

Summit

10 ***REASONS***

***WHY SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAMS FAIL
– AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT***

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A successful senior leadership team (SLT) requires each of its members to possess and demonstrate a range of skills and qualities that are not required at lower levels. It is important that a leader inspires trust, not just in their technical competence, but also in their personal character. It is essential that s/he can skilfully collaborate across teams beyond their own area of expertise to ensure that optimal value is being created for the organisation through efficient, timely and structured action. And they must be able to effectively present information to peers, stakeholders and directors in a way that creates collective understanding, and be willing to initiate those awkward but necessary conversations that are vital to keeping the organisation running optimally and relationships healthy.

When problems arise in a SLT, it is usually because one of these skills is not properly developed, or even if developed, not proactively demonstrated consistently. Here we will describe some of the reasons behind these problems, and what can be done to prevent them from appearing in your SLT.

1. THE DIRECTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SLT HAVE NOT MADE ABSOLUTELY CLEAR WHAT LEADERSHIP SKILLS ARE EXPECTED FROM SENIOR LEADERS.

Without knowing what so-called 'soft skills' they are expected to display, what responsibilities they are expected to fulfil, how they are expected to work, and what value for the organisation they are expected and trusted to deliver, senior leaders are left to use guesswork and their own incomplete understanding of the business to determine their priorities and preferred ways of working. The problem here is that what the individual feels is an effective way of working may not align with the values or priorities of the organisation as a whole and end up hurting rather than helping overall effectiveness and profitability.

2. HIGHLIGHT RECIPROCITY WITH AN 'IF/THEN.'

A role within the SLT is one that deserves to be earned through displaying competence in relevant skills such as people leadership, self management, collaboration and communication in a wide variety of situations. However, in too many cases these roles are presented to a Manager or specialist Technician as a reward for displaying competence in a completely unrelated role which required completely different skills and qualities. How many employees are likely to turn down such a promotion, accompanied with elevated status, authority, and very likely financial benefits too, even if they know in their heart of hearts that they are not suited for the role, and the role is not suitable for them? It is vital that those responsible for recruitment and selection get their appointments right, free of bias.

3. THE ABSENCE OF A SUCCESSION PLAN TO IDENTIFY FUTURE APPOINTEES.

Identifying a potential SLT candidate months before appointment allows time to ensure they have the skills and qualities necessary to fulfil their new role successfully. Unfortunately, too many appointees are chosen for, and appointed to, their new role far too quickly, based on hasty and unconsidered decision making. This leaves them with little time to understand what their new role entails, the competencies they need to develop and value they are expected to deliver for the organisation. Similarly, those doing the appointing do not have sufficient time to ensure their potential appointee has the qualities necessary for a senior leadership role.

4. IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS ARE 'FALLEN INTO' RATHER THAN INTENTIONALLY FORMED AND NURTURED.

High-trust relationships are vital to the smooth running of any organisation. Yours included. When colleagues feel they can rely on each other, there is no need for them to keep checking the other's progress or take on tasks themselves that should and could be effectively delegated.

High trust relationships throughout the SLT leads to higher quality outputs that are achieved in less time, and at lower cost, therefore creating more profit for the business. But these relationships can only exist where people actively invest the time in developing them. When this investment is not made, quality suffers, efficiency suffers, and ultimately, the business suffers.

There are very clear financial benefits to high trust relationships as there are clear financial costs for low trust relationships.

5. SENIOR LEADERS SHOULDER NO PERSONAL COMMERCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.

Every senior leader has a commercial impact on the organisation's ability to function effectively, perform optimally, and operate efficiently. However, senior leaders often don't look at how to refine and improve ways of communicating, operating, or performing outside of their own area.

Even at SLT level it is common for individual members to focus purely or largely on the performance of the specific area they manage without consideration for the benefits of inter-dependent relationships which can help to improve the organisation's ability to perform at, or very near its best on a consistent basis.

The opportunity for developing more beneficial ways of operating, whether it be quality, customer satisfaction, production or cost control and profit retention are lost. Is a SLT member with no clear accountability for commercial performance really a leader; or are they a Manager?

Five years ago as part of a Board level development programme, the Finance Director of the business, eager to promote greater responsibility of the need for individual and collective SLT members to 'own the numbers' as she put it, suggested I invite the company's Health & Safety Manager for a coffee. "Scott, you'll see just how easy it is to own the numbers in any position within this business."

She was absolutely right. The Health & Safety Manager knew precisely the cost to the business of virtually an 'incident' which the business could be exposed to. She had researched and had verified, the likely costs of financial claims, likely reputational costs, employee absence, rehabilitation costs, temporary employee cover costs, and more. Much more in fact.

She not only knew the numbers her role was responsible for achieving; she absolutely owned the numbers she was responsible for. Her passion was in developing relationships with stakeholders, leaders, peers, front-line employees, suppliers and partners, to ensure that they individually and collectively understand what the business (and she) expected of them; and why.

6. AN ABSENCE OF ALIGNMENT.

So often in teams, each member will leave a meeting certain they have a clear understanding of what the group has agreed are their priorities, when in fact, each of them has a completely different understanding of the SLT's supposedly 'agreed' action plan. This leads to confusion, a decrease in output quality, and missed deadlines as team members struggle to clean up the mess caused by SLT members unknowingly chasing different goals or pursuing different courses of action.

