

the HRDIRECTOR

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the HRDIRECTOR INTERVIEW:

**Jack Constantinides – VP HR Business Partner,
Monster Europe West**

BUILDING SUCCESSFUL TEAMS

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**Mike Barnato –
Interim manager, Local Better Regulation Office**

**Hazel Dickinson -
Human Resources director, ADP UK**

**Dina Knight -
HR director, Northgate Information Solutions**

Becky Mason – People and policy manager, BT

Bristow Group

**British American Tobacco
Hertfordshire Constabulary**

Lloyds TSB

NHS

Sara Lee

Pictured: Jack Constantinides
VP HR Business Partner, Monster Europe West

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**DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE WHERE WE LOOK AT: FORUM - OUTSOURCING; LEADERSHIP;
CSR; INFORMATION SECURITY...AND A SPECIAL DIVERSITY SUPPLEMENT**



TEAMS OF LEADERS - CAN YOU MAKE A RIGOROUS BUSINESS CASE FOR BEING A TEAM?

WOULD YOUR EXECUTIVE TEAM SUCCEED IF THEY WERE ASKED TO PRESENT A RIGOROUS BUSINESS CASE FOR BEING A TEAM - A CASE THAT HAD TO PROVE THAT COLLECTIVELY THEY WERE FAR MORE EFFECTIVE AND PROFITABLE AS A RESULT OF WORKING AS A TEAM, RATHER THAN A GROUP OF TALENTED INDIVIDUALS? CHARLIE IRVINE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, QUESTIONS OF DIFFERENCE LTD, LOOKS AT JUST WHAT EFFECTIVE TEAMS ARE MADE OF.

No matter what we call them - executive teams, executive committees, top teams, executive management teams - I am constantly astounded by how many of these top teams fail in two key areas:

- To work effectively as a team of leaders
- To develop an innovative and dynamic conflict culture.

WORKING EFFECTIVELY AS A TEAM OF LEADERS

A few months ago I was working with an executive team at an off-site event. The purpose was to review the organisational structure. Whenever a director left the room for a comfort break, the post-it note representing the IT department was moved under their name, which led me to reflect on how the team were 'working together' to review the structure. It soon became evident that this was the first time this group of people had ever looked at the whole structure together. The previous CEO had seen no value in the senior group operating as a team and had, therefore, allocated various departments to individuals without the team having a sense of the wider structure. When the new CEO was appointed, the challenges he faced were silo working, lack of communication between directors and their departments, and information seen by all as power and never shared.

This group call themselves a team – they spend four hours together

every Tuesday morning. Members of their staff wait outside the door to present. If they are called in they are lucky if anyone focuses on what they are saying. Depending on which department they are from, things are challenged or not. The four hours are up and off they go to lead the business for another week!

It is no accident, in my view, that teams of leaders are often the most ineffective in most organisations. I often hear complaints about back to back meetings, time wasted, endless discussions around the same issue, the real issue discussed in the corridor and decisions never taken. What is more astounding to me is that the people who most complain about these things are the people who have the most capacity to change it – the top team.

Drawing on work with over 50 top teams, I have come to identify certain characteristics that are present when teams of leaders work well together. Listed below are the top three factors I see in these teams – how would you rate your top team against these?

They have made a clear business case that they should be a team

They have actually had the debate about whether or not they are, or should be, a team. They have discussed exactly what sort of team they should be. They have investigated their own experiences of high performing teams

and agreed on which elements of their individual past successes they will draw on. One of the teams I worked with came to see very quickly that they were not a team at all – more a confederation of businesses who had been brought together because they all reported to the same individual. The most effective thing they ever did was to stop trying to be a team. They met three times a year to discuss and solve particular issues in their areas. Working as consultants to each other was far more effective than playing at teammates. Who will have the courage in your organisation to ask the top team whether they have a business case to be a team?

They perpetuate stories of success and use the details

These are stories that are grounded in detail and reality - it is not spin. The team generate a collective memory that they all relate to about moments of success. They pay attention to what generates success and build strongly on that - they do not spend time telling war stories but dedicate time to understanding the details of what works. By understanding what works they are able to draw on this intelligence when things do not work. Much research now indicates that our rate of learning escalates to 70% when we learn from what is working. Teams that have this capacity are able to work faster and with more energy by knowing what works and applying it. Does your top team really understand what works?

They master the art of questioning

The most effective teams fundamentally recognise that their organisation will go in whatever direction it is questioned - so they ask questions that affirm and disrupt ways of thinking, rather than fighting to find the 'right' answer. This is not the kind of questioning we have become familiar with – i.e. the kind where the person clearly has the answer and is rather hamfistedly trying to lead us to their solution. These are the kinds of questions that, when you hear them, you are tempted to leap to an answer and suddenly stop short, realising that you need to think about what you have been asked. Some of the questions I remember hearing included: "What are we not seeing?", "What will be different when ...?", "What is the purpose?", "What would be different if this team did not appear for a month?". When last did you have the good fortune to work for someone who had a real gift for asking questions that catapulted the organisation in new and incredible directions? Or perhaps you are that leader.

