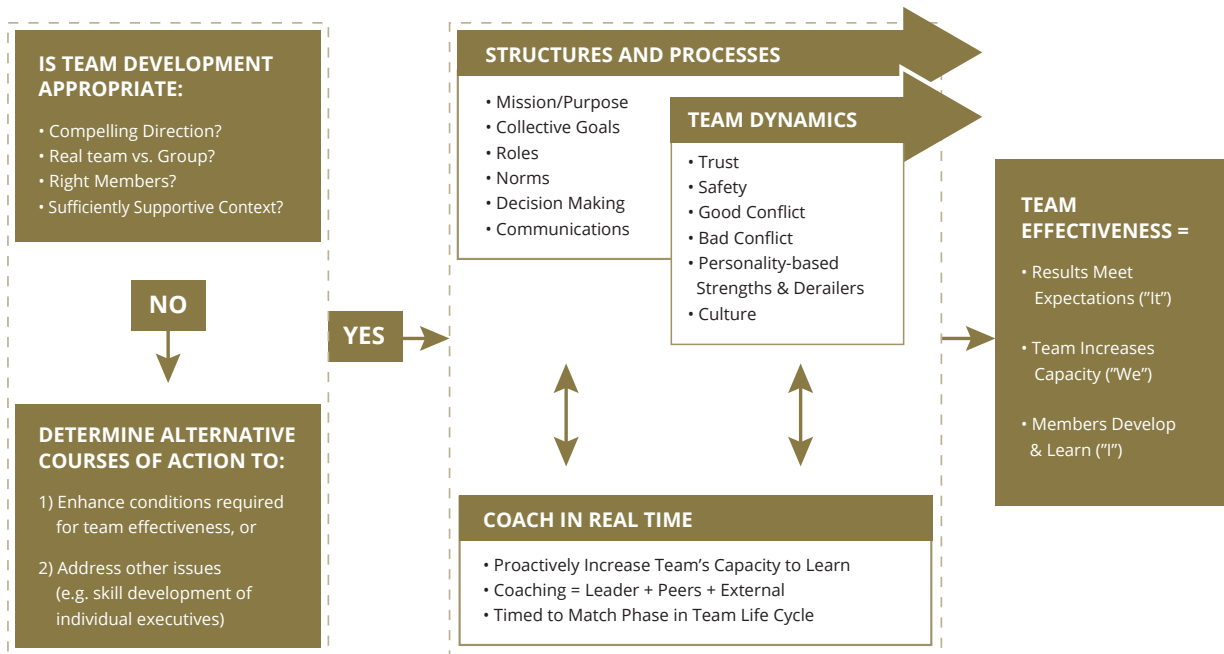


# HOW TO DEVELOP A HIGH-PERFORMING LEADERSHIP TEAM

In an increasingly turbulent world characterized by a relentless pace of technological change, more and faster flow of information, and intense global competition, teamwork affords the possibility that a collection of people can make better decisions, come up with more innovative ideas, and implement them faster than individuals working alone. Given the demands of the external environment, effective teamwork is a competitive advantage. However, leadership teams often fail to fulfill their potential. People who are “A” executives often lead “C-minus” teams. Real work happens outside of the team, and rather than being energizing, team meetings are merely events to be endured. The IQs of the individual members might average 140, but the team has a collective IQ of 85.<sup>1</sup> In order to help organizations maximize the value of their leadership teams, Overfield Leadership Group (OLG) has created a structured yet flexible process that integrates a range of practices to improve the effectiveness of leadership teams. The Leadership-team Development Framework (LTDF) provides an overview of this process.

Drawing on lessons learned from the research literature and hands-on experience consulting with leadership teams, the LTDF process targets the team as a unit, rather than the individual members. It should be noted that this process is not a replacement for executive coaching for individual team members. On the contrary, coaching a leader may be a prerequisite intervention for starting team development, and frequently executive coaching with team members occurs simultaneously (for more information, see our whitepaper on executive coaching). But optimal team development cannot be achieved by merely helping individuals become more effective team players. It requires that the team as a whole be coached, and the coaching needs to occur as the team is actually carrying out its collaborative work.

