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Idea in brief

Alpha teams at the top of organisations are a particular species. They differ from any other kind of 'teams'. Thus, acknowledging their specific features and dynamics – AND leveraging those is crucial for successful coaching work at the top.

Coaches must leave their comfort zone and take risks to master this challenge – just as top managers have to cope with insecurity day after day.

Team Coaching at the Top: How to accelerate Top Management Teams

Dr. Kai W. Dierke and Dr. Anke Houben

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"Systemically speaking, cats and tigers are pretty similar – however, you would do best to treat them quite differently!" This metaphor by the British historian Robert Conquest succinctly describes the challenge of team coaching at the top: Top management teams are an exceptional species. Thus, successful coaching work with top teams is critically dependent not only on recognizing their unique characteristics, but also on leveraging them consequently for team development.

Top teams as its own species – tigers not cats

Top management teams are of a very special kind – everything is different: the players, the goals, the issues and the collective autopilots as "team" at the top. Even if each top team is unique and functional or dysfunctional in its own way, they all have one thing in common: The specific dynamics of these teams require a special type of intervention in team development.

Specific players

Top management teams are teams of "alphas” – composed of 95 percent male managers who have reached the top of the company through their unconditional commitment. Alphas, deeply convinced of their superior rationality, are assets to any company, and at the same time they hold an enormous risk. Under pressure they develop behavioural patterns which can have a destructive effect on cooperation, such as dominance, activism and rivalry. Thus, intervening successfully in a team of alphas requires inner strength and independence. The coach has to operate on eye level to counter alpha dominance.

Specific goals and topics

Structurally, management teams are “non-teams" – they are only loosely connected by abstract missions or financial targets. The success of each one’s own "silo" is a priority. Alphas need to consciously switch off their personal "autopilot" and structural compulsions, so that they can work towards collective leadership in which the interests of the company are their primary goal. A thorough business understanding is a prerequisite for successfully intervening in areas where the dynamics are extensively shaped by departmental egoism. The coach has to be able to highlight the effects of dysfunctional team dynamics on business results – and illustrate the benefits of cooperation, the "collaboration premium".

Specific interaction patterns

Top management teams follow a "collective autopilot" – they are aligned to rigorous prioritization as a survival strategy. The world of top teams is a VUCA world, one characterized by **v**olatility, **u**ncertainty, **c**omplexity, **a**mbiguity. It requires fast solution-oriented team decisions more than ever. The top team’s "management attention" becomes one of the most valuable resources for the coach. Using this narrow “corridor of attention” effectively is a prerequisite for successfully intervening in top teams.

Collective autopilots in top teams – and their implications for coaching interventions

Typically, one finds certain attitudes and behaviours in top teams that can be detrimental to progress and innovation, but can also be turned into an advantage if the coach is suitably alert and well equipped.

1. *Facts are more important than understanding perceptions*

Alphas in the top team are typically rational managers with high analytical intelligence (IQ). Objective facts are their currency. Subjective perception or emotional intelligence (EQ) are not rated very highly. The consequent suggestion we have, is: "Confront the team with brutal facts!" Top teams need rational anchors and strong impulses to engage in a reflective dialogue. "Perception is reality" only becomes an uncomfortable fact if the team is forced to deal with the adviser’s qualitative and quantitative sound diagnosis. Therefore, the coach has to invest in diagnostics and put forward ‘hard facts’ in the style of a manager.

2. *Action is more important than joint reflection*

Top managers are action-oriented. When quick decisions become the benchmark of effective action, it leaves no time for self-critical reflection. Each strategic issue is given priority. Additionally, many managers are experienced in avoiding reflection, as self-critical questioning carries the risk of destabilising the self or one’s role. What does this mean for a coach? "There is no alternative to reflection!" Meeting eye-to-eye and having inner strength are crucial to successfully withstanding the alphas' defence mechanisms. And there are quite a few of them, ranging from criticizing the diagnosis ("Is this really the right method?"), through fundamentally criticizing feedback providers ("Do we even have the right leaders in the first place?") to trivializing. The coach has to lead the team to reflection – and keep it there, even against strong resistance.

