

Institute of Leadership: Wanted: World-Class Top Teams

What are the key things that keep leaders awake at night? Within the top five on the 'worry list' is ensuring the capability of a strong top team pulling in the same direction and delivering success. This can be the top team of a business, a professional firm, a school or a sports team. How do you achieve this? A question I had asked a few years ago in a different setting that was to result in a new understanding in a world that cried out for leadership from top teams. In this article I'd like to share that experience of searching for the answer in the hope it will help today's leaders and their top teams.

It began on a cold November morning when I arrived at my local business breakfast club to hear what I thought would be an interesting talk by the RAF Red Arrows. I had been learning to fly at the time so was interested in aerobatic flying. It turned out that the next hour would change my life. As the Squadron Leader explained the work of the Red Arrows, he used a metaphor to describe the experience: "Imagine driving down the outside lane of a motorway at 200 miles an hour, bumper to bumper with eight other cars, knowing that no one would do anything silly, each relying on the others to do their job."

Suddenly I realised that what he was explaining had huge significance for others. How do you develop a top team that could achieve outstanding performance based on trust and high standards? At the end of the talk I pushed my way through the crowd and gave the Squadron Leader my business card saying: "Call me, I have an idea!" Later that morning he did call. A week later we met and within a month I was security cleared and on an RAF base beginning what was to be a two year project with the aim of answering the above question and find a way to enable others to achieve what may seem impossible – a high performing top team that could accomplish whatever they set out to do.

What was it that made this team so effective? When I explored explanations in already existing team and leadership models and theories, they all failed to explain fully the dynamics of the team. For example, two teams over two years had very different team profiles but this in itself didn't explain the team performance. Observing the team it was noticeable how open they were with each other criticising their own mistakes and the mistakes of others in the team including the team leader or 'boss'. But what was key was *how* they did this. Such criticism was never taken personally or used to blame but rather seen as a way to improve both individual and team performance. It was equally important for team members to praise each other when performance improved. The more experienced gave confidence to the new members of the team. For the Reds, this debriefing was the key to their success but my study found that there was much, much more involved that they are not even aware of.

The trust the RAF Red Arrows built was paramount and came when they trusted themselves through self-awareness. Mistakes were not hidden for fear of reprimand but were used to learn and improve how they did things. For some organisations this will require a transformation in the culture led by example from the leadership in top teams. In other words, there is much here that could be translated into companies and the public sector including how top teams work. Likewise, the way performance was reviewed evolved around the team values and knowing what to focus on. Leadership was centred not hierarchical in the team using collaborative leadership where possible with the team leader making the final decision on difficult issues. Everyday responsibility and accountability was shared.

From the study I developed a new model and process for high performing teams. The next challenge was to find out whether this model would work in different contexts. In the next few months it was tried out in an array of different organisations including boards of directors, the top teams of professional organisations such as lawyers and accountants, the coaches of a national football team, the top team of a financial service company and a global manufacturing company based across Europe with its Head Office in the USA.

The results were not only improved performance but top teams realising that they are more than a group of 'specialist heads'. By focusing on the strengths in the team and matching these to achieving the objectives one team member changed his role; another stopped feeling isolated; another stopped dominating the meetings; teams were far more open and so on. Today the process has worked with senior teams across Europe, the Middle East and the USA and broke down cultural barriers in multinational teams. It has been a joy to work with teams and see the results.

With the current economic challenges, a more global market place, cuts in the public sector and mergers of large organisations, success will only result through honest dialogue and collaborative leadership with the top teams.

The process I developed goes far beyond training to a way of learning that is much deeper. The key to the success of teams is to realise that doing the best for the team results in doing the best for oneself rather than the other way around. The final truth is as an Italian saying goes: **'We are all angels with one wing; we can only fly when we embrace each other'**.