LEADERSHIP-TEAM DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK



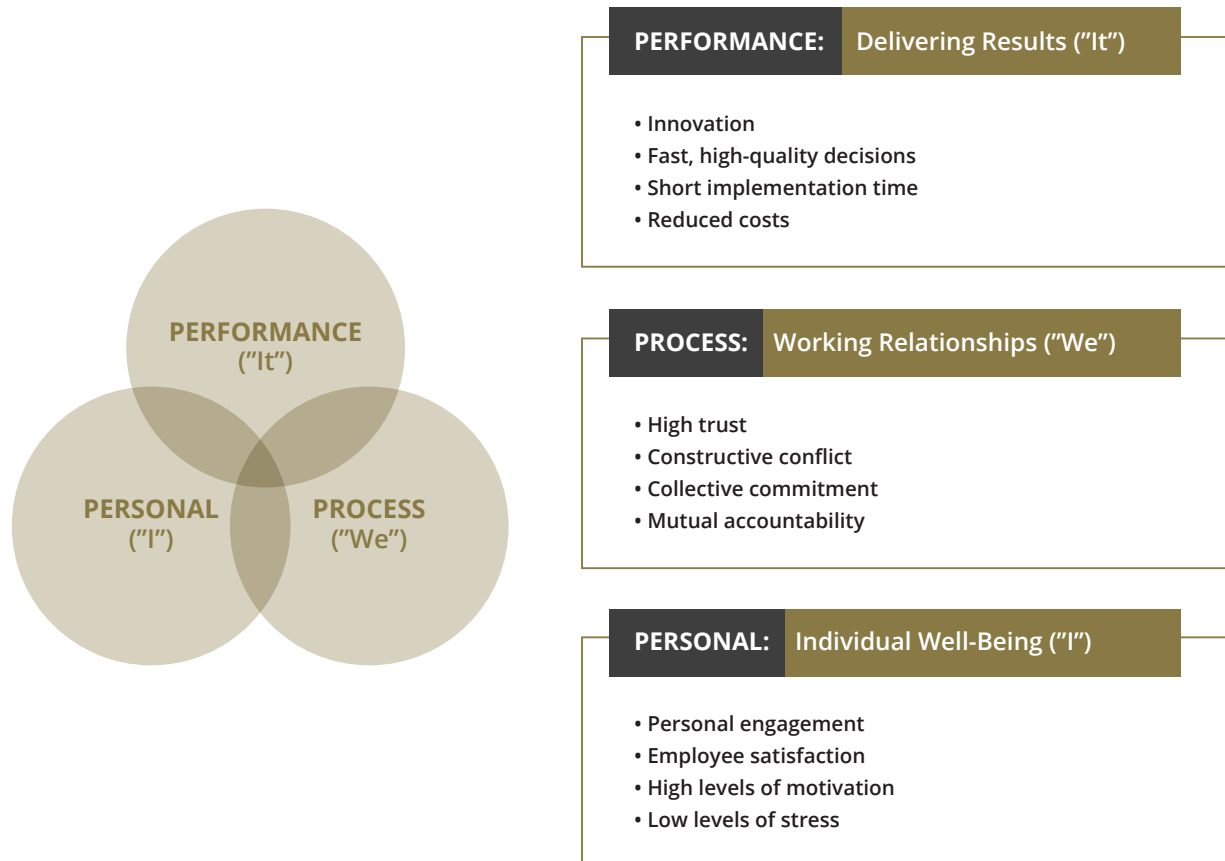
Source: "A Comprehensive and Integrated Framework for Developing Leadership Teams," by Darren Overfield, in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, volume 68 (2016), number 1, pages 1-20.

The process guided by the LTDF occurs in three phases: (1) qualifying, during which it is determined if team development is appropriate; (2) intervention, during which the development takes place; and (3) evaluation, during which the outcomes of development—in terms of team effectiveness—are analyzed. The first phase is discussed in the OLG whitepaper, "Is Team Development the Right Tool for the Job?" The activities that make up the second and third phases may be used in different combinations and in various orders, but applying them effectively requires systematic implementation. This paper will discuss the activities of these phases, as well as a methodology for applying them.<sup>2</sup>

## BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND: DEFINING TEAM EFFECTIVENESS UP-FRONT

Although evaluation is the final activity implemented in team development, conceptually it should be considered at the beginning. Prior to starting a development intervention it

is useful to assess the degree to which the team is designed to achieve three effectiveness criteria.<sup>3</sup>



First, is the team able to deliver results at a level of quality and speed that satisfy the standards and expectations of those internal and external customers or stakeholders most directly affected by the team's work? Measures of this performance-related criterion include financial data such as revenues, costs, and profit margins, as well as other results such as implementation times, customer support, decision-making, and innovation.

