

Action Leaders

Action-learning at the top.



by Bruce LaRue

LEADERS HAVE LONG favored a “bias for action,” and yet many leadership teams are largely dysfunctional, precisely because they fail to function as an action learning team (ALT) to execute the strategy.

ALTs develop specialized, strategic capability across functions, drawing together individuals with highly specialized knowledge in order to collaborate on developing and applying new forms of knowledge.

Executive teams are charged to focus first on purpose (strategic intent), and once this is clear, to develop people and processes that align with this purpose. The purpose must be so clear that all see how their role or function fits into big picture and how best to achieve the strategy.

In addition, processes must be developed (and others abandoned) to ensure that these clearly support the strategy. Often one or more of these critical components is lacking alignment and clarity, and resolving these problems must begin at the top.

ALTs at the Top

The executive boardroom is composed of specialists (VPs of functional areas, such as marketing, finance, engineering, operations, and IT) and a leader “generalist” who orchestrates activities. Most senior executives, too, are talented in their fields, but now are also expected to play nicely in the sandbox together with others who they scarcely understand. Hence, they often blame one another for failures, compete for budget, lobby for resources, and engage in CYA in advance of the inevitable breakdowns in execution.

Harlan Cleveland, former U.S. Ambassador to NATO and member of the Council on Foreign Relations, once said that the primary emotion pervading boardrooms is one of thinly veiled terror—defensiveness, posturing, identifying too closely with functional roles, and a pervasive inability or unwillingness to test cherished assumptions. This situation often

leads to premature consensus, conflict avoidance, and poor decisions. Critical cross-functional communication and coordination breaks down, leading to further blame, finger-pointing, animosity, distrust, poor performance, and unhappy customers.

Sometimes the problem is not so much the team members as it is how they act once they come together. Instead of encouraging constructive conflict, they discourage debate and disagreement. They turn into a team that values consensus and unity over truth and accountability.

Re-Thinking Success

We have consulted in organizations where every functional area was meeting or beating their performance metrics, yet the company’s share price was in steep decline, and they were hemorrhaging customers and market share. To remedy this, measurement and reward systems must be changed to hold each individual and functional group accountable for the final result of key initiatives, not for just doing their job. This is critical in creating cross-functional alignment.

Boeing and its major contractors have learned these lessons. The new Boeing 787 Dream Liner is slated for delivery in 2008, and Teague, a leading-edge industrial design firm, is using ALTs to bring a new level of innovation and comfort to the interior of this long-range passenger aircraft. Facing incredible competitive pressure coming from Airbus, Teague’s goal is to deliver a superior experience for passengers in a concept jet. Rather than organizing along functional lines, Teague brought together designers, engineers, factory workers, vendors, and their client (Boeing) to create one cohesive ALT.

The goal, says Program Manager Wayne Yutani, is to “ensure that all functional groups share a common strategic intent—and then act in concert to create an unparalleled experience for passengers.” Expert facilitation is coupled with action-learning to

develop the capabilities and competencies necessary for a turnkey solution. This way of working together does not come naturally to a team of highly specialized knowledge workers. But because tactical decisions have strategic consequences, we worked with each contributor and team member to help them see their role in the context of the whole initiative, and to act accordingly.

The ALT Process

To create ALTs at the top, we integrate behavioral and operational dimensions of team development within four key phases of the change process: inquiry, design, deployment, and integration.

- **Inquiry** illuminates the gaps in knowledge and understanding that create dysfunctional behaviors. Inquiry challenges basic assumptions and requires leaders to examine paradigms and models that limit their thinking.

- **Design** explores how to create a road map for innovative change—a blueprint for bridging the gaps. It makes use of brainstorming with team members to generate new ways of thinking and break old patterns. It engages key stakeholders and end users (customers



or clients) in creating the solution. And it explores piloting a project and testing the design before deployment.

- **Deployment** examines how to break barriers that impede change, create common interests, and deploy initiatives with speed and power. Deployment begins to change fixed identities to overcome complacency and other forms of resistance. It attacks the self-dramatization that causes companies to tell their collective stories about how they are victims of management, the organization, or the marketplace. Deployment dispels the illusion of powerlessness.

- **Integration** is designed to synthesize lessons learned and make them a part of the organization’s DNA by ensuring that change initiatives are woven into the fabric of the company. Integration helps create new norms and shared values that reinforce new initiatives by shaping a supportive culture.

Begin where you are, and allow the results to speak for themselves. LE

Bruce LaRue, Ph.D. is an Executive Coach and Team Development consultant. He is co-author (with Paul Childs & Kerry Larson) of Leading Organizations from the Inside Out (Wiley). bruce@brucelarue.com, 253-576-7100

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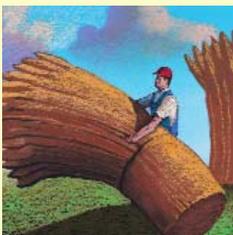
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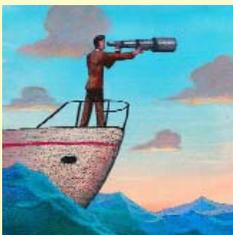
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