3. Routines are more important than adaptive learning

Acting according to routines is one of the most important success strategies in top management. Adaptive learning by critically questioning these routines rarely happens. The consequent suggestion we have, is: "Use the routines to break the routines!" An "anything is possible" approach of the coach and relying on process competence only are doomed to fail. Coaches must earn authority and the top team's respect with a bold approach, in order to lead the team into a learning attitude. To operate successfully, the coach has to master the language of management and to demonstrate business understanding, power of judgment, courage to disagree and a clear position.

4. (Pseudo) consensus is more important than productive conflict

Top teams are experienced in avoiding open conflict. Every conflict increases the risk of being discredited by the organisation or the stakeholders, as "without clear direction" or "estranged". What does this mean for the coach? "Reveal conflicts and use them!" Alphas are masters in trying to resolve conflict quickly by treating the symptoms. Deeper underlying roots of conflict, such as in personal success models or conflicting areas of interest, are rarely addressed. Coaches need to break the 'harmony cartel' if the team is avoiding to do so. Alphas will only take risks if the coaches themselves demonstrate an appetite for risk.

5. Direction setting is more important than leading by example

Top managers rarely use an "I" when defining a problem. Top teams usually rely on "rule defining," i.e. on technical approaches such as codes of conduct. "Role modelling" as a form of leadership by example, demonstrating productive behaviour, is often underestimated. The consequent suggestion we have, is: "Get close to the person!" Coaches need to think of top management intervention as a contact sport: It is personal, uncomfortable and to the point. The coaches themselves have to get out of their comfort zone, make themselves vulnerable and be aware of their own unproductive autopiloting behaviour when they interact with alphas.

6. Results (WHAT) are more important than processes (HOW)

"Visible results" is the one priority that ranks above all others for top teams. Results, decisions and concrete agreements are what matter. The quality of HOW, i.e. the collaborative process or dialogue, rarely count as meaningful in their own right. The consequent suggestion we have, is: "Rigid process is not enough!" Top managers always need to understand the direct relevance of discussions about their behaviour. In the end, there have to be results with consequences for day-to-day management. Coaches who see their task as process moderators only, have no chance in the top team. The coach must act flexibly, practice a variety of methods and not cling to rigorous structures.

Top managers have strong barriers against self-critical reflection as basis for behavioural change. For successful coaching at the top, the consequences are quite clear: Massive barriers require equally massive interventions.

Case study #1:
A top team trapped in CEO's dominance – intervention targeting the leader

"Our team morale is at an all-time low and the team members are withdrawing. We urgently need to motivate them!" The CEO's assessment of the state of affairs during our first meeting was as clear as it was inaccurate. Our diagnosis, based on interviews with the members of the board, revealed a different problem: In any top team the CEO is the key role model for either functional or unproductive behavioural patterns. A dysfunctional team can often be linked to the CEO's dysfunctional behaviours. Thus, coaching mandates with the goal of "aligning the team" often mean coaching the CEO first, something that wasn't asked for here.

Case study #1 : Diagnosis

The board of directors of the international mechanical engineering group started off as a successful and highly motivated group. The team – handpicked by the CEO – had made a remarkable turnaround. After years of decline, they were able to increase sales and grow profitably. Nevertheless: "After two years of success," said the chief marketing officer, "our CEO turned the team sour. We are winning to death!" Further interviews confirmed that there was a collective burnout and depression. The team was on the wrong path, with colleagues oscillating between inner resignation and open mutiny. Despite all the success, the CEO unwaveringly saw his main task as keeping up the pressure on the team: “We cannot afford to slack down now.” The CEO’s ambition resulted in behavioural patterns that had a dysfunctional effect on the team, in that he:

… focused on deficits without recognizing achievements;
… paid attention to detail, which was perceived as a lack of trust; and
… took on a "challenging” mode that prevented any dialogue.

The oppressive actions of the CEO invariably triggered the same two reactions in the executive board members: defence or avoidance.

