How to be part of
the executive decision-making team

Executive decisions are often made without the input of HR. **Paul Donovan** examines this process and reveals how HR can ensure it is part of the executive decision-making team

Rich cautionary tales of poor decision-making abound in recent corporate downfalls around the world. And within these examples a strong theme emerges which requires our attention: the decision-making in many of these scenarios was centred in the hands of just one or two within the group. As a result, the decisions lacked balance and wisdom. This practice made the group and the company extremely vulnerable.

But can you blame these leaders? The vast majority of corporate leadership texts promote an individualistic, heroic stand by individuals who hold their ground against the tide of opinion. It rarely celebrates the leader who openly invites their colleagues to test their reasoning, expose and challenge their assumptions and evaluate their conclusions. The problem is that the individualistic approach has been historically successful (and glorified) but is now simply dangerous in our current world.

Does your senior executive group know how to engage in genuine collective decision-making? In my experience, most executive groups do not know how to share their decision-making within their own group. That's right; the chances are that many of the important decisions are made outside of their meetings, by one or two powerful people. Our research has shown that this practice remains the predominant approach, especially for contentious decisions. After all, how often have you heard the phrase "I think we'd better take this offline" when discussions get charged or threatening?

What can HR do?

What can the HR professional do with their senior management team to increase their capability in this critical area of collective decision-making?

First, you require some buy-in from the team to even discuss the issue. Gaining buy-in can be tricky since there will most likely be powerful people who will have unspoken intentions of keeping the status quo. I would suggest that the first step would be to secure permission to

address. Each of these areas, while separate, are related. I would suggest that your proposal include a very brief description of each area and a broad statement about the required action for each area.

The details relating to the action would be best determined with the group. Below, I have included a summary of these four areas as a reference as you prepare your own proposal.

1. Individual mindsets as they relate to leadership. Our individual histories have informed our understanding of leadership, power and decision-making. It is entirely necessary that we bring some awareness to our individual beliefs about these important topics. To do so will enable us to avoid being directed by old assumptions that remain untested and that are no longer useful. In addition, it increases our ability to consciously align ourselves with those beliefs which are helpful in managing our current environment and its demands.

2. Communication skills present in our senior team. "That's not going to work!"

"Yes it will, I think we need a more positive approach here"

"I think it's better to be realistic than naïve"

And so it goes. Interactions like this might look extreme in print, but our research suggests that they are common in senior executive meetings. I would go on to say communication skills required for effective collective decision making remain a rarity in the meeting rooms of Australian senior executive groups. What are those skills? They are fundamentally

engage the whole team on the subject of their decision-making.

Having gained that permission, facilitate their discussion with the following four questions:

- Let's list your general observations about how decisions are made in your group.
- What themes emerge? What feeling do you have about those themes?
- Which themes represent a concern to you and what might be the implications of not addressing it as a group?
- Having identified this problematic pattern(s) would you be willing for me (the HR professional) to draft a proposal for action that we can consider together?

Next, write your proposal. There are four main areas that your proposal should

Practical exercises to address each of the four areas

Individual mindsets

We recommend that members of the group reflect on their earlier experiences of leadership. In particular, any demonstrations of leadership that stand out are unique or somehow important. We invite them to briefly write about these experiences, one before the age of 18 (as a kid), one after they left school say in their early 20's and one that has happened in the last 2 to 4 years. Once they have completed their journals, we suggest they share them with each other, most likely in a pairs or threes. Following their sharing with each other, we suggest they simply reflect on the following question "How have these early experiences of leadership shaped my current beliefs and assumptions about leadership?"

