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# TALENT

Quarterly

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# YOUR TOP TALENT DESTROY YOUR COMPANY

*Hiring, training, and promoting the best people can backfire in the c-suite. It all begins with an errant "I."*



# TALENT IS ROYALTY THE TEAMS

*By* GORDON J. CURPHY, PH.D., *and* DIANNE NILSEN, PH.D.



**T**

here's a big paradox happening in the c-suite today. Thanks to research-based talent management, the highest-ranking executives tend to be smart, hard-working, socially skilled leaders, respected for their business savvy and functional expertise. Naturally, we expect this stellar group of individuals to form an effective leadership team, but in fact,

that's rarely the case. Research by Ruth Wageman and her colleagues shows that members of top executive teams are four times as likely to describe their team as poor or mediocre than as high-performing.

The cruelest twist of all? The same talent management techniques that lead to hiring and promoting high-performing leaders work against nurturing high-performing teams. Or, to put it more bluntly, team dysfunction exists *because* of best talent practices, not despite them.

As we see it, there's a "sin of commission" and a "sin of omission" at work in talent management, and both sins combine to bite the organization in its proverbial butt when it comes to top team functioning.

The sin of commission involves building the leadership bench by hiring, training, and promoting people who appear guaranteed to fit the company's cultural mold and competency models.

The sin of omission, meanwhile, is

neglecting to cultivate and reward teamwork skills—what we call TQ, as distinct from IQ or EQ—beginning with the organization's top team. Together, these sins seed four common problems for leadership teams.

## PROBLEM #1 CLONING

BY THE TIME PEOPLE MAKE IT TO THE c-suite, they tend to be much more similar than different in how they think, talk, and act. As a group, they lack the necessary range of perspectives.

These leaders have imbibed so much of the company Kool-Aid on their way to the top that they routinely discount contrary information. Cloning creates a self-perpetuating doom loop: Because leaders are rewarded for fitting the mold, they value the mold; because they value the mold, they're rewarded. And because they promote other people who look and act the way they do, they perpetuate the problem.

When circumstances prompt a change of strategy or culture, these top teams are slow to react to issues that range outside their collective perspective, and they lack the necessary experiences to develop adequate responses. This is one of the reasons why industry disrupters like Lyft, Amazon, and Tesla have been so successful against established companies.

In his 2009 book *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins describes how arrogance, hubris, viewing success as an entitlement, and the pursuit of more pervades many organizations' falls from grace.

For a recent example of the negative effects of cloning, consider the ongoing Wells Fargo scandal. For years, no one at the top of the banking company thought it was a problem to create millions of fake bank and credit card accounts and sell unneeded automobile insurance or mortgage loan products to customers. Guess what? It was.

## PROBLEM #2 ALPHA-PARALYSIS

TOP TEAMS TEND TO BE POPULATED BY alpha females and males. While these competent, self-confident individuals usually have strong opinions on just about everything, they also have the social skills to not be overtly obstructionist.



Alpha-paralysis is a kind of power dance that plays out in one of two ways with top teams: They either spend countless hours discussing issues and giving everyone an opportunity to weigh in, without deciding anything lest someone's nose get out of joint. Or they waste time discussing minor issues, without leaving enough time to address real strategic problems that require attention.

Alpha-paralysis was the root cause of problematic meetings involving c-suite leaders of a well-known retailer with whom we worked. These individuals spent most of their time in three types of meetings: one to determine the objectives, agenda, and participants for upcoming meetings; another to question data, debate minor points, and try to one-up others; and a third to make actual decisions with a subset of the key players from the second meeting. When the latter could not be achieved, the three-meeting cycle restarted.

### PROBLEM #3 ARTIFICIAL HARMONY

WHEN THE NEED TO GET ALONG TRUMPS the need to raise difficult issues, and team members self-censor to maintain cohesiveness, artificial harmony reigns in the c-suite. Top team meetings are cordial, back-slapping affairs. Controversial topics are never raised, and inappropriate behavior or performance shortfalls by team members go unaddressed.

Inwardly, individual team members may be seething, but they handle their feelings passively aggressively, using their lieutenants to wage proxy wars or covertly sabotage other functions. The hidden conflicts begin to escalate, and not always in time to prevent substantial losses.

We recently worked with the lead team of a midsize manufacturing firm. Despite major marketing and sales campaigns, revenues from its core products hadn't grown in three years, and the company was looking for breakthrough ways to boost the top line. The marketing and R&D departments proposed a game-

## WHEN ALL LEADERS FIT THE IDEAL, THE C-SUITE BECOMES CLOGGED WITH CLONES.



changing product they believed would significantly improve revenues, but also cannibalize the company's cash cow.

The COO, CFO, and VP of quality had major concerns about this new product, yet only asked minor questions during the presentation. These three routinely got together to complain about the product, but never shared their concerns when the CEO asked where people stood on the proposal during the company's annual strategic planning meeting. The proposal passed unanimously, the product experienced major quality problems, sales fell well short of projections, and the company experienced a decline in revenues and reputation because of the ill-fated decision.

### PROBLEM #4 MYOPIA

MYOPIA OCCURS WHEN C-SUITE MEMBERS view issues through the lens of how they individually contribute to the organization's success, rather than how the team can collectively contribute. Because senior leaders spend their entire careers being rewarded for personal accomplishments, it's difficult for them to break set and cede opportunities that would add to their own column of wins.

