CULTURE CHANGE IS
A TEAM GAME

the 3 success factors of CATs (Culture Action Teams)

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This article examines the crucial support role that Culture Action Teams (CATs) can play in a culture transformation. Drawing on my experiences designing and facilitating such teams, I describe three factors which I have come to view as absolutely critical to the impact and sustainment of CATs within organizations: (i) securing the direct participation of senior leaders, (ii) getting the right people on the CAT, and (iii) establishing a productive operating rhythm. My hope is that this article can serve as a thought-starter for organizations considering how best to use teams in support of a culture change and a call for others to share their learned "best practices."

Senior leaders need support to successfully navigate the culture change process

Title of this article notwithstanding, anyone working in this space knows that the success or failure of real culture change starts and stops with the senior-most leaders of the organization. They are the catalyst of what is certainly a much bigger team game in the long run. Will they be willing to look inward and examine the role and impact they have on the organization? Will they be capable to lead the change that is needed in the organization by *first* making the necessary changes within themselves? And then… can they get others to follow?

While these decisions and actions are the leaders' to own, they will need a lot of help. Help for culture change can come in many shapes and sizes, from the broad involvement of everyone to the formation of specialized teams, such as a Culture Action Team or *CAT*. CATs are typically launched in support of the process of culture change, which can involve several steps or phases and includes the initiation of the eventual solutions, in whatever format, that are sparked by this process [*see Exhibit 1*]. CATs are typi-
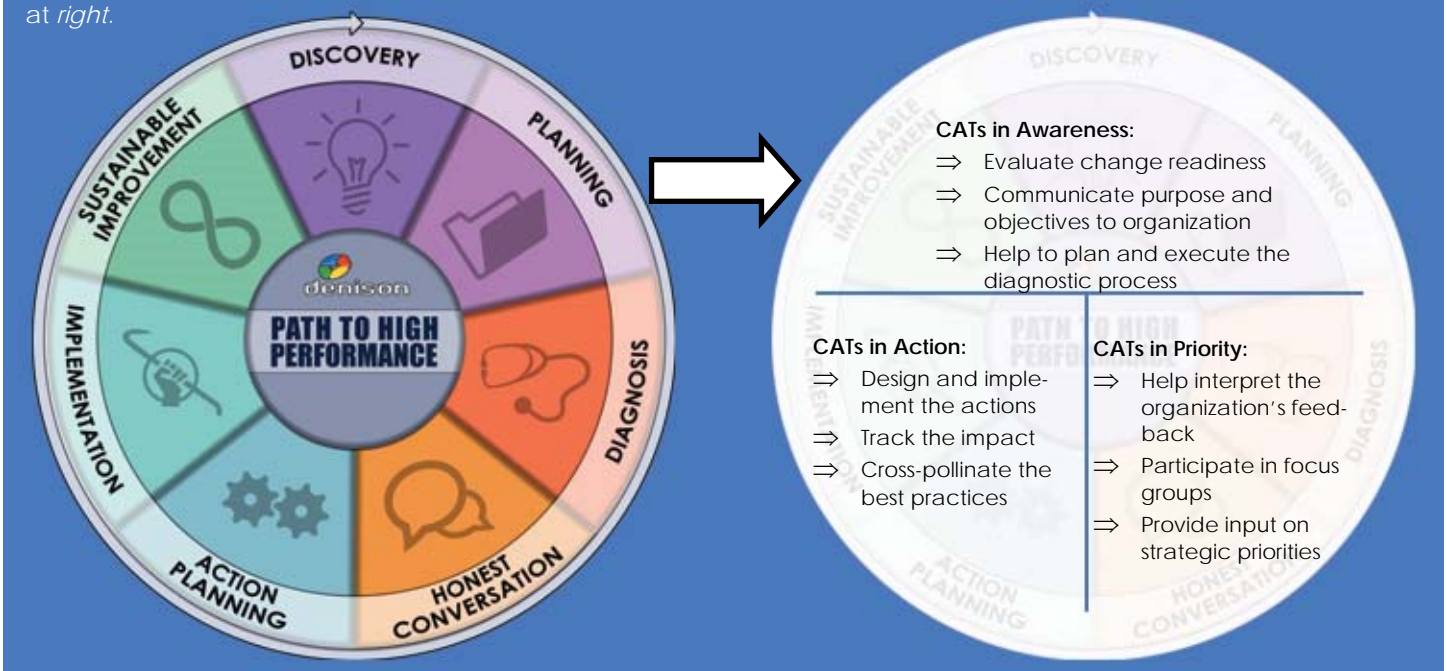
cally cross-functional in representation and preferably no bigger than "two-pizza teams" in number. [1]

