

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

Certified Public Accountants/Business Consultants

Flying in Formation: Leverage Executive Strengths with Flexible Team Design

For those of us living in North America, each spring affords us another opportunity to observe the aerial migration of Canada geese. Now there's a team design that has stood the test of time. Those familiar "V" formations have cut across our skies for thousands of years. The group structure is efficient, aerodynamic in design and allows for shifts in role responsibility. In business as in nature, there are clear advantages to a flexible system which allows members to alternately take the lead or fall back to roles best suited to individual strengths.

Flexibility in executive team design promotes the ability of organizations to progress and evolve. Adaptable teams which favor the promotion and utilization of individual strengths are positioned well to respond to external pressures such as market conditions and industry competition.

A team dynamic based on situational shifts in leadership can also effectively address internal strategies such as organizational culture, management structure and administrative systems. Executive teams well-versed in the art of collaboration will always achieve performance levels well above individual members "flying on their own."

Welcome to the C- Suite.

Picture an executive team comprised of 10 individuals. Each executive is at the top of his or her game. Each individual has reached the high point of his or her career and is now part of the leadership circle of the organization. The journey has required hard work, perseverance, talent, and a goal-oriented mindset. They have mastered the art of delegation. They are accustomed to assessing conditions, facing challenges head-on and moving forward with decisions – independently. And, very often, a collective group of strong personalities does not always transition easily into a cooperative team dynamic.

I never promised you a rose garden.

For the most part, executive teams rarely function as teams at all. Executive leadership groups are often comprised of highly motivated individuals with successful track records of personal achievement. Members regularly gather together and report on separate areas of responsibility, and then break away to attend to the same. Often, there is one senior officer whose decisions serve as final directives for most situations. Each member of the group has a role, and the roles don't usually flex when change occurs in other areas, internal or external. This traditional "pyramid" design has a high dependence on the abilities of the leader at the top. While the authority channel is clear, the pyramid design does not always encourage or optimize the participation and active stewardship of the other members.

Hard wired to lead.

Psychologists and other observers of human behavior have identified specific personality components among individuals who achieve leadership status in corporate environments: above average intelligence, highly developed self confidence, independence of thought, a drive to succeed and a tendency to dominate. These very traits which led to individual success are often the anti-thesis of the collaborative behavior patterns we associate with compromise or sacrifice of personal agenda for group gain.

Shifting gears for optimum performance.

Anyone who has driven a car with a manual transmission has first-hand knowledge of how shifting from one gear to the next allows the vehicle to accommodate changing road conditions. High performing executive leadership teams follow the same principle. They have the ability, and expectation, to shift roles of responsibility in order to best drive and guide the organization.

The diverse talent advantage.

It is not easy to shift from a traditional leadership structure to a team-based design based on shared responsibility. There is comfort in knowing there will be one final vote which determines most outcomes. However, that design does not make the most of the individual talents that make up the entire group. Remember the ever-changing "V" formation; constantly moving forward, yet the lead position changes as

conditions shift and change. The group stays focused and committed. Responsibility is shared. Leads are given breaks to refresh.

Crossing over.

The best way to adopt an effective crossover from a traditional leadership pyramid to a flexible executive team dynamic is to move forward in stages. First, make certain you have the "right people in the right seats." Ineffective team members who are incapable of taking on responsibility perpetuate the necessity of one individual as lead.

Second, most management re-structure will benefit from professional facilitation. An organization development specialist is the best resource for a successful transition. OD and human resource professionals have the business acumen and people skills to effect the best implementation. Successful flight is rarely accomplished when team positioning is locked into a fixed structural system. A flexible team design allows for executive contributions in roles best suited to individual strengths. This type of leadership model does require a higher degree of engagement from its members. While the opportunity for personal contribution is great, so is the need for responsible stewardship from all.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Melissa McDaniel at 301-662-2400 or via email: melissa@mksh.com.

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McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond

11311 McCormick Road, Suite 100
Hunt Valley, MD 21031
410.296.6200

www.mksh.com

70 Thomas Johnson Drive, Suite 100
Frederick, MD 21702
301.662.2400.