

3 obsolete understandings of leadership teams

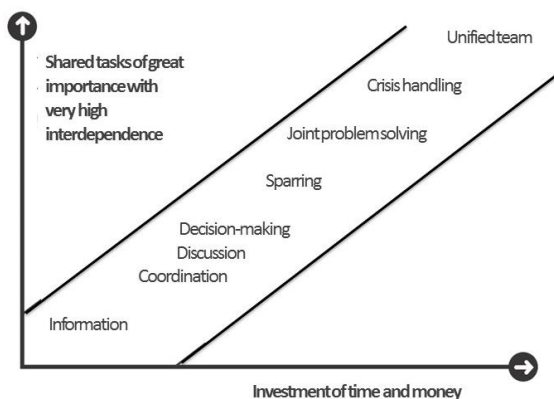
Make your leaders 8 times better at addressing your organization's most important unsolved problems by updating your understandings of team, effectiveness and leadership

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Our markets have become more global. Organizations have become more complex. Employees and managers have become better educated and more expensive. Unless we change our understanding of how to succeed as managers under these new conditions, our competitiveness will be left as many years behind as our thinking. In this article, I challenge three common misunderstandings of the leadership team in dire need of an update.

Update 1: From team to teaming

Since Katzenbach and Smith's model for "High Performance Teams" in 1992, it has been a common misconception that you are either a group or a team. Preferably, you should be "a high-performance team". However, leadership teams must necessarily work both as a group and sometimes as a team. In addition, many leadership teams do not have tasks that require an expensive high performance team. Contrary to Katzenbach's model, we must understand teamwork as a way of working that we can use to various degrees. Depending on which important tasks the team can only solve together, you can use different degrees of teamwork. Force a group to be a *team* and you will never get teamwork. Find an important task they can only solve



together, and they tend to find the the right amount of teamwork themselves.

The model shows how you can decide which type of teamwork to use based on the team's most important tasks.

Update 2: From efficient leadership teams to effective leadership teams

Did you ever experience the leadership team efficiently making a decision only to find out later that real commitment was lacking?

Efficiency is good if we know in which direction we are headed, if we have simple problems and share more or less the same interests. However, most leadership teams have complex problems, conflicting interests, and lots of confusion and feelings. If the goal is to be an efficient team, the team will have to skim over the most difficult tasks - the very tasks that only the team can solve. If it does so, it will be efficient, but on the other hand, ineffective and boring to be in. The "dirty leadership team" is a better ideal. Instead of striving for clean efficiency and harmony, the team members get down to the dirty business together. They share their challenges rather than their status and successes. Diversity, openness

and directness are rewarded rather than consensus and kindness, and the team members engage in reaching qualified shared understandings, rather than many individual decisions.

What leadership teams typically appreciate the most after having completed a leadership team training is the fact that they can have a passionate discussion and still reach shared commitment.

“It’s great to know that we can really go at it and still stick together.”

Update 3: From leadership as input to leadership as output

The third outdated understanding is our basic way of understanding leadership.

The most common understanding of leadership is the one formulated by Max Weber. He describes leadership as a role leaders take on to use their powers and resources to get followers to solve a specific task. This makes perfect sense in a classic bureaucratic organization with relatively articulate objectives where the leader has certain powers over some employees.

However, the world is changing. Modern organizations are full of coordinators, project managers, account managers, process managers, specialists, head doctors and chief specialists. Often they do not have any extra resources, no formal powers and no employees. A large successful Danish company found that 37% of their leaders had 1 or no direct reports. What kind of leadership are they performing, then? We cannot use Weber’s thinking to understand their leadership.

I am inspired by Bill Drath’s alternative: “Direction, alignment and commitment”. The

core point of this understanding is that leaders and leadership are two different things.

Leadership is something a community produces. Leadership is when the team demonstrates direction, coordination and commitment. The formal leaders have a particular responsibility to make this happen. Some leaders think that leadership is when you have prepared a strategy or values, and they forget that there is more to leadership than a statement on their website. Leadership is only when people actually start moving in a coordinated effort. Some leaders prepare detailed instructions and systems, but during the process, they lose employee engagement. And then they have not succeeded with leadership. Some leaders also think that if only we are passionate enough, then we will succeed. This is not leadership either. Leaders are responsible for the creation of leadership (that is direction, alignment and commitment) among everyone in the organization.

The main advantage of this new understanding is that it makes it easy to spot the leadership team’s tasks: It must create direction, alignment and commitment in its area. This can be done the hard way or more gently, but you cannot do it alone. Neither direction, alignment nor commitment. The leadership team becomes a help and a necessity, and we need all kinds of informal leaders in order to succeed. They are all key players.

If, on the other hand, the leadership task is seen as that of making decisions, then the leadership team is more of a nuisance. It is easier to make decisions on your own. Contrary to Weber’s old Western mindset, the concept of “direction, alignment and commitment” also works across cultures.



Get your thinking straight

In my experience, these three updates make a big difference in leadership teams. And they require only that we think differently about teamwork, efficiency and leadership. And the potential of

rethinking is great. The Danish Agency for Modernization investigated the difference in how leaders experience their work, depending on the well-functioning of their leadership team. They found that in well-functioning leadership teams, leaders were three times as happy with their employment, twice as happy to get to work in the morning, six times less likely to look for a new job, and 8 times more likely to feel capable of resolving the most important yet unresolved problems in the organization.

And if 8 times as many leaders can tackle the most important problems, this must be worth something to any organization.

There is every reason to improve our leadership teams. We owe it to our organizations, ourselves and not least our employees that we eliminate the 20-year old understandings that are in the way of leaders' job satisfaction, retention and leadership quality.

