



# Senior Team Synergy

*Forging Strong Leadership Teams to Execute  
Urgent Strategic Priorities*

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4060 Peachtree Road, Suite 523 Atlanta, GA 30319

[www.conneradvisory.com](http://www.conneradvisory.com)

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*Synergy, or the ability to work together to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of its parts, is of utmost importance to senior team collaboration and achievement of results. This is especially true during times of transformational change, the likes of which international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and non-profits are facing today. Yet despite the best intentions—and sometimes even the best efforts—of top executives, synergistic teamwork is not guaranteed. This paper draws on what we have learned over four decades of work with senior teams around the globe who have successfully achieved senior-level synergy and leveraged it to fully realize their organization’s change objectives. In particular, we look at what circumstances and factors contribute to synergy and the characteristics that members of the senior leadership team must embody in order to achieve this kind of working relationship.*

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“Teamwork is at the heart of organizational success” is an axiom that is especially true during periods of major organizational transition and of particular relevance to those leading an enterprise. Yet despite this widely accepted notion, high-functioning senior teams are rare. Synergistic teams are not easy to develop or to sustain under even the best of circumstances, never mind amid the myriad factors that can arise to thwart teamwork during major change. In this paper, we focus on the interpersonal dimensions of senior teams and what is required to produce team synergy .

In our experience, it is not uncommon to encounter executive teams who are unprepared (or unwilling) to set aside territorial battles and repair estranged relationships in order to navigate the challenges they face in times of change. Top executives inside INGOs and nonprofits are no less susceptible to these divisive forces. Though the civil society sector attracts leaders who are prone to think of themselves as being resistant (if not immune) to motives and behaviors that would in any way detract from accomplishing their organization’s higher-order mandates, there is ample evidence to the contrary. The sector suffers from too many upper echelon teams operating with inadequate cohesion and effectiveness. The prevailing themes they abide by are implicit over explicit communications; conflict avoidance over candid, healthy confrontation; and passive-aggressiveness over direct problem solving.

The issue of a less-than-optimally-functioning leadership team is of utmost importance for INGOs and nonprofits, because nothing short of strong, effective teamwork at this level will allow civil society organizations to successfully navigate the disruptive environment they are facing. Simply avoiding dysfunctional behavior isn't enough; the CEO and his/her direct reports must be capable of operating *synergistically*. This means that members of the team need to work together in such a way that their interactions produce better results than the aggregate of what the individuals would have accomplished working alone. Furthermore, they must collectively consume as few resources (time, attention, effort, courage, discipline, etc.) as possible while achieving greater quantity and higher quality than if they had contributed separately.

Senior leadership teams who achieve this kind of synergy stand a much greater chance of their organizations successfully executing major change. The trouble is that many top leaders lack an in-depth understanding of the underlying dynamics that influence how synergy works—they can recognize when a team is highly effective but often aren't sure what contributes to this kind of optimization and, thus, what can be done to foster and sustain it. It is therefore the intent of this paper to shed light on what constitutes synergistic teamwork and how it can be fostered among INGO and nonprofit executives.

## THREE TYPES OF WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Senior leadership teams have two main responsibilities: manage routine operations (standard, reoccurring tasks and issues) and successfully lead change (shifts in expectations). Unless leaders are skilled at toggling between these two distinct domains, they cannot maintain their day-to-day duties while simultaneously adjusting to—and helping others adjust to—new requirements for success. However, both of these responsibilities demand significant time, attention, effort, and other resources.

When it comes to routine matters, most leaders (assuming they are being used to their full capacity) struggle just to find the means to fulfill their day-to-day duties. When the organization faces transformational change, these leaders must find ways to tap into additional assets to accommodate

the added demands. This is one of the most important functions of the senior leadership team: working together toward common goals. By pooling their resources, executives create the potential for their working relationships to free up collective resources—a reserve that is critical for times of change.

However, combining available means does not *inherently* lead to a surplus. Top executives attempting to leverage their combined energies ultimately develop one of three types of working relationships: self-destructive, static, or synergistic. Each relationship has significant implications for how resources are used and what benefits—if any—emerge.

## 1 + 1 < 2: Self-Destructive

In self-destructive working relationships, two or more people interact in a way that consumes more resources than the value they generate. The result is: (1) less productivity and quality than if the same individuals had worked independently, and (2) less total time, attention, effort, courage, discipline, etc. available for managing change. This kind of working relationship represents the antithesis of teamwork—the executives can accomplish more day-to-day work by operating autonomously, and they collectively lack the time, attention, effort, courage, discipline, etc. necessary to successfully execute new initiatives.

