What it takes to be a great leadership team member?

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Executives at many companies rise the ranks in large part because of their past accomplishments and functional expertise; sales results for the head of sales, successful product launches for the CMO, balance sheet and capital raises for the CFO, technological innovation for the CTO. Advancement is also often a reward for putting in hard work and years of service or forming the necessary political bonds with the right senior influencers. Functional track record, work ethic and relationship skills are important for any senior executive but are insufficient when an executive is asked to be part of a senior leadership team.

Great leadership teams establish and steer an organization's strategic direction and set the tone for how their organizations operate. In normal circumstances this is challenging work, but today's uncertain and complex environment requires leadership teams to be much more than a collection of talented senior executives. To be successful leadership teams have no other option than to leverage each other's talent so they can navigate the uncertainty in a manner that fuels innovation, enables operational agility and inspires confidence.

Throughout this crisis we have talked to many CEOs who are frustrated with their teams as they find themselves getting involved in disputes among departments and stepping in to make decisions that should be made by their direct reports. Competence and role clarity are two root issues behind these frustrations and the crisis has intensified the negative impacts. In some cases, CEOs are discovering that their executives lack the capabilities to be effective senior leadership team members. In other cases, CEOs admit that they have done a poor job communicating and reinforcing the requirements that each leadership team member must have for their teams to lead their organizations effectively.

So, what does it take to be a great leadership team member? In our experience and in speaking with many CEOs over the past few months there are four unique skills that all senior leaders must have or at least be working to develop to be great leadership team

members. These are foresight, management of complexity, a greater good focus, and modeling values.

Foresight

To be a great leadership team member it's not good enough simply to manage the function and get 'things back to normal.' Great leadership team members practice foresight in their functional areas and with their leadership team colleagues – e.g., anticipating new technologies for serving customers who are evolving how they engage with your company.

Foresight is not about predicting the future. It is an important capability that helps leaders manage, harness and leverage the constant change around us. It includes being able to sift through large amounts of conflicting information and being astute observers of the environments in which they operate. These are obviously important abilities in normal times, but the need gets heightened in a crisis. Foresight helps leaders anticipate challenges and avoid letting situations fully dictate and overwhelm their organizations. To develop good foresight leaders must be curious about learning and experimenting, disciplined about not letting their own biases get in the way, and passionate about engaging and learning from others.

Simplifying the Complex

Simplifying complexity doesn't mean ignoring it. Rather it means breaking down complex information into logical patterns that enable simple solutions to emerge which will be essential in the coming months. In his ["Simplifying Complexity" TED Talk](#) Eric Berlow suggests that 'the more you step back and embrace complexity the better chance you have of finding simple answers, and it's often different than the simple answer that you started with.' Simplicity matters because it has such a big effect on how businesses operate and on a leadership team's ability to communicate as a team and with the entire organization. Leadership team members who are not skilled at simplifying complexity hold their organizations back as they tend to lead reactive and inefficient functional units and contribute to confusion and frustration throughout an organization.

There are two important 'simplify complexity' skills that leadership team members must have or at least be working to develop. The first is the ability to gather or observe

complex data, identify the outcomes the team is trying to influence or evaluate, and identify patterns or interdependencies between the data; all in the interest of discerning potential conclusions or solutions. The second skill is the ability to communicate complex topics in manner that satisfies the needs of recipients. This often requires prioritizing what's most important from the recipients' perspective, articulating clearly and concisely, and providing context and examples.

Greater Good Focus

Being a good member of any team is hard work and the challenges are exacerbated on senior leadership teams where egos, ambitions, and ingrained ways of working are considerable. For a leadership team to be great, each member has to be loyal to the team first and at times subordinate their functional role and personal agenda to that of the team. On great leadership teams talented functional leaders debate and argue well so that the decisions and actions they take are in the best interest of the company. This is especially important in a crisis when decisions must be made with limited data and great risk.

This greater good focus is not always a natural skill and therefore must be reinforced. Leadership teams need to actively discuss and gain agreement on the behaviors that support a greater good focus – "we" instead of "I", volunteering to give things up, excitement about company success not directly related to their function. Team members also need to welcome and encourage input from their colleagues even on topics outside of their expertise. Greater good focused team members appreciate this input because they know it is coming with the right intent. Perhaps most importantly, team members (not just the CEO) need to consistently model these behaviors and hold each other accountable to them.

Modeling Values

In many organizations values are simply words listed on the web site or posted in conference rooms. To find out if this is the case simply ask an employee in the lunchroom if posted values are real. If the response is 'if you heard how the CFO talks to his team you would laugh at our people first value' then you know there is work to be done. However, if the response is 'heck yea, let me tell you how we take care of employees at this place,' you can be sure that the leadership team is reinforcing these important behaviors.

Values should be the guideposts for how all employees in an organization behave and, simply put, they will be consistently practiced only if every member of the leadership team models them in how they interact as a leadership team and with all stakeholders, how they make decisions, and how they operate their individual functions. Employees take their cues from the leadership team – service focus gets diminished when an executive publicly disparages a customer, people first gets diminished when an executive yells at a team member, team focus gets diminished when employees hear leadership team members speak poorly about their colleagues.

These are tough times and those leadership teams that are comprised of team members with these four important skills are likely weathering the storm much better than those that are not. Members of great leadership teams recognize that it is a privilege to be on the team and to serve the organization. They may not be able to practice foresight, simplifying complexity, greater good focus or values modeling when they start as team members, but they must have the capability to develop these important skills and actively commit to do so.