Confronting the CEO with himself – reflecting on “unprompted feedback”

CEOs act largely in a feedback-free space. In fact, almost nobody will tell their CEOs anything they don’t want to hear. Thus, CEOs rarely reflect on their own contributions ("the shadow of the leader") to unproductive dynamics in the top team. For the CEO there is hardly ever an "I" in the problem definition. That is exactly where coaches can fulfill a key function: They can determine the issue, direct the dialogue, and decide on providing unsolicited feedback if they consider it as essential for productive team development. "What are we doing in the team workshop?! Thirty minutes will certainly be enough to talk about this. I don't have time for the scheduled 90 minutes!" At the beginning of our second conversation (after the interviews) the CEO was in his typical dominant mode. The only option for us was to set the agenda and take a definite stance: "The workshop is not the issue here! We will be spending the next 90 minutes talking about you!" Thus, after a brief moment of irritation, we paved the way for reflecting on feedback.

In such situations, our "CEO Performance Report", based on the aforementioned diagnostic interviews, has proven an effective instrument. Diagram 1 shows how the CEO’s strengths can turn into weaknesses, affecting team dynamics. Based on these facts, a surprisingly open and self-reflective coaching dialogue developed – and this for two hours, instead of the planned 90 minutes. The discussion revolved around a single question: "What dysfunctional patterns does your behaviour trigger in the team, and what are the consequences for business success?" The exchange resulted in an effective next step: The CEO decided to send a strong signal to the team and openly shared his feedback report during the team workshop.

Diagram 1 : "CEO Performance Report" (excerpt):
Confronting the CEO with brutal facts

The “Shadow of the Leader”:
Strengths, turning into weaknesses…

Your strengths	Positive effect on the top team	Negative effect on the top team
1 Highly intelligent and self-confident	▪ Has strong analytic power ▪ Act decisively, with good inuition	▪ Is dominant, not self-critical ▪ Excludes others, overrules team members
2 Focused and action-oriented	▪ Gets things done ▪ Produces results	▪ Is impatient, hectic, actionism as rule ▪ Is unwilling to learn
3 Performance-focused and ambitious	▪ Achieves highly ambitious goals ▪ Exceeds expectations	▪ Is distrustful, always unsatisfied ▪ Focuses on deficits only
4 Disciplined and non-emotional	▪ Is extremely productive, energetic ▪ Focuses on the issue at hand	▪ Over-stretches the team members by over-ambitious expectations ▪ Shows rarely appreciation
5 Very direct and straightforward	▪ Is clear and explicit ▪ Pushes others into action	▪ Triggers sarcasm instead of trust ▪ Produces only superficial obedience and risk avoidance

The CEO makes himself vulnerable – leading the team beyond the "threshold of trust"

Showing weakness in a circle of other alphas is one of the biggest personal challenges an alpha leader can have to deal with. But, it is also his most powerful lever to demonstrate that he trusts his team: "I received harsh feedback from you, so I understand that I need to change for us all to become better together!" The team’s reaction was as expected: After an initial dialogue between the CEO and us about his feedback, a two-hour long structured and guided exchange developed between the CEO and his team. They jointly reflected on behavioural dynamics in a brutally honest, but also a respectful manner. This dialogue marked the turning point. The team followed the CEO’s example, dropped the strategic issues that were planned for the following day and decided to give each other open feedback. This highly emotional process resulted in an agreement on individual and collective behavioural goals, which was extended by a commitment to mutually hold each other accountable.

Positioning “the shadow of the leader" – leveraging a role model in the organisation

The "feedback marathon" of that particular workshop became part of the team’s collective memory and served as key reference point for continued reflection of unproductive behavioural dynamics within the team. Eventually it became the basis for fundamental behavioural change, as the organisation’s HR department reviewed the events years later: "This was a team like none before, a real role model: All those alphas had enormous individual performance aspirations, and yet, they all pulled together, highly motivated and loyal, confident that the team and the CEO together would fight for the best solution. They radiated this new awareness and attitude: the silo mentality and departmental egoism weren’t an issue anymore". Today, five years after the first workshop, the team still practices the “feedback marathon”, even though the composition changed and a new CEO came in. Because it proved to be one of the most effective instruments in "leading by example", the management board decided to do away with all classic "performance reviews" at executive level, and to replace them by various forms of peer feedback.

