



Why Leaders Fail to Help Their Teams Succeed — And Here's How To Fix It

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*It's hard to beat the triple-threat resume of [Harry Feuerstein](#), my colleague and the president of *The ExCo Group*, the senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm I joined last fall. Harry played sports and owned professional teams when he was younger, served as a U.S. Army officer, and his business background includes building a startup as CEO as well as CFO and CEO roles at divisions of Siemens. He now leads our practice helping teams sharpen their alignment around culture and strategy. I sat down with him recently to ask him about the themes that come up time and again in his work. Here's our conversation, edited for space.*

Q. What are some patterns you've seen during all your work with leadership teams?

A. One of the questions I usually ask when I go into an offsite is, "What are the behaviors that you want from each other?" And usually within the first two or three answers, someone will say, "We've got to have each other's back." At some point in their lives, most of them have played sports. Occasionally someone's been in the military. Maybe it was a fraternity or sorority, but at some point they've all been in environments where they've had each other's back. But they go to work and that all goes right out the door.

As a general rule, teams don't have each other's back for a number of reasons, and most of them go back to the fact that they've never thought about what it means to be a team. And it

goes back to the leader. Leaders don't always set their teams up to win. They get together as a team, but the conversations are really about updating the leader, and not having the right conversations to win against their strategy.

Q. So many people use sports analogies in business. But what are the right lessons that are applicable in both worlds?

A. In movies and books about sports, the most important scene is usually the motivational speech. But people forget sometimes what really great coaches do. There are fundamental truths that have nothing to do with their individual coaching style.

For example, every single one of them has a clear direction on what they want to accomplish. It might be to make the playoffs, or if you're the New England Patriots, you set the bar high, and your objective is to win the Super Bowl. But everybody's clear on where they're going.

Second, every coach has a system to win, and there's a philosophy and identity around that system, and everybody knows what it is. And the coach says, "I'm going to get the players to work within this system, or I'm going to tweak my system based on what I have."

But in business, people often forget those fundamentals. They get together for meetings to report out numbers, but skip over the important questions. What does success look like for us? Why do we have a team in the first place? Everybody has a day job, but what does the team need to work on together to accelerate the strategy? At the end of the day, there needs to be a system that's aligned to the strategy for winning.

Q. But most people don't run their meetings that way.

A. No, they're usually hub and spoke: the CEO wants to be informed and maybe hand off things to people in the moment, or people are giving updates.

Instead, the conversation should start with, what does success look like, and what does this team have to do to make that happen? What are the three things we need to get done, and what is the team's role in making them happen? As a team, you need to own those three things, and you need to set your meeting agendas against those goals. In sports, people practice against the coach's system, and teams in business need to do the same. The meeting agendas reflect the system, because it prioritizes having the right conversations and how you're going to make decisions and communicate them to the organization. The leader has to own that.

That means shifting meeting agendas from where they are today, which is usually about 90 to 95 percent tactical and a small percentage for strategic discussions. You have to shift that paradigm so that you're talking about things that matter against the strategy and prioritizing them, and talking openly and honestly about the behaviors that are going to guide the group.

But when you look at the priorities of the average team, most of them a) don't fit within the scope of the team's collective responsibility and b) are a series of individual projects and c) are often way outside the available bandwidth, so things don't get done.

Q. All this rests on the leader's shoulders.

A. It has to start with the leader. The leader owns the agenda, and making sure everyone is driving to the outcomes, and creating accountability for the behaviors to get people working together. Again, this is what great teams do. They hold each other accountable. They don't start out that way. It starts with the coach saying, "This is how we're going to work together and I'm going to hold you accountable." And over time, the team develops a muscle around accountability.

I generally don't see leaders holding people accountable for their behaviors. They tend to hold people accountable only for results, but results are bigger than just the numbers. If you want your team to ultimately work as a team, then you as a leader have to hold people accountable to the behaviors that you've all agreed to or that you've set. And if you do that, then those behaviors will cascade down through the organization.

Q. What are other patterns you've seen?

A. Leaders often don't communicate enough. You have to keep people informed and then expect the same level of communication deep in the organization.

They also have to understand inter-dependencies on the team. The leader has a much bigger role in this than sometimes they think. Once you set the priorities, you have to be clear about everybody's role to make them happen. Again, that's what great teams do; everybody knows their role and how they're going to work together. Most teams don't spend a lot of time talking about that.

And you have to be willing to do addition by subtraction. You may have a great performer, but they don't work within your system. That said, they may thrive in a different system.

Q. Why are high-performing teams so rare?

A. It's not a natural muscle. Here's the sport analog: We come in as stars. You join a team, and you're good at what you did to get on that team. So naturally you're going to try to keep doing what you do well, often at the expense of everybody else. And you probably have compensation systems that encourage those behaviors, too.

We've grown up competitively. And that's the way we're often taught about leadership, which usually doesn't talk about teams as more than just a component of leadership. They teach people how to lead a team, but they don't actually tell you how to be on a team. So the leader has to be really intentional to get them to develop that muscle.

Q. How did you learn this yourself?

A. I was the CEO of a group at Siemens, and I was flying in on a Sunday night for my team meeting the next day. And I was shrugging my shoulders and rolling my eyes. And I literally thought, “Wait a second. If I’m shrugging my shoulders and rolling my eyes and I’m the CEO, what does the team feel like?”

It was a big pivot for me. Because when I was in the military or when I was in sports, I would have never thought that. I would get jazzed up for those meetings. Why am I not excited for this team meeting? That changed my whole attitude, and I wanted to get this right. That was a big leadership moment for me.

Let's keep the conversation going. What do you think holds some teams back from working together? What are the best ways to build a more cohesive team?