



The Simple 3-Step Process to Create a High Performing Executive Team

Published Aug. 5, 2015 on [LinkedIn.com](https://www.linkedin.com)

Author: Daniel Stewart

The success of executive teams rests with each member knowing two things:

- 1. what they need to achieve*
- 2. how they will achieve it.*

The first part is about purpose and identity — what results the team needs to accomplish.

The second describes the rules of engagement for the team — the expected behaviors while working together.

Over the past few months, I've worked with two senior executive teams to increase their synergy and effectiveness. One team consisted of 26 people, and needed to replace bad habits, learned through the company's old fear-based culture, with forward-thinking habits. The other had 12 executives, many of them new to one another and to their roles.

And both teams needed two things:

- 1) A clear **team purpose** that everyone understood
- 2) Agreed upon **Operating Principles** that outlined *how* team members would collaborate to achieve their objective.

The first part, **establishing a team's purpose**, is critical and is where a team often spends time crafting and reworking until the purpose is just right.

The second part, **defining the Operating Principles**, is too often left to chance and not given sufficient time to ensure buy-in and accountability among all team members.

This is why we find it best to establish an executive team's Operating Systems at a single team-building event with a three-step process:

STEP 1: Divide and Conquer

A fun way of starting this process is to do a series of team performance activities, such as the ones we have developed to test team efficiency. These activities are highly participatory, engaging participants while building trust between team members.

1. Divide the team into groups of 5-7 people and ask each group to develop a list of Operating Principles that they will use during their activities (for example, make sure each voice is heard, clearly define roles, and celebrate successes).
2. After each team activity, let the groups edit and add to their list of values whatever that they think will help them perform better in the next activity.
3. After 2-3 rounds of activities, the teams should have a very strong list of behaviors that work, which will form the basis of the Operating Principles.

STEP 2: Blend and Combine

The next step is to blend the lists of values from each group into a master list of Operating Principles.

For this, we use the power of the pen.

1. We give each person a marker and invite them to write on a whiteboard the 1-2 Operating Principles that mean the most to them.
2. The event facilitator reads each comment out loud, crosses out duplicates, and merges them into a concise list. The key here is to ask the person who wrote it, and then the rest of the group, what this potential Operating Principle brings to the team.

3. In this safe environment, people can challenge and clarify these Principles in an open and helpful conversation with the aim to create a solid list of Operating Principles for the team.

STEP 3: Make it Stick

The final step is asking how the group will hold each other accountable.

1. Usually by this point, the team is so excited about the Operating Principles that they want to immediately share them with their teams and put copies up in every conference room at all the sites in the organization.

2. This engagement is admirable, and while it is smart to share it with their teams, it is better to use the list as a way of holding oneself accountable, rather than imposing it on others outside of the team. The main point is for each Executive Team Member to verbally commit to living the agreed upon Operating Principles (even putting everyone's signatures on a single document). Executive teams also encourage each team member to call out good behavior and candidly discuss the bad in each other.

3. In the end, most executive teams decide to post a copy in their primary conference room and in their offices. They also communicate the principles to their teams as a sign of leadership unity and to ask their teams to hold them accountable.

4. Finally a 90 and 180-day follow-up is also scheduled to review and discuss the Operating Principles.

We have found immense positive benefits to teams who go through this process, and create and adopt Operating Principles. This is one of the areas in which we as Stewart Leadership specialize.

Executive Team Operating Principles Example*

1.

Operate with integrity and following through with what you say.

2.

Make inclusive, timely decisions that include and inform everyone.

3.

Own the decisions of our team. Everyone champions it.

4.

Deliver on the organization's purpose to the highest standards.

5.

Act with purposeful urgency to achieve and sustain top quartile excellence.

6.

Seek first to understand each other through active listening.

7.

Freely discuss and share information, respecting others opinions and perspectives.

8.

Be flexible and adaptive to circumstances—be open to change.

9.

Have fun and celebrate success.

10.

Model the positive attitude and behaviors we want our team and peers to have.

**NOTE: These Operating Principles were selected from several different organizations as an example for you.*