This article examines the special characteristics of representational groups, especially as they apply to senior executive teams. Senior executives are expected to function as both representatives of their divisions or functions and as corporate officers charged with organization-wide planning and decision making. This situation brings with it certain inherent tensions. A description of these tensions is followed by a discussion of the characteristics of representational dynamics. The article concludes with suggestions for how these tensions and dynamics can be managed more effectively on senior executive teams.

In 1980, Fallows, a former speechwriter for President Carter and well-respected author in his own right, published a short piece in the New York Times about the United States Cabinet. He observed:

[The President elect’s] spokesmen are saying that his Cabinet secretaries will not become partisans for their departments’ views. They are wrong. If the Secretary of Labor does not start with a different view of handling unions from the Secretary of the Treasury, he will soon develop one. If the Secretary of Health and Human Services does not disagree with the Secretary of Defense about the proper division of resources between guns and butter, then one of them will have serious problems controlling his own department, whose members and clients will consider him a weakling. [The President elect] is not going to change the fact that different departments have different purposes and different constituencies. Even less will he change the trait of human nature that makes those who work in such departments take on their organization’s views. (p. 31)

Fallows’s words describe a critical challenge facing all who seek to lead and manage senior executive groups. To the outside world these groups look like any other, populated by individuals of widely differing personalities, each attempting to make his or her point in the service of his or her collective problem-solving and decision-making responsibilities. Like any other group, senior executive teams work better if they work from an agenda, respect each other, distribute participation so that one or two individuals do not dominate the conversation, resist pressures toward conformity, handle disagreement and conflict productively, and follow a host of other well-established guidelines for effective group functioning.

For those who have served on such teams, the reality is, as Fallows pointed out, much more complicated. Senior executive teams, as much as any other groups in organizations, are composed of representatives, and the dynamics of representative groups are significantly different from simple task groups, groups without apparent external memberships. The job confronting

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I would like to gratefully acknowledge the influence of Clayton Alderfer’s work on this article. During the past 25 years, his pioneering work in the area of group and intergroup relations has both illuminated and encouraged my own thinking in these areas (Alderfer, 1986, 1987, 1997).

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the CEO is keeping his or her direct reports focused on both their functional or business areas as well as the overall corporate well-being and growth. As in most cases, the word both is what makes this job tricky.

Key Tensions

With the exception of the chief executive officer (CEO), members of senior executive teams are asked to represent the interests of multiple stakeholders who often have very different and even contradictory goals. Members are asked to bring forward the interests of their own function or business unit, on the one hand, and to represent the interests of the corporation on the other. They are present because they are both the most senior representative of their unit and a representative of the organization’s most senior management group. This creates a unique set of tensions.

How do you represent multiple sets of interests if and when these issues conflict in a particular situation? For example, from the senior management perspective it may be in the best interests of the organization to sell a piece of a business unit, downsize a department, or reassign a group to another division. From the perspective of the business or group being moved, such action may demoralize the rest of the division, reduce opportunities for growth (both individual and divisional), and be perceived as a lack of confidence in the division leader. The divisional representative on the senior team is in a difficult spot. If the unit is reassigned, her own division may feel betrayed or inadequately represented. If he is successful in convincing the senior executive team not to reassign the unit, his senior colleagues may feel he is overprotective of his own “turf” to the detriment of the organization.

Is it possible to view senior team members as anything but their function, division, or business? In an executive team meeting, the opinions, ideas, suggestions, and criticisms of individual members are often perceived as serving the interests and views of the groups these individuals represent. When the chief marketing officer speaks, for example, other team members may assume that the views expressed represent the interests and biases of the marketing department. If all members are perceived to have a biased, “parochial” view, how does the team have a discussion about what is best for the corporation as a whole?

How does a senior executive team manage to have a discussion about a current issue when all of the different groups represented at the meeting have long histories with each other? The various functions and businesses represented on a senior executive team often have long histories with each other, some of which predate the tenure of the current senior officers. The team members, therefore, also represent the feelings, good and bad, that result from these historical interactions. If finance and technology, for example, have been at odds over budgets and return on investment for the past several years, the legacy of that relationship will be present, to some degree, in every discussion involving the two senior team members from these areas. How do you manage relationships in which people symbolize past histories and unresolved conflicts, even when the current discussion may not be about any of these historical issues?