Case study #1: Conclusion

Making the CEO part of the problem	Effective team development has to start with the CEO personally. The coaches must get the CEO to take responsibility and see himself as part of the problem – in order to become part of the solution. But precisely this is not part of the official mandate, usually. The coaches should be prepared to take high risks, also in taking this decisive first step despite initial resistance.
Leveraging the CEO as a "role model"	Top team effectivity is not achieved by means of complex intervention architectures and detailed design, but by simple, targeted, consistent interventions aimed directly at the person. A new positive "shadow of the leader" of a CEO and his/her top team is the most important lever for introducing cultural change, without which change programmes become a mere waste of time.
Working as a coaching tandem at the top	When working with alpha teams, the coaches' powers of joint reflection and resilience are imperative. High intellectual ability, fast interaction and learned defence mechanisms are particularly prominent in this sphere. A strong team of coaches is indispensable for analyzing team dynamics in the "reflecting team," ad-hoc interventions, and in terms of the required high level of flexibility and readiness to take risks.

Case study #2:
A top team in crisis mode – confrontation as an intervention

"Our strategy is clear, but my top team has a massive performance problem, exactly now that there is this global financial crisis! A new quality of leadership has to evolve in the team offsite!" The CEO's diagnosis was vague, his judgment was harsh and he had high expectations of quick solutions already underway. Our experience was confirmed here again: The CEO is never just the client who books us; he is always part of the problem as well. In this case, especially given the pressure of the financial crisis, the CEO-CFO axis became so markedly dominant and exacerbated by the heroic self-stylization of the two main players, that the rest of the top team played only a puppet's role. This dysfunctional situation had to be addressed by interventions.

Case study #2: Diagnosis

Under the impression of the financial crisis and the limited success of the new strategy, a dysfunctional "crisis regime" had established itself at the top of the company: A dominant CEO-CFO axis that monopolized all decision-making according to the principle "the crisis justifies all means". Conflicts spiralled out of control, and the CEO and CFO stepped in to resolve them in an aggressive "announcement mode". The consequences were serious:

- the other top team members reacted with denial or blaming;
- controversial decisions were initially delegated to managers on the next level;
- conflict avoidance, blockages and blaming "all against all" increased on this next level as well;
- everyone tried to cover their backs through excessive attention to detail and escalated decisions to the top.

The CEO and CFO interpreted the board members' and Top 100 managers' attitude as one of poorly taking responsibility and directly took over decision-making themselves, thereby continuing the vicious circle.

