

Strategies of Successful Leadership Teams

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“We’re not just running—we’re galloping!”

These were the words of a senior executive on a leadership team in an expanding, urban healthcare system. The healthcare environment is complicated and uncertain. Leading an expanding, complex healthcare system in this arena is requiring both intuitive and counter-intuitive practices. When a system is in *doing* mode, in an environment that creates unrelenting pressure to execute and “get things done”, it may seem counter-intuitive to pause.

In our recent work with a leadership team, we offered the following strategies for navigating complex, dynamic landscapes. We used them as the basis for the design of a one-day retreat for the 30 top leaders of a regional healthcare network. We think these practices may be useful across sectors. They are derived from our experiences as observers and facilitators of organizational life, relevant articles and research, and thought-provoking conversations with colleagues and clients.

Scanning

Paying continuous attention to the larger, external environment and the implications for strategy and leadership work—effectively bringing “the outside in”

A key word here is continuous. Doing a collective environmental scan during the strategic planning process is common practice. It is not enough. It needs to be done on a regular basis. Scanning the external environment is not just the province of the CEO. It is a task for the entire leadership team, because each member of the team sees different elements of the environment through a different “lens” and has different capability to discern what is relevant and important to pay attention to.

Re-grounding

Regularly re-viewing the intent and opportunity for the system that the strategic focus provides

When leaders are in doing mode, their heads are down and they can become very focused on detail. It is easy to lose sight of what was intended in the first place, or that this intention is part of a larger, unfolding story. Leaders can re-ground themselves in the system’s strategic intent by *lifting their gazes* and re-viewing the bigger picture.

Informing and Aligning

Sharing relevant information so all members of the leadership team have an understanding of the whole, and can execute the broader goals of the system; this helps with alignment and subsequent individual goal setting

Members of a leadership team have collective responsibility for the success of the enterprise. They can only take up this essential role if they are informed.

When galloping, it is hard to find the time to have the needed conversations with others. Crossed signals, assumptions, increased fragmentation or missed opportunities are a consequence. Technology—texts and emails—can only take you so far.

Anticipating

Pausing periodically to anticipate issues; exerting intentional effort and thought toward anticipating issues helps balance all we have to respond to as leaders

If all energy is going to *responding*, it is harder to be strategic. It is challenging to pause long enough to see what *could be*.

Pausing to anticipate issues also provides room for an incisive question like the one asked by a leader at a recent client leadership retreat: “*What can we do to know when we are reaching capacity, before it’s too late?*”

Appreciating

Noticing what’s been accomplished and what’s being learned along the way...Success leaves clues...

We live in a culture that, for the most part, focuses on what’s wrong. While it is true that much can be learned from understanding mistakes, it needs to be counterbalanced with examining what contributed to success. This focus infuses energy.

Learning

Continually applying conceptual frameworks and newly acquired skills to their repertoire of leadership capabilities

Leaders readily stay up-to-date in their content areas (e.g. finance, marketing, HR, facilities, etc.). This is not necessarily the case with leadership capabilities. Training is often too little too late or too much too soon. Leaders need opportunities to learn together as they live into their leadership roles. They need conceptual hooks on which to hang their everyday experiences and expand their choices. These tools and frameworks need to be infused into the strategic work of leadership teams.