

Executive Teambuilding: Dos and Don'ts

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of approaches to teambuilding which add real value – and to outline some useful tools. A central point is that poor teamwork significantly impacts organisational performance and this seldom 'gets better on its own'.

The good news is that there are smart ways to intervene and improve the functioning of executive teams. This document highlights some of the key dos and don'ts.

Executive Teams come in all shapes

Over the past 30 years, I've had the opportunity to work with more than 100 management teams in Ireland and internationally. Some of these were absolutely first-class, high performing teams who delivered superior results. Other organisations had brilliant executives but somehow the overall team was less than the sum-of-the-parts. A small number of senior teams were completely dysfunctional – toxic places to work and a source of mental illness for the individuals involved (divorce rather than marriage counselling is sometimes the best solution).

If teambuilding adds value, why is it not used more often?

Problems within management teams are not often openly addressed. Sometimes, it's simply a lack of time. More often, a central difficulty for organisations is how to assess performance levels in the softer areas of teamwork and co-operation which are difficult to define. The awkwardness of discussing interpersonal relationships makes managers uncomfortable and they 'swim away' from this topic.

What do excellent executive teams look like?

To help an executive team to move forward, a useful starting point is to ask: "What does an excellent team look like?" In my experience, high-performing executive teams exhibit three clear characteristics:

1. Team Missions: Healthy teams have a crystal clear understanding of their collective mission and individual roles to make this happen. In less-well-performing teams, there is often confusion between the role of the senior team and the organisation mission – a fogginess which needs to be clarified. By definition teamwork = shared commitment to a common goal.



Good teambuilding can help to overcome the executive team working as an executive group – a bunch of managers who have a common manager but not a common agenda.

2. Recognise Strengths & Weaknesses: Great teams recognise individual strengths and weaknesses, welding this into collective effort. The goal in teamwork is not friendship – but effective working relationships. Contrary to the popular view, strong management teams are not defined by an absence of conflict – but the presence of conflicting views that can be dealt with productively. Once this is understood it allows the individual players to move on from the annoying (but sometimes, not particularly important) issue of style differences among the key players. The best teams use conflict productively to address presenting issues, rather than destructively on personalities.

3. Learn from the Past: Excellent executive teams ensure a consistent winning formula, by openly discussing and learning from past successes and failures. This requires the discipline of setting time aside to reflect on this and the courage to confront underperformance. This 'Learning' becomes a way of life for executive teams that function effectively.

Q: Using the above criteria as a yardstick, how does your executive team stack up?

The Objectives of a Teambuilding Intervention

While individual circumstances will differ, executive teambuilding typically has four central objectives:

1. Working Diagnosis: Provide a working diagnosis of the current operation of the senior team. This focuses on both hard (strategies, structure, systems etc.) and soft (interpersonal) issues. It gives direct and open feedback to the executive team, a sort of group performance appraisal i.e. "how are we doing?"

2. Shared Mindset: Develop a shared vision for building a preferred future. In simple terms, the senior team need to have clear 'today' and 'tomorrow' pictures. The gap between these provides the change agenda for the organisation.

3. Action Listing: Prepare a detailed listing of areas for improvement, including positive (things which enhance the achievement of operational & strategic goals) and negative roadblocks to progress. Goal = fog clearance.

4. Strong Teamwork: Build a strong sense of teamwork within the executive team, based on high quality personal relationships which are supportive, authentic and robust.

Leading from the front by role modelling: Teamwork at the top of the organisation has a bonding impact lower in the hierarchy. The corollary also holds true. Where fissures in the senior team become evident, relationships lower in the organisation are damaged i.e. 'jockeying for position' rather than serving the customer becomes the *coin of the realm*.