Is a senior team member’s primary task to maximize the productivity and/or profitability of his or her division or the productivity and/or profitability of the company as a whole? The primary objective of senior team members can become ambiguous. For example, the primary goal of the head of business Unit A (and the task that is most likely to result in his or her promotion!) might be to maximize profitability in Unit A. At the same time, a decision to shift resources from Unit A to Unit B might be in the long-term best interests of the company, as in the case of taking resources from stable businesses to invest in high
tech or high-risk ventures or from a low margin business to a higher margin business. Does the head of Unit A defend investment in his or her unit or advocate for the shift of resources to another unit? Do the values and commitments of the CEO to each business unit and to the senior executive group as a whole influence the resolution of this very concrete personal and organizational question?

**Representation**

The first step in working our way through these key tensions is to examine the nature of representative groups. All groups are composed of “representatives” (Rice, 1969; Wells, 1985). When we work or play on teams, we do so both as individuals and as members of a variety of groups. Our personality characteristics affect the way we behave in groups—assertive, shy, argumentative, friendly, organized, intuitive, critical, inspiring—and the way others respond to us. Some people like aggressive, organized, critical types. Others do not. We also bring our group memberships with us to these teams. We come from families in which we have learned values, attitudes, and behaviors. We come from a part of the world, a country, a region, and town. In these places, too, we have learned a language, a way of seeing the world, a “reality” that is anchored in our everyday life. We also grow up as men or women, with or without a religious affiliation, a racial identity, an educational background, and, as we enter the work world, professional or functional training and experience. When we join a team, we become members of that team, and we bring all these other group memberships with us (Alderfer, 1987).

We become representatives of these groups in two ways. First, some elements of our “representativeness” are explicit. We have been assigned to a team because we are an engineer or a nurse or a manager or a teacher. It is as if we wear a sign around our neck that testifies to our representative function. Cross-functional teams in organizations are a clear example of such explicit representation. Such teams are created (in the best case) because the task requires the input or perspective of the different functions at the table. If the engineer is not on the team to represent the engineering perspective, then he or she should probably be replaced. The task facing cross-functional teams requires functional representation. Medical teams, new product development teams, basketball teams, and community development corporations all require explicit representation from the relevant constituencies.

There is another way in which we become representatives. Others often see us as representatives, whether or not we have been explicitly assigned to serve in this way. We may be seen as a “Southerner” or an “old timer,” or we may be responded to as the “Italian American” or the “token woman.” We may in fact hail from the South or have been employed by the company for a long time or be the only woman on the team, but these “group memberships” are rarely the explicit reasons we are part of the team. They are the implicit representative roles we play. In some cases we may feel the responsibility of representing these groups even though we were not assigned to represent them. We may, depending on self-identity, be aware that others see one or more of our group memberships (especially race, gender, and ethnicity but age, educational background, and national origin as well, among others). We feel a connection to these groups, and we understand the consequences for others who share our group memberships of our success or failure. In other cases, however, we may not even be aware that we have been cast in these representative roles. For example, I was assigned to a team as a psychologist. I represent not only psychologists but middle-aged, Jewish White men as well, whether I choose to accept these roles or not.

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Representational Dynamics

Teams of representatives behave in certain ways precisely because individuals bring both their personalities and their group memberships to the team, explicitly and implicitly. When these teams meet, intergroup histories (past experiences between functional or business groups) are as present as interpersonal histories (past experiences, positive and negative, between individuals). Comments, ideas, suggestions, and criticisms are exchanged in the historical context of the groups in the room. If, for example, the legal function (represented by the chief counsel) has vetoed the last three merger proposals brought by the Mergers & Acquisitions group representative, the interaction between these two individuals/representatives on any issue will be influenced by this recent history. A recent class action suit by female employees charging sex discrimination will likely have an impact on the relationship between male and female team members. In a company founded and run by an engineer, the influence of the engineers on the nonengineers will be influenced by more than just the personalities involved (Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

The history, both recent and “ancient,” between the groups represented on the team is a powerful force in team meetings because the groups involved remember what has happened to them and quickly pass on these memories to new group members. The engineers tell each other about the manufacturing people. The salespeople talk to each other about the finance types. Everyone knows about the human relations people and the information technology group. A group’s “view of the world” is communicated in subtle as well as direct ways. In many cases, it begins during one’s educational preparation for joining the group. In almost all cases, the “traditional” views one group has of another group quickly begin to define how the representatives see and respond to each other.

