



# Trust in the Top Team

A business can easily lose its way because of infighting, egos and politics within the senior leadership team. **Dawn Murden** finds out how a CEO can keep everyone aligned

**A** business can move so much faster when leaders trust one another and are able to work together towards a common goal.

Conversely, when senior executives behave as a disparate collection of individuals, the consequences affect not only the CEO, but the entire business.

As **Hera Siu**, Managing Director for Greater China at Pearson, says: "You want people to be able to debate and agree to disagree on certain topics, but once they leave the room they [must] present a unified front to the rest of the organisation.

"They should be open to ideas and constantly challenge themselves, so

they're asking: 'Is there another way to do it?' If the team is to be effective it will be a living thing and [will] evolve. The loudest member will learn to listen more, while the quiet ones will speak up because trust has been built."

If senior executives start to prioritise their own agendas and forget what's best for the business, that all-important >



alignment can be lost. **Matthew Blagg**, CEO at Criticaleye, says: "When trust isn't there, the senior executive team won't be able to execute their objectives, and that can happen for many reasons, such as when the CEO isn't capable. Similarly, problems occur when the competencies of one or more individuals are not right, and especially when politics form."

## True North

It's up to the CEO to articulate the direction of the business, then decide whether the current crop of senior executives have the talent and desire to get there.

**Leslie Van de Walle**, Criticaleye Board Mentor and Chairman of SIG and Robert Walters, says: "Cracks appear when the business is not performing in-line with the common purpose; some people start doubting the vision or personal agendas creep in."

This needs to be dealt with swiftly. "If a person has been given a fair chance to realign but they haven't changed, that person needs to be dismissed or replaced," adds **Leslie**. "If you don't make that decision quickly it taints the rest of the team, or they become disturbed because you've not reacted to it."

Of course, getting the chemistry of the top team right is one of the biggest leadership challenges a CEO will face. **Neil Matthewman**, has appointed six new senior executives since becoming CEO of Community Integrated Care (CIC) Group four-and-a-half-years ago. He has introduced 'away days' and offsite sessions so that executives can discuss strategy

*“Skills are interchangeable within great teams”*

and overall performance. Recently, he brought the executives together to run through team development.

"We started to explore behaviours. Getting to know each other is important and we've invested more in team-based activities in order to maximise the potential around the table," he says.

It takes work to ensure that communication doesn't solely occur in weekly meetings when the focus is on short-term priorities. **Gary Kildare**, Chief HR Officer at IBM Europe, comments: "There are still many organisations that have appraisal systems and management by objectives; that's great but it needs to go way beyond that for senior leaders."

**Gary** argues that there must be an emotional connection that allows them to feel part of the team: "You may start off a little bit mechanically to ensure that regular discussions and meetings are taking place. Often a bit of forcing needs to happen by the CEO and other senior leaders in the team, but through these sessions you should be building trust, which allows more ideas and information to flow openly."

It comes back to alignment, clarity of purpose and openness, which enable senior teams to navigate challenges, whether that's a turnaround, disposal,

acquisition or moving into new markets. "There has to be something that pulls them together and not just business as usual," **Gary** comments.

If a business is to achieve sustainable success, both the CEO and board have to recognise why it's important to reassess and appraise the qualities and chemistry of the top team. **Matthew** at Criticaleye comments: "More conversations need to be had about how long someone will be on the journey for."

"Skills are interchangeable within great teams so if someone leaves – including the CEO – the results are not impacted. It's a matter of having a succession process." ■

The importance of trust in the top team will be on the agenda at the forthcoming Criticaleye [Human Resources Director Retreat](#)

### Featuring Commentary From:



**Matthew Blagg**  
CEO  
Criticaleye



**Gary Kildare**  
Chief HR Officer  
IBM Europe



**Neil Matthewman**  
CEO  
CIC Group



**Hera Siu**  
MD  
Greater China  
Pearson



**Leslie Van de Walle**  
Chairman  
Robert Walters

Contact the contributors through:  
[www.criticaleye.com](http://www.criticaleye.com)