In one organisation I consulted with, a senior executive was nicknamed 'Sabotage' because of his track record torpedoing the careers of his peers (on one level it's humorous, but the impact on the people involved was anything but funny). In effective teambuilding, this type of behaviour can be cleverly surfaced and addressed. While it is not always possible to stop 'being shot from the front' (by customers or competitors), great teams figure out how to avoid 'being shot from the back' (by colleagues). In teambuilding, a central goal is to promote the idea that 'performance is in, politicking is out!'

How should a teambuilding session be structured?

(a) Move from a 'hard' to a 'soft' agenda: Working from a 'hard' (goal clarity, role clarity, agreed processes) to a 'soft' (interpersonal relationships) agenda usually works best. Executives typically have a hard agenda bias and you need to address this before swimming into the 'deeper end of the pool'. Sometimes teambuilding occurs as a positive side-benefit to another project (e.g. strategy development) rather than being explicitly addressed head-on.

(b) Focus on strengths, along with weaknesses: By their nature, problem-solving interventions tend to focus on the negatives ("Where are the gaps?"; "How can we close these?"). However, a central principle in psychology is that people change from a position of medium security. It follows that there is a strong need to spend time focusing on 'what's worked well to date' as a foundation for understanding current organisational/interpersonal challenges and how these might be addressed. Authentically highlighting what's working well – allows the facilitator to 'enter-the-castle' – and begin to work with the executive team on necessary changes. The alternative model – where the facilitator makes him/herself look smart by focusing solely on weaknesses can damage the self-confidence of the management team. Agreeing strengths, along with weaknesses is a central thrust in effective teambuilding. No matter how old we are, most of us like to be told when we're doing well. The market for positive-reinforcement is not saturated!

(c) Make the softer issues discussible: In many organisations, management teams fail because of an inability to address 'softer' issues which can become practically un-discussible. A key goal of any successful teambuilding intervention is to help the executive group develop a robust working relationship where issues of concern can be openly addressed (the key skill here is not being too open: management teams are not therapy groups). One U.S.A. consultant made this point memorably: "Teambuilding interventions should follow

the rules of surgery – never ‘open-up’ anything that cannot be closed in the same meeting!”

(d) Customise the approach to the particular

organisation: There is no off-the-shelf solution to teambuilding projects: the best are custom-fit to the organisation, like a hand-crafted suit. In a broad sense there are 10 types of teambuilding events (see later model) and you need to pick the right tool for the job. Prior to an actual event I typically run semi-structured interviews with individual team members, distribute teambuilding questionnaires and sometimes send educational materials on how executive teams work in practice. From this data we build a customised agenda, allowing each of the team members to contribute to this. Participation in agenda setting positively impacts follow-through. Teambuilding is one area where volunteers beat conscripts hands down.

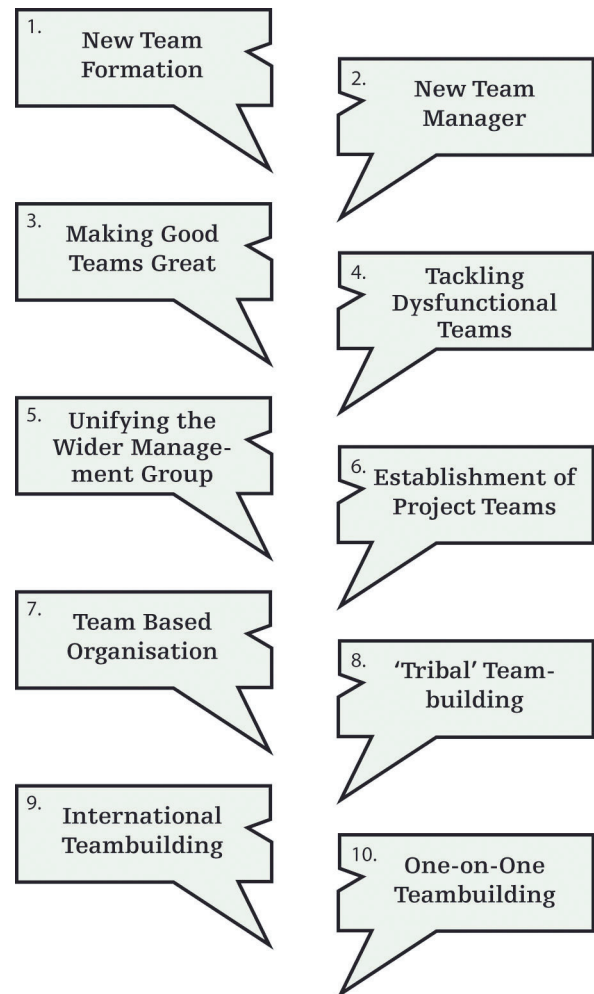
(e) Don't attempt to do too much: Some people feel that there is an inherent risk in teambuilding exercises e.g. they are anxious about ‘damaging’ or de-stabilising a team. In practice, this is overcome by good design (establishing ground rules, sticking to these, sequencing of topics etc.) and excellent facilitation (ensuring that an ‘appropriate level’ of openness is achieved during the group sessions). Interventions typically need to be bounded; in teambuilding, less is often more and it can be useful to do some initial work which can be built upon later. It really is the beginning of a journey – rather than a 1-off event to ‘cure’ the management team!

