

Idea in brief

Alpha managers' strengths are top team's burden. In an increasingly complex, uncertain and volatile world, effective collaboration in the C-suite is a key lever for success. Yet too often, non-teams prevail at the top: Individualistic mindsets and unilateral agendas of alpha executives determine the path taken, thus leaving significant potential untapped. In order to realize the full "Return on Collaboration", teams have to develop a practice of reflective dialogue.

Teaming the Unteamables: How Alpha Managers become an Alpha Team

Dr. Kai W. Dierke and Dr. Anke Houben

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The quality of decisions in the C-suite of companies has an enormous effect on the performance and development of organizations. So, in an increasingly complex, uncertain and volatile world effective collaboration at the top is essential. Yet often, the particular interests of individual alpha executives decide which path is taken – not leveraging the full potential of the entire top executive team. Prof Timo Meynhardt and Dr Brigitte Winkler sat down with Dr Kai W. Dierke and Dr Anke Houben, authors of the book “Gemeinsame Spitze. Wie Führung im Top-Team gelingt” (Collective Leadership. A successful team approach at the top) and discussed their findings in consulting and supporting top executive teams.

OE: Dr Houben, Dr Dierke, you have been advising top management teams in the C-suite for years, what is so specific about them?

Houben: Teams at the top, that is executive boards or executive committees, differentiate themselves from other types of teams in middle management in three ways: by personal character traits, by issues and by the structures in their working environment. As people, top managers act differently to lower-level managers, because teams in the C-suite are teams with mostly alphas. These are individuals who are one hundred percent convinced of their own rationality. As a result, there is built-in dominance and rivalry among alpha team members. Furthermore, alpha strengths easily become weaknesses when under stress: decisiveness turns into actionism, competitive spirit turns into a quest for dominance, etc.

The second specific dimension in the C-suite team is the issue level. The only element that ties these top teams together is an abstract mission or strategy, one that usually allows a lot of room for interpretation. Top teams are faced with very complex topics on daily basis. These issues are difficult to grasp and often, there is no single right solution. Yet the team constantly needs to make decisions under pressure that have far-reaching consequences.

The third dimension is structural: Top teams are caught in specific structures. The team members see themselves primarily as representatives of their

respective business units. The operational and functional units represented in the top team are mostly silos. Most top managers act according to the OHIO principle (Own House In Order) – and that’s it. They are struggling on daily basis with complex issues while they are thinking and acting mostly in clearly departmental structures. Getting these alphas to consistently cooperate in the interests of the company is a constant challenge that you won’t face that same way in teams beyond the C-suite.

OE: Precisely this counterproductive silo mentality of top executives often causes huge problems in companies...

Dierke: Exactly! That is why we say that leadership at the top of a company is a collective task. The top team does not just represent the individual business units and corporate functions. It is also the highest “unifying” decision-making body. The members of the team need to repeatedly decide to assume a collective perspective. And they need to prioritize the interests of the whole organization in order to move the company forward. But that is entirely contradictory to the mental models of most of the members of these teams.

Therefore, if you have a real effective team at the top of a company, it is not by design but by choice. It is exactly this quality of reflection and collaboration at the top that sets successful top management teams apart from less successful ones. That is the reason why our approach goes beyond the usual concept of teams. We observe something that we call “Return on Reflection” at the top of a company, particularly in complex and uncertain situations. Return on Reflection is the result of a consistent productive dialogue in the top management team. How teams can achieve and foster this core skill is described in more detail as the “Seven Disciplines for Leadership in Alpha Teams” in our book “Gemeinsame Spitze. Wie Führung im Top-Team gelingt” (transl. “Collective Leadership: A successful team approach at the top”).

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Houben: To us, the inner dynamic and the quality of collaboration is the decisive success factor in a high-performing top team. Mostly, teams are described by their static characteristics: number of people, job descriptions, processes, structures. We concentrate primarily on the inner dynamic of a team. We look at interpersonal interaction, both positive dynamics as well as counter-productive dynamics. There are typical traps that top team members fall into when under stress. That is silo mentality, a lack of cross-functional cooperation, delaying decisions or a lack of disciplined execution. Our experience has clearly shown that the poorer the collaboration at the top, the less effective the leadership and the strategy implementation in the organization.