For example, in some INGOs, members of the senior team spend an inordinate amount of energy protecting turf, miscommunicating, and blaming each other for unresolved problems. The fact that they may be doing so in subtle, indirect ways doesn't lessen the detrimental impacts of their actions. When this happens, executives resemble contentious competitors pursuing disparate agendas and quarreling with one another rather than exemplars furthering the organization's mission.

Working relationships of this nature are self-destructive in that they don't bear enough fruit to compensate for the drain they cause. Add to this the harm that can come to their direct and indirect reports and overall senior team unity when these tensions spill over, and the true cost of this kind of dysfunction begins to reveal itself.

Leaders who operate this way produce a negative net result on productivity/quality levels within their areas, which means that their functions will eventually renege on important commitments, and other leaders (possibly including the CEO) will be forced to divert energy from their own responsibilities to address the shortfall. Ultimately, this type of relationship is self-destructive because it cannot endure unless subsidized by others; for it to continue moving forward, more and more fuel must be pulled in from outside the relationship. This puts an untenable burden on the rest of the leadership team. Even when the organization is large and/or otherwise healthy enough to underwrite the debilitation, over a long enough period of time, the drain on human capital will reach a point where it starts to jeopardize other executives' ability to get their jobs done.

Without an intervention to address the problem, extended  $1 + 1 < 2$  interactions create a double whammy: not only will the parties' reserves be insufficient to meet basic productivity and/or quality expectations, but they will also be unprepared to make any significant changes needed to help their units remain viable. Thus, the relationship results in both inadequate output and an inability to do anything about it, which places the whole senior team (as well as the entire organization) at risk.

## 1 + 1 = 2: Static

In static working relationships, two or more people interact in a way that consumes about the same amount of resources as the value they generate. The result is: (1) an acceptable level of productivity and quality when dealing with routine matters, and (2) a combined reservoir of time, attention, effort, courage, discipline, etc. that is sufficient for addressing routine tasks and issues but leaves nothing extra for accommodating change. This kind of working relationship represents what good teamwork looks like under stable conditions: people in steady surroundings getting standard, customary things done more effectively than could be accomplished through individual efforts.

At first glance, there appears to be no problem here. The output from their combined application is what would be anticipated from people who merge their energies. If two widgets are expected to be the result of the leaders working together, their combined performance delivers exactly two widgets—no more, no less.

Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that this equilibrium between expectation and results is tentative and remains in place only to the extent that the setting in which the executives are working is relatively stable. In a “static” environment, few issues challenge the working relationship and its ability to deliver what is anticipated. The modest changes that do need to be made are incremental in nature and typically necessitate few assets beyond those needed to meet the usual productivity and quality requirements.

$1 + 1 = 2$  relationships are very effective when change is both infrequent and modest. However, they are not well suited for periods of transformational upheaval. Dramatically shifting circumstances create new demands and put added pressure on working relationships by requiring swift reactions to unfamiliar realities.

By their very nature, static relationships are ill-prepared for this kind of turmoil. Accommodating disruptive change is a resource-consuming activity, and  $1 + 1 = 2$  relationships produce no excess reserves; the time, attention, effort, courage, discipline, etc. needed to accommodate new demands simply do not exist. The only options, therefore, are to not engage the change, proceed with it without the care and consideration it deserves, or pull energy from what had been allocated to meet day-to-day production and/or quality expectations. No matter which alternative is chosen, if it becomes a pattern, it can trigger a downward cycle that continues until the static relationship degenerates into a self-destructive state.

## **$1 + 1 > 2$ : Synergistic**

In synergistic working relationships, two or more people interact in a way that generates value greater than that of the resources they consume. The result is: (1) higher productivity and quality levels than typically occur when people pool their aspirations, and (2) a combined reservoir of assets that exceeds what is needed for routine tasks and issues, leaving a surplus for accommodating change. This kind of working relationship represents what highly effective teamwork during transitions is all about—accomplishing more together than would be possible through individual achievement.

By way of example, when professional athletes play team sports, they often achieve exceptional feats by interlacing the skills of separate players into a smoothly operating unit that is capable of performing far beyond the individual team members' abilities. It is common to see teams composed of individual "no name" players who, when operating synergistically, defeat teams comprised of "out for themselves" superstars. As the Navy Seals, an elite unit of the U.S. Armed Forces, say, "Individuals play the game, but teams beat the odds."

