



# Senior Leadership Teams

April 2012

WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE THEM GREAT

IN THIS ISSUE:

## Why Senior Leadership Teams?

Leading teams in any organization takes a certain skill set, but being a “leader of leaders” calls for a creative, authentic, sure, and intelligent person. One who can build trust and build confidence without losing their own along the way.

It’s about “*something more than competent management.*” (page xi) This book focusses on showing those of us who are or who aspire to be leaders of leaders exactly what it takes from both ourselves and our teams, for greatness to happen.

Wageman et. al carried out a management and organizational study over the course of several years that was global in nature. 120 senior teams agreed to take part in their research, which set out to illustrate the why and the how of senior leadership teams.

**WHY?** “*They argue that in today’s world of ever-accelerating change, demands on leaders in top roles are rapidly outdistancing the capabilities of any one person – no matter how talented. Result? Chief executives are turning to their enterprise’s senior leaders for help.*” (book jacket)

**HOW?** The authors illustrate that an imperative first step is to ensure the right people are team members, with no compromise on the demand for excellence at this level.

Instead, the authors present their findings on the commonalities that are present in the work environment of highly performing organizations or units and discuss how six conditions in particular have been introduced, nurtured, and supported by the leader of that organization in order for the members of the Senior Leadership Team to individually and collectively find and achieve their own path to greatness, together.



### It Doesn’t Have to be Lonely at the Top

The Traditional “Heroic” Leadership Model versus the Leadership Team Approach

Page 4



### Leaders are Still Learners

It is essential that we continue to grow as people and professionals both for our own self-worth and for the residual value-add it has for the organization and team we serve.

Page 3

# Creating a Culture for Success

**Environment. Culture. Organizational History. Buzzwords? Or bona fide aspects of an organization that must be learned and respected before trying to impact the ebb and flow of the team?**

Wageman states that there are *six conditions* that are present in organizations with highly effective and cohesive senior leadership teams. Her research illustrates that these conditions have been uncompromisingly implemented by the leader of the team and that they are nurtured and protected to ensure the team environment is only ever encouraging and open to success.

What are the Six Conditions?

Divided into two groups: the *essential* & the *enabling*, the six conditions are:

1. **The Right People**
2. **A Real Team**
3. **A Compelling Direction**
4. **A Supportive Organizational Context**
5. **A Solid Team Structure**
6. **Competent Team Coaching**

*"The essentials (1, 2, and 3) are just that: if organizational or personal circumstances prevent you from getting any one of them adequately in place, groups of senior leaders cannot collaborate effectively at all." (p.13)*

*"The enablers, by contrast, serve to support the performance of senior*



*teams and enhance the ease and speed with which they develop into deft and ever-improving entities." (p.14)*

How important are the six conditions? The authors devoted a full chapter to each one in their book!

## QUICK QUOTE

*The task of leadership is not to put greatness into people, but to elicit it, for the greatness is there already.*

*-John Buchan*

# Choosing and Onboarding the Right Leadership Team Members

Making the right decisions even when they are difficult to implement is a sign of an effective and respected leader. This means that one not only decides who should join a leadership team, but in some cases, who should leave it.

Once that "dream team" is assembled, it is imperative that they are attuned to the mission, vision, and values of the organization or unit; adopting it as their own.

Having three conversations during onboarding is critical, say the authors:

- Set out clear expectations for the role you expect your team member to play and be responsible for
- Follow that with the expectations of how their role fits into and supports the success of the entire organization
- Next, be explicit about how this role engages with the senior leadership team and contributes to their performance measures, and vice versa

*"The challenge is to...focus on less obvious criteria as well, such as the person's ability to engage in robust but constructive debate with other team members and to think strategically about the enterprise as a whole." (p. 82)*



*"Composing a leadership team is not only a matter of selecting people by position or title or individual contributions to the organization. Your team members must also bring the essential competencies necessary to work as a real leadership team." (p. 82)*

## Chapter 4

*"You need to get the right people on your team – and the wrong ones off"*

ENABLING A TEAM BASED CULTURE



*Supporting Team Competency Building While Honing Your Own Skills is Essential*

Supportive Context

“The leaders of great leadership teams don’t assume that it is an insult to the ingenuity and expertise of the members to make sure they have access to all the resources they need to carry out their work at the highest levels of excellence.” -SLT, Page 20



Compelling Direction

“The team’s purpose highlights the interdependencies among team members, and it orients the team toward its objective, helping members make intelligent judgments among alternatives as they lead the enterprise forward.” -SLT, Page 17

FAST FACTS

21%

Percentage of leadership teams found to have achieved outstanding performance as defined by authors during their research for this book.

