

# ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP TEAMS THE BENEFIT OF COHESION & ENGAGEMENT WITHIN LEADERSHIP TEAMS



*Many leaders would agree there's nothing as good as a crisis to bring people together. Merryck have found that the teams we've spoken to have organically created a level of cohesion and engagement in 2020 but now need to build on this foundation with a renewed energy to enable them to adapt as a team with a future focus.*

This year the virtual working environment has brought benefits and difficulties. On the positive side, teams have described the experience as liberating, fostering greater equality of voice, more transparency, and a confidence to challenge thinking given the prevailing uncertainty. On the downside, people have responded to the environment differently, while some are thriving, others are struggling particularly as people are not able to come together face to face and have 'coffee machine chats'. The virtual working environment has also proven an issue as companies onboard new people.

Many teams have met more often and been able to make decisions at pace, however this has led to some not allowing the time for the unstructured conversations and instead they have focused on the more transactional agenda items. According to Merryck Mentor Dennis Kerlake, "often the unstructured conversations are where you will find the thought processes which will make a big difference".



Leading as a cohesive and unified team is tough. As [David Politis, Founder and CEO at BetterCloud](#) said. "We all have different personalities, we've all been shaped by profoundly different life experiences, we all communicate differently, but when we come into work we're expected to interact with each other in a one size fits all way."

A cohesive and engaged team will truly understand one another and how each individual is likely to respond to different circumstances. They will naturally create the environment and space for everyone to be heard and valued and encourage more unstructured conversations. A strong team will recognise the strengths and capabilities of the team members and encourage shared learning and understanding. So how do you build that cohesion and engagement in the months ahead?

## THE THREE LENSES OF LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Previously, we explored what is key to accelerating leadership team impact. We've discussed the importance of [trust among team members](#) and in our [last article](#) we revealed how teams use three lenses to accelerate their own and their organisation's performance. These lenses are:



**Create clarity and focus** on the purpose and outcomes the team and business need to achieve. This agenda also includes prioritisation, mutual accountability, and communication.



**Build cohesion and engagement** through team alignment, psychological safety and engagement with critical stakeholders.



**Foster agility and innovation** to enable speedy execution, experimentation and creation of new sources of value.

We now turn our attention to the second lens.



## BUILDING A COHESIVE AND ENGAGED TEAM

To aid an organisation's success, it's important to have a unified and engaged team to navigate the strategy and be empowered to take action. Having open conversations and bringing diverse perspectives into the room is a real strength.

From our conversations with highly effective leadership teams, cohesion and engagement can be built by focusing on these 3 practices:

- Building trust and psychological safety among team members, which in turn permeates out to the wider organisation
- Valuing capability, diversity and inclusion in the team
- Encouraging learning and shared experience

## BUILDING TRUST AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In a previous article we explored how trust cannot be taken for granted among leadership teams, but also takes time to build. Highly effective leadership teams create an environment where people feel comfortable and safe to be open and share their points of view, challenge and contribute to the conversation.

A common obstacle to trust is intent. Often people worry about the intent behind what fellow team members are saying or doing. They look for clues in what they say and how they say it – particularly when remote working makes face to face interaction harder. These concerns can lead to intent being misread and this undermines trust and hampers collaboration.

Investing time to understand team members helps to remove the intent obstacle. At Merryck we use many tools to support leadership teams. These include structures and approaches for meetings to encourage greater transparency, share of voice, understanding and openness.

### *Some questions to help your team's thinking:*

- How do people feel when leaving the meeting? Clearer or more confused? Energised or exhausted?
- Do team members feel comfortable challenging and speaking out in team meetings?
- Do I trust everyone on the team, and do they trust me?
- Do I understand everyone's strengths and ways of working?



We're also advocates of a 'Leadership User Manual TM', amongst other tools, which celebrates and respects people's differences and creates greater transparency for team members. It removes the time wasted on mind-reading and assumptions, instead helping teams to recognise and play to both their own and their colleagues' strengths. As [Jared Belsky, CEO at 360i](#) says "We have user manuals for our laundry machines, our phones, rental cars, lego sets and hundreds of other things in our lives, so why not for ourselves".

Listening and ensuring team members feel that they've been heard also ensures trust is created. A simple approach such as turn-taking can let everyone have their say uninterrupted. This can be used to uncover and in turn appreciate the different levels of risk tolerance amongst the team and agree a commonality of purpose or shared goals that everyone is comfortable with. It can also release ideas, and help break down silos or stem turf wars over budget, allocation of resources and business focus.



