

TEAM DYNAMICS

In a study of Boards that fail (“What Makes Great Boards Great”, Harvard Business Review, September 2002) Jeffrey A Sonnenfeld tells us that there is little difference in the structure, procedures or make-up of great boards and boards that fail. What makes the difference between a winning board and a failure is the Board’s social dynamics. Great boards have social systems characterized by trust, open debate, mutual respect and individual accountability, while boards that under perform and oversee corporate collapse are characterized by rigid roles, game playing, political posturing, buck passing, poor communication and lack of transparency. The difference between success and failure lies not in what you can see and measure but in the nebulous, imprecise area of relationships. Get the social system right and very tangible results follow.

Leadership Teams

While Sonnenfeld’s research was specifically on boards the findings also hold true for any leadership team. You can put all the structures, systems and procedures you like in place – yet success or failure actually depends on how people behave and relate within them. This is a difficult concept for highly analytical, task oriented managers to grasp. They want to get on with “it”. “It” being a task, a visible, measurable, rational plan, job or agenda. So often dealing with the social system is seen as a waste of time. Now there are many reasons for this. First, most of what happens in the social system is unconscious, that is, it happens below the level of our conscious awareness – which by definition means we can’t see it. It is only too easy then to maintain and operate as if it doesn’t exist and therefore doesn’t matter. If we can get past this state of the denial, the next obstacle is that dealing with the social system means that we move past the realm of ideas into the domain of emotions and relationships. For many managers these are awkward uncomfortable areas – not to analyse and opine about but to deal with in a concrete, practical and workable way. Dealing with emotions and relationships demands that we feel our feelings – something many leaders would rather avoid. Once we start to feel our feelings we are out of the rational controllable world into areas of gross discomfort – areas in which many managers feel vulnerable.

In an address to the World Economic Forum Ben Zander, Conductor of the Boston Philamonic Orchestra referred to business leaders as

meant that, in business, people prefer to stay in the analytical world, in which they feel in control. It is from the neck up that we think and talk. Zander described the body of such people as just hanging beneath their tie which served as a demarcation line. However it is the body (below the neck) that acts. Therefore if we are going to walk our talk, our body and head have to operate in synch. The connecting force is our emotions and human spirit. These are also the forces that underlie our relationships. When we ignore these things not only do we fail to walk our talk, but also our relationships don't work. If this happens to leaders the enterprises they lead stand a great risk of failing.

This is true for workteams, top teams and boards.

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Margot Cairnes