So, if we do all of the above, it will definitely work?

In most cases, yes. Assuming that the management team want to address the issues, good teambuilding events leave a positive legacy. But the idea needs to be sold well with the objectives clearly stated in business terms – not psychobabble. The client needs to set the scene correctly by introducing the concept and the facilitator to the group. It's not just a set of technical skills – the chemistry between the facilitator and the group has to work. Telling someone to: “Show up at Tinakilly House with an overnight bag and we'll see what happens” is not the way to kick off an executive teambuilding event if you want to secure a solid outcome.

Drilling into the Details - 10 Types of Teambuilding

For those of you who enjoy ‘detail’ there is a range of separate teambuilding events – which need to be designed in different ways. In the following section I've attempted to describe various types of teambuilding ‘issues’ and how each challenge might be progressed.



Goal: Choose the right tool for the job!

Teambuilding # 1:

New Team Formation

Focus....

A new management (or other) team is coming together for the first time.

Philosophy/General Approach

- The approach differs depending on the exact circumstances e.g. if it is an entirely new team in a Greenfield start-up or if a new team is created internally within a business.
- Clarity of direction/common purpose is a key initial ingredient.
- Defining attributes of successful teams (educational element) is sometimes required.
- Legitimising conflict as a healthy ingredient of a team functioning often proves useful e.g. the Intel Value of constructive confrontation (built on the fundamental idea of being able to 'disagree and commit') is a useful discussion point.

Toolkit

- Several teambuilding/team dynamics exercises are available e.g. Bunker Selection. These help managers to understand how effective teams operate and provide a 'roadmap' for excellent team performance.
- Selected readings on the concept of teamwork. These have to be custom selected to particular audiences (depth of comprehension etc.)
- Video materials (team clips from commercial movies) provide useful debate starters.
- Outdoor/learning experiences. For some people, working outdoor provides a powerful metaphor for working in teams. Tends to have positive participant feedback (albeit it needs to be professionally structured and facilitated).

Teambuilding # 2:

New Team Manager is Appointed

Focus....

CEO or next level senior management is appointed to the organisation.

Philosophy/General Approach

It is possible to provide a 'telescoped' introduction and shorten the settling in process for a new manager. This allows new teams to reach their performance level very quickly. This process works best where the new manager is somewhat of an unknown to the group. The promise here is speed. It does not offer a superior relationship to that which develops normally (it does create some sensitivity for the manager on the issues which the group feel are important).

Fast Start Toolkit

New Manager Assimilation Exercise (exercise based on material from the Centre for Creative Leadership in the U.S.A.). A version of this tool has been used successfully in General Electric for many years.