We recently worked with the c-suite

of a company whose top-line growth was in decline. The EVP of product development sought to solve the problem by introducing cutting-edge technology, launching new products, and adding more features. He was certain that his approach was the right one. The EVP of sales believed the solution was putting more feet on the street, with freedom to offer more discounts. He, too, was certain this was the answer. Meanwhile, the EVP of operations argued that a stronger focus on quality would help the company retain customers and get more repeat business.

Each leader viewed the situation as a chance to be the hero, but none saw it as an opportunity to improve coordination between their functions, which is ultimately where the CEO landed.

### Why Talent Management Is the Culprit

In theory, hiring, training, and promoting people who seem guaranteed to mesh with the company's competency models and cultural mold make sense. Talent provides a competitive edge for organizations in an era of disruptive technologies, fragmenting consumer preferences, shifting political and economic trends, and the advent of the gig economy. Cultivating talent can be viewed as a type of Darwinian selection, gone corporate. It's the way to win.

But by overdoing these techniques and over-refining the leadership's gene pool, talent management inadvertently creates clones, sets up alpha paralysis, and breeds artificial harmony. That's because when all leaders fit the cultural ideal, are groomed by the same programs, and climb the ladder through similar experiences, the c-suite becomes clogged with clones.

Executives engage in the dance of alpha-paralysis because they're socially and politically skilled. They retreat into artificial harmony because "team players" don't ask embarrassing questions, challenge group-think, or buck opinion to make tough calls. Occasionally, organizations recruit talent from the outside to shake up this prevailing culture, but it usually takes only a year or



# THE RELENTLESS FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL IS A PROVEN DETRIMENT TO TOP TEAM PERFORMANCE.



two before the outsiders are asked to tune up their résumés.

C-suite myopia is the direct result of talent management's sin of omission. Talent managers consistently apply research-based practices to raise the bar on individual performance. We know goal-setting improves performance, so we set individual goals. We measure and give feedback to individuals about their personal performance. We reward individuals who accomplish their goals. But incorporating team goals, team feedback, and team rewards into our talent management practices is relatively rare, even though most significant organizational achievements are the result of collective efforts.

What gets measured gets managed, and the relentless focus on individual potential and performance has been to the detriment of top team dynamics and performance. We end up with smart, functionally competent, interpersonally savvy leaders who excel at delivering on individual goals, but struggle to work as a team.

## How to Fix Your Teams

Reversing c-suite dysfunction starts with recognizing that no matter how smart, hardworking, disciplined, or creative your leaders are, none of those traits matter if these leaders can't come together and work as a team to achieve organizational results.

This doesn't mean we should throw out individual IQ, EQ, technical expertise, business savvy, or performance ratings from our talent management systems. It means that TQ—a leader's ability to build high-performing teams—also needs to be figured into hiring, performance evaluation, and promotion decisions.

Here are five practical steps tal-

ent management professionals should follow to improve top team dynamics and performance.

**1. When hiring and promoting for the c-suite, be careful about over-weighting cultural fit.** While you don't want to put a square peg in a round hole, you also don't want your pegs to be replicas of one another. Leave room for different thinking processes and perspectives.

**2. Consider expanding the focus of talent management to teams, not just individuals.** Think: Team goals. Team feedback. Team performance. Team training. Team incentives.

**3. Include TQ as a factor in making succession planning decisions.** LINO (leaders in name only, or glorified individual contributors) who have difficulties building teams shouldn't get promoted into the c-suite.

**4. Provide top teams with benchmarking feedback on team dynamics and performance.** Given the competitive nature of top teams, this feedback is often incentive enough to get teams to work better together.

**5. Give leaders the guidance they need to improve team dynamics and performance.** This includes setting up meetings with the right topics, teaching top teams how to have challenging discussions, helping CEOs effectively manage conflict, and building in accountability mechanisms to ensure adherence to team norms.

Somewhere during our talent management journey, we forgot that leadership is a team sport. We construct organizational systems designed to groom and place individuals with high IQ and EQ into the top jobs, but because we don't give TQ equal consideration, team and organizational performance suffer as a result.

By strengthening TQ in the c-suite, we can reverse tendencies toward cloning, alpha-paralysis, artificial harmony, and myopia. Organizations that want employees to work effectively in teams must make sure the model starts in the c-suite. This means giving top teams regular feedback on how they compare to other top teams, the tools needed to address areas of improvement, and methods that ensure new practices become part of the top team's culture.

It's also worth noting that improving teamwork across organizations doesn't have to be an expensive or time-consuming endeavor. It's relatively easy to add the ability to build high-performing teams into leadership competency models and weigh this factor appropriately when hiring, developing, evaluating, and promoting talent.

Now's the time to act. Organizations are increasingly moving away from traditional structures and toward more nimble teams and groups to deal with challenges that arise. This means leaders who can successfully launch new teams, integrate disparate teams, manage virtual teams, and have track records of consistently improving team dynamics and performance are critical to organizational success.



**GORDON J. CURPHY, PH.D.** and **DIANNE NILSEN, PH.D.**

are partners at Curphy Leadership Solutions. They specialize in executive assessment, leadership development, and team-building.



They have developed several commercially published assessments, conducted more than 10,000 team surveys, and sold more than 100,000 copies of their books on leadership and teams.





## Ready for more Teams?

Read the entirety of our TQ Team Issue for more practical, science-backed insights on how to build teams that deliver. We have over a dozen world-renowned HR experts explain why teams work, why they fail and how to make your team high performing. Available in print and e-book.

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