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Top Teams Brief 03

SGTT Roundtable: Modeling Top Teams

On March 6th, 2014, the Competence Center for Top Teams of FIM at the University of St.Gallen organized the third St.Gallen Top Team (SGTT) Roundtable. As with previous events top leaders from leading organizations contributed their reflections on leading top teams to top performance. The Roundtable expectations were compellingly set at the onset by Mr. Nani Beccalli-Falco, President & CEO GE Europe and CEO GE Germany; "I am creating teams (and) expect to create a team here." The SGTT co-development *team* would try to model team performance, linking insights from the frontlines of practice with research from academia.

Prof. Winfried Ruigrok, Dean of Executive School and Director of FIM pointed out the University's position, where "dialogue with practice is key" and with that premise in mind, it is fundamental for academia to understand "what top team challenges in practice are." Stephanie Schoss, Director of CCTT and roundtable organizer, shared a construct from academia, "self-efficacy" (one's beliefs in one's own ability to accomplish). The normative implication for teams would be to introduce persons to the team with high self-efficacy. Could "team efficacy", self-efficacy having become a "collective" property, a guide for team formation?

An issue that soon centered the group's attention was the role of team leaders, or in other words, how democratic can top teams be? Rolf Dienst, Founder of Wellington Partner Venture Capital, quickly dismissed any romantic notions: "Top teams are not at all about equality." Interestingly in top venture teams (TVT) it may not be obvious at the beginning who the leader is, but a leader "emerges" as top challenges are met, often thanks to his or her *Achtsamkeit* (i.e., mindfulness). Patrick Magyar, CEO of the European Championships in Athletics 2014, identified key attributes of a team leader (represented at the 'top' of an inverted pyramid); leadership at teams means being a 'translator' and bridge-builder balancing the diverse skills of team members.



Dr. Jürgen Galler, Chief Strategy Officer and member of the executive board of Swisscom, emphasized the often-overlooked reality that “teams need a goal” and Nani Beccalli-Falco complemented the thought noting that it is the leader who provides the “common direction.” Moreover, leaders are pivotal in motivating individuals to “morph into a group”. The importance of a team leader has an ominous side; “great teams will be ruined by the wrong leaders.” So what is the essence of team leadership? “Service!” Dr. Milena Danielsen, a top banking executive, further expanded the service proposition from leaders to all the members of a team, in a poignant formula; “We, less Me”. Egos need to be managed and team members must move beyond their personal agendas.

Should a SGTT model include the visualization of a normative mindset transition along the ego-to-service continuum? Are top teams formed for routine tasks or for specific missions? Some teams are ‘inherited’ and within these we have top down team formation (GE and Swisscom) as well as self-selection (fighter pilot teams). Lieutenant Colonel GS Daniel “James” Pfiffner, responsible for selection and training of the Swiss Air Force, noted that teams “reject pilots with the best flying skills if their personalities don’t fit in the team”. At the far opposite from inherited, we have teams (like those at start-ups) where formation is completely ‘greenfield.’ In short, among the rather diverse team taxonomy, SGTT will have to select master variables for its models. This implies hard choices, and yet despite the rich debate there is consensus that teams are key to many of the most vexing paradoxes of management. Dr. Galler provided an illustration of the central role of teams in a statement that rings deeper than might be obvious at first sight; “Teams link culture with strategy.”

The insights, dialectical relationships, and open challenges brought forth during the Roundtable generated tremendous energy and left CCTT with yet another throve of ideas to model top teams. The SGTT co-development phase is in full swing and the first beta components of the incipient model are expected to see light before the summer.

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