Second, as the unit becomes stronger over time, will it increase its capacity to work together interdependently in the future? This process-related criterion concerns the working relationships among team members, level of trust, degree of mutual accountability, and ability to handle conflict.

Third, does the team foster the well-being, growth, development, and learning of its

members? This personally-related criterion concerns the degree to which individuals become more capable over time. High levels of personal engagement with one's work, satisfaction with the job, and motivation, coupled with low levels of occupational stress, are markers of this factor.

To sum up, effective teams manage the paradox of simultaneously focusing on “it” (delivering bottom-line results and accomplishing other task-focused activities), “we” (fostering effective relationships among team members and the esprit de corp of the unit), and “I” (facilitating personal growth and development).

Getting a fix on these things before beginning the implementation of team development can be useful for several reasons. For example, focusing solely on delivering results risks burning out members of the team. Similarly, only considering the interpersonal bonds among people could lead to a “country club” atmosphere in which individuals enjoy interacting with their colleagues but the business bottom line gets short shrift. And personal growth and development should occur in conjunction with improved results and more effective relationships. Viewing the activities comprising the team intervention through each of these three lenses before commencing increases the probability that all three criteria will have been achieved when the intervention concludes.

Once the interventions have been conducted, OLG assesses how well each of these success criteria have been achieved. For example, we frequently create brief surveys or conduct targeted interviews to evaluate goal attainment.

## THE 'CUBIC' APPROACH TO TEAM INTERVENTION

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After confirming with a client that team development is the right tool, OLG will do the following to ensure that the intervention is effective.

### CONTRACT

During contracting, OLG works with the organization to determine what specifically to do and how to do it. A careful assessment of the four LTDF qualifying conditions (compelling direction, real team versus a group, appropriate membership, and a sufficiently supportive organizational context) informs the best way to structure the core interventions.<sup>4</sup> Other interventions may be involved as well—such as individual coaching for the leader and team members—before initiating a team-development process. Contracting is an iterative process to identify the team’s strengths, gaps, pain points, and learning opportunities. We work with the client to determine which of the three areas of intervention identified by the LTDF (structures and processes, team dynamics, and coaching in real time; see below) will need to be addressed and in what order. And we do not rely solely on the team leader’s assessment of the situation. We involve others (team members, board members, HR leaders, and so on) to get their input on how best to help the team improve. This approach provides the requisite information for effectively determining the role of OLG, scope of work, timeline, and budget for the intervention.

### UNDERSTAND

After contracting for a specific scope of work, OLG seeks to better understand the nuances of the development situation, to “enter this team’s world”: What are the specific pressures, challenges, and opportunities facing the team—internally, within the larger organization, in the external environment? What is going well, and why? What is not, and why? What might be going on that is not immediately obvious?

Depending on a team’s specific needs, this work may call for conducting brief interviews or surveys with open-ended questions, or it may involve administering formal assessments such as personality instruments or surveys of team dynamics. For a new team, it is important for us to understand members’ expectations and assumptions about the team. For existing teams, this represents a deeper dive into the issues identified during contracting and yields data to be used in service of increasing the

team's capabilities. For some teams, this may also be an opportunity to inquire about any undiscussables, the proverbial “elephants in the room”—issues that have a negative impact on the team but are not talked about openly. In addition to yielding valuable diagnostic and more nuanced information (as well as identifying the key questions that the team needs to wrestle with), this process of understanding also helps build trust and rapport between OLG and team members.