Teambuilding # 3:

Making Good Teams Great

Focus....

Existing Management team which is working well wishes to improve its output or functioning.

Philosophy/General Approach

This is quite a broad area. The approach chosen will depend on the exact issues surfaced in meetings with the client. This can sometimes be a wider agenda than teambuilding e.g. the development of a full organisation change agenda, installation of a values programme etc. In this case the tools used would be a more complete set of 'change options' tools (e.g. the Breakthrough Strategy) and would not be confined to the narrower area of teamworking.

Toolkit

- Range of Video material – collected clips from commercial movies which focus on the particular issues to be addresses e.g. Leadership. There are a number of videos of companies undergoing organisational change programmes (Chrysler Corporation using time as a competitive weapon etc.). The Power of Ideas at Work (Harvard Business School) and 'Transformation' (BBC Executive Video Seminars) are good sources for materials.
- Rolling back the Future/Moving to a preferred future – range of visioning exercises.
- On occasion, we have designed events where customers give direct feedback (both negative and positive) to the client company as a way to unfreeze the existing organisation.
- 360 degree feedback can sometimes work well.

Teambuilding # 4:

Tackling Dysfunctional Teams

Focus....

Focus here is on existing Senior Management team which needs remedial assistance to improve functioning.

Philosophy/General Approach

Typically the presenting issues are described as being 'personality based'. Sometimes they are rooted in personalities but more often they have a technical basis (confusion around goals, roles, processes etc.). We try to be as authentic as possible and help to skilfully surface these issues.

Toolkit

- Diagnostic tool kit includes working with various instruments which allow a 'temperature check' of the organisation to be conducted (focus groups + semi-structured interviews).
- Large – group process meetings are sometimes a useful change vehicle (depending on the particular requirements).
- We have developed a proprietary teambuilding instrument which is useful as a diagnostic tool and makes difficult issues discussible.
- G.R.I.P. Model (Goals, Roles, Interpersonals and Processes) from Columbia Business School is simple, but effective.

Teambuilding # 5:

Unifying Wider Management Group

Focus....

Senior executive team wish to link the entire management group into a unified force – ‘all the horses’ moving forward in a single direction.

Philosophy/General Approach

A common presenting problem is where the senior executive team wish to engage the second line management team. Presenting issues can vary but usually include some of the following¹:

- a. Not enough ‘headroom’ for strategic issues (senior team getting sucked down).
- b. Infighting among functions.
- c. Debates on Mission/Strategic direction.
- d. Underperformance against key objectives.
- e. ‘Next level’ managers swimming away from their leadership role.

Toolkit

- Problem-solving tools and the establishment of key priority projects which the group works on (action-learning).
- Clarity exercises to answer the question: “What’s my role in the show”?
- Best practice review of a number of selected benchmark companies (in Ireland and internationally).
- Customised Video to act as a ‘repositioning’ tool (expensive, but can be quite energising).

Teambuilding # 6:

Establishment of Project Teams

Focus....

Where project teams are being installed to address specific organisation performance issues.

Philosophy/ General Approach

Many companies use Project Teams as a way to turbo-charge performance. These differ from Natural Management Teams in that they are a temporary feature of organisation life.

Toolkit

- Turbo-charged Project teams: Helping participants to understand the design elements of project team working (Purpose, People, Process, Measurement etc.). This is a specific model developed to take project groups through the various stages from team formation to performance.
- A key step is to ensure that the ‘ask’ from the Project Group is crystal clear (reports, presentations, formats, by when, cost parameters etc.).
- Action-learning always needs senior team support to drive the outcomes. Example: method used in ESB as part of their executive development programme is typical of a ‘Best Practice’ approach.

¹ The objectives of this exercise need to be very clearly specified. They could include: (a) To systematically assess strengths and weaknesses in all areas of the operation (b) to develop a business-oriented cross-functional plan (c) to establish priorities to strengthen the areas of greatest vulnerability etc.

