



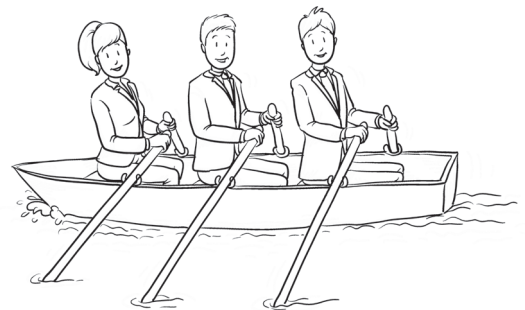
The Power of the Executive Team ***Let's cut the sporting analogies***

Danny Taylor

Dead-ends for executive teams

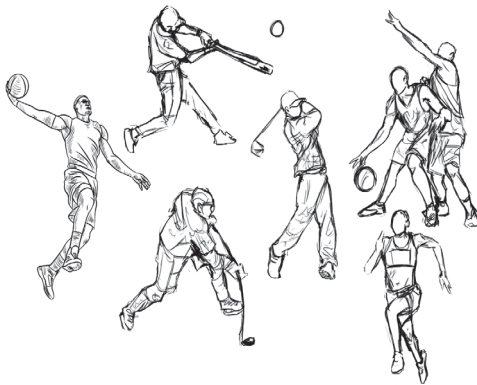
Dead End 1: Outdoor team-building exercises...

Team-building exercises are great for first line leaders and their teams!! The work in these teams is tangible, operational, and measurable. Outdoor exercises mimic this. They're fun, interesting, and good for team bonding. But these exercises are close to useless for senior leadership teams. Their work is intangible, strategic, and hard to pin down. And pinning it down often means dumbing it down. For senior leaders, team-building exercises are irritating, boring, and an invitation to cynicism.



Dead End 2: Sporting analogies...

Same thing! These are also great for first line leaders and their teams!! The work in these teams is again tangible, operational, and measurable, and sport mimics this. But sporting analogies are also dead ends for senior leadership teams. The challenges are much more complex; team members spend more time away from the executive team than in it; teams don't always do their most important work when together; effective teams are necessarily much looser units; and team members (senior executives) need more discretion to be effective.



The value of any executive team

As we move through more senior organisational levels, we notice teams doing different work. By the time we get to executive teams, we may as well be on another planet. All teams must add-value. But executive teams do so in their own unique way. While customer service teams do this in a standard way (self-help-books abound for this level of work), there is no off-the-shelf solution

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when it comes to executive teams. They must address a series of issues, the answers of which will be unique to *their* team. Their strategic context demands it! This requires leaders who are “grown-ups”; seasoned executives with a strong sense of felt responsibility, clear that they face complex issues. There are no prescriptions, but there are challenges to confront. The most critical is clarifying how we will add-value as a team. This challenge needs to be addressed by the team itself, as a group, by slowing down and thinking together. Executives need to wrestle with the issue until the answers are clear. All the team-building in the world won’t change that. Once resolved, everything else in the team will become less problematic. With Jackie as company CEO, and Martin running one of her business lines, it will be important for Jackie to lead this discussion with her executive team.



The critical question for an executive team

There is one significant question that all executive teams, including Jackie’s, must ask, grapple with, debate, resolve, and refresh over time. That question is...

“What’s the work of OUR executive team, such that we will maximise the value we add to our organisation; it’s the work that only WE can carry out; work that if not done by us, will probably not happen, and will result in a loss of value?”



This question addresses the level of complexity the team needs to confront. Much of the day-to-day work of an organisation should be delegated at this level. So the implied question is “what needs to be attended to by us?” Another way of looking at this is recognising that executive teams often interfere with the work others should be empowered to run with, and in turn don’t attend to what should get their focus. They default too much to the business of today, absconding from that of tomorrow. They engage in what researchers have coined “present bias” (1). Most of us have a bias towards focusing on the present at the expense of the future.

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So let's think about the sort of work challenges that emerge, and the sub-questions, when teams at this level seriously consider our critical question above?

Our Strategic Work

What is it? What's our role in strategy? What does this mean in practice? Is this ongoing work or something we set and forget? If we don't do this, who will do it?

Organisational Performance

What do we mean by that? How do we define this? How do we monitor performance as a team? How do we take corrective action when needed? If we don't do this as a team, who does it?

Our Culture

Is this an important item to us? Why? What do we aspire to culturally? How do we lead this? What's our role? How do we monitor this?

Organisational Roadblocks

How do we stay attentive to where things are broken, not working, stuck, etc.? What's our role in sorting this stuff out? Do we give this adequate time?

Our Talent

What's our position on this? What's our role in this? How active do we need to be? What's the balance between developing our people and bringing in new talent? How do we keep abreast of this as a group?

So What?

Unchecked, 80% of an executive team's focus defaults to what is reactive, immediate, and overly tactical. They just end up fixing problems. And without a clear view of the value of the team, reactivity becomes the norm. Even with a well-formed focus, the team is likely to struggle, because the tendency is to deal first with crises, or mini-crises, of a tactical nature. For Martin, who we remember as Jackie's direct report, the higher level work becomes a lower priority. So developing strong rhythms in the executive team around staying focused on the right issues is important.



Executives like Martin have competing interests. He will be juggling these all the time. The work of Jackie’s executive team is only part of his focus. If we follow him around during an average day, we’d likely see that most of his judgements, and the work he does, is not as a member of Jackie’s team. He will make many decisions within his individual business, and will be continually delegating to others.

He will necessarily have a “loose” relationship to Jackie’s executive team, and a “tight” relationship to the work he is held individually accountable for by Jackie. But as we’ve just seen, there is important work he will need to do in Jackie’s executive team, as part of that collective. If he doesn’t, value will be lost, because only the executive team can do that work. And everyone in Jackie’s team needs to step up to the team’s challenges.

So clarifying the work of Jackie’s team, committing to making this a collective focus, and creating mechanisms to return to that emphasis, is critical. Otherwise the executive team will be an amorphous group with a lack of purpose. It will feel to Martin like a background responsibility he returns to because he has to; one that gets in the way of him doing what he experiences as his real job. Team-building exercises usually kick in at this point, to solve a symptom and not the problem. And the downward spiral continues.

Creating context is creating stability

Executive team members operating as a cohesive group create the context for everyone and everything in the organisation. Chaos results when the context is absent. The work of the executive team is critical. It’s what the executive team holds on behalf of the organisation.



It sets the scene for everything else to occur; creating and maintaining overall direction, allocating resources, establishing organisational rhythms, processes, and policies, and managing culture. Only the leadership team can attend fully to the organisation’s context. If they don’t do it, it won’t happen. This is what creates organisational stability.



Everything hangs off this

Without being clear about this, without taking this seriously, without consciously avoiding being side-tracked into non-value-adding discussions, the executive team loses its way. Getting on well is never enough, if the team's focus is mistaken or absent. But if the focus is sound, the team becomes powerful. The quality of relationships, dynamics of the team, and levels of trust, all become significant. They develop a collective potency they can never have when the team is unfocused. The executive team can now become great.

By Danny Taylor

- 1. Present bias refers to the tendency of people to give stronger weight to payoffs that are closer to the present time when considering trade-offs between two future moments: O'Donoghue, T., & Rabin, M. (1999). Doing it now or later. American Economic Review, 89(1), 103-124.*