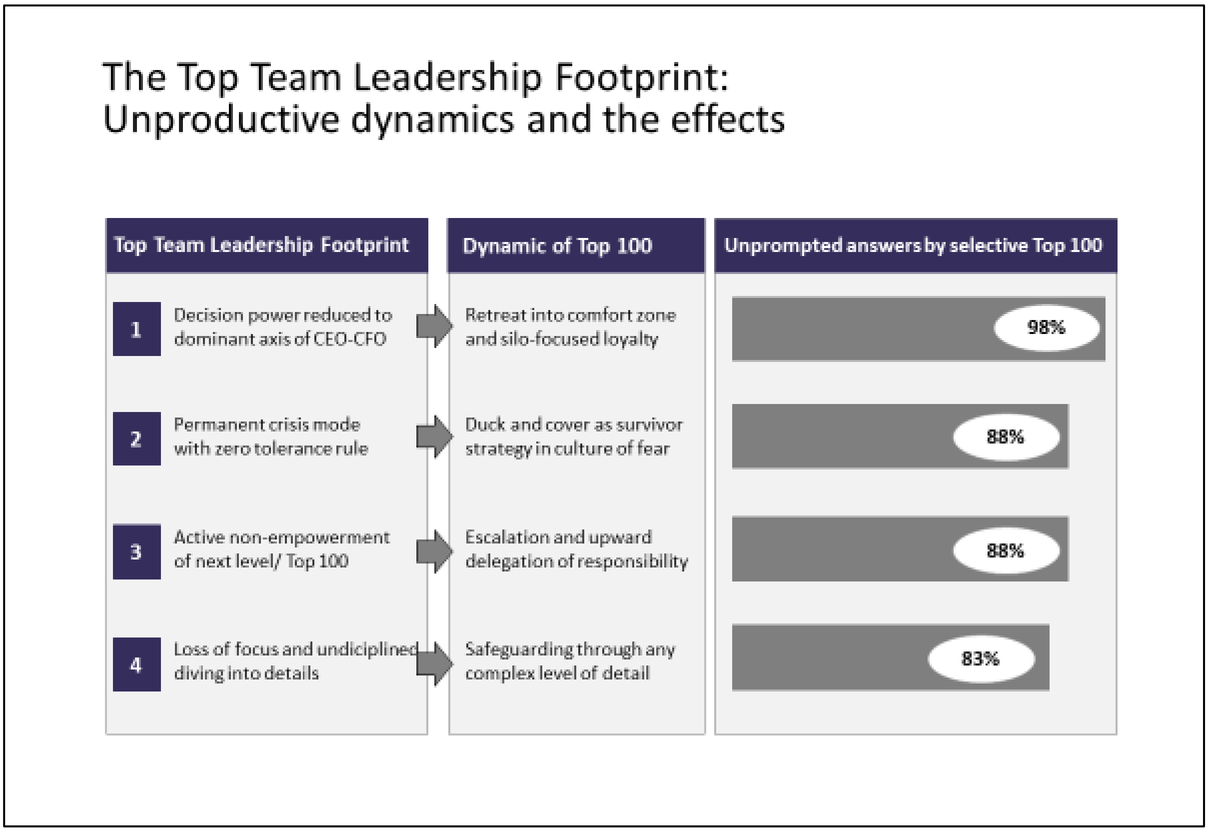
"Stretching" the mandate – instead of clarifying it in detail
Paradoxically, a confrontational intervention promised the greatest success in this crisis dominated by fears. And the confrontation started right at the first meeting with the CEO. The most important prerequisite for effective

intervention in an alpha team is a completely open coaching mandate from the CEO personally, without any hierarchical protection zones. The CEO has to acknowledge the coaches as trusted partners at eye level, who require no less than deferring authority to them during the process of team development. The conventional logic of clarifying deliverables before starting with an assignment does not apply here. Our goal was not to specify and thereby limit the assignment and the possible results, but rather to open up all options. This applied to the diagnosis, as well as to the team workshops, CEO coaching and other interventions.

Confronting the team with brutal facts - instead of just working with "what is in the room"

Confrontation also determined the way forward: We decided to include not only the members of the board but also half of the second management level in the diagnosis. Thereby we increased the pressure on the top team. We focused on the question "How does the top team dynamics affect the performance at other leadership levels?" At the first team offsite, we confronted the board with the results of our interviews with team members and with 40 selected direct reports. For this, we used our own instrument, the "Team Leadership Performance Report" which has the form of a classic strategy presentation, written in managerial language and presenting our findings in a structured and analytical way. Diagram 2 gives a first impression of this report that deliberately provides an emotionally provocative and, at the same time, easy-to-access impulse, and so became the basis for the first round of reflection, working in groups of three. We did not “present” our diagnosis, but processed it directly with the team members. The "authoritatively" small working groups we put together, assured that the "right" team members started talking to one another.

Diagram 2: "Team Leadership Performance Report" (excerpt):
Forcing the top team out of its comfort zone



The collective "autopsy without blame" followed one single key question: "What do we see?" And there was an explicit condition: "No quick-fix solutions!" A dialogue within groups of three participants helps to avoid a massive confrontation about the content while also reducing reluctance to engage. The unanimous response in the next open team round was as follows: “We have a massive trust and behaviour problem in our team, and our best people have judged us extremely critically! These are facts, and ones we can no longer ignore". This finding was supplemented with examples from management practice. Bilateral conflicts were addressed by the team and orchestrated by us. For the first time a self-critical, emotional dialogue developed in the team about the causes of the dysfunctional dynamic in the team and the organisation, and each individual's role in it.