How exactly does this happen? Most organizations, especially those that exist in a competitive environment, preach both competition and collaboration. Competition defines our relationship with other organizations (for customers, market share, product development, profit margin, and so forth) while collaboration defines our relationship with our coworkers, our organizational colleagues. The reality is, of course, more complex (Smith & Berg, 1997). We often collaborate with colleagues in other organizations, both formally (best practices) and informally (at conferences or over the phone). More important for our examination of senior executive teams is the fact that coworkers are usually in a competitive relationship with each other, for recognition, pay, and promotion. Departments, too, are in a competitive relationship with each other, for budgetary resources, visibility, and for the career opportunities of all involved, especially the departmental leader.

So, while collaboration is important for organizational success, this same success initiates a process of finding the one individual (on the team) or department (in the organization) responsible for the success. Organizations assess individuals, groups, departments, and businesses. They reward and promote individuals. All collaborative activities also contain competitive elements. This is especially true at the top of organizations, where the next promotion is the Big One. (Once the decision to promote a senior teammember to CEO is made, the senior team often dissolves as those not chosen leave the organization having “lost” this final competitive round.)

Let us now return to the question of how groups learn about other groups in organizations. What happens when something goes wrong in an organization (the success of one group can be experienced as a failure by another)? Groups rarely blame
themselves (and unfortunately blaming rather than learning is the first order of business). The source of the problem is usually seen to lie elsewhere, either with another group in the organization (“They did not design it right”) or with an individual who belongs to this group (“Joe, the guy in engineering, did not design it right”). A neophyte quickly learns, from watching how organizational problems and successes are explained by members of his or her group, how to relate to the other groups in the organization. Much of what is learned is not constructive or good for the long-term health of the organization.

Teams in which people function as representatives or are perceived as representatives, especially those in which the relationships among team members are competitive, struggle with a number of potentially destructive dynamics:

1. Team members can lose sight of the big picture. A subtle shift can occur on senior executive teams. This shift in objective is away from what is best for the organization toward what is best for my division. The decision-making objective shifts from finding the best decision to winning the decision-making contest. There are many examples in the social science laboratory as well as the corporate world of this phenomenon (Lewicki, Saunders, & Minton, 2000). In the end, the decision quality is subordinated to winning, or at a minimum, not losing.

2. Communication becomes increasingly restricted. Senior executive teams in which the representatives see themselves as in a competitive relationship are extremely careful about information sharing. Information can give one representative an edge in the decision-making discussion described above. Sharing that information gives away that edge. On such a team, sharing information too freely can give other team members ammunition in public or private discussions that can be used to discredit an opinion or position. Perhaps most important, restricted communication makes it increasingly difficult for the whole team to examine and analyze the facts, because only some members have these facts.

3. Information that is presented is often distorted in the way it is perceived. Social science research is clear on the finding that group representatives, on average, distort what they hear and see in a way that favors their own group and demeans other groups. The reason competitive sports have referees and umpires is because team affiliation (as player or fan) affects the way one sees things (safe/out, foul/fair). This powerful effect on how group representatives perceive information can make decision making and problem solving difficult. Team members leave the same meeting believing they heard, not interpreted, but heard different information (Sherif, 1966).

4. Representatives develop ethnocentric views of other team members (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). Competitive relationships often lead representatives to see their own group as central, important, and right while viewing other groups as peripheral, out-of-the-loop, and often just plain wrong. Each function comes to believe in its own essentiality. Salespeople believe that without sales, the company has no revenue. Manufacturing believes that without manufacturing, there is nothing to sell. Without product design, there is nothing to manufacture, and without finance, products lose money. Senior teams run the risk of convening a group of representatives in which each one believes that he or she could make a decision, based on information from his or her own group, that would be better than a decision made in collaboration with these (slightly) inferior other perspectives.

5. Mistrust grows. The impact of the first four points is that mistrust among senior team members can increase over time when most CEOs want the opposite to occur. To complicate matters further, the CEO brings his or her groups to the senior team as well. She may come from one of the functional
divisions, she may have important relationships with some or all of the Board of Directors, and like everyone else she comes with a number of identity group memberships. It is easy to understand how group representatives begin to doubt the motives, information, agenda, and integrity of other team members. This mistrust, of course, fuels the other dynamics in a potentially vicious cycle.

6. Tension trickles down. The big risk is that unresolved tensions at the senior level give rise to conflicts in the rest of the organization. As a senior executive’s direct reports hear about, observe, feel, or speculate about their boss’s difficulties with other senior executives, the likelihood increases that they will begin to discover problems with their peers. Conflicts at lower levels in the organization are often the result of unacknowledged or unresolved conflicts at the top (Smith, 1989). Subordinates have a sixth sense for their boss’s frustrations with his or her senior colleagues and are often supported for being foot soldiers in the daily skirmishes that result.