Synergistic working relationships exist within INGO and nonprofit executive teams when:

- The CEO and his/her reports coordinate their energies so that routine responsibilities are fulfilled in a more efficient and effective manner than would be the case if each person worked on his/her own.
- The team fuses the perspectives, knowledge, and skills of each member into a cohesive unit that is vastly more capable of managing change than a group that functions as a composite of individuals.

People who are engaged synergistically make optimal use of their combined resources, which increases the likelihood that, after addressing everyday operations, they are left with enough time, attention, effort, etc. to manage transitions. Synergy does not grant immunity from the stress of change—it simply provides the resources necessary to respond sooner and more successfully to the demands of the change.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

Synergistic teamwork sounds appealing when compared to the "static" or "self-destructive" alternatives, but make no mistake: these high-performance relationships require tremendous effort and are hard to come by. They are coveted precisely because they are both powerful and rare, but they also demand considerable exertion to form and maintain. Leaders must possess certain knowledge, judgment, and skills related to group dynamics, while also investing considerable



mindshare and tenacity in the creation and ongoing maintenance of synergistic teamwork. If such a work environment were easy to secure, there would be  $1 + 1 > 2$  teams at the top of every INGO.

What makes it worthwhile for CEOs and their direct reports to make such extreme investments to foster extraordinarily productive relationships that accelerate progress toward full realization of needed changes? When senior team synergy emerges, the following three conditions are typically true:

- **Critical circumstances** have raised the stakes for the organization—significant consequences are associated with achieving (or failing to achieve) the intended outcomes.
- **Diverse perspectives** are encouraged and valued—the pressing circumstances call for unique, creative approaches that can only emerge from exploring and integrating dissimilar perspectives.
- **Common goals and interdependencies** are recognized as essential, unifying bonds—mutual reliance between members of the senior team is critical to achieving vitally important outcomes.

## Critical Circumstances

There is no shortage of leadership teams who are drawn to the idea of operating synergistically; however, most lose their enthusiasm when the reality of the challenge becomes apparent. Those who do succeed in creating a  $1 + 1 > 2$  dynamic are typically motivated by the critical nature of the circumstances they face (“critical” here not being intended to mean “good” or “bad,” but to denote the vital nature of a situation—the importance of addressing whatever is at hand).

Consequently, synergy isn’t driven so much by a *desire* to operate in an optimal fashion as it is fueled by the *necessity* to do so. Upper echelon teams operating synergistically are usually facing conditions that they feel demand their utmost cooperation and teamwork. Of these conditions, the most common ones that cause senior teams to view synergy as an imperative are:

- **transformational change**, where the organization faces one or more *dramatic shifts* in how it functions or what it is attempting to accomplish, which must be
- **fully executed**—meaning that the intended outcomes are completely realized and the change’s ultimate purpose entirely achieved (not simply installed)—and
- **treated as imperative**, i.e., pursued as an absolute necessity, not a “good idea” that may or may not be achieved in full.

When civil society organizations face transformational change, and achieving full realization is an unqualified imperative, it is senior leadership’s responsibility to ensure that the team operates in a synergistic manner. The change may be the result of current or anticipated problems or opportunities, but because of top executives’ “*This project will not fail on my watch*” attitudes, senior team synergy is not considered a luxury; it’s an indispensable, nonnegotiable stipulation for organizational success.

## Diverse Perspectives

When breakthrough problem solving and innovation are called for (as they are during a transformational change), healthy nonconformity and oppositional thinking are required and must be encouraged. Contending with different perspectives, however, can be draining and counterproductive if not managed properly. Leaders who tend to form self-destructive or static relationships are prone to avoiding, ignoring, or smoothing over contrasting opinions (particularly when they are strongly held) instead of celebrating them and capitalizing on their potential.

Executives who interact synergistically, on the other hand, do just the opposite: they eagerly surface and actively pursue their differences. The synergistic mindset follows this logic:

- Our organization is contending with transformative shifts. Nothing short of full realization is acceptable, and reaching the intended outcomes is an unshakable promise we have made to ourselves and to those who depend on our guidance.

- We are up against change challenges that won't be resolved through conventional solutions; they are complex in nature and demand bold, imaginative, resourceful, breakthrough thinking.
- The needed innovation isn't going to materialize unless we bring our separate, contrasting, and sometimes contradictory perspectives together to fashion a better solution than any of us could have devised on our own.
- And regardless of the breadth and depth of debate we have engaged in over different solutions and/or approaches, we will publicly support the final decision and its successful realization.