43%

Of teams scored in the mediocre range when it came to development of the team and its individual members

# Leaders are Life Long Learners

Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

- John F. Kennedy

No matter how many seminars you attend or books you read, there is no substitute for hands-on, real-life learning.

The authors state that *“to develop leadership competencies almost always involves intensive practice, detailed feedback, and reiteration.”* (p.201)

Even when you’ve practiced for years, there is always something new to learn and another model to explore. The most important thing is to never become complacent in your eagerness to learn.

One can never know it all... in fact; strong leadership teams are built on the fact that every *one* person does *not* know it all!

A great leader is constantly trying to strengthen and expand their knowledge base. Or, as the authors put it, their “competency portfolio.”

They share three strategies other leaders have used effectively and encourage the reader to implement them in their quest for improvement:

1. Seek personal coaching to develop specific competencies. While this does have the propensity to become expensive, a coach that has their own experience in the area you want to improve in and who can give you meaningful and useable feedback, may be worth it.
2. Learn who on your senior team possesses competencies you do not and rely on them to help provide those competencies to the organization. Watch them, learn from them, ask questions, and model their behaviors.
3. Experiment and learn from each experience. Oftentimes, learning moments are in our day to day activity; we just need to open ourselves up to the experience, and recognize that there is learning even in failing.



**Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses will help guide your ongoing and meaningful learning.**

**Four** universally useful senior leadership team norms: (p. 129)

**Commitment:** Treat the role of team member as seriously as your individual leadership role

**Transparency:** If it affects more than one of us, put it on the team table

**Participation:** Each member's voice is welcomed on issues affecting the enterprise

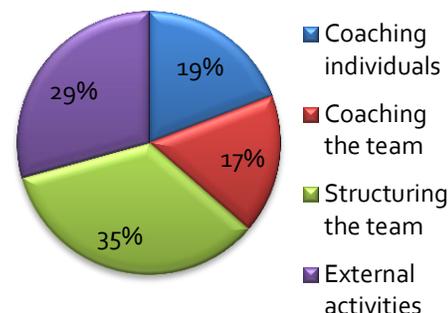
**Integrity:** What you say and do when you are with the team is what you say and do when you're outside the team

#### QUICK QUOTE:

*I must follow the people.  
Am I not their leader?*

Benjamin Disraeli

### Areas of Leader Focus (p.165)



## Heroic CEO or Team Leadership?

If you are of the traditional ilk, you may believe (or at least be conditioned to think) that the success of an organization's employees lies in the ability of the individual and usually, public "leader" of the organization.

But the fact of the matter is; any one leader of a team - be it the CEO of an organization or the director of a unit, cannot *make* his or her team great. Yes, this goes against

conventional wisdom that the CEO is the heroic figurehead that demands high levels of activity and *pulls* their team across the finish line to success.

The authors suggest that instituting a Senior Leadership Team model just might be the key to increased effectiveness and success.

#### The key is deciding if you both need and want a TEAM

*"The first question is whether there is a vital business need that would be better met if you worked with a leadership team than a loose collection of individual executives focussing on their own accountabilities." (p. 30)*



What if the answer is yes, but the perceived risks for introducing a senior team model are insurmountable?

*"...many smart executives realize that combining their top leaders into a unified and powerful body is a direct threat to their own power, should the team's inclination turn that way, [and] hesitate to take the risk of fueling such a potent force." (p.34)*

Confidence and self-awareness, obviously then, become key to the decision to become a leader of leaders.



# Practical Concepts or *Good in Theory?*

*Senior Leadership Teams* gives an in-depth view of how integral a leadership team can be for an organization if and when they are structured well – both strategically and cohesively. It also lends insight into what discord can occur when they are not. The core purpose of the book is to frame the examples and lessons discovered throughout the period of the authors' advanced research in the form of a functional model that "senior executives can use to strengthen their leadership teams." (p. xix)

*Senior Leadership Teams* is heavy on theory. However, that the theory is founded on two extensive research projects involving 120 teams from all over the world lends both credibility to the study and authority to the leadership model that is introduced and illustrated by examples of real-life practice throughout the book.

Having been a member of senior teams myself, I was able to understand fully many of the pitfalls and unnecessary/ unfortunate mistakes some of the example teams had to work through in order to become a performing and happy team. It reminded me of the old but true adage about not just making sure "the right people are on my bus", but that "they are in the right seats", too.

Luckily, because I've had the privilege of working with some outstanding leaders, I was also able to recognize and affirm positive behaviours within myself as well as the teams I both participate in and lead today.

The statement that "*this book helps you make leadership choices explicitly, based both on your own aspirations for your team and on solid research findings about what it takes to make top teams great*" (p.xv) is not blithe.

