

Five Questions Every Leadership Team Needs to Discuss

A simple exercise can reveal where a team is aligned—and where it has only assumed agreement.

Ask five members of a leadership team to describe their company and you might expect five versions of roughly the same story. You may be surprised.

One person thinks the company's priority is growth. Another thinks it is improving profitability. Someone else believes the immediate challenge is developing the next generation of leaders. They may even describe the culture differently. None of them is necessarily wrong. They just may not be as aligned as they think they are.

There is a simple exercise I have used to begin that conversation. Give each member of the leadership team a 5 x 8 index card and ask everyone to answer these five questions independently:

Who are we? What do we stand for? What behaviors define us? What do we want people to experience when they work here or do business with us?

Where are we? What is happening in the business right now? Financially? Organizationally? With customers and employees? What trends are helping us or creating problems?

How did we get here? What decisions, habits, systems and ways of working produced today's results? What have we done particularly well? What might we have allowed to continue too long?

Where are we going? What do we want this company to become? What matters most? What do we care about preserving? What do we want to see happen over the next several years?

How are we going to get there? What needs to change? What should we continue doing? What will we stop doing? What are the few things that deserve our greatest

attention? And how will we know whether we are succeeding—financially, operationally and culturally?

Then comes the important part. Don't discuss the questions while people are answering them. Have everyone write independently first. Then put the answers on the table and compare them.

Where are you saying essentially the same thing? Where are the answers different? Where has one person identified something no one else mentioned? And perhaps most importantly: Where have you been assuming agreement that may not actually exist?

Those differences create the conversation. The objective isn't to decide whose answer is right. It is to develop a clearer, shared understanding of the company—where it has been, where it is today and where its leaders intend to take it.

Only after that conversation would I draft the final document. And I wouldn't make it a 20-page strategic plan. Try to get it onto one or two pages. Write it in ordinary language. Make it understandable to someone who joined the company last week.

Then take it beyond the leadership team. Use it to have conversations with managers and employees. Ask them what makes sense. Ask what they see differently. Ask what may be missing.

For a newer employee, imagine the value of being able to understand: This is who we are. This is where we are today. This is how we got here. This is where we're trying to go. And this is how we intend to get there.

That is more than communication. It gives people context. And context helps people make better decisions without waiting for someone above them to tell them what to do.

Five questions. Five index cards. And perhaps a very different conversation about the company you are building.