



Steps to Unlocking High Performance

Matthew Blagg, CEO of Criticleye, identifies six key characteristics needed to build a successful executive team

1. There has to be trust

One of the qualities that differentiates strong executive teams is trust. Not only do they have the confidence to rely on one another to deliver, but they share a common goal.

I often see senior teams confuse trust with 'like' and 'get on with'. They're not the same. When you look at what tends to unpick teams, it's emotion and concerns about ulterior motives. You need to be able to have difficult conversations – that can be undermined when emotional responses come into play. An executive team that's able to remain rational in high-pressure situations is going to outperform,

especially if they are able to go back and reflect on how things could have been done differently at certain moments.

2. Take the long-term view

High-performing executive teams don't make decisions that provide a one or two-year fix. There's longevity in their thinking about the business and that's what makes success sustainable.

When a CEO is constantly thinking about making a profit every quarter, it influences their decision-making in an unhealthy way. It's easy for a CEO to be pulled into that mindset, whereby they think they have to demonstrate quick-wins. It's always a concern when a

company is fixated on squeezing out every last bit of profit.

Part of the problem is that CEOs are suckered down a path without realising it. Pressure is exerted on them either by the board or, if they're a divisional head, by group, and they either don't understand how to push back or believe they aren't able to. For me, that's where experience in business really counts.

3. Be open minded

As we get older, we tend to gravitate to areas where we feel safe. It's human nature. I admire people that are able to keep moving outside of their comfort >



zone, those who want to be pushed and tested in their thinking.

It's important to have such people in your senior leadership team. It means they'll be taking in information and reflecting on the wider implications for the business. There is a danger that if you stick to rigid goals and are fixed in your strategic thinking, it can leave a business vulnerable.

This ability to question orthodoxy in a way that's constructive and forward-looking isn't easy to find. I think this is especially true if you have an internationally dispersed team. It's really difficult for CEOs to bring people together in the same room and get the communication and information flow right between the different parties.

4. Teams need balance

Strong executive teams have a complementary mix of skills. For instance, emotional intelligence (EQ) is important as it's people who make up the business, in most sectors anyway. But does a CEO necessarily have to possess EQ? I'm not sure they do although they should recognise that they will need someone in the senior team who does.

It's about collective team strength.

5. Good CEOs make time to reflect

I constantly see CEOs grappling with the problem of time allocation and knowing what to prioritise.

I've always felt that leadership is about getting rid of things, not taking them on. In fact, CEOs need to be inherently lazy. That is really important because in order

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to do the things that are fresh and to create change, you can't be bogged down in the day-to-day running of the business.

CEOs have to be able to see the bigger picture. For instance, people often say they took too long to make changes to the business. It isn't necessarily about bringing new people in, it's being able to create different ways of engaging.

It's the way you come together, the frequency of those meetings and the subjects you discuss. If you're constantly looking at the same information, you can miss things. Are the KPIs the right ones? Are the things you're constantly assessing what really matter for the business?

People can become stale, but high-performing teams have an ability to keep things fresh.

6. Build a legacy

There is a worrying trend to recruit new CEOs externally. There absolutely needs to be more attention on promoting internally, so you're bringing people through who understand the culture, the customers and can focus on creating sustainable success.

There is also a perception that current executive teams ought to be shaken-up and a raft a changes made. Does that create better performance? I'm not so sure.

It can actually slow a business down and, if I'm being negative, chairmen can use a CEO appointment to exert control and put their own person in.

You need to give people time – CEOs and senior executives can't be looking over their shoulder. It's not healthy to chop people whenever mistakes are made.

A CEO should have a sense of their own legacy and look to have a successor. When you try and bring people through internally, there's always the case that some won't make it but I guarantee others will rise to the challenge. Succession can only be good for the business. ■



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Matthew's experience in setting-up businesses and advising firms on strategy and corporate development have shaped his role as CEO of Criticaleye. He has extensive chairing experience and has broadened these chairing skills to include the facilitation of intensive strategic sessions for the boards of leading global organisations. He also continues to be a well-respected Board Mentor within the Criticaleye Community.

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