Truly, the concepts are practical, tested, and useable in nearly any type of organization, and with a multitude of team structures. I would recommend it to colleagues who lead or aspire to lead without hesitation.

If there is any criticism of *Senior Leadership Teams*, it is in the heavy reliance on large corporate entities as cases. The examples used are mainly teams of heavy hitters in business, such as BP, Citicorp, Applebees, etc.

While this does give the reader a sense of validity about the study, I got the sense that the authors chose these examples for the effect of the name on the reader, not necessarily that they had the best illustration of the senior team concept. They gloss over the one reference to a non-profit symphony and miss out on looking in-depth into a sector that is growing, valuable, and full of examples of amazing leadership teams focussed on what are at times, daunting mission-critical tasks.

Overall, *Senior Leadership Teams* presents some adaptable, sensible, and - most importantly when trying new practices – palatable ideas for leaders to put into play as they enlist the help of their senior team to guide their respective organizations to greatness.

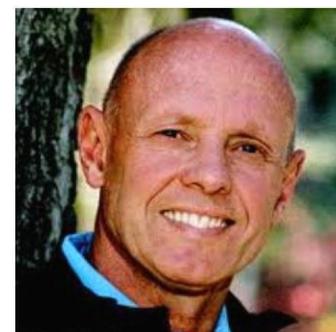
## WHAT OTHERS THINK: - ABOUT THE BOOK & ABOUT LEADERSHIP



**David Gergen**

Director, Center for Public Leadership, John F. Kennedy School of Government

"With firsthand knowledge and compelling real-life examples, *Senior Leadership Teams* presents indispensable guidance on getting your best people to work and thrive – together."



**Stephen R. Covey**

"I am personally convinced that one person can be a change catalyst, a "transformer" in any situation, any organization. Such an individual is yeast that can leaven an entire loaf. It requires vision, initiative, patience, respect, persistence, courage, and faith to be a transforming leader."

# About the Authors

**Ruth Wageman** is Director of Research for Hay Group and Visiting Scholar in the Department of Psychology at Harvard University. Professor Wageman received her PhD from Harvard in 1993; she received her bachelor's degree in Psychology from Columbia University in 1987, and returned there to join the faculty of the Graduate School of Business, making her the first female alum of Columbia College to join Columbia's faculty. She also has been a member of the faculty of the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth.

Her research, teaching, and consulting interests include the design of effective leadership teams, the theory and practice of leadership development, and the effectiveness of self-organizing teams with civic and political purposes.

**J. Richard Hackman** is Edgar Pierce Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology. He received his bachelor's degree in mathematics from MacMurray College and his doctorate in social psychology from the University of Illinois. He taught at Yale for twenty years and then moved to his present position at Harvard.

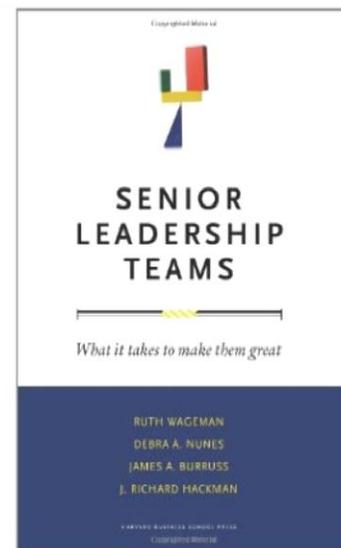
Hackman teaches and conducts research on a variety of topics in social and organizational psychology, including team performance, leadership effectiveness, and the design of self-managing teams and organizations.

**Debra A. Nunes** is Vice President at Hay Group's McClelland Institute for Research and Innovation, where she leads the firm's international practice on executive team leadership. Working primarily with large global companies, she specializes in helping CEOs and the heads of major business units execute their companies' strategy. As part of this effort, she works with leaders to improve their personal leadership effectiveness and the capabilities of their leadership teams.

Nunes' work with senior leadership teams spans more than two decades. She has worked with companies headquartered in Asia, the Pacific, Europe, Africa and the Americas. She earned a Masters degree in Counseling and Personnel at Western Michigan University and a Master in Business Administration at Boston University.

**James A. Burruss** is one of the founding members and senior vice president of Hay Group's McClelland Center for Research and Innovation. He earned his B.A. in Psychology at NYU and Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice at Harvard University, studying and working to understand human motivation and its impact on communities, teams, organizations, and societies.

Burruss has applied his understanding of human motivation and performance over the last 30 years to helping organizations in both the private- and public- sectors around the world. His consulting experience has primarily focused on the role of leaders and leadership teams in creating high-performance organizations.



## Reference:

Wageman, Ruth, Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss, J. Richard Hackman.

*Senior Leadership Teams: What it takes to make them great.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2008.

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