## VALUING CAPABILITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Highly effective leadership teams understand the strengths, capabilities and drivers of individuals within their group. They recognise the importance of that deeper understanding to enable them to make more effective decisions and leverage diverse perspectives. In exhibiting these traits team members get to know the people behind the title or role and actively engage with them at a personal level. This way of working typically extends to other teams they interact with.

Increasingly this year, there's been a shift to focusing on what's needed for future performance, rather than legacy and past achievements. A fresh focus on the capabilities needed for the present and future is swelling as the world changes at a pace and there's a growing appetite for greater diversity.



[Pedro Pizarro, CEO of Edison International](#) leads one of the most diverse executive teams in the S&P 500. He recalls, "There's been a lot of opportunities and moments to test the value of that diversity – being comfortable enough with each other to bring out the benefit of different ideas and perspectives, but also being pretty candid about when we disagree with each other. It gets messy sometimes and you have to be able to work through that messiness and then leave the meeting with the sense that we're partners in this, we're friends, we care about each other."



To be a team, you need to make sure that all the individuals are committed to the team and their shared purpose. You can't rely on individual performance alone and need to look at the team as a whole unit. Traditionally, people make leadership team changes too late, deferring in respect to past successes rather than current performance. However as [Paul Kenward, Managing Director of British Sugar](#) said, 'Someone advised me early on that if you think someone is not quite good enough, you should act on your doubts. By all means coach them and help them try to improve, but if it's not working, you should make a change.'

## ENCOURAGING LEARNING AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

Effective leadership teams understand the positive impact of learning together. They review their actions regularly and ensure that learning is always on their agenda. They look for opportunities to create a shared experience that helps to create strong bonds and common language with team members and key stakeholders.

Paul Kenward of British Sugar often asks his team to consider as a collective "What are we proud of now? What would you really have loved to have achieved over the next five years for the business to have changed?". In doing so he finds, "People need to feel that they have made progress. It's difficult enough to make change happen. If you don't remind people that they were able to change things already, people give up before they've started."

The shared experiences of learning and achieving together (whether formally or through something like a crisis) not only develops leadership teams' capabilities and effectiveness, it also creates strong engagement and cohesion.

### *Some questions to help your team's thinking here:*

- How could I better understand the needs of people in my team?
- Do we understand and utilise the range of individual capabilities that currently exist in the team? And how do these differ from what we'll need in the future?
- Are we aware of the strengths and gaps among our team?

### *Questions to consider:*

- Are we a learning team?
- Do we understand the skillsets and capabilities we will need in the future?
- Do we use a shared and common language to ease understanding?
- Is learning on the team's agenda - to learn together and share experiences as a team?



## SUMMARY

Now more than ever it's important for people to understand each other beyond the day job. The virtual way of working may have given us glimpses into each other's worlds through a laptop screen and greater share of voice, but equally has had its down sides and a deeper layer of understanding is needed. Teams who invest the time to build the relationships and leverage each other's skillsets will continue to thrive in an ever changing world.

For many leaders and businesses, it has been a challenging and exhausting period and people have not been able to invest the time in focusing on the team as a collective. Engaged teams with a genuine insight and care about each other's wellbeing ensure their leadership team remain resilient and agile.

Following on from this focus on engagement and cohesion, we will look at fostering agility and innovation from the team and into the organisation. In the meantime, here are some final questions to leave you with.

- Is our time focused on collective accountability and learning, or turf wars?
- Do we take steps to ensure that everyone feels safe to share their contributions?
- Do we welcome feedback and use it as a learning opportunity?
- Do we value diversity and utilise it to improve debate and decision making?

### **About Merryck & Co.**

*Because leadership is the "How" of strategy®, Merryck & Co. helps businesses accelerate the impact of leadership. We are a global executive coaching & mentoring firm made up of experienced CEOs and top business leaders who bring an operator's lens to leadership development and effectiveness.*

*After a period where leadership teams have been operating at speed and at scale virtually, and as teams regroup and consider their organisation's purpose in the months and years ahead, Merryck is helping them deliver greater impact and value.*

*Merryck Mentors partner with you and act as catalysts for Transformation, bringing the unspoken into the room, helping you identify insight and have the courage to challenge your status quo. We meet you where you are and guide your team where you need to go.*

### **To arrange a conversation contact Merryck & Co.**

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