My firm has worked with many CATs over the years, some which we helped to initiate from scratch and others which were already in place when we first came on the scene. We have seen a lot of variability in the purpose and design of these teams, and nearly as much variability in their success. *When successful*, we've seen these teams tackle a wide range of issues and create an equally wide range of solutions, such as:

- Launching new customer outreach and feedback programs
- Re-designing onboarding, training, and mentorship practices
- Creating "best practice" teams and forums to transfer job knowledge
- Sparking localized (e.g., department-level) initiatives to clarify vision and goals
- Supporting leadership communication via town halls, newsletters and social media

EXHIBIT 1. Most culture change processes we have seen, including Denison's Path to High Performance Model (*below-left*), involve in some format, each of the following key steps or phases: (i) creating **awareness** about the culture, (ii) getting aligned on the **priorities** for action, and (iii) taking **action** and learning from the results.

CATs can provide crucial support to senior leaders for each phase of the change process, with specific examples shown at *right*.

CATs in Awareness:
⇒ Evaluate change readiness
⇒ Communicate purpose and objectives to organization
⇒ Help to plan and execute the diagnostic process

CATs in Action:
⇒ Design and implement the actions
⇒ Track the impact
⇒ Cross-pollinate the best practices

CATs in Priority:
⇒ Help interpret the organization's feedback
⇒ Participate in focus groups
⇒ Provide input on strategic priorities

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[1] Former CEO and Chairman of Domino's Pizza, Dave Brandon, described two-pizza teams to characterize the optimal team size as no bigger than that which can be fed by two large pizzas.

Some of the teams I have worked with sprinted out of the gate at high velocity, some set a slow but steady pace, and others ate donuts on the park bench. Below, I reflect on some of the key factors that contributed to the varying levels of success.

SUCCESS FACTOR 1

Securing the direct participation of senior leaders

Building the right kind of partnership between the CAT(s) and senior leaders is one of the first challenges to address. In many organizations there are gravitational pulls toward *either* strong command-and-control dynamics [..."here's a specific task, go execute it"] *or* arms-length delegation [..."here's a broad problem, go and figure it out"]. Neither is very effective. Though handing specific tasks down to a CAT can drive action and accountability, it is hard to imagine new cultural dynamics emerging out of the old tactics. The opposite tendency to create the CAT and then stay out of its way is equally if not more frustrating. Over time, the teams that lack a well-trafficked bridge to the senior leaders tend to focus on smaller and smaller agendas and eventually morph into the newest iteration of the "party planning committee". All the while, senior leaders believe they are "empowering" the team.

Instead, senior leaders should think of this partnership as the "cultural petri dish" for the organization. Create something good in the dynamic between the senior leaders and the CAT, and it might *just* be worth scaling-up! From my viewpoint, a scale-worthy dynamic has both strategic and operational elements. The **strategic** element allows senior leaders to view employees as a true partner in making good decisions throughout the change process. The **operational** element provides the engagement in the process and "leg work" that is needed to implement these decisions out in the organization [*see Exhibit 2*].

There's no two ways around it, building this type of partnership requires the direct participation

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EXHIBIT 2

CATs are most effective when their partnership with the senior leadership team (SLT) has both strategic and operational elements. The example below shows the results of a "give and get" we did with one organization, where the purpose was to clarify the nature of the SLT–CAT partnership.

SLT "GIVES"

⇒ The tone & basis for change & development
⇒ Insight into decisions & priorities
⇒ Active participation in the CAT
⇒ Support, guidance, & "accountability boost" to the CAT

SLT "GETS"

⇒ A partner for aligned action
⇒ Input & perspective on strategic matters
⇒ Honest dialogue about ideas & direction ("road-testing")

CAT "GIVES"

⇒ Brain & leg work to move us to action
⇒ Feedback that is representative of the organization
⇒ Insight into what is being seen & heard as we move through the changes

CAT "GETS"

⇒ Support for action on core issues & challenges
⇒ A partner for problem-solving & barrier removal
⇒ Visibility of actions through SLT communications

of senior leaders. Two recommended ways to accomplish this are (i) joint meetings of the CAT and senior leadership team and (ii) the use of senior leaders as "champions". Together, these provide an important coordination mechanism and help to keep the focus on core issues and challenges.

