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What Washington Needs to Learn about Teams

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BY JON KATZENBACH

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I n September, *Washington Post* columnist Jena McGregor suggested that U.S. President Barack Obama, who was about to lose his chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, should bring a few business gurus on board. Because of my long-standing work with team performance (my book *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization* was published by Harvard Business School Press in 1993), I was named as one of them. McGregor thought the president would benefit from having a single person responsible for an accountable outcome, rather than relying on the give-and-take of a team for making a decision. She also clearly felt that government needs to hire more thinkers like me: those who have a private-sector background and understand the way business operates.

Although I certainly appreciate the compliment, I don't agree that the advice should flow in only one direction. Yes, Washington can learn some things from business teams about how to address performance challenges. But believe it or not, corporate leadership teams can also glean some important insights from Washington's abortive team efforts — even given its emotionally charged atmosphere of political infighting. To be sure, the bipolar political cultures in elected government bodies differ markedly from the individual accountability cultures in for-profit corporations. Yet when it comes to team effectiveness among senior leaders, the two cul-

tures face surprisingly similar challenges. Indeed, we find very few "real" teams at the top in either the public or the private sector — which helps explain why most companies *and* government agencies have such serious problems these days with accountability and performance.

A real team, in my view, is something very specific. It differs from the more common "single-leader unit" in three important ways. First, all members of a real team have an equal level of emotional commitment to the team's purpose and goals. Second, the leadership role shifts easily among the members based on the skills and experience they have and the challenges of the moment, rather than on any hierarchical positions. Third, the team members hold one another accountable for the quality of their collective work. Members of real teams subordinate their formal affiliations, personal prejudices, and loyalties to the team's purpose and goals.

These practices together give real teams both the capability and the accountability they need to accomplish their tasks. Any organization that needs to produce results will need to cultivate real teams to do so. Yet as simple as this principle may sound, real teams are rare. It takes both discipline and hard work to operate as a real team. Perhaps that's why most company teams work as real teams only when they feel compelled to, either by their supervisors or by external forces.

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(with Zia Khan; Jossey-Bass,
2010).

Similarly, you don't have to be a team expert to recognize that most committees and working groups in Washington fail to function as real teams. The failure is especially pronounced with any bipartisan group. Whenever you see a so-called bipartisan team whose recommendations split along party lines, you can be pretty certain it did not function as a real team. For one thing, team members obviously did not subordinate their formal affiliations, personal prejudices, and loyalties to the team's purpose and goals. The clashing loyalties of the members may not be the primary culprit. Both sides might well have been willing to find a common ground, but nobody had put in place the necessary preparation: the time and process design required to get the members of the team to integrate conflicting beliefs, experiences, and views in ways that got the best of both perspectives. Without that intensive time and work, and the patience to see it through, there will not and cannot be any true bipartisanship.

The Limits of Compromise

To understand how to change this, you have to understand the limits of compromise — and the ways of moving past it. In the early 1900s, a thoughtful organizational thinker named Mary Parker Follett called out the critical difference between *compromise* and *integration*. A team that compromises has settled for the lowest common denominator: a solution, no matter how incomplete, to which all can easily agree, just to move things forward. Compromised solutions made in this way are more likely to break down.

A team that integrates, by contrast, is looking for the best possible solution — one that takes into account the best of all the perspectives of the people involved.

This type of team is determined to understand conflicting positions, and the members don't quit until that understanding is reached. They may still disagree, but they persevere until they can come to a solution that incorporates the things that both sides want (or need) most. If trade-offs are involved, the team thinks them through and works out a way to give everyone the best of what they are looking for. The integrated vote of this real team would never be counted as, say, six Democrats versus four Republicans, or vice versa. There is no such thing as a minority opinion.

Of course, this takes hard work and accountability from all members. The team may still reach impasses, but now its members are keenly aware of the need to achieve certain results. If that hard work and accountability are lacking, then those seeking a real team must look more broadly at the context in which the team operates. They must look, in other words, at the culture of the organization.

The Culture of Government

Perhaps that's why real teams seem so rare in Washington. Leaders of a real team must have a culture that is reasonable and coherent enough to ensure that disciplined choices can be made, including those about when to team, how to team, and when not to team. Your organizational culture can either energize or encumber senior team efforts. Those who fail to explicitly enlist elements of their existing culture in setting up and managing teams will rarely achieve the benefits of real-team performance.

