm that advocates speaking and acting as if one is only considering the big picture has perverse effects because other team members are likely to assume that a position taken is to promote the interests of the leader's own constituency. By making one's concerns on behalf of one's own group explicit, those concerns become part of what the team can discuss.

Consistent with Berg's position, we saw in our research on top management teams that the outstanding teams were significantly more likely to place individual concerns on the table and to have members

who displayed high levels of empathy to each others' concerns. The lesson holds for the activist teams we studied as well. Activist teams that developed explicit norms about shared decision criteria that took into account individual concerns were significantly better able to mobilize the whole group and less likely to dissipate their power in multiple, competing activities (Ganz and Wageman, 2008).

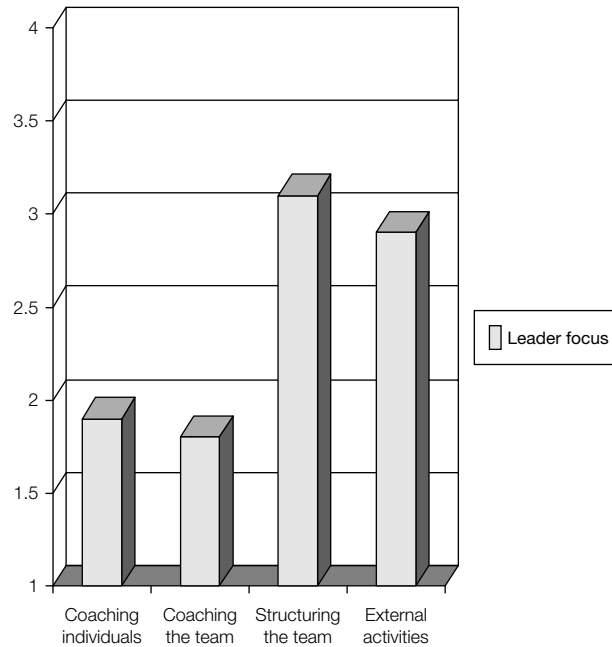
High-quality norms are essential for leadership teams, but we found that they do not develop in the absence of active influence from the team leader. Indeed, in our research on top management teams, we found that healthy norms "take" only in teams in which the leader gave explicit attention to modeling the norms and reinforcing them in the team. Although the most effective teams in our sample did help define their norms and eventually took on the role of maintaining them, it took early action by the team leader to get constructive norms established and accepted.

### ***5. Coaching the team***

Leadership teams do not get much coaching from their own leaders. As is seen in figure 17-2, of four possible functions that could command team leaders' attention (external activities, structuring the team, coaching individuals, and coaching the team), team coaching came last. But, as is seen in figure 17-3, teams that scored highest overall on our three criteria of team effectiveness had leaders whose focus was evenly balanced between external matters and attention to the team itself.

Hands-on coaching accounted for significant variance in the effectiveness of top management teams, and a high proportion of our sample indicated that they would benefit from a good deal more of it (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008). Direct intervention into team processes is especially important for teams of leaders because of the high likelihood of process losses that stem from the inherent challenges posed by such teams' structure and context. For one thing, active management of the team process by the team leader can help the team be explicit about and deal constructively with differences in their individual interests (Edmondson, Roberto, and Watkins, 2001). Moreover, competent coaching can help leadership teams develop shared definitions of the very *facts* that they rely on in their discussions (Berg, 2005). Neither of these behaviors is likely to emerge in the absence of deliberate attention and competent facilitation.

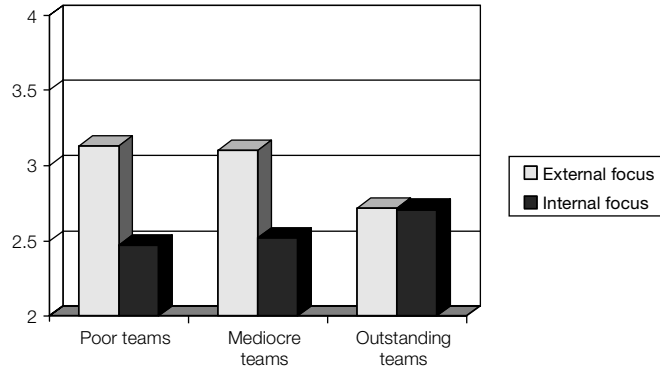
FIGURE 17-2

**How leaders apportion their attention\***

\* These scores are *relative* ranks; it is not possible to score high on all of them.

Both the top management teams and the activist teams we studied faced real dilemmas about *who* should provide team coaching. For top management teams, the magnitude of the power distance between CEOs and the rest of the team made coaching attempts by team members extraordinarily risky, and it was viewed as appropriate only when carried out in response to an explicit invitation from the leader. For the activist teams, widely shared norms of equality militated against members claiming the authority to intervene in team processes. In neither case was member coaching impossible, and we did observe it on occasion—but in the main, it was very, very, uncomfortable for all concerned. The transition to shared responsibility for intervening in team processes, we found, occurs most smoothly when team leaders first model good coaching and then explicitly invite other members to join in when they feel they are ready to do so.

FIGURE 17-3

**Dual focus of the leaders of outstanding leadership teams\***

\* These scores are *relative* ranks; it is not possible to score high on all of them.