It is important to keep in mind that these dynamics are probably not solely or mainly the result of individual personalities or of personality conflicts, though we often attribute them to individuals and individual personalities may be drawn to certain roles in groups. A senior executive teammember might complain about some others on the team who are not big picture thinkers, who play their cards close to the vest, always defend their turf, and cannot seem to recognize a good idea unless it comes from their own division. These complaints are common across many organizations. Personalities do vary and they do influence team interactions, but the regularity of these complaints points to the predictable dynamics that characterize representative teams in highly competitive organizations.

Finally, there are serious consequences to misdiagnosing the source of difficulty or tension in senior teams (Edelson & Berg, 1999). A CEO who decides that there are one or two personality problems on the team is likely to direct his energies toward fixing or removing the problem, only to discover that the mistrust or restricted communication persists. By the time she realizes that the team’s problems are rooted in representational dynamics, one or two people’s careers may have been seriously affected and the senior executive team is struggling to adjust to the departure of two of its members and the likely addition of two new ones. The disruption sets the team’s development back weeks or months without addressing the key representational tensions.

**What Can Be Done?**

There are no simple ways to manage representational dynamics at the highest level in organizations. As James Fallows pointed out in the quotation at the start of this article, too many forces are acting on senior team members to allow for an easy prescription. The leader of a senior executive group must strive to maintain a balance between the specialist and generalist orientations that coexist at this level. There are, however, some guidelines that can help manage the tensions inherent in teams of representatives.

**Let People Have Their Groups**

Too often when faced with the difficulties presented by competing or conflicting group memberships, leaders ask team members to give up one or more of their allegiances. If team members can be made to focus on their common identity as senior executives and to put aside, temporarily, their other, potentially conflicting identities, the chances of collaboration should increase. Usually this is a call to leave one’s narrow, functional silo mentality at the door so that each team member can assume his or her organizational role. There
are three problems with such an exhortation: It is impossible to accomplish, it works at cross-purposes to the raison d’etre of a senior executive team, and it can make excessive representation even worse.

Senior executives who represent entire functions or divisions cannot be expected to leave those commitments and concerns behind when they convene as corporate officers. The roles these people fill require them to carry both sets of responsibilities. It is psychologically impossible to shed one or the other like a raincoat in London on a spring day. Both roles are important, and both must be carried at all times. In fact, the success of a senior executive team, as a team, depends on each member playing both roles. The CEO, and the organization as a whole, relies on the various functions and businesses being powerfully and competently represented at the top of the organization. Imagine if the legal or financial or marketing perspectives in a private sector firm were not strongly represented in key corporate decisions. Or consider a nonprofit institution in which those who represent the mission are not strong advocates in the face of those charged with overseeing the organization’s financial viability. The work of senior executive teams is to consider the many, often competing, factors that sometimes converge only at the top of the organization. Without forceful representation of these factors, organizational problem solving and decision making is compromised and the purpose of the team is undermined. Leaders who ask their direct reports to give up one role or another risk poor decisions and sometimes disaster.

The 1986 Challenger accident is a case in point. Transcripts of the conversations that occurred the night before the launch reveal that the launch leader called the chief engineer twice during that night to inquire about how the now infamous O-rings would perform in the cold weather at the launch site. The first time he called, the chief engineer recommended against launching. The second time the launch director called, he asked the chief engineer to “put on your management hat” and decide about the launch (Report of the Presidential Commission on the Space Shuttle Challenger Accident, 1986). With this framing of his role, the engineer authorized the fatal launch. In this case, a leader asked one of his senior team members to give up his role as a representative. The result was a tragic mistake.

It is important that senior team members are encouraged to maintain their connections to their groups while they work, and often struggle, to make decisions in the interest of the entire organization. In its simplest form this encouragement translates into the leader (and other team members) resisting the urge to exhort people to give up their representative role in the service of the greater good. In a more complex way, a senior team needs to work together with an acceptance and awareness that its members are in a continuous struggle to balance the interests of the group they represent with the interests of the senior group to which they also belong. The acceptance of this struggle leads to another guideline.