OE: That is an insight that most of our readers probably share. What is it that sets your consulting approach apart from the rest?

Dierke: Our perspective is defined by our backgrounds, both as traditional strategy consultants and as members of executive boards. That is what differentiates us from the therapeutic perspectives of traditional process consultants. I'm being deliberately provocative here: We're not interested in therapy for a "broken system". At its core, the task is to create highly productive forms of collaboration in concrete business contexts, whether that is shaped by the complexity of the outside world – markets and stakeholders – or the inner complexity of a matrix organization. Of course, one could argue that in some organizations there is no need for teamwork at the top. For example in a financial holding where it is mainly about steering the individual business units. But if an organization has a more integrated business model, as in most industries today, the question arises: How to create a "Collaboration Premium" that is more than the sum of its parts? And that is something that can only be organized and role modeled at the top of a company. Understanding this dynamic and anchoring this rationale from a corporate perspective in the C-suite team is what sets our approach apart.

OE: How do you know that a team is developing and increasingly thinking and acting collectively? What are the signs of success?

Dierke: Interaction within the team changes. One indication is a noticeable shift in communication from downloading to real dialogue. But in order to achieve this, a quantum leap in self-awareness is necessary. Due to structural constraints, but also as a result of long-standing individual models of success, cognitive biases or even ingrained dysfunctional practice, the members of top teams cannot do it individually. Development and change can only be achieved through a collective effort, one that requires the members of the top team to help each other develop and to take joint responsibility. If you watch board meetings before anything has changed and then at a later point in time, it is visible that at the beginning downloading predominates: There are more or less only rehearsed statements that are decided upon quickly. Sometimes there is an indication of discussion. But there is no real dialogue in which colleagues build on one another and challenge each other as equals. That is not only true in what they say but also in the way they work together.

A second indication is the way how conflict is dealt with. Often, teams at the top of companies act as what we call "Harmony Cartels", artificially free of conflict. Conflict is avoided, diffused into the company, where it doesn't get resolved either. Because in doing so and getting to the root of the conflict, one would break the unspoken non-aggression pact in the top team. The consequences are: Decisions are delayed, issues are delegated to the second level and are escalated upwards again, paralysis and blockades are common. But if a team has developed a productive approach to conflict, beyond the widespread "dog and pony show" in the board room, then we observe – during our shadow coaching sessions – the transition from an old to a new logic of interaction.

A third indication is openness to feedback. Normally, these teams work in a feedback-free environment. Thus, unproductive behaviour, interpersonal issues and reservations aren't discussed. This is how top teams leave a huge potential for learning and change untapped. And I don't just mean personal feedback in an open exchange in the top team. I also mean the willingness of the top team as whole to deal with feedback from the broader management team below the C-suite. We are always surprised how much top teams are prepared to learn when

confronted with concrete feedback on leadership performance and collaboration as a team.

“Alphas need self-critical dialogue, as equals, in order to be able to recognize their own dysfunctional patterns of behaviour.”

OE: What distinguishes successful top teams from others?

Houben: Successful top teams have a well-functioning muscle of collective reflection of their own behaviour. They have developed something like a “Reflective System 2”, as Daniel Kahneman would say: a collective system that is able to step in and challenge the routines and action-oriented autopilots of individual top team members. This is not something a top manager can do alone. It needs to be accomplished as a team.

We call this the “Double Top Team Paradox”. The first part of it reflects a “team of the best” not necessarily being the “best team”. That means that the very skills that have got each individual to the top, in competition with other alphas, are destructive patterns of behaviour in an alpha team at the top. Which is where the second part of the Double Top Team Paradox comes in: In order to get past these patterns of behaviour, alphas need reflection and feedback from their peers. They need self-critical dialogue, as equals, in order to be able to recognize their own dysfunctional patterns of behaviour. That is not only those patterns each and every one of them displays individually but also those that they send into the organization as a team. The drive to perform better by challenging each other through feedback and reflection should not be underestimated among alphas. Their readiness to leave their comfort zones and enter into this unsafe sphere is a clear sign that the team is starting to move in the right direction. Finally, collective emotional intelligence – as according to Daniel Goleman – is the enabling trigger for collective rational intelligence, the IQ. Without this step, the valuable resource as a team will remain untapped. And this is where the CEO needs to act as a role model. If he dares to make the first step you can be sure that the others will follow.

