

Getting Fit

Become a real player.



by Howard M. Guttman

HIERARCHICAL IS OUT; horizontal is in. There's no room today for the multiple layers, slow decision making, and dependence on leaders. Successful organizations are characterized by consultation, collaboration, and cross-functional problem-solving, decision-making, and planning.

Why are horizontal organizations so much more nimble? Extended product development cycles are replaced by rapid movement from design to market; decision-making bottlenecks are eliminated; leaders empower and delegate; and the focus is on the success of the business, not individual functions.

Horizontal Success

Leaders intent on this transition must take four actions:

1. Look into the mirror. The top team sets the tone. Before expecting others to "go horizontal," senior managers must ask, "What are the decision-making patterns on our team?" "To what extent do we see ourselves as accountable and responsible for one another's success and for the outcomes of our team?" "Do we depersonalize conflict and confront one another honestly and openly?" If the president is still calling the shots; if team members are constantly lobbying for resources; or if internal conflict has brought decision making to a halt—it's time to practice what we preach.

2. Align all your teams—beginning at the top. Raising team performance and reframing team behavior begins with alignment. Ask seven questions to determine whether or not a team is aligned: Does the team have clear goals? Are those goals aligned with the strategy? Do all team members know who is responsible for what and how they will be held accountable? Are protocols or rules of engagement agreed upon so everyone knows how decisions will be made? Are rules in place for how conflict will be managed? Are relationships between and among team members

healthy and transparent? Do people assert their point of view honestly and openly and treat disagreement not as a personal attack but as a business case?

3. Shift from commanding to influencing. In the new paradigm, the one who wins isn't the person with the most clout, but the one who possesses the right strategic instinct, content capability, rapport, and persuasion.

When Susan Fullman was director of distribution for United Airlines, she was a cross-functional player in a hierarchical context. Her success hinged on her ability to influence rather than command: "I had to sell my vision to each director. And I couldn't do that without learning to clearly articulate my ideas, depersonalize the way I made my case, develop my powers of persuasion—and learn to listen to each person and address their concerns."

4. Become a player-centered leader. The horizontal organization calls for a shift in the role of the leader to a new "player-centered" model.

The question becomes: How prepared are the players to handle increased authority and responsibility? As teams proliferate and decision making becomes decentralized, people must step up. Managers must know each person's capabilities and skills and adjust his or her "style" accordingly.

For example, when managing an inexperienced team leader, a senior manager needs to provide a high level of direction, structure, and support; but as team leaders become more competent, the senior manager can adopt a more hands-off style. The goal should be to inspire and empower, not prescribe or direct. Provide coaching and collaboration as each player requires.

Many leaders talk about decentralization, layering, and empowerment. But decisions continue to be made by the CEO; functional heads are still vying for resources; and further down are vacationers and victims.

Horizontal organizations are more states of mind than states of matter. It's not as much about titles and boxes as it is about every employee showing up, every day, as an energized, strategically focused team member. **LE**

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