Is it plausible to suggest that integration could permeate the dysfunctional culture of a major government capital like Washington? Isn't the essence of a political

culture the battle over every compromise — each party trying to get the greatest advantage in each case, so that it can claim to have "won" in the next election? Maybe, but most political cultures tend to have, operating under the radar, a large number of administrative people who are simply trying to get things done, who need one another to do so, and who adopt various ways to integrate without overtly clashing with the more visible culture of compromise. This culture of integration exists in any government, but it is often hobbled by the rest of the system; a truly savvy political team organizer needs to find it, understand it, and cultivate it to achieve real results.

The political cultures within most governments today reflect an unhealthy combination of conflict, strong elements of compromise, and the subculture of integration. They work at cross-purposes, making it extremely difficult for real-team efforts to emerge, much less succeed. This problem is exacerbated by the reliance on compromise that is built into the culture itself, in which opponents discuss, debate, and dispute in legalistic fashion, rather than trying to accomplish results together. This cultural trait is not likely to change much within any reasonable time frame; it is far too deeply embedded and self-reinforcing.

But it is possible for real teams to exist and be effective, even within a highly political culture. Some of them in the U.S. government, particularly in the Senate — the McCain–Feingold team on campaign finance reform, or the bipartisan teams within the banking committee that developed provisions of the Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act — are relatively well known. Others are less visible, generally operating within the executive branch. Although they may have

compromised on some important elements, they also worked long and hard to realize the best intentions of both sides in even more important ways.

Fostering Integration

It may come as a surprise — at least to those who don't know business very well — to hear that most executive teams at the top of large corporations face a similar problem of a clash between integration and compromise. Although few companies have to bear the intense political infighting seen in Washington today, they are seldom free of political considerations. Sometimes those considerations reflect hierarchical ambitions, sometimes functional allegiances, and sometimes personal animosity. Whatever the source, however, whenever those considerations take precedence over the team's purpose, high levels of performance are very unlikely.

The solution in both the public and private sector lies in recognizing and understanding how the hidden elements of culture can either vitalize or derail real-team efforts. Usually, these elements are more emotional than rational, and must be dealt with accordingly. If you are a leader in an organization with this kind of dysfunction, you have to work with and within the culture to get the behavior changes you need. The following principles and rules of engagement can help:

1. Take advantage of the positive emotional power of your culture. Never ignore or underestimate it. It is at work (either for you or against you) in the hallways, around the desks, and behind closed doors. And don't expect to change your culture overnight without the "help" of a major economic, political, or marketplace disruption. In other words, you cannot change a well-established culture very much very fast. The recent tur-

moil at the top of Hewlett-Packard Company illustrates what can happen when leaders ignore a culture as deeply embedded as the famous "HP Way."

2. Concentrate on the "critical few" behaviors that will determine success by reinforcing the cultural elements of integration that already exist within your company. What are those behaviors? How will meetings be conducted? What will members need to do between meetings? How will the leadership role be shifted? How will "bad behaviors" be handled? A senior leadership "culture team" at General Motors Company made remarkable progress recently working with a seemingly dead culture by focusing hundreds of managers on changing the critical few behaviors at multiple levels that affect speed, accountability, and customer experience.

3. Use both the formal and the informal elements of your organization. The best leadership teams are highly networked in ways that inform their teaming and spread support for the team's recommendations. They use both formal and informal mechanisms to sustain their networks. They also make frequent use of sub-teams to permit different member configurations and working approaches. Before Michael Sabia left the CEO post at Bell Canada in 2008, he launched a pride-builder movement that spread virally (via peer-to-peer interactions) as well as programmatically and changed motivational behaviors in 1,500 frontline supervisors in less than 18 months.

4. Select team members who can check their politics at the team-room door. Think about what it will take to ensure safe interactions that are not overly emotional or political. Each member should have the skills and experience that are essential to the team task, and each will be respected by other members. Their hierarchical, functional, and political affiliations should be secondary to the capability required to achieve the team's purpose.

The impact of culture on real teams provides most organizations — even stultified bureaucracies like some government agencies and corporations — with their leverage for change. It's not that culture matters for its own sake; by working with your culture more explicitly, however, you can accelerate real-team behavior and thus bring this type of high performance to even the most unlikely contexts — including, perhaps, the White House. +

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