OE: How do you concretely advise teams in the C-suite?

Dierke: It is very important to us to reduce the symptoms of dysfunction, a bit like in short-term therapy. Our approach is simple: “It is easier to act yourself into a new way of thinking than to think yourself into a new way of acting.” That is why we primarily deal with the behavioural side of things and aren’t tackling the structures of personality. But of course, if you are addressing the behaviour, then you are definitely in a position to change thoughts and mindsets by generating behaviour-based experiences. But to be honest, for many top management teams it is already very helpful to just change behaviour symptoms.

Houben: For us, it is more of a long-term learning partnership than a project. There is no upfront declared endpoint. We work with most of our clients for many years and see many permutations of teams. After all, a C-suite team is in permanent change due to new members and ever-changing business challenges. We usually form such development alliances directly with the CEO, which means he has ownership of the topic and is in charge to drive it forward. Within this set-up, we practise a wide range of formats and methods from various different areas. Amongst others, we are shaped by the Manfred Kets de Vries school of thought and our work in the INSEAD Global Leadership Centre that he founded. We relate his principles “we are all products of our past” and “the subconscious is omnipresent in our actions” very strongly to concrete challenges the top managers are facing. We often work with top managers in their mid-forties or mid-fifties, who are at an age in which they are starting to be more self-reflective. So there is a willingness to ask questions such as “How did I get here?”, “What effect did this have on me?” and “What impact do particular patterns from my childhood have on my managerial behaviour today?” If we see that there is a crack in the door, we march on in. Often, a much deeper change is possible that way.

“Top managers, who usually have a great amount of self-worth and self-confidence, need to be put into productive stress to trigger change.”

OE: Which mental model, or which methodological principles do you use in your work?

Dierke: We work based on four principles: leveraging emotion instead of rationalisation; reflection instead of action; adaptive process instead of technical solutions; and collective instead of individual responsibility. We are thoroughly convinced that top managers, who usually have a great amount of self-worth and self-confidence, need to be put into productive stress. This is the ultimate source that can trigger change. We move alphas through emotion, not by rational argument. In doing so, we follow Edgar Schein's "Survival Anxiety Model": "in order to make it, we have to change". The Survival Anxiety, which means being afraid you might not make it, needs to be more powerful than the Learning Anxiety that is being afraid to change.

To be able to use this productive anxiety as "great modeller" – according to the Gerald Hüther understanding of the term – we present the facts confrontationally and in clear language during our interventions. We need uncomfortable proof to engage an alpha emotionally. We need to remove him from the cocoon of his own strengths. It is annoying for top managers to be told that they are not well-performing and could do better. We repeatedly see that top managers have a sweet spot: a desire to succeed and also the productive vanity to do better.

The second core element is reflection instead of action. We consciously try to keep executives in the sphere of reflection as long as possible by asking "what do we see?" and not "what do we need to do?" Particularly at the top, managers are unwilling to invest in adequately understanding social complexity. Because of their action bias, they would rather throw themselves into planning measures, roadmaps and similar things. Over and again, keeping them reflecting is uncomfortable, and for some even painful. But this is the only way to bring up topics that always remain unspoken and disrupt constructive work in the team.

The third methodological element is focussing on the adaptive challenge. As, usually, top managers cannot suppress the impulse to think in terms of structures and processes. In other words they look for technical solutions to the question "how do we fix this now?" However, we focus on the question "How should we, each one of us, change our

behaviour to more productively work together and lead?"

The fourth element is our insistence on developing a sense of collective responsibility in the top team. Top Managers aren't used to that because they have built a successful career applying a model of individual effectiveness and performance. In these four dimensions, we push top managers out of their comfort zone. Thus, all four are areas of anxiety for them. But that is what works.

OE: Could you give us an example based on a typical consultancy project? Which steps do you take?

Houben: Development alliances are never identical, but do follow a certain four step inner logic: We always start with reflective interviews with the team members, paying attention to the dynamics and dysfunctions in the team. It is not just about gathering information. Already in this first step, we strongly trigger self-reflection: "What part do you and others play in the team dynamic?"

