

CAN A TOP TEAM EVER BE A 'TEAM'? by Rosanne Cole and Kevin McKee

"Why don't the Board/Executive speak with one voice?" "Why don't they work as a team?!" How many times we have heard these complaints in the businesses we work with. It seems that everybody would like their top management to show an example of teamwork but virtually none of them do. So, we ask the question is it realistic to expect a top management group ever to be a "team"?

Our starting point for investigating whether or not a Top Team can ever be a team, is what makes them different from any other management team? Certainly the idea of a team at the top seems to remain a core concept in most organisation structures. John Katzenbach points out that *"That there are very few CEO's who do not refer often – both privately and publicly – to 'their' top team"*.

Top teams do, however, have to grapple with some different challenges from teams lower down in the hierarchies. They frequently deal with complex long-term strategic issues, have huge demands on their time and decision-making capability and, most significantly, have a deep ingrained sense of individualism. The people who make up the top teams frequently achieve their status by being competitive and focused, and these qualities often inhibit true 'team behaviour'. George Fisher, CEO of Motorola observed *"In my mind there is a definite parallel between self managing worker teams and our top management group. We are really trying to create the same behaviours of openness, collective problem-solving, multiple leadership and mutual trust and respect in both situations..... But somehow it is still different and more difficult at the top."*

In their book **"The Wisdom of Teams"**, Katzenbach and Smith devote a chapter to Top Teams and found that there are five popular, but misguided beliefs about how top executives are expected to act that run counter to their ability to form a high performance team. These are:

- The purpose of the top team is identical to the purpose of the company
- Membership in the team is automatic
- The role and contribution of team members, including the leader, are defined by their hierarchical and functional position
- Spending extra team time is inefficient
- Team effectiveness depends only on communications and openness.

Four years later Katzenbach returned to this theme. He presented three very helpful "litmus tests" to determine whether a group can achieve real team performance:

1. It must focus its attention on shaping **collective work products** i.e. not spend most of its time on each individual's divisional or functional contribution;
2. Its members must learn how to shift and share leadership roles;
3. The members must be mutually accountable for the team's results.

In our work we have only found a few top executives prepared to make the tough journey to true team performance. As the following article on Virtual Teams shows there may be other effective options which need less effort.

“Your senior team is, for better or worse, the organisation’s model of what a high performing team is.”

Howard Guttman