In order for the SLT to achieve its full potential and to deliver optimal value for the organisation, the SLT must be strict about ensuring every member has a shared understanding of the business' capabilities, obstacles, priorities and most important goal, as well as a clear understanding of how they individually and collectively are expected and supported to meet the challenge, and how they are trusted, paid and expected to support each other too.

7. LEADERS ARE NOT GIVEN APPROPRIATE SUPPORT IN THE TRANSITION TO THEIR NEW ROLE.

When an SLT appointee is given no support from a credible, experienced leader during their transition from a management to leadership role, that transition will likely be slow to progress, cumbersome to manage, and likely more disabling than enabling for the new leader.

Without prudent and timely guidance, how can the new 'leader' easily understand their new role and responsibilities, and what is expected of them by the rest of the SLT as well as the directors(s)? They can't.

8. A NEW ADDITION TO THE SLT HAS NOT BEEN EXPOSED TO AREAS OF THE BUSINESS THEY AND THEIR TEAM WILL HAVE AN IMPACT ON.

A senior leader has to have a meaningful understanding of all areas of the organisation, the tasks they complete, the value they deliver, and most importantly, the relationships and interdependencies between them. After all, if the sales leader who is focused on generating profitable sales, doesn't communicate effectively with the production department leader to ensure that a potential new order can be delivered to schedule, to quality and profitably, the likelihood of either a serious problem in terms of delivery, or issue in terms of a high trust relationship being maintained or developed is likely.

9. THERE IS A DISCONNECT BETWEEN A LEADER'S PASSION AND THEIR ROLE.

It's unlikely that someone with a passion for innovation would thrive in a role responsible for quality, and equally unlikely that someone more interested in compliance would be interested in taking responsibility for developing innovative new products and services.

Assigning roles this way risks promoting square pegs into round holes. While it is important to recognise that people can develop and demonstrate competencies that lie outside of their passions, and learn to be effective in new and different roles, it is equally important to keep in mind that an individual is more likely to excel in their own area of interest. Beware of promoting an individual to a role which lies outside of their passions. Failure isn't guaranteed, but genuine success is unlikely.

10. THE TEAM AS A WHOLE LACKS ACCOUNTABILITY TO THEIR OWN MANAGER(S).

When business is going well it is easy to become complacent and performance simply drift along. Even though this approach is most definitely not promoted or endorsed by the most senior leader/s, it can happen on an individual and collective basis. When business is going well, virtually anybody can manage. Not lead. Manage.

It is the SLT' members' role and responsibility to continue to refine procedures and maximise value even during times of success. If they do not, they are merely fulfilling a managerial role, not one of leadership. It is important that every senior leader is clear about this expectation and is held accountable for continually achieving it. Having in place a business wide performance appraisal system, 1-2-1's, personal development plans and more can be valuable organisational tools. But the value is created (or not) by what you actually do with these tools.

The benefits of the most senior leader/s creating culture of candour; a genuinely accountable environment, where accountability includes value to be created, within and across departmental teams, rather than tasks completed cannot be overstated.

SO WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

- Identify candidates early: Selecting potential new leaders months before they are to be appointed allows time for them to be set relevant projects that will help them demonstrate and develop the skills they will need when joining the SLT. Use this time to ensure they have a clear understanding of the different parts of the organisation, are developing relationships across departments, and know what effect their area and the SLT as a whole have on all areas of the business.
- Introduce a trial period: Instituting a 16-week trial period in which the potential appointee is taken out of their previous job to learn about the role of a senior leader will ensure that when they join the SLT they know what is expected of them. This time should be spent ensuring they understand their new responsibilities and how they are expected to fulfil them, as well as the additional personal qualities they need to display or develop. It should be made clear throughout that a senior leader is expected to deliver value for the whole organisation, not just their area within it.
- Include mentorship in the onboarding process: In a new appointee's 16-week trial, assign them an experienced existing member of the SLT as a mentor. At the beginning of the process, present the aims and focuses of the trial to both mentor and mentee to ensure clarity for both as to the goals of the trial process, and to develop a shared responsibility for undertaking each of the focus activities.
- Organise team development coaching: If your existing team are struggling with alignment, relationships, or leadership skills, a professional leadership coach might be able to help. A team development coaching session can help your SLT improve the clarity of their communication, build trust in their relationships, and learn how to disagree constructively, as well as improve a variety of other vital skills.

- Remove SLT members if value isn't created or objectives achieved. Having the 16-week trial period in place not only provides ample opportunity for the senior leader/s to mentor and support the candidate, and for the candidate to demonstrate competence, or at least acquire competence in the more human 'soft' aspects of leadership.

The 16-week trial period is the seat belt you would wear in your car when driving. The trial period does not guarantee that all will be wonderful. It does though guarantee that because you and the candidate have entered in to the trial period with shared understanding of boundaries, expectations, standards, value to be created, the likelihood of a prudent appointment decision is made.

If the candidate has been successful, the appointment can be presented on a 6-month probationary period. Why? Because your organisation really deserves to understand that the successful candidate hasn't 'performed' as would an actor through that 16-week period.

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Contact us on:



www.SummitTraining.co.uk



Info@SummitTraining.co.uk



0845 052 3701 (UK)