### **BUILD/BOLSTER**

In order to establish the foundation for effective teamwork, some building (or bolstering) may have to be done. Research has found that the leader plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of a senior leadership team.<sup>5</sup> The leader's influence occurs especially through two general mechanisms: ensuring the team is set up right and providing effective team coaching. In view of this finding, OLG begins all team-development interventions (no matter how well-functioning a team appears to be) by consulting with the team leader—and oftentimes senior HR executives as well—to determine ways to strengthen any weak areas. Of particular importance is ensuring that clear behavioral norms—rules of engagement—are in place to guide member interactions. With newly established teams, the emphasis is on *building* the foundation for effective teamwork and motivating team members. With existing teams, the focus is on *bolstering* essential and enabling conditions, making changes to increase effectiveness.

### **INCREASE**

The next step is to increase the team's capabilities. We begin by addressing two topics with the team collectively. First, we summarize the fundamental issues that undermine team effectiveness: (a) Teams are poorly structured—for example, the team's purpose is not understood by all; it is not clear who is on the team and who is not; roles and responsibilities are poorly delineated; and oftentimes behavioral norms governing members' interactions have evolved over time, rather than being explicitly agreed upon, and are not as effective as they could be. (b) There are dysfunctional dynamics among

team members—trust is low and conflict is high, perhaps owing to structural issues and perhaps because of the psychological make-up of the team. (c) Team members are likely good problem-solvers—smart—but not effective learners.

Second, we outline a customized plan for developing team performance by deciding how best to address the team's specific needs: coaching in real-time, establishing structures and processes, and improving team dynamics. We discuss with the team the staging and sequencing of team-development sessions, outlining the activities that will take place and the assessments that will be employed and addressing questions and concerns. These are not linear steps in a sequential process, and most interventions will emphasize some components more than others.

**Coaching in real-time.** Because increasing a team's capacity to learn is critical to the success of nearly all teams, and because coaching is an effective way to promote team learning, coaching in real time will be incorporated into almost every team-development engagement. Furthermore, we have found that the topic of increasing a team's capacity to learn is a useful way to kick off work with a team.

Coaching the team in real-time as it engages in real work complements a focus on creating structures and processes and improving team dynamics. Because it is an activity that typically spans the team-development intervention, coaching takes different forms at different stages in the life cycle of the team. For instance, beginnings, such as launching newly formed teams or when existing teams undertake new initiatives, require coaching that orients members to the key purpose of the team and increases motivation to tackle important challenges. After a team has been working together for a while is an opportune time to take stock of how the team is functioning and whether any changes are warranted. The conclusion of a project or the end of a task cycle provide opportunities for the team to reflect on what they have learned and to identify implications for further improving collaboration in the future. Compared to mediocre or poor teams, outstanding teams receive more coaching from the team leader, each other, and external sources. However, team coaching is an activity that many teams do not productively engage in without external assistance.<sup>6</sup>



**Establishing structures and processes.** It is important to have a solid team structure and well-defined and mutually agreed upon processes for how the team operates. For existing teams, enhancing structures and processes is likely to improve effectiveness; for newly created teams, establishing them early on is imperative. For instance, when a client within a Fortune 250 financial-services firm was promoted to SVP, he asked OLG to design and facilitate a two-day offsite to help him and his newly created team get off on the right foot in working together. The session provided a structured framework for collaboratively drafting a charter that clearly outlined the team's purpose, each member's roles and responsibilities, how meetings would be run, and the norms by which members agreed to work with one another. One team member owned each section of the charter, which became a living document that was refined as the team gained experience working together, its external environment shifted, and membership changed.

**Improving team dynamics.** When we talk with teams about improving their dynamics, the members often initially think this means focusing on interpersonal interactions. That's because there is strong emphasis in organizations on relational harmony in teams. And many consultants, perhaps in order to meet the expressed needs of their clients, play to this belief. For example, arguably the most popular approach to team development in use today is Patrick Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.<sup>7</sup> His model is predicated entirely on relationship problems (the absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, and avoidance of accountability) that collectively cause the team's inattention to results, and it is sensible as far as it goes, but it does not account for the whole picture of team dynamics, let alone team development.

Team dynamics are multifaceted. So in addition to working on specific dysfunctions, it is necessary to balance psychological roles, address collective derailers, and improve cultural fit. The interaction of these factors influences team performance to a larger extent than team members may appreciate. So we make sure to carefully go through all these issues.

