



## BOOK REVIEW

### Tipping the totem pole

By SARA FITZPATRICK  
CORRESPONDENT

Is your business like a ladder? If you're at the top, who's stabilizing it at

the bottom? Have they really got your back? Or, as they hold it, are they entertaining visions of taking your place? Whoa! Feels a little shaky.

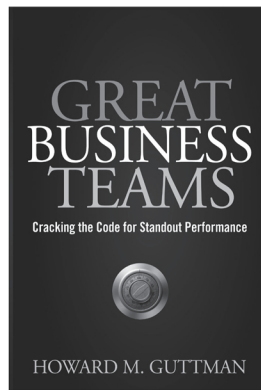
Put that ladder flat on the ground. It's more stable that way. It distributes your weight, making it possible to cross a muddy patch without sinking. Stand on it, sit down, lie across it. It doesn't move. Instead of needing to hold it steady, your people can stand on it with you. Any possibility of falling from a great height has been removed.

In his book "Great Business Teams: Cracking the Code for Standout Performance," Howard M. Guttman makes the case for making your organization "flat," or horizontal. He does not suggest stripping people of their titles as a warm-and-fuzzy display of egalitarianism. Rather, he advocates streamlining corporate operations by maximizing the efficiency of team units, standardizing protocols for their functioning and distributing power to their members.

"To the high-performance leader," he writes, "power is a value-neutral concept. It is neither jealously guarded nor shared for the sake of sharing. High-performance leaders seek to leverage power, not monopolize it — to put it to use to drive up their team's or organization's performance."

#### A well-oiled machine

Guttman realizes his model is counter-intuitive, as it contradicts the traditional hierarchical construct of business organization. He prescribes a very rigid process for instituting the changes he



**Great Business Teams: Cracking the Code for Standout Performance** by Howard M. Guttman  
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lot of psychobabble to keep the consultants in business, but it actually makes quite a bit of business sense. And it gets results. Guttman's approach has been adopted with great success by such companies as Mars North America, Novartis Oncology, Chico's FAS, PepsiCo and L'Oreal.

#### Truth be told

A hallmark of the Great Business Teams approach is candor. It can also be a stumbling block. It involves being honest with one's self and giving feedback to one's team and its leader. For those with a long history in hierarchically structured organizations, it can be an attribute that's been suppressed.

The flip side of candor is being receptive to feedback, which necessitates an ego adjustment. Chico's CEO Scott Edmonds, as quoted in the book, says, "I don't know any senior executive who enjoys being told that he or she doesn't walk on water. But once you get over the shock, you can then move on to considering the feedback from your team and improving your leadership ability — and the abilities of those on your team."

By receiving feedback with an open mind, the executive models to the team a necessary characteristic in being part of a high performance team culture. Role-modeling itself is a hallmark of the process. Yet another is to come to grips with the fact that some people simply aren't able to make the shifts required of them under the new structure. Guttman provides guidance on when to say when and how to know if a player could come around with some additional coaching, or simply can't manage the quite responsibilities of the team approach.

"Working horizontally is something of an unnatural act," he writes, "given most people's experience working hierarchically."

Confrontation is desirable and necessary to team growth, Guttman asserts. Undercurrents of interpersonal tension would derail a team's focus. Getting it out in the open, while sometimes uncomfortable, is made easier by having protocols in place for doing so. In fact, protocols in Guttman's systems exist as well for areas including holding meetings, making decisions, and correspond-

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ing electronically. These may seem like a lot of new areas to police. However, the teams will ultimately have to enforce them internally. If someone isn't honoring the protocols, he or she will be called out for it by the team. There ends up being much less for a top executive to do as far as day-to-day operations, leaving him or her free to refine company vision and strategy.

Besides, how were these areas policed in the past? With common sense? Experienced leaders know that sense isn't common at all, and varies greatly person to person, based on upbringing, cultural past and work experience, among many other factors. Learning how to talk to people and being talked to may seem like something everyone should have learned in kindergarten, but is that the level of interpersonal functioning you want on your teams?

#### Brave new world

Going from hierarchical to horizontal is not for the faint of heart, especially for the executive who initiates the change in a long-standing organization. In Guttman's words, he or she needs to create a "burning platform" for fundamental change, working to demonstrate principles that might be new to him or her as well.

David H. Greenberg, a senior vice president for L'Oreal USA, says in the book, "I had led large hierarchical organizations both in the U.S. and abroad, but here I faced a new challenge of leading a cross-divisional team with a disparate set of priorities and distinct agendas. I knew I needed to lead in a new way, and I knew my leadership style needed to change."

So dedicated is Guttman to this team

approach, and also to the role-modeling principle, that he resists any temptation to use the pronoun "I," except on a couple of pages where it is needed for clarity. He uses "we," not in the royal sense, but to represent a team of consultants working collaboratively with the participating companies to reinforce a culture of high-performance teams. He also does not give any cutesy marketable name to his system, referring to it as "high performance," indicating that once learned, it can be carried on independently within teams and with the prescribed protocols in place, it is self-correcting. He does not claim to own the system, merely to enable teams to benefit from it indefinitely.

#### One size fits all

The experiences of the executives interviewed by Guttman highlight the practices as they relate to large busi-

nesses with multiple tiers of teams. However, much of the information will be useful to managers and employees of companies of all sizes. Business coaches and consultants, too, will broaden their knowledge base by exploring this unique distributive power approach.

Even without adopting the complete organizational strategy, a reader will come away with a renewed understanding and practical knowledge of advanced interpersonal communication techniques, tips for running more-efficient meetings, and better delegating savvy.

An additional section in the appendix about active listening skills would benefit anyone, in business — and at home at the dinner table.