Make Group Memberships Discussable

In many senior teams, except when a member is reporting about his or her division, there is subtle pressure to speak from a big picture perspective rather than from the relatively narrow perspective of one’s professional background or executive function. The pressure exists because narrow, so-called parochial opinions do not carry as much weight as opinions that are formed with the organization’s interests in mind. As a result, team members (who cannot and should not escape the views of the groups they represent) often attempt to convey their views without reference to the groups to which they belong. When discussing broad strategic or policy questions, team members try to avoid labeling their ideas as coming from “the marketing department”
or “finance.” Doing so would run the risk of evoking the representational dynamics described above and undermining the power of the idea, opinion, or analysis.

Unfortunately this strategy can have the opposite effect. Everyone assumes that a teammember’s big picture suggestion is, in reality, an attempt to disguise an idea that comes out of the marketing or finance view of the business. So they, in turn, offer a critique, “global” in nature that represents an alternative or competing point of view. Because there is no explicit acknowledgment that the discussion is an understandably difficult struggle to come to a decision in the face of competing views, the task is made even more difficult. In addition, the CEO may find it hard to speak for the needs of the senior executive group as a whole because of his or her dependency on one or more of the senior executives. A senior executive who feels chastised, “caught,” or criticized in the senior executive team can seriously undermine his or her boss in the short and long term.

One approach to breaking this cycle is for each member to “confess” the parochial source of his or her suggestions. One of the primary reasons that divisional heads serve on senior teams is in order to represent their divisional experience, expertise, goals, and perspectives on organization-level decisions. If each member of the team speaks from this perspective first and explicitly, the interests or perspectives are available for discussion and debate. These confessions also allow other members of the team to refer back to the group interests being represented when a decision is being considered. “What will be the reaction of your group?” is more likely to be honestly asked and honestly responded to when the earlier stages of a discussion have included explicit reference to these groups.

A small caveat. Group memberships cannot be made discussable by accusing others of really speaking from or for their group. A question like “Are not you really saying, David, that human resources favors an education benefit for all employees?” is more likely to evoke a response about how education benefits are standard in the industry, create competitive advantages, and enhance functional competence than it is to initiate a discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of such a benefit for the company. A confession like “As the HR representative here, let me say that we believe an educational benefit will help us recruit and retain people. We think it will also increase functional competence, but we would like to hear from the other functions,” stands a better chance of promoting such a discussion. The latter formulation not only emphasizes that the opinion comes from a particular area of expertise, but also that the area of expertise, like all areas of expertise, has its limitations and needs reactions from other areas. This simultaneous assertion of competence and limitation is what makes it possible to balance the role of representative (bringing competence) with the role of senior teammember (bringing a limitation that requires the input of others).

**Develop Facts, Do Not Assert Them**

Senior team discussions often founder on a heated discussion of the facts. Often, senior team members see facts differently or use different sets of facts because of the representational dynamics described above. Deliberations break down because one person accuses another of “just not knowing the facts,” or a topic is tabled until the team “can come to some agreement” on the facts. When two or more team members feel that their “facts” are being questioned, it is almost impossible to create genuine collaboration. Because “facts” are themselves a product of group membership (what we read, how we analyze, what we are exposed to, what we are trained to see as important), there is a significant likelihood that members of senior teams will come to meetings with very different facts. Imagine a conver-
sation between a doctor and a patient in which the important facts for the patient include the consequences of a course of treatment on the quality of the patient’s life and the only important facts for the doctor are those related to the diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

If we accept, for the moment, that facts are produced in the experience, training, objectives, and daily life of the groups represented on senior executive teams, then an important step in all senior team deliberations is a commitment to developing facts rather than asserting them. In its simplest form this commitment translates into a preliminary agreement about what constitutes a relevant fact for purposes of a particular discussion. The agreement may be simple, but is most often complex. It is best undertaken before the substantive discussion occurs. In the case of the patient-doctor discussion of treatment course, the preliminary agreement might be about the validity of both medical and quality-of-life “facts.” In the case of a strategic planning discussion in a for-profit corporation, the preliminary agreements might concern what numbers are being used for the analysis and how they were produced. Developing facts is painstaking work up front but can save a discussion from becoming a frustrating debate over “facts” being asserted by different members of the team.

**Intervene Within Rather Than Between Groups**

The influence of groups on their representatives is a powerful one. I have suggested that it is both impossible and in some ways inadvisable to escape this influence. It is also clear that some of these influences are problematic. Ethnocentric attitudes (“We are the straw that stirs the drink”), for example, jeopardize the possibilities for collaboration because group representatives are reticent to throw in their lot with others who they perceive as less competent or informed. Similarly, historical “injustices” kept alive by stories handed down within a group or division threaten the ability of groups to work together. (They will show up at cross-functional meetings, but will they actually collaborate?)