The routine involvement of senior leaders as "champions" in the CAT is particularly helpful because it provides the team with the leadership input and the support it will need to address significant challenges. Some leaders will play this role quite effectively, by skillfully reducing their status gap and focusing their participation in ways that help move the team to action.

For others, some coaching may be needed or in rare cases, a re-assignment. One of the most detrimental examples I have seen is the senior leader who repeatedly interjects with different versions of, "been there, done that." This is cultural stability in action! And although there is certainly wisdom in understanding what has and has not worked in the past, bringing about a change requires re-thinking and, at times, directly challenging the old assumptions. To get there, the most effective champion(s) demonstrate their humility about the missteps of the past and a willingness to reinvent for the future.

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SUCCESS FACTOR 2

Getting the right people on the CAT

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As with any team, getting top-notch people on the bus is absolutely crucial. Many organizations seek volunteers, nominations, or some combination thereof, i.e., "volun-telling." Given that so much is riding on the team's make up, putting some thought into the selection process is well worth the time and effort. Regardless of the methods used, I have found three practical criteria to be very helpful when shaping the team's membership – *Interested, Respected, Problem Solvers!*

The first one may seem obvious, but CAT members need to have more than a passing interest in the team's success and their being a part of it. In most cases, participants take on this role above and beyond performing their core responsibilities. The team is squarely dependent on the energy and passion that the individual members bring to the process.

The second one is a little less obvious, albeit quite logical. CATs should be very interested in gaining the participation of the most highly respected people in the organization. In most workplaces, people can quickly point to two or three colleagues who fit the description: "when he/she speaks up, others listen". These are the *influencers* in the organization and their impact is disproportionate to others'.[2] The inclusion (or exclusion) of these key people sends an important signal to the rest of the organization about the legitimacy of the process and goes a long way toward determining the team's reach into the organization. This is where the facilitators of the process can be very smart from a social engineering standpoint and even go as far as incorporating sophisticated tools like social networking analysis to choose their teammates.[3]

The third criterion worth considering carefully is the need for people who are oriented toward solving problems. These are the people who are resilient, optimistic, and keep a forward-looking perspective. Culture work is challenging in this way because it requires, simultaneously, the patience and curiosity to understand the history and origin of current dynamics in the organization, a realization that dynamics 10 years in the making will not change overnight, *AND* a resistance to getting bogged down in the past. It's amazing what a CAT-killer even one or two problem *describers* (as opposed to *solvers*) can be. One thing to note briefly is that there is an elevated risk of attracting problem describers when prior focus group volunteers are used as the primary recruiting source for the CATs.

Finally, two additional criteria are worth a brief mention as part of this discussion, the inclusion of subject matter experts (SMEs) and cross-functional representatives in the CAT. Although domain-specific knowledge and expertise is crucial to the process, it is both difficult and typically unnecessary to fold all of the SMEs that will be needed under the umbrella of the CAT's membership. Instead, CATs can reach to

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[2] Readers are referred to Malcolm Gladwell's discussion of "mavens" in his popular book "The Tipping Point." Gladwell provides an engaging introduction to the idea of social networks and the key influencers within them.
[3] See Rob Cross and Laurence Prusak's 2002 article via HBR: https://hbr.org/2002/06/the-people-who-make-organizations-go-or-stop?cm_sp=Article-_-Links-_-Top%20of%20Page%20Recirculation

these individuals as needed throughout the process. A wonderful example of this was when one of the CATs I was facilitating stood up a sub-team composed entirely of "techies" who could design and lead a series of much-needed technical trainings.

In the case of cross-functional representation, 'more is better' is a good general rule. In some cases, teams can be created to canvass all of the functional diversity that exists. In other cases, this coverage is achieved by the use of multiple localized CATs, such as one CAT per division, per department, and so on, with the addition of special meetings and communications to ensure cross-pollination between the teams. The decision among these options is typically informed by the size and complexity of the organization, as well as the strategic decision about where best to drive the action.

Once membership is formed, there are a number of tools that can be introduced to help the team get into a productive rhythm for its operations. As already mentioned, the team's work is often done on a volunteer basis with its efforts aimed at core challenges. This is a heavy lift. In my opinion, the team should not have the added weight of figuring out sans guidance how best to operate. This is where some flexible templating by the architect(s) of the culture change process can help a lot. When it's me wearing the hard hat, I focus on three key areas: (i) clarifying and contracting roles, (ii) setting productive team norms, and (iii) introducing a process and tools for action planning.