***Irony V: Shared leadership may be especially unlikely in teams composed of leaders***

Our analysis of the five leadership functions needed to create effective leadership teams suggests our fifth ironic feature of leadership teams. Since all five functions are conditions that are best initiated by a powerful individual—specifically, the leader of the leadership team—shared leadership is especially *unlikely* to emerge spontaneously in teams that are composed of people who themselves have extensive experience and expertise as leaders. The combination of authority dynamics, the need for attention to the key elements of high-quality team design, and the inherent challenge in defining a purpose for a leadership team may place such teams especially in need of a single authority, at least early in its life, to fulfill critical leadership functions and to establish the conditions that foster team effectiveness.

**Conclusion: The Competencies of the Executive**

We close by identifying two essential competencies—one cognitive, one behavioral—that are implied by a functional perspective on leadership teams. These are by no means the only capabilities that can help. Indeed, in our book on top management teams we devote an

entire chapter to the competencies that contribute to the competent leadership of senior management teams (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, and Hackman, 2008, chap. 8). The two competencies we choose to address here are prompted by the analyses we have offered in this paper, which we believe may be especially valuable for the leaders of leadership teams.

### ***Understanding Teams as Social Systems***

We have seen that the natural setup of leadership teams, as well as their emergent processes, undermine the accomplishment of key leadership functions. And we have argued that leadership team effectiveness requires identifying the *systemic* conditions that create obstacles to team effectiveness, and then creating design features that can elicit and reinforce effective collaboration in such circumstances. Consistent with these observations, we saw that the best leaders of both top management teams and activist leadership teams were those who were adept both in comprehending the systemic nature of their teams and organizations and in taking actions that respected and took full advantage of systemic forces.

Competent leader interventions require a diagnostic frame of mind, in which one asks “What are the critical functions that are *not* being fulfilled in this system as it presently exists?” That kind of diagnostic question can identify the actions that have the best possible chance of strengthening a leadership team in its particular context. For example, a capable leader of leadership teams must be able to recognize the degree to which unclear purposes or trivial tasks are the root causes of members’ seeming disengagement in a leadership team meeting. That recognition allows the leader to take well-aimed action, clarifying purposes or redesigning the team’s shared work, as the situation warrants. A diagnostic frame of mind, coupled with an understanding of the main conditions that do elicit and reinforce effective collaboration, defines what we mean by understanding teams as social systems.

### ***The Art of Structuring***

The specific conditions that leaders must create to enhance the effectiveness of a particular leadership team vary from context to context. Moreover, the set of actions it will take to get those conditions in place

is unpredictable and idiosyncratic. For example, the particular purpose articulated for a team depends on the critical contingencies the enterprise faces at the time the team is convened. How one best articulates that purpose and what themes one chooses to emphasize to energize the team depend on knowledge of the team's history, relationships, and values. The member capabilities that are needed to fulfill those purposes, the specific norms that will adequately support the requisite team processes, the details of how the members should construe their roles in the enterprise—each of these conditions demands attention to the unique circumstances in which the leadership team operates.

Moreover, leadership teams of the kinds we studied face chronic patterns of team dissolution and relaunch. In the case of the activists, team membership is changed with some predictability by the cycle of elections. For top management teams, membership alters as leaders move in and out of the organization. Each time that happens, the leadership team needs to be restructured all over again. There is no recipe or formula for leading a leadership team. As a consequence, effective leaders of leadership teams must have a wide repertoire of ways of enacting these conditions, and of recreating them over time.

The uniqueness of the circumstances leadership teams face over time and the rapid shifts in their composition and leadership suggest that in any given organization, developing leaders' repertoire of structuring skills—and embedding that expertise in the organization, not just in specific individuals—is essential for the long-term effectiveness of leadership teams in any enterprise. Leaders of leadership teams need to develop the art of structuring—and to understand that structuring *is* an art. To get good conditions in place for leadership teams requires leaders to learn to fulfill those functions in whatever way they can, using whatever styles and special capabilities they call their own.

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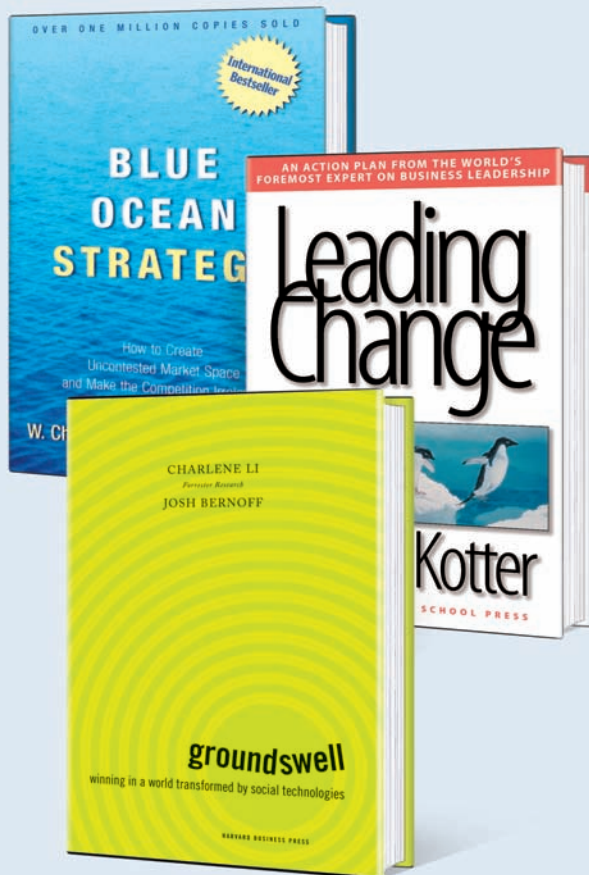
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