



4 Lessons on Building a Great Leadership Team

Alan Armitage, CEO for Standard Life (Asia), tells Dawn Murden the four points he keeps in mind when motivating and developing his leadership team



A senior leadership team made up of individuals who are motivated, collaborative and whose relationships are built on trust can achieve great things. Alan Armitage, CEO for Standard Life (Asia), shares his four tips on achieving that type of team unity:

1. Ensure There is a Common Goal

The first thing when you put a team together or join a new team is exploring whether there is a common goal.

More often than not people will want to head in one direction, however an individual's interpretation of the direction may be slightly different, but unspoken. Individuals will think they're heading in the same direction.

There has to be an opportunity for teams to work through the development of the goals.

Something we did as an executive team at Standard Life a few years back was to establish no more than five corporate priorities.

They were then communicated to the whole organisation – it was a way of focusing as a whole organisation on the things that will enable us to achieve our goals.

It stops debate around the organisation about what should be done. I've seen instances where clever and intelligent individuals spend an inordinate amount of time just working out what's the priority between A and B.

Now, if the wrong priorities are chosen then you probably need to replace the executive team.

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2. Encourage the Right Behaviours

We've put a strong emphasis on behaviours, both individually and collectively especially on whether we have the right blend of individuals within the team and if they will work together in a productive manner.

We look for the team, and the environment that surrounds the team, to be open and honest as well as challenging.

The team also needs to be supportive of each other; that includes coming together in times of stress or when things are not going as planned.

It's relatively straightforward to have what seems to be a high-performing executive team if things are going well. But often the making of a team

is how they can pull through in times of challenge and adversity. A lot of the behaviours we look at are geared towards that.

I have to ensure everyone has an opportunity to have a say and to challenge, but when the team makes a decision they then have to go away and implement it.

If that doesn't happen then it's going to be very difficult to sustain a high-performing team and it's likely that factions will be created.

3. Reward Collaboration

Clearly if people are remunerated and rewarded upon a set of results that are inconsistent across functions or organisations within a broader corporate, then it's easy to see how silos can develop.

Personally, I'm not a fan of having KPIs that focus on outputs. That doesn't drive activity, that drives an outcome and no one really knows how you've achieved that outcome; therefore you cannot direct your activity in the right places.

I prefer tracking a set of agreed actions. The actions influence things and the outputs are a bi-product of the actions.

You need those mechanical things like KPIs in place to make sure you draw out a way of harnessing cross-team collaboration.

You also need to ensure you do not engender the exact opposite of that, with individuals or a whole department going down the wrong path. >



Taking Standard Life as an example, our life insurance company and investment company are very different in terms of how financial success is measured. And while they remain that way, it was critical to get these parts of the organisation working together.

What we've done over the last few years is to provide a common financial language that can demonstrate how to maximise monetisation through the combined forces of these businesses.

That has driven a lot of behaviours in terms of enabling people to work together. Now, everyone can see if we work together we can maximise the financial performance of the Plc as opposed to the individual businesses.

Maximising the performance of the Plc means that everyone benefits, whether they're individual shareholders or they're on a Plc bonus system - it's a way of demonstrating the collective sum of the parts.

4. Hold the Mirror Up

Every single member of our team has an individual development plan. Those plans need to be absolutely distinct from the individual's day job and their performance related plan.

They are focused on where the individual would like to be in three years' time. They need to be challenging and also outline the steps an individual needs to take.

We also utilise 360 degree feedback and Myers-Briggs in terms of both trying to assess the profile and characteristics of individuals and the whole team.

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It's not just about selection but how they're understanding the characteristics of people that sit round the table and how they can best collaborate.

Years ago we had an independent consultant take us through a variety of things. One powerful tool was to have the whole team in a room and one by one a person's name was written on a sheet of A4, then everyone went round and wrote what they would like that person to continue doing, stop doing and start doing. People were open and honest.

It's something I have used sparingly because I have also been with an executive team where there is a cultural issue and so deemed it far too progressive for the maturity of the team.

It's easier to do that when the team has had some successes and you're wanting to take it to the next phase.

If there are conflicts or issues then this could just antagonise that situation further.

For my current leadership team, which has been in place for a number of years bar a few people coming in and out, we introduced this a year ago. I felt the team was mature enough to take direct feedback from others.

We even managed to do that and take into account some of the cultural differences that they have here versus a Western organisation. ■

Alan was a speaker at Criticleye's Asia Leadership Retreat, in association with Accenture and CEIBs. Find out more [here](#)



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Alan is responsible for Standard Life's wholly-owned operations in Hong Kong, and drives the wider China strategy and the development of the business' interests throughout the region.

He is the director of Standard Life (Asia), Standard Life Investments (Hong Kong) and Heng An Standard Life, a 50/50 China Joint-Venture with TEDA International.

Alan joined Standard Life in 1990 and has held various leadership positions in the UK, Canada and Asia.

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