



ARTICLE

Board Composition and Recruitment Weak-Link vs Strong-Link Theory

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It requires a strong and consistent focus to select/recruit directors that balance the skills, characteristic and attributes of each director to create a cohesive board team.”

Board recruitment, composition planning and their relevance to organisational performance are well-traversed subjects. But what is less well traversed is this question; is your boards composition and recruitment predicated on 'Weak-link' or 'Strong-link' theory? If not, should your board adopt one of these approaches?

Before answering these questions. We must first agree that weak-link vs strong-link theory applies to board environments. Why, because this theory relates to teams. Therefore, we must first agree that a board is a “team.” The definition of a team is straightforward, it is a group, comprising individuals who combine their skills, knowledge, expertise, and behavioural characteristics and attributes to lead an organisation in attaining its goals and strategies. While it is unusual for boards to think of themselves as a team. Using that simple definition, we can define boards as a team.

It is important to recognise that a board is not the only team in the hierarchy of an organisation. The structure of organisational leadership is most often conceived as being two dimensional containing the board, and the executive. While residing in the same organisation we view them as operating independently of one another in a hierarchal structure. This is true, but within that hierarchal structure there is a “third team” which forms and operates episodically and whose influence is critical in organisational performance. I highlight this because it is critical that when recruiting directors or deciding on board composition, the impact of these on this “third team” is considered. Let me explain.

Research [Searching for the “mythical unicorn”- the missing link between boards of directors and organisational effectiveness] has

identified that an organisation's hierarchy has three distinct teams, the board, the executive and the 'Third-Team' [see: The Third Team: Linking Boards and Organisational Performance]. The Third-Team forms when the board and executive collaborate in formal and or informal settings, e.g., meetings and strategy sessions. When formed, the Third-Team is the most influential in an organisation, because the collective skills, knowledge, wisdom, etc., within the team drives organisational performance. The research identified the development of Synergy, Trust, and Confidence within and between the two groups (board and executive) who make up the Third-Team as being the defining characteristics of a high-performing team. Synergy, Trust, and Confidence were identified as critical for many types of high-performing teams, e.g., sport, project, etc.

Question

When recruiting directors,
what is important –
“star” power or “team” power.

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With acceptance of this overarching view, The next question to reflect on and answer is when boards conduct recruitment and or succession planning; “do they base their decisions and recommendations on how well the candidate supports their best director or, how well the candidate adds value to the collective (team) skills, etc. What makes a winning team, how do we recruit additional or new members for our board team. Are the boards recruitment decisions more often driven by “star” power or, “team” power?

Football or Basketball

The research of Anderson and Sally [see: The Numbers Game: Why Everything You Know About Soccer Is Wrong] investigated what matters most when recruiting or transferring football (soccer) and basketball players. Their question was: when recruiting players what is more important to creating a winning team: how good your best player is, verses, how good your worst player is?

The research found that what matters most in football is how good your worst player is. It is a “weak-link” sport. Football relies on every player using their unique skills to support and collaborate with other players to score.

If there are five perfect passes, followed by one bad pass, it is like the five perfect passes never existed. Like a football team, boards rely on the unique skills, expertise, and collaboration of each individual director to collaborate in arriving at the best decisions.

There is a famous sequence of passes [48 in total] that lead to a goal in a game between Tottenham Hotspur and Queens Park

Rangers. This sequence of forty-eight passes perfectly reflects a team playing with synergy, trust, and confidence. They see themselves not as individuals supporting one player (strong-link) but as a team supporting each other in their strategy to score. Football is a “weak-link” sport.

Passing the ball between players in football is an excellent metaphor for the constructive debate and questioning that reflects a high-performing board. Directors add their own unique view and touch to a topic (ball) with individual directors playing different yet critical parts in the debate until the discussion /questioning culminates with the Chairperson summarising the discussion and decision.

In contrast to football, Anderson and Sally identified basketball, as a strong-link sport. When recruiting or transferring players between basketball teams, it matters more how good your No. 1 player is. If four players are average and the fifth is Michael Jordan or LeBron James, Michael or LeBron will still score. A basketball teams' overall performance relies more on the strength of its strongest player. Unlike football, the mistakes of the weak players are not as costly.

But, in basketball, if Michael or LeBron miss a goal attempt or make a mistake, everyone knows. Their failings are obvious for all to see. But when a board's decision making is controlled by its dominate or star director. Collective responsibility combined with the cloak of silence which surrounds board decision making ensures no one knows. Therefore, from the stakeholder's and or shareholders' perspective, the board team is at fault.

In a board, Michael or LeBron are avatars for that dominant or star director. Just like a basketball team, weaker directors are subservient to the star director for their lead while supporting the star director's comments and decisions.

We often credit Michael and LeBron and other star players with winning games single handed. When footballs Lionel Messi scores, while skilful and amazing to watch, he relies on his team, placing him in a position to score. Football is a weak-link game, basketball is a strong-link game.

Director Recruitment and Cricket

Cricket is another sport where stars are common and often lauded for leading their teams to victory. But when selecting players for a cricket team do selectors use a “weak-link” or a “strong-link” approach to selections?

Question

Is your Board's recruitment
based on “Weak-link” or
“Strong-Link” recruitment policies?

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Cricket teams include two recognised groups of specialist players, batters, and bowlers. There are some exceptional players who excel at both, but these players are rare. To create a successful cricket team, you select players who are not only talented players with different skills, but they must also respect the skills, knowledge and experience of every other team member. Foremost, they must be “team” players. Collaborating and supporting each other as each member of the team uses their skills and experience to help the team win. Cricket is a “weak-link” sport.

Like batters and bowlers, we consider a board and executive to each hold specific skills, knowledge, etc., yet their functions are separate and distinct. Individually, whether it is directors and executives or batters & bowlers, each is important, but one without the other cannot win games or lead an organisation to success.

When selectors select cricket players for a team, they endeavour to create a balance in skills, temperament, experience and behavioural attributes and characteristics, among other qualities. When recruiting new director's boards should take a similar approach to the cricket selector. Making selections that balance the skills, characteristic and attributes of each director to create the strongest team possible.

This requires a strong and consistent focus on recruiting directors who not only have the skills, knowledge, expertise, etc., but who can become a cohesive part of a board team. They must respect the skills, knowledge, and experience of every other director on the board. Importantly, as with football or cricket, directors must be “team” players. Board Work: A Team Sport

Question

“Board recruitment is a “weak-link” process. The ultimate performance of your board and organisation depends on the whole board (team), not one member.”

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Conclusion

The world is becoming significantly more complex, reinforcing the need for boards to develop and or recruit the competencies, skills, knowledge, etc., needed to meet the challenges of this rapidly developing world. This complexity means that boards cannot rely on a single or even two “star” directors to carry the load and have enough expertise, skills, knowledge, etc. Added real value to organisational performance in today's rapidly evolving world, requires a “team” of directors.

Grounding board recruitment practices and processes on weak-link theory does not mean foregoing that brilliant director. But it means rigorously assessing the board's requirements to make sure a depth and breadth of skills/knowledge, expertise, etc., across the board team. You should purposively review the processes used, so that when reviewing board composition or recruiting a new or replacement director, the assessment structure and processes are predicated on “weak-link” not “strong-link” practices.

Weak-link recruitment adds long-term (succession) and short-term (performance) value to your organisation. If your organisation wants, to get the most value from its board team.

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