The incubator for the attitudes and stories that shape a representative’s views is the culture of the constituent group. When operations people or finance people or school board members get together, each group tells its stories—stories of accomplishment and frustration, likes and dislikes, prejudices and grudges. Improving relationships among group representatives begins at these moments, because how group members view others is powerfully influenced by these conversations, by how groups piece together an understanding of their organizational world. So, for example, when a story is told at an operations meeting about a finance guy whose only skill was “counting the beans” or “watching the watchers,” and everyone laughs, the neophyte learns about how operations people look at the role of finance in the organization. After 20 years, the neophyte is now a senior executive. When he or she takes a seat at the senior executive team, these stories tag along, exerting their influence on relationships, discussions, and decisions.

Imagine the consequences of someone talking positively about finance people at that operations meeting. “I had a finance guy on a product development team once, and he was very helpful, not at all what I expected.” This comment changes what is learned and taken from the meeting. At worst the neophyte learns that not all finance people are the same. At best, the new guy learns that, like operations people, some finance guys are helpful and some are not. Or imagine the effect of an executive returning to his department from a senior team meeting to report what he learned from a senior colleague and how it changed his mind on an important topic. The subtle messages conveyed in both of these scenar-
ios is that “they” are like “us,” and this means that working with “them” in the future is both possible and potentially productive.

It is not easy to tell a positive story about another group when everyone around you is laughing at a negative story, especially when there are real organizational or societal power differences between the groups involved, just as it is not easy to offer a critical perspective at a meeting of your own group when everyone else is being self-congratulatory. Moreover, these actions may put organizational acceptance and promotion at risk. But relationships between group representatives are more likely to be a mutual exchange of positive and negative views if the exchanges within groups have the same character. What we cannot accept about our own group (our limits, weaknesses, prejudices), we are likely to notice and criticize in others. What we cannot accept and talk about in our own groups limits what is acceptable in our conversations with other groups.

Aim to Create Strong, Permeable Boundaries

A once popular management icon suggested that a successful organization is a boundaryless one. In spite of the appeal of the phrase (“to know no boundaries”), the simple concept is a recipe for disaster. Organization does not exist without boundaries. Businesses, functions, tasks, assignments are ways of describing boundaries, as are time schedules, production schedules, membership lists, and policies involving privacy, confidentiality, and authority. In context, the term “boundarylessness” may have been coined to compensate for the rigid, impenetrable walls that had grown up around organizational units to the ultimate detriment of the organization as a whole. If one division has a cheaper, more effective way of handling accounts receivable and does not share it with other divisions, the division looks good but the company suffers. If we make a decision to switch vendors to save some money but in doing so we jeopardize a huge sale to this same vendor from another division of our company, we are ensuring our divisional gain at the expense of organizational gain. Exhortations to be “boundaryless” were not intended to advocate for the absence of boundaries but, rather, were aimed at breaking down or more accurately opening up the boundaries within most organizations.

This is, after all, the ultimate point. Senior teams succeed to the extent that they manage the tension between maintaining the integrity of the boundaries around the group each member represents and around the senior executive team as a whole while opening these boundaries up to allow the give and take across the groups that promotes high-quality organizational deliberation. Maintaining the integrity of the boundaries allows each group (division, function, senior executive team) to control its own quality standards, to hire and educate the best human resources it can find, to explore and develop area expertise and innovation, and to develop its core competencies in the service of the entire enterprise. Opening these same boundaries to the experience, expertise, and perspective of other groups is what makes true collaboration possible. This openness is predicated on the understanding that all organizational groups, like all living human systems, cannot survive alone. Each is too limited, too partial to prosper without the others.

Conclusion

As consulting psychologists, it may be tempting to treat senior executive teams as small groups. Well-developed theory and practice in group dynamics, team building, process consultation, and small group effectiveness provide us with sound professional footing in this area. This article contends that this temptation is worth resisting.
because the dynamics of senior teams have more in common with intergroup or representational dynamics than with intragroup processes. A small group approach to senior executive teams is likely to be ineffective because the vast majority of these approaches do not take account of the group memberships alive and active in such teams.

We will be better equipped to work with senior executive teams when we can diagnose both the small group and representational dynamics that affect them. It is difficult to help senior executives with the tensions that arise from representing a division or function at the highest corporate levels unless we familiarize ourselves with these tensions, learn to recognize their manifestations, inquire about them, and develop ways to address their influence on executive work. This article has attempted to describe a foundation from which to begin.

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