During the second step, we confront the team with our diagnosis or team performance review, which contains quantitative facts and qualitative anonymous quotes. "Where is the team at the moment?" "How well do we trust each other?" "How much do we hold each other accountable?" "How committed are we to the collective team result?" "How well do we use productive conflict to reach the best solution?" In a first team workshop we reflect back what we have found. Thus, from the very beginning we bring out in the open what is going on in the managers' heads anyway. There is no possible hiding place. Constructive dialogue begins straight away without avoiding the "elephant in the room" for long. Depending on the diagnosis, we might give the CEO clear feedback and coaching before this second step.

Mostly, the third step is a leadership performance review. In this phase, we include concrete leadership feedback from managers below the C-suite: "How is executive leadership perceived?" "What is the shadow of this behaviour into the organization?" "Which patterns of behaviour are observed between departments?"

The fourth step is made up of a whole range of interventions – regular reviews and team offsites,

shadow coaching in board meetings, individual coaching of the CEO and selective members etc. Whatever is necessary to promote the process of reflection and development.

OE: How do you get such jobs and how is the task at hand defined before a cooperation with a client even starts?

Dierke: Often, CEOs get in touch because they are vaguely aware that something is going wrong: "There's something not working properly in my team, we could do much better." While we are clarifying the task at hand, we leave the client's observation vague and do our diagnosis with a "bucket" than a "spotlight approach". We arrange to go into the organization without any constraints or instructions and do fact finding. We also do not allow anyone to preview the surveys, prototype reports or detailed workshop agendas. It is a joint process of development. We decide based on our experience what is necessary to be successful together. We are more like a lawyer than a service provider for our clients. If someone wants to squeeze us into a corset we decline the job.

"Openness and self-criticism by the CEO are decisive signals to the team. If the CEO opens up, the team will likely do the same."

Houben: Time and again, we are approached by a CEO to create better teamwork in the top team – but then the diagnosis shows that we first need to work with the CEO. In which case, we tailor our approach to him and do a personalized feedback report in a two hour meeting saying, "We don't need to bother you with your team yet." That isn't something that is predefined. It is the result of our diagnosis. If the CEO isn't willing to move and experiment with new behaviours, the team will perpetuate its dysfunctional dynamic. The CEO has simply too large a shadow and too important a role in the workshops. Strong CEOs share the personal feedback we give them as a handout and discuss it openly with their team because they want to learn. Openness and self-criticism are decisive signals to the team. If the CEO opens up, the team will likely do the same.

Dierke: You have to imagine the teams as though they were on a journey. Once they pass certain

stops they become braver. For instance, if in the first workshop they have dealt and got to grips with the team performance review, then for example the follow-up offsite can be spent coaching the individuals in and with the team. When doing so we usually spend one hour focusing on each manager based on additional 360 degree reports and the team is integrated into this coaching through feedback and collective reflection. That is an unbelievably powerful element for the individual and the team. As a deeper look at the individual creates particularly strong team cohesion. In opening his or herself more than usual and facing the feedback of others, the individual becomes visible to the other members in the team. A strong opening takes place on both sides. In our opinion, this gives the team the strongest impulse to bond. Often, trust in others is missing in alpha teams. Building up this valuable trust is an element that is promoted in this format of individual coaching with the team's support.

OE: Your descriptions up until now give the impression that you work mostly with male teams. Is there a difference in team dynamic if you are working with male only teams or mixed gender teams at the head of a company? And if so, what do you observe and how do you use your observations in the consulting process?

Houben: Yes, unfortunately, the C-suite is a male arena. Women in top management teams are still a rare species and virtually threatened by extinction: Since 2013, we've been experiencing a downright exodus of women from the executive boards of DAX 30 companies, for all sorts of different reasons. And even if women have made it to the top, we find what Herminia Ibarra calls "Pink Ghettos": Women are mostly heads of support functions such as Legal and HR. Just as much as male colleagues in these roles, they are rarely equal players and have a particularly hard time driving productive team dynamics in a team of alphas. Therefore, the popular demand for more women in boards is, in this general form, not sufficient.