In order to better understand team dynamics, we frequently ask team members to complete a brief survey that assesses trust, psychological safety, “bad conflict” (interpersonal friction), and “good conflict” (engaging in dialogue and debate). Norms for this survey are based on a meta-analysis of published studies of executive teams. This approach allows us to compare a client team to a broad range of teams in the research literature, thus highlighting potential areas of dysfunction that might not be obvious to members or outside observers.

Then we turn to the issue of understanding the team’s strengths, which can be leveraged for success. One way to address this issue is look at the various roles teams need their members to play. These roles fall into two categories. The first relates to necessary technical skills, and concerns the functional roles that people play on the team—usually specified by a person’s position title (for instance, VP Marketing, SVP HR). The second relates to the informal psychological roles that are essential for effective teamwork (for instance, achieving results, generating ideas, or considering relationships). Members gravitate toward psychological roles largely based on their personalities. Balancing these informal roles facilitates team performance, and not doing so can seriously inhibit team effectiveness. So OLG conducts an analysis of all team members to better understand how many people are likely to play each role. This information is useful for highlighting the team’s strengths and areas of struggle and provides a starting point for improving team effectiveness.

After understanding the team’s strengths, we work on collective derailers.<sup>8</sup> Such behaviors represent the default setting for a team under pressure—what it is likely to do when under stress or operating on autopilot.<sup>9</sup> In many instances these can be strengths but under certain circumstances—for instance, when people are tired or stressed—can disrupt relationships, corrupt judgment, and interrupt the ability to collaborate effectively with others.

These so-called “dark side” characteristics are especially problematic for team

effectiveness when they are collective—that is, when several members have one or more risk factors in common. Trouble is likely in such cases because, if teams lack insight into the impact of their collective behavior, members believe their actions are normal or expected. These collective blind spots decrease the likelihood that members provide feedback to one another.

In addition, team members at risk for engaging in the same dysfunctional behaviors may accentuate the situations that trigger these behaviors, thus increasing the likelihood of their occurrence, creating a vicious cycle. For example, on a team with several members prone to emotional outbursts, hurt feelings from past clashes with peers can simmer just below the surface, creating a tense emotional climate in team meetings. If unaddressed, this chronically stressful climate increases the probability that one or more members will have an emotional outburst, which—in turn—leads to a more uncomfortable emotions.

Finally, we address the improvement of team dynamics by promoting a better understanding of the team's culture. Values form the basis for team norms, culture, and decision-making, and shared values can advance team development. Where the team has shared values, you see team or cultural anchors, which the team can use in case of disagreement. Team values are powerful at uniting and driving the team as a whole toward the attainment of some goals at the expense of others. Shared values also make teamwork more enjoyable. And alignment on core values increases the efficiency and effectiveness of teamwork. Teams with shared values are more stable, with higher levels of commitment and satisfaction. Conversely, teams lacking shared values often fail to agree on priorities. At the other extreme of the continuum, teams with too many cultural anchors can struggle with groupthink.

## **CONSOLIDATE**

An important aspect of coaching the team is to facilitate a process to consolidate the team's learning both in terms of content (that is, the results achieved, what members learned, and so on) as well as process (for example, identifying what went well and

why, what could have gone better, and what members learned about how to collaborate with each other more effectively in the future). Carving out reflection time may be challenging given the hectic schedules of busy executives. Doing so, however, is critical to fostering the learning that team members need to develop in order to improve their capacity to self-correct in the future. Finally, this may be an opportune time to collect follow-up data (for example, conducting a time-two assessment of team dynamics to compare to scores from the beginning of the process and interviewing key stakeholders again) in order to provide quantitative feedback to team members on their progress.

## CONCLUSION

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Organizations face a world that is increasingly uncertain. Most problems are more complex than any one person can solve. Consequently, leadership teams are playing an important role in contemporary business. Unfortunately, many organizations do not realize the full potential of their leadership teams because their executives are ill-equipped to lead them effectively. This creates a double dilemma: They can't effectively guide them, and the teams in turn can't effectively guide their organizations.

