

## HIRT&FRIENDS EXECUTIVE BRIEFING



Dr. Michael Hirt

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### **War of the Alpha Animals. When Top Management Teams Argue Instead of Achieving Results.**

Question:

"In our three-member executive board, there are always very time-consuming discussions about important decisions, which in my view often are very unproductive. What can I do?"

Michael Hirt answers:

#### **In a nutshell**

If a conflict in the top management team is of a factual nature, the first thing to do is to clarify whether the conflict exists about the goals to be achieved or

about the ways to achieve them. If there is agreement about the goals, but different opinions about the ways to reach these goals, the CEO as moderator has to point out the alternatives to reach the goals and their advantages and disadvantages and lead the team to a consensus. If the conflict has already reached an unobjective dimension, or has slipped down to the personal level, the goal-oriented approach depends on the escalation level of the conflict. In the case of a moderate escalation, a neutral third party may be able to help; in the case of a higher escalation level, only a forceful external intervention can help.

### **The detailed answer**

Basically, a top management team should concentrate on those topics that are most important and focus on those problems that can only be solved by top management.

In the strategic area top management should therefore primarily focus on the progress the company makes towards fulfilling its core mission and achieving its strategic goals, key strategic projects that can make a high positive or negative value contribution to the company, and active opportunity and risk management.

On the operational side, the main focus should be on hiring and promotion decisions, as well as on operational performance and its continuous improvement.

If a conflict in the top management team is of a factual nature, the first thing to do is to clarify whether the conflict is about the goals to be achieved or about the ways to achieve them, so that one starts at the right level.

First, the goals to be achieved should be clearly defined together. It is important to define the goals independently of the alternatives for action identified at the moment. If no consensus can be reached on the goals, there is no point in discussing the paths. If a management team cannot agree on the goals to be achieved, even after honest efforts and involvement of the owner or supervisory board, then personnel changes will probably have to take place.

If there is agreement on the goals, but different opinions about the ways to achieve these goals, the CEO, as moderator, must identify and clearly formulate the alternatives to achieving the goals in order to do justice to all team members and their views.

Afterwards, the preferences of individual team members should be made transparent as early as possible, so that no time is wasted on unimportant alternatives that nobody considers meaningful anyway.

The chosen alternatives must be formulated and their advantages and disadvantages worked out together. Alternatives should be compared with external standards (best practice cases, competitors, etc.) in order to increase the quality of the solution.

It is important in this discussion process that there are clear rules as to how the team deals with each other, and that attention is paid to consistent adherence to these rules, so that the team deals with each other tough on the substance, but fairly on a human level.

Furthermore, the factual and personal interests of the individual team members must be clarified in order to be able to create a comparison here. Individual discussions between the CEO and the team members in the run-up to decision meetings can also be helpful, in which an open discussion can clarify what is necessary in order to persuade the individual team member to reach a consensus.

In the final step, the CEO acts as a filter for the various alternatives and supports the team in reaching a decision that best serves the interests of the company. Sometimes it is necessary to combine alternatives for the best possible solution.

Only in the last consequence should the CEO make use of the possibility to make the decision alone or in an authoritarian way. In a modern leadership model, this approach can only be the final consequence, because a consistent authoritarian leadership style would lead to other team members withdrawing and no longer contributing their best ideas and solutions.

If the conflict has already reached an unobjective dimension, or has slipped down to the personal level, then it is much more difficult to find a solution.

For an initial analysis of this situation, the nine-step scale of conflict escalation by Glasl is suitable.

As long as the conflict is still in the first three stages of the scale (hardening, debate, action/omission), you can normally solve it on your own, especially if there are clear rules in the team and at least the CEO, but better everyone, feels responsible for consistently adhering to them.

If the conflict is already in the second three stages of the scale (enemy images/coalitions, loss of face, threats), then "the conflict has the conflict parties" and a neutral third party is necessary in order to get the conflict under control again and to gradually return to the first three escalation stages.

If the conflict has already reached the third three levels of the scale (limited annihilation, fragmentation, joint destruction), then the chances of a constructive solution are relatively low and experience has shown that forceful intervention from outside is necessary to get the conflict under control. In practice, this usually means a personnel change, usually combined with an intervention by the owner or the supervisory board.

All the Best!

Michael Hirt

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**Dr. Michael Hirt**



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