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATIVE AND DYNAMIC CONFLICT CULTURE

Conflict is one of the greatest natural resources any organisation has – you do not have to go out of your way to create it, buy it in or develop it. It is there; the challenge is how you limit the negative impact and maximise the positive benefits. If we see conflict as the inevitable expression of disagreement due to difference, then we will see that failure to develop the capacity to work with conflict is costing organisations millions in wasted time, missed opportunities, petty politics, silo working – and most importantly an ineffective top team. In most organisations the reality is that most conflicts are either created by the top team or eventually surface in this team to be resolved. And yet it is here that there is often the most dysfunctional conflict culture. It is often the HR director who needs to have the courage to lead the team through a process to create an effective conflict culture. >

CASE STUDY ORGANIC FARM FOODS

ORGANIC FARM FOODS IS BRITAIN'S BIGGEST IMPORTER AND DISTRIBUTOR OF ORGANIC FRUIT AND PRODUCE, AND SUPPLIES TO ALL THE UK'S MAJOR SUPERMARKETS AS WELL AS BOX SCHEMES, SCHOOLS AND MARKETS. THE COMPANY WAS ESTABLISHED IN THE 1980S BY PETER SEGGER, WHO STARTED GROWING FOOD ORGANICALLY WHEN WE WERE STILL WATCHING TOM AND BARBARA IN THE GOOD LIFE.

Recent dramatic changes in consumer attitudes and buying behaviour brought major challenges to Organic Farm Foods; supermarkets increased demand and applied strident price and quality controls, and other food producers entered the organic market. The company had to adapt to meet the challenges, which led to turbulent times for the senior executive team with re-financing, dramatic cost cutting and merging work sites, all under the control of a 'new' joint MD team.

Morphic is a company that specialises in business team coaching. It uses traditional methodologies with positive psychology and social/emotional intelligence to deliver a unique coaching approach.

When Organic Farm Foods met with Morpheic, the changes the business had undergone had left an impact on the staff, as Jill Whitelaw, Morpheic business team coach, explains: *"The initial phase of work found an emotionally exhausted senior team. Although things were vastly improved from before the changes, many still felt weighed-down by the turmoil of the past. There was a stressful working atmosphere of conflict and misunderstanding, where the future vision had become lost in the day-to-day running of the business."*



Morpheic worked with employees from across the diverse workforce to understand their views of the organisation and the future. Members of the senior team underwent 360° feedback and strengths-based assessments.

Through a mix of individual and team coaching the team were able to reflect on the past, review where the organisation currently was, and agree the next steps for building a strong executive team. A new working ethic, with improved communication, was established for a stronger business and future for Organic Farm Foods.

"The whole experience with Morpheic was very positive for us. The timing was right and the feedback really helped me to understand the team and their issues. We are all working better together and I have more time to focus on the future," comments Adam Wakely, Joint MD.

For further information:



www.morpheic.co.uk



www.organicfarmfoods.co.uk

> Three strategies I have found effective are:

Identify individual conflict profiles and agree on the team conflict culture

Each person in the team will have developed a particular approach to dealing with conflict – their personal conflict profile. This will be based on a number of things including their own experiences of what has worked in the past. If they have learnt that not raising things in meetings but dealing with them at a later point works, then that is what they will do.

As discussions about personal conflict profiles are not things that people are accustomed to, this strategy needs care. It is often useful to give individuals an opportunity to reflect on their own approach to conflict through a discussion or confidential questionnaire before bringing the topic into the team. By getting individuals to discuss how they deal with conflict, people in the team gain great insight and can often make sense of historic actions or incidents that have remained a mystery – and often resulted in a strong sense of annoyance.

Once the team have had an opportunity to discuss their conflict profiles, you will be in a position to create the most effective conflict culture for the team. The key elements of the culture should include the following:

- How information is presented in contexts of conflict
- How individuals are prepared
- How discussions will be facilitated
- How language will be used and understood e.g. agree to disagree means what exactly – you are an idiot and I am going to work in this way anyway?
- How 'hidden' and not so hidden agendas will be discussed
- How decisions will be taken
- How support for the decisions will be demonstrated by everyone in the team.

Address the issues that everyone knows about and no one talks about

This is often an area where HR finds itself in a very difficult position. By working in a world where we believe it is appropriate for HR to have confidential discussions with people, we can often create unhealthy conflict cultures. I am not referring here to those few occasions where confidential discussions with HR are important. It just seems that by allowing individuals in top teams to raise things confidentially, we continue to create cultures where issues are not brought into the open and dealt with. I have not come across a team yet where, within a short space of time, I (along with everyone else in the organisation) am made aware of the unspoken issues. Somehow we have created the belief that these things cannot be dealt with in the open; that they require all kinds of astute political manoeuvring and endless sub meetings to deal with. Address the elephants!

Insist that people develop conflict skills

At times it seems as though the biggest challenge is helping people to see that they should and can learn to handle conflict differently – and that it is possible to use this natural resource in organisations to good effect. There is little in our education system either in school, university or business that teaches us the skills to manage conflict

effectively. If you are going to ask the top team to prove their value as a team and challenge them to form a strong conflict culture, it is clear that you will not only need the courage but also the skills to guide these conversations.

If you are prepared to take up the challenge I am certain you will notice the significant impact on individual and team effectiveness. And who knows, you may find one or two people in the home lives of these executives who thank you for the inadvertent impact you have had on their world!



Charlie Irvine
Managing Director

www.questionsofdifference.com

QUESTIONS
OF
DIFFERENCE