Initiating learning outside the comfort zone - instead of simply defining solutions to symptoms

Alpha managers are typically hesitant in building trust – be it in others' competence, judgments or intentions. However, a high-performance team has to cross the "threshold of trust" together. This crucial step was the focus of the second team workshop, 10 months later. In these cases, we use the INSEAD Group Coaching Method based on a 360° feedback as an intervention. Under the guidance of two coaches, every manager reflects on his personal findings in an open round of discussion with the team, identifying his own productive and unproductive patterns of behaviour. The feedback tool is not a standard instrument, but is developed for each client individually to assist them in meeting their specific challenges in managing the business and behavioural dynamics. Although at first glance the method is aimed at individual development, personal reflection in an open round is an exceptionally strong trigger in developing trust within a team. This works well because it not only demands of each member to be open and appreciative of others, but also to acknowledge own weaknesses, and to take responsibility for the personal development, as well as that of all other team members.

Three years after the kick-off of the mandate, the effects were visible: The intensive dialogue, the management board's leadership commitment and the members' individual commitments all formed the starting point for new behavioural dynamics. Despite natural, sporadic relapses, this influenced the entire organisation. The CEO presented the findings emanating from the first workshop, at a top management conference. He wanted to present the findings transparently to the Top 100 and encouraged them to cooperate by anchoring the "leadership commitments" on all management levels. Also, the top team members held similar workshops with their area teams. Personal performance in line with these "leadership commitments" makes up the largest part of variable pay today, based on regular feedback sessions.

Case study #2: Conclusion

Keeping the mandate robustly open	Crisis situations are socially highly dynamic, complex and risky. Coaches can only be successful if they are able to obtain an open, robust mandate directly from the CEO. This is the only way their analysis and interventions on all unproductive dynamics on an individual, team and organization level will be taken as legitimate.
Setting targeted pressure points in the team	Development takes place outside the comfort zone, and this is especially true for the top team. Alphas are learning when they are challenged to question familiar perspectives and to cross their own boundaries. Coaches need to be brave enough to engage in confrontation with confident, assertive top team members. And they need a high level of intellectual and emotional stability.
Recognizing the rhythm of the team	Each team has its own pace. This also applies to the top team. Behavioural changes come as a result of reflection and new experiences, for which time is needed. Coaches cannot artificially accelerate this process; they have to "go with the flow" and determine the rhythm of their intervention in such a way that the team is ready for it.

Case study 3#:
A top team in denial – the risk of intervention failure

"This is not a team, this is an old boys' club!" This verdict of the new CEO of an energy company about his "inherited" leadership team was straightforward. In the top team made up of "old timers", every member was an expert in his field, while jointly delivering only average performance. According to the CEO, the team was lacking a real desire to achieve – in short: "...we really need to shake things up in there". We knew the CEO well from long-term work with him and his earlier teams in other companies. And we also shared his standards: A clear focus on team success, productive fighting for the best solution, joint responsibility for the team result and never being satisfied with the first results. Therefore, our approach was clear: with a robust mandate we could take a confrontational approach. However, if success models become routine, there is a growing risk of failure. This applies to coaches as well.

This leadership team operated differently, as was clearly revealed in the interviews with the team members. They didn't operate as a high-performance team, rather as a circle of friends: personal solidarity as basis, appreciation of one another as specialists, harmony and non-involvement in one another's respective responsibilities, team performance as the sum of individual performances. "We never needed this 'team workshopping' before, we've always been fine!" The head of production was to the point when it came to the board's self-perception. For years this team got along in the collegial circle. They found "team events like when we went to Marrakesh or Barcelona" to be important, as "that really strengthened the esprit de corps".