Communication skills

We recommend that they begin by applying the following advocacy template to a discussion about a contentious or threatening issue. The template is as follows;
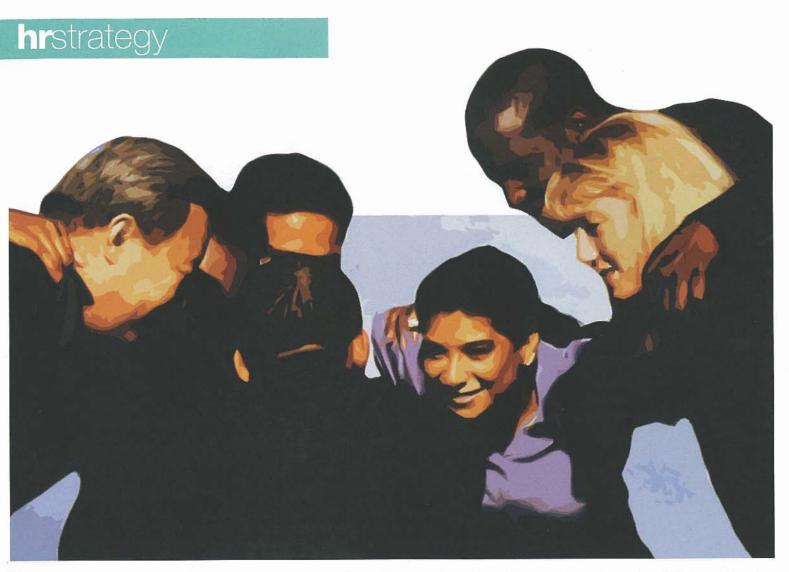
1. My opinion is ... (share conclusion, eg 'that marketing approach won't work')
2. My reasoning and associated assumptions are....(e.g. We tried that approach 2 years or so ago and the results were patchy at best. Customer recognition of campaign was low when tested 6 months later and no significant change in revenue was associated with the campaign)
3. Could someone comment on my reasoning and is there relevant data that I'm not considering?

Culture of the senior team

Invite the group to become deliberate about the culture required to create high quality collective decision making. Facilitate their agreement on the 4 to 6 statements that are to guide their overall approach to these important discussions.

Systems and processes of the senior team meeting

I would recommend the senior team initiates a weekly tactical meeting that lasts for no longer than 60 minutes. Patrick Lencioni maintains that this approach cuts down on emails and expedites the making of tactical decisions. It also leaves your monthly 3 to 4 hour strategic meeting to be just that; focused on a maximum of 2 to 3 strategic issues.

those of advocacy and inquiry described by Chris Argyris.

Put simply, skilful advocacy is the practice of contributing ones point of view (or conclusions) in a way that reveals your reasoning, while at the same time inviting others to test and comment on your conclusions and associated reasoning. Skilful inquiry is the practice of requesting others to share their reasoning, assumptions and evidence associated with a conclusion they are drawing.

3. Shared culture of our senior team meetings. The reality is that the culture of most senior executive groups runs contrary to the practice of collective decision making. And by culture we do not mean the company's values statement or vision and mission. We mean the unwritten, usually unspoken rules and guidelines that

shape the group's interactions. Here are seven common and very problematic unspoken guidelines I have found to be operating within many senior executive groups:

Don't openly challenge the viewpoint of the boss in the meeting and definitely don't surprise him (or her) with new information.

Don't raise any business concerns that could cause a loss of face to others in the group and if you do, raise it so generally that nobody will feel put on the spot.

Always stick to the topic and don't raise concerns about the way we are talking.

Only raise potentially contentious topics if you have garnered sufficient support from key group members before the meeting.

It is simpler and better for decisions to be made outside the meeting, by one or two of us. After all, a fast meeting is a good meeting.

If you raise concerns about a problem, for God's sake you better have the solution as well.

The person who offers the solution will carry responsibility for its success.

There are many more like these and

in each case these beliefs can have devastating effects on the group's ability to engage in the robust dialogue required for effective collective decision making.

4. Systems and processes associated with our senior team meetings. Many senior team meetings suffer from what Patrick Lencioni calls the 'pot-pouri' approach to meetings. In this approach the group attempts to oscillate between enterprise wide strategic issues to smaller tactical issues and back again, all in the one meeting. In my research, I have found it is common to have such issues about a major marketing campaign and discussion on the best company Christmas party venue on the same agenda. The problem is that these topics require very different quality of discussion and it is very difficult for these to co-exist in the one meeting. The first requires a reflective, thoughtful even explorative approach, the second a much faster rational problem solving approach.

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