The LTDF was created to address this situation. In addition, along with the specific content it provides, the framework is conceptually valuable in two respects. First, it provides a mental model within which to understand the needs of any leadership team. It not only takes into consideration through-puts (the specific steps in a team-development intervention), it also explicitly considers both the inputs to the process (conditions that need to be in place for teams to realize their potential) as well as the outputs (how to measure team effectiveness). By encouraging people to begin with a broader view before locking in on a specific intervention, the LTDF encourages everyone to delve into foundational aspects of a team's functioning that might not be apparent.

The second value added by the LTDF is in demonstrating a practical way to incorporate

a focus on learning into more traditional aspects of team development, such as improving team dynamics. It has been over 25 years since Peter Senge began writing about learning organizations.<sup>10</sup> Chris Argyris' scholarship on the central importance of learning dates from the 1970s. More recently, Roger Schwarz has done a masterful job of tying together ideas from these and other thinkers into a comprehensive way to increase team effectiveness by improving learning. However, in general, few team-development frameworks expressly consider the importance of learning. The LTDF is grounded in learning.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Page 245 in Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard B. Ross, and Bryan J. Smith, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization* (New York, NY: Crown Business, 1994).

<sup>2</sup>For more on the LTDF, see the 2016 article “A Comprehensive and Integrated Framework for Developing Leadership Teams” in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, volume 68, number 1, pages 1-20.

<sup>3</sup>Page 45 in Roger Schwarz, *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams: How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2013).

<sup>4</sup>Page 14 in Ruth Wageman, Debra A. Nunes, James A. Burruss, and J. Richard Hackman, *Senior Leadership Teams: What it Takes to Make Them Great* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Page 184 in Wageman et al. (2008).

<sup>6</sup>Page 160 in Wageman et al. (2008).

<sup>7</sup>San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Hogan and Joyce Hogan, *Hogan Development Survey Manual* (Tulsa, OK: Hogan Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup>Page 20 in Lawrence S. Levin, *Top Teaming: A Roadmap for Leadership Teams Navigating the Now, the New, and the Next* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2011).

<sup>10</sup>Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1990).

### Suggested Additional Reading

Argyris, C. (1991, May-June). Teaching Smart People How to Learn. *Harvard Business Review*, 99-109.

Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1974). *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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Hackman, J. R. (2002). *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Schwarz, R. (2002). *The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Managers, Trainers, and Coaches* (new and rev. ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.



## BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

We build relationships based on trust and integrity. We don't cut corners, operating with transparency, ensuring confidentiality, and delivering on promises. Candor is only possible in a completely confidential environment.



## KEEP SCORE

As Peter Drucker stated, "Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes." With this spirit in mind, two types of metrics are a critical component of each development initiative: Process metrics monitor progress along the way, and outcome metrics evaluate end results to help deliver on the promise of becoming a more effective leader. We begin by clearly defining with a client what would constitute a "win" and then collaborate to deliver this outcome.



## APPLY SCIENCE

There are three areas of applying evidenced-based best practices. First, there is the science of goal setting and behavior change. Thirty years of research has identified what is effective (and what is not) when it comes to making the behavioral changes required for a person to grow and develop as a leader. We tap into this vast literature and provide practical ways for clients to benefit from its findings without getting lost in the minutiae. Second, there is the commitment to learn how to learn. As Eric Hoffer said, "In a time of drastic change it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists." Consistent with this message, we help clients apply research-based insights from the burgeoning fields of learning agility and growth (in contrast to relying on fixed mindsets). Third, there is the awareness that one must manage paradox in order to become a versatile leader. As F. Scott Fitzgerald observed, "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." In a similar vein, the literature on developing mental complexity provides useful approaches for growing as a leader in the midst of an increasingly turbulent environment.



## KEEP IT SIMPLE (BUT NEVER SIMPLISTIC)

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." In this spirit, we help clients crystalize the key messages in their assessment results and clearly articulate compelling development goals.



## MAKE IT PERSONAL AND PRACTICAL

We offer truly custom-built solutions, rather than an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all approach to development.



## PRACTICE WHAT YOU PREACH

We are concerned with our own growth, requiring of ourselves the same level of learning, risk, and vulnerability that we ask of clients.