Despite the findings, we decided to follow our success model in line with the CEO's expectations and chose a confrontational approach here too. In doing so we stepped right onto the path to failure. Our "Team Performance Report" did not have the desired effect of paving the way for a self-critical dialogue about dysfunctions and potential; rather, it served as a catalyst for the full repertoire of defensive mechanisms, namely

- denial, as in "We don't have to be a team!"
- rationalization, as in "In our line of business there is no other way!"
- black-and-white thinking, as in "Should we pretend to have conflict now… isn't that artificial ?" and
- personal attacks, "So you actually want to question our recognized achievements?"

Although we succeeded in steering the discussion at the workshop in a constructive direction, the reflections and agreements of the team remained "technical", superficial and far below our expectations. Only in the course of two additional workshops, we managed to overcome the defences and initiate a productive development mode in the team. In this case, it was decisive for the continuation of the team process that the CEO did not plan to stop the entire thing just because the first offsite did not have the optimal effect. We learned a lot about the team dynamics from the first workshop that we could use for the follow-up workshops. At the same time, our trusting relationship with the CEO helped us to openly discuss our joint learnings.

Case study #3: Conclusion

Reflecting one's own models of success	The confrontational approach is not without risk: It relies on the team, perceiving itself as a performance and development community and having a "sense of urgency" for further development. If this is not the case, strong interventions can trigger defensive reactions that are hard to overcome.
Regulating team pressure sensitively	Every team has its comfort zone – and its zone of "productive insecurity", in which learning takes place. Interventions have to be set in such a way that they build productive pressure for change, but do not exceed the team's capacity to absorb criticism.
Maintaining an unbiased stance	Long-term client relationships at board level hold a danger of "fusion" in which client judgments and positions are almost identical to those of the coaches. Even when team members seem to have a dysfunctional attitude, it is important to stick to an appreciative, development-oriented perspective.

Leadership means mobilizing people to go to places they would never go alone – outside their comfort zone, into personal confrontation, and into reflecting on "soft" behavioural issues. This simple definition of leadership shows that coaches themselves should take a lead in order to support the alpha managers of a top team. When working in such a challenging way with the 8 to 15 top executives of a large company, it has to be kept in mind: Coaches must earn authority to effectively work with these authorities, and they do so through leadership.

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Kai W. Dierke and Anke Houben work as a duo in leadership consulting for the C-suites of leading corporations in Europe. They are "panoramic" senior professionals: Building on 20+ years in the business, they embody a unique blend of experience in executive positions, knowing the boardroom from within, strategy consulting expertise, and coaching + leadership development practice. They founded DierkeHouben Leadership Partners in 2003, a Premier Leadership Coaching and Development Boutique for C-suite leaders and top talents stepping up to highest leadership roles. Their clients in coaching and consultation on leadership, team performance and culture transformation are board members and top teams of Euro Stoxx 50/ Dax 30 companies as well as mid-cap companies – covering a broad range of sectors like financial services, telecommunications, technology, pharmaceutical industry, transportation, consulting, and public sector. As a quality leader in their field, they do not limit themselves to any single school of thought or method but provide multiple lenses and leverage their access to latest academic and empirical research for the benefit of their clients. Both are Adjunct Professors on Leadership Experience at the international HHL Leipzig Graduate School of Management. They publish regularly in Harvard Business Manager and other professional Management Journals. Their recent book: "Gemeinsame Spitze. Wie Führung im Top-Team gelingt" (Joint at the Top. Successful team leadership in the c-suite).

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Gemeinsame Spitze. Wie Führung im Top-Team gelingt, Campus

«This book sets new standards: It not only gives access and offers a deeper view on the top mangement level of corporations. Beyond that, it is written in an appreciative style describing top managers with their deeply human strengths and weaknesses. Top decision-makers will recognize themselves with great benefit. Based on real life case studies, DierkeHouben illustrate how their approach serves to analyze highly complex leadership challenges and to find a productive way forward. With their profound knowledge of the state-of-the-art literature on management and group dynamics as well as their know-how of the daily reality in top management – a rare asset – they provide vivid insights into cases of success and failure.» Review: «*Erfolgreich in eisigen Höhen», Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*