Teambuilding # 7:

Team-Based Organisation Structures

Focus....

Movement to a full team-based organisation. This tends to emphasise empowerment and high commitment and de-emphasise control and hierarchy.

Philosophy/ General Approach

In recent years a focus has emerged around 'reinventing' the corporation by getting employees lower in the hierarchy involved in quality control and decision-making processes. There has been some limited experimentation in Ireland with the movement to full team-based organisations. This is usually part of a broader strategy of creating a highly competent/committed workforce and is based on three underpinning concepts:

- a. Creating a sense of 'belonging' to the organisation (being involved and sharing in the success).
- b. Creating a sense of excitement/pride in the work itself.
- c. Developing confidence in the authority of the management team.

Toolkit

- Fully team-based organisation structures are the Ferrari's of work design – potentially high performance but difficult to establish and maintain. The success of this structure is prefaced on the support for teamwork within the company culture (in simple terms it is 'not available' to all organisations).
- It is also dependent on the nature of the work/ technology employed e.g. there can be more effective/less expensive ways to ensure high quality and lower costs.
- Case studies e.g. the McPherson case study on an American Plant which successfully introduced team working (after a number of 'false starts') can be a useful thought starter.

Teambuilding # 8:

'Tribal' Teambuilding

Focus....

Inter Division/Department Functioning needs to be improved.

Philosophy/ General Approach

Most often occurs in functionally based organisations where there is significant 'stovepiping' (Sales Vs. Operations; Client-Services Vs. Fund Management). It can also occur among organisation levels e.g. the management team vs. the group of craft unions/back office sales staff etc.

Toolkit

- Large group process meetings can be particularly effective here with an initial focus on 'what we really like about the other group'.
- The 'grief cycle' can be used (e.g. in post-strike situations).
- Art exercises to help people understand their own feelings and the perception created with others can help develop a positive future.
- The goal is to help both groups to gain a common/ shared understanding of reality. The flow outlined below often works well:
 - a. Move forward by understanding the past.
 - b. Move forward by being authentic about the present.
 - c. Move forward by creating a shared future.

Teambuilding # 9:

International Teambuilding

Focus....

Inter-Plant problems are causing sub-optimum performance.

Philosophy/ General Approach

Within the multi-national sector, plants and divisions often have to operate in synchronisation (e.g. R&D and Marketing). In some cases, first stage product is sent to sister sites which may be internal competitors with all of the potential friction which this structure can promote. International teambuilding can either be focused directly on the issue or be indirect e.g. focus on some 'hard' issue where better teamwork emerges as an indirect outcome.

Toolkit

- Role negotiation exercises.
- Diagnostic intervention and follow-through action planning with the key players.
- Where some of the barriers are caused by misunderstanding caused by country culture, it can be useful to help participants understand elements of national culture (e.g. 'loss of face' concept in Asia) and the importance of language skills.

Teambuilding # 10:

One-on-one Teambuilding

Focus....

Manager and direct subordinate relationship is not functioning well. Needs outside intervention to support or manager wishes to improve the way s/he relates to subordinates.

Philosophy/General Approach

Issues in this area are sometimes driven by a manager/ subordinate relationship which is under strain ('pain driven'). Sometimes, the manager, conscious that a better relationship could be in place, wishes to work in a modified fashion with one or a number of subordinates ('vision inspired').

Toolkit

- Various role negotiation exercises exist e.g. material from marriage counselling can be particularly useful (although the consultant may not directly refer to this source!).
- Sometimes the route of personal counselling is required for one of the individuals concerned and there are a number of ways to progress this particular agenda.
- Decision-tree matrixes to diagnose the exact presenting issues and the likelihood of these being resolved (not all relationship breakdowns are fixable).

Personality profiling and identification of training needs approaches are sometimes useful.

- Paul Mooney Ph.D

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