# Leading Ways:
## BUILDING AND USING EXECUTIVE TEAMS

- *"My team was carefully put together from the best folks inside and out of the company, but they seem to be more focused on building their empire than seeing or valuing the overall work of our division, much less the entire organization."*
- *"The LT meetings have become dreadful, nothing but dull reports, mercifully interrupted by the occasional firefighting."*
- *"I'm convinced that there is not a better, more congenial group of leaders in the agency, but our time is completely wasted and I'm not sure anyone knows how to get us on track."*

If these laments sound familiar, it is because they are taken directly from my work across the healthcare spectrum, from hospitals, to public insurers, government systems, and biopharma firms. What is most disconcerting is that I often hear similar complaints from both leaders and members, who are all on the same team!

Like the last quote above, the people are all accomplished, dedicated, and well meaning, but no one seems to know how to do a reset to get the best out of their executives. Executive teams are not that different from any other type of teams; to be effective they all need clear goals, roles, processes and some active modeling from the leader. Here are some thoughts.

## DEFINE THEIR PURPOSE
The first step in all of this is to make the purpose, direction, goals and values of the leadership team as transparent as possible. Whether you call it a charter, charge, or mission statement it should look something like the two examples below.

For a leadership team in **biopharma** the charter might look like this:

### Sample Executive Team Charter
"The Large and Small Molecule Discovery Leadership Team (LSMD-LT) was created to provide general leadership of all research functions in the company related to scientific research of large and small molecules. The team works with the Senior Vice President for LSMD to develop and implement strategies to achieve our goal of supporting the discovery and development of new drugs.

This also involves understanding changes in technology, keeping invested in the broader professional field, working closely with our internal clients, customers and collaborators, and sharing in the managerial leadership of the LSMD section.

Each team member works to develop relationships with all other team members that are characterized by trust, accountability, transparency, engagement, and commitment to our common work."

For a state **Medicaid** Agency that is undergoing needed change the charge might look like this:

**Sample Executive Team Charge**

"My expectation of our Leadership Team is that we will all be committed to the Agency's overall purpose to improve the lives and health of our citizens as effectively and efficiently as possible. To do this we will collectively assume responsibility of developing and implementing strategies to advance and improve our work to meet this goal. The behaviors that will characterize our team are creativity, honesty, directness, support for one another, development of ourselves and our individual teams and professional integrity with how we do our work. It is the responsibility of each team member to hold themselves and all other members of the team, including the Director, accountable for living these behaviors."

## CLARIFY THEIR ROLE

There are lots of ways to describe roles. The key is to get the definition to fit everyone and to have a strong behavioral dimension. The one I have always liked is:

"As members of the Executive Leadership team we will individually and collectively operate and lead our sections with excellence and openness, develop and maintain an enterprise wide perspective, understand and value the contributions of each area, take responsibility for helping other team members develop, build our collective understanding of the external environment in which we compete, contribute to the ongoing monitoring of our work internally with customers and collaborators, and hold ourselves and the rest of the team accountable to our list of shared values."

## IDENTIFY KEY PROCESSES

There are many important processes that good teams exhibit, but three are key: **decision making**, **communication**, and **conflict management**. If these three can be owned and managed by every team member, then most other things will take care of themselves. First, make sure that the decision-making process is clear and reflects the values you want to characterize within your team. If you desire a lot of engagement within the team and want them to step up to take on more challenging tasks, but you are still swooping in to make all of the decisions, or publicly second-guessing decisions they do make, then they are not likely to be as independent as you want. Three rules to follow are:

1. Be clear with what the decision-making process is and to be doubly sure that it reflects the outcomes you want.
2. Have everyone discuss and own the communication protocol. This should start with an email manifesto that everyone agrees to, but includes the full range of communications expectations- from transparency to style to frequency.
3. It is essential that executive teams normalize conflict and the best way to do that is have a discussion about the "rules of engagement" such as no personal attacks, focus on the general purpose, politeness, etc.

These should change and grow with the team.

## MODEL WHAT YOU WANT

If you want them to be more supportive of each other, then you need to be supportive of them, by encouraging them to create a development plan and dedicating some of your time to making it succeed. If you want to build a more transparent relationship with another person or group, then you need to gradually build more openness and honesty into your communications. When you cannot be as open as you would like, let them know as much as you can as to why this is the case. And don't forget self-awareness here. Be open about what you know about yourself and ask them to share how they see you. Not easy at first, but over time this is a strength of all successful teams. Deciding which values you want in the team and how you express these will create the culture you desire. The steps for you are:

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1. Create a short list of values you want the team to reestablish or start anew – four to six is a good place to start
2. Establish how you express these values through your behavior and allocation of time, focus, and energy
3. Give yourself honest feedback on item b (do you really do this or is it more a "want to be"?)
4. Set a plan to practice one value by changing or emphasizing a behavior – "these are the three things I will do this month with the leadership team to be more transparent."

## STRUCTURE WHAT YOU WANT

Your behavior is important to changing the team culture, but so is the material reality that surrounds them. If you want them to focus on broad strategic issues, then you need to get them out of the day to day and give them a time and place to do that sort of work. If they don't know how to do this, you might need some help from an outside facilitator to teach them how to think and engage at a strategic, not operational level. You might want them to be more creative, so a workshop with someone that can help them practice responding to problems with more creativity could be needed. But simpler things also help. Such as, allocating time on the agenda for their meeting to support what you are trying to build? If accountability is a problem are you using one of the many online tools to share commitments, deadlines, and progress? Is a staff person assigned to keep it current? Is a part of each team member's annual review tied to how well they have expressed the new team values and behaviors you are advancing in their work?

## PRACTICE WHAT YOU WANT

Aristotle said that if you want to be a better archer, you should probably shoot some arrows. So, practicing these dimensions of team work in regular executive team meetings, retreats and having the members practice with their own teams, will move it forward and make it better. I've also developed a longer list of practices for alignment, roles, and professional growth that you might try.

## CREATE A SYMBOL FOR SUCCESS

One of the best leaders I've ever worked with had an executive team that did not pull together for the whole enterprise as much as we needed to. One weekend he was away in the North Carolina hills and came home with some very small, four-legged stools about the size of your fist. He left them on the corner of our desks Monday morning. At the next Dean's Council he shared that in his mind we were like those stools – four legs - education, clinical care, research and service -and that when we didn't work together the stool got a little off balance and didn't work as well. Simple I know, but it sat there on my desk as a constant reminder of what I was giving or taking in this process and how I should be raising my sights to look across the organization, not just my department. It worked. And thirty-five years later I still remember, and I still have the stool.

If you want to do a quick team assessment this tool is an easy place to start.

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