Like all teams, there are different roles to be played within a CAT, and people need to understand the expectations that accompany each role. Minimally, it is useful to clarify who will lead the team (sometimes referred to as a "chair-person"), who will facilitate team meetings (if different from the chair), and who is expected to attend the meetings, including the cadence of the senior leader champion(s)

participation. As the team moves to action, ownership and support roles need to be clarified for each new project and task the team undertakes. **And I'm sure it goes without saying that close support from one or more "liaisons" or "consultants" with expertise in HR/OD/change management is also a tremendous resource to have. Well there, I said it anyhow. **

A charter can be a useful living-breathing tool for navigating and documenting roles. This allows each member to make an honest evaluation of what is needed from him/her prior to giving their commitments. Open-ended timelines can be one of the most uncomfortable elements of volunteering, so the charter can also help to clarify expectations about the requested length of each participant's service.

Thinking back to the idea of the CAT (and its interaction with the senior leadership team) as a "petri dish" for the organization, as well as a vehicle to action, it is important to have an explicit discussion early on about the kind of team norms that will contribute to the CAT's success. Again, it's quite hard to imagine a team with a toxic internal dynamic spreading something positive to the broader organization, so this dialogue ought to address in a candid way the behaviors that the team is hoping to avoid in addition to the ones they want to live by. For example, one team that had been working together for several months articulated the following as destructive behaviors to leave behind:

- *Stop* addressing minutia
- *Stop* with the negativity
- *Stop* taking a "siloed" view of the organization
- *Stop* talking about the distant past
- *Stop* limiting your input

Discussing team norms and staying accountable to them are two different things. Although everyone has a role to play in this, in most teams, it is the team leader who has the primary responsibility to shape a productive team dynamic. And this is certainly true in the case of CATs. One highly effective chairperson I worked with was truly passionate about the CAT's work and mission. In one of the team meetings his passion boiled over as he responded somewhat aggressively to some challenging feedback directed his way. He was able to reflect on this pretty quickly, and at the end of the meeting, he offered an authentic apology, explaining that his behavior was not what he hopes of himself or others on the team. I have no doubt that his accountability to himself in that moment had a strong effect on the positive norms that developed within this particular team over the following year.

A big part of what these teams do is captured

under the umbrella of *action planning*. When broken down, this involves the multiple steps needed to work from the overarching issues (at the highest level) down to the eventual solutions that get implemented (at the most granular level), a process we have called "draining the swamp."[4] There are many ways for the team to get lost or lose people along the way, such that it can be extremely helpful to provide a roadmap.

Some of the most rigorous ones we have introduced teach the CAT how to progress through a series of steps that include problem identification, root-cause analysis, brainstorming, prioritization, and finally, action plan formulation and execution. And there are a variety of tools that can be used to support these steps, ranging from embarrassingly simple to bells and whistles. Whatever steps and tools are introduced, giving a discipline and depth to the action planning process makes it repeatable and adds some muster that the solutions will in fact address the problems.

Culture change is a team sport

All trends point to the increasing appetite for effective corporate culture strategies. Deloitte's research indicates that upwards of 90% of companies identify culture and engagement as top challenges.[5] Culture is a key source of innovation, growth, and competitive advantage. Culture is also king in the war for talent.[6] Demonstrating you can foster the right culture is a key priority on the path to the C-suite according to a 2014 survey by McKinsey & Co., and once you get there, culture occupies its own seat and agenda, i.e., "the Chief Culture Officer".[7,8]

The dialogue that most business leaders are having today has moved beyond a question of "why look at or manage the culture" on to the all-important question of "how." Much less has been written or researched in response to *this* question, particularly as it relates to the use of CATs. My hope is that this ongoing shift will open the door to new work and case studies that can hone and add to the insights shared here. My only prediction is that CATs will be with us for the foreseeable future. After all, culture change is a team game!

[4] I would like to credit my colleague Paul Wright, Ed.D. for coining this phrase in our work together facilitating CATs.

[5] See Deloitte's 2015 "Human Capital Trends" report: http://dupress.com/articles/employee-engagement-culture-human-capital-trends-2015/

[6] Many articles have been written on this topic; see for example John Hall's 2015 article via Forbes: http://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2015/12/06/the-secret-to-creating-a-great-company-culture-and-winning-the-talent-war/

[7] See Kathy Gurchiek's 2015 article via SHRM: http://www.shrm.org/publications/hrmagazine/editorialcontent/2015/070815/pages/070815-chief-culture-officers.aspx

[8] See Shelley DuBois's 2012 article via Fortune: http://fortune.com/2012/07/30/the-rise-of-the-chief-culture-officer/