Dierke: In the rare cases of top female executives running business units with actual responsibility for P&L, we don't notice a fundamentally different team dynamic. Women aren't better leaders: Just like men, they also bring their personal characters, strengths and weaknesses to the table. Nonetheless, in our experience, women often have

a more reflective view of unproductive dynamics, are braver in addressing conflicts and will talk more openly about topics that are avoided as “soft” by alpha males. Women contribute the resource known as emotional intelligence, which is proven to decrease the higher up the rankings you go in companies. Thus, it is particularly low at the top where it is most needed. Of course, we use this resource. Yet, a strong female player isn’t enough to promote open dialogue in a team. There needs to be a critical mass of women in the team. And their male colleagues need to be prepared to appreciate this diversity and engage in a collective learning process.

OE: Do you work alone or as a duo?

Houben: We nearly always work as a duo, particularly in workshop settings. Seven to ten alphas can be a quite challenging bunch of people. In order not to sway under pressure and the alphas’ strong dynamic, we have to consistently work as a reflective team in workshops. That means we reflect together on dynamics and play them back: “What is actually going on in the workshop at the moment?” “Which dysfunctional patterns of cooperation are happening right now – as a case in point?” That is known as action learning in a concrete situation and it is important in maintaining high energy levels in the workshop. We need to repeatedly think: “What is the correct next step?” That is because these workshops are extremely dynamic. We create a rough agenda, and change it as we go along so that we can meet the demands of the team. To do this, we need to be able to take the step – what we call – from the “field to the balcony”. In other words we switch from player to observer, and that is only possible if there are two of us.

There’s another aspect of our work as a duo: Executive teams act in a highly risky environment. Therefore they are very reliant on us opening up for them a transitional space for learning. And as a couple, not just as business partners but also life partners, we can offer them something similar to a new version of the original holding environment. That is probably something that defines working with us: The holding environment that is created by a man and a woman. Clients have told us that exactly this interaction between a man and woman

gave them a certain form of security needed to bravely make the next step for change.

Dierke: Our division of roles is dependent on the situation, but we tend to divide them according to our backgrounds: Anke focuses more on the individual psychodynamic whereas I concentrate more on the organizational dynamic. So, we complement each other. As a rule, Anke is more likely to take on the challenging role, while I am in reframing mode.

OE: What are the requirements in order to be able to successfully coach C-suite teams?

Houben: You need a solid understanding of the business because you need to be able to connect the challenges in team collaboration to the strategic challenges. That is the first question a CEO asks, and you need to be able to answer it straight.

Dierke: That is the first pressure test.

Houben: On top of that, you should not use any psychological or theoretical speak. Otherwise you’ll quickly find yourself back outside the door. You need to be able to translate what you have learnt on a conceptual level in various professional trainings into management language. I can only agree with Wolfgang Looss, who said that coaching isn’t something you can learn in a short period of time like a technical skill. Professionalism can only grow through long-term and diverse experience and international expertise.

Additionally, you need to be unwavering. Most CEOs try to back you into a corner in the first minute, just to test how you react to pressure. And if you are the right person for the company’s alpha team. You have a maximum of three minutes to establish your authority at eye-level. That is the usual process. You need to be able to deal with that and like it.

Indeed, coaching CEOs requires courage, tenacity and independence, in particular when it comes to tough feedback. Until now, it has never gone awry. That is because top managers in the C-suite usually appreciate independence and direct language and say “My goodness, in this feedback-free environment someone is finally telling me how ineffective I am. That’s great!”

Coaching and consultancy can be very effective instruments, especially in the C-suite. In order to pass the test in this business, you need a diverse professional foundation based on a solid education, business acumen, a steadfast nature and poise.

Dierke: I would add just one thing: positively appreciatively accepting alphas as they are. There is much cynicism and malice, interestingly, on the side of coaches and consultants in particular. In order to be able to work with alphas productively, you need to accept them as they are. You need to interact with them in their specific way taking their specific

dilemmas into account. Having been ourselves in management positions this is very natural for us. If you don't do that or think you need to fundamentally change them, you won't get very far. And I really mean it: I don't mean it superficially, I mean appreciating and personally embracing who they are – which is something the client perceives and feels right away. In that respect, as a coach you need to understand and present yourself as an equal partner at eye-level – only then you are able to create an effective development alliance.

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