The basic idea is this: iron and nickel could not be more elementally different, but when they are brought together, they produce steel. Similarly, during major change, leaders who succeed with their endeavors tend to forge a viable path forward by valuing and, when appropriate, synthesizing their dissimilar viewpoints.

Synergy doesn't emerge, however, simply because different perspectives are shared among colleagues. Members of self-destructive and static teams also express contrasting viewpoints; the problem is that in doing so, they tend to confirm why they disagree, rather than finding ways their ideas complement and/or build upon one another. What is missing from  $1 + 1 < 2$  and  $1 + 1 = 2$  teams is "appreciative understanding"—the capacity to value and constructively harness the diversity that exists in a working relationship.

The difficulty in applauding and respecting opinions that differ from our own stems, in part, from the importance that is often placed on rational, linear thinking and critical analysis. Discernment is an important aspect of leadership, but overuse of anything, even logical processing, causes it to become a weakness. The disadvantage of "left-brain reasoning" is that it narrows one's focus to isolating events, separating what is "right" and "wrong," and looking for ways something is flawed at the expense of right-hemisphere processing (looking for ways to make something work that appears to be impossible, integrating two opposing perspectives into one that can be supported by all parties, etc.). For senior executives to work together synergistically, a balance of rational, deductive reasoning and the inventive merging of disparate ideas is needed.

For INGO and nonprofit executive leaders to increase their appreciative understanding of each other's views, they must operate in an environment where they can freely express their thoughts and feelings without fear of being attacked or otherwise told that their input is not valuable. This requires all parties to hold off on forming judgments about others' input until those views have first been valued and harvested for creative interpretations or ideas that might help to strengthen the eventual course of action.

## Common Goals & Interdependence

Synergistic relationships are not easy to develop and maintain. Most executives are willing to invest what is called for only if a significant benefit can be gained and/or detriment avoided by working together in a  $1 + 1 > 2$  manner. When this is the case, it is possible to establish one or more *common goals* that the entire senior team can relate to as vitally important.

This kind of goal solidarity, however, only exists when top executives share a deep understanding of, commitment to, and alignment around the fundamental intent behind the change goal(s). To generate this unity, the leadership team needs to debate and then author a complete, concise, clear, and compelling written narrative that articulates the ultimate purpose of the endeavor they are pursuing.

When high-ranking officers share the same interpretation of what fulfillment looks like, their energies and actions are more likely to become focused on the activities necessary to achieve that outcome. They will waste fewer resources on hidden agendas and behaviors that are inconsistent with realizing the goal.

Yet common goals alone are insufficient to generate synergy. Two leaders can want the same outcome, but if one executive sees the other as unnecessary (or worse, counterproductive),  $1 + 1 > 2$  behavior seldom materializes. *Interdependence* is the final ingredient needed to generate meaningful unified action. People involved in synergistic working relationships recognize that their goals cannot be achieved without key contributions from others holding critical roles. Anyone who can't or won't

acknowledge and act in accordance with this interdependence will be a detriment to synergistic interaction and poses a risk to results.

It isn't easy for people to set aside personal preferences and egos and really work at not only understanding different points of view, but valuing them and seeing them as essential to group success. Upper echelon players' willingness to relate to each other this way is tied directly to situations where they share a sense of urgency about addressing an important change. These leaders see the change as demanding "all hands on deck" and view each member of the team as vital to realizing the change.

At the end of the day, INGO and nonprofit executive teams that form and maintain  $1 + 1 > 2$  relationships are invested in achieving a common goal, and they know they must rely on each other to accomplish it. If they cannot or do not rely on one another fully, egos will take precedent, personal agendas will rule the day, and the full intent of the change will likely never come to fruition.

## VITAL CHARACTERISTICS

Top executives who are willing to put forth the extraordinary effort required for synergy to thrive typically only do so (1) when they are facing vitally important circumstances (2) that demand the synthesis of diverse perspectives to create innovative solutions, and (3) members of their team approach the challenge with a common objective and acknowledgment that interdependencies are their unifying force.

Still, as important as they are, these three elements do not guarantee synergy. They are prerequisites, not assurances. They establish an environment in which synergy may flourish, but a CEO and his/her direct reports must do much more to deliver synergistic leadership during transformational change.

Given the right conditions, senior teams must also display particular mindsets and behaviors in order to turn  $1 + 1 > 2$  potential into a reality. These include:

- **Clarifying roles and responsibilities**—Members know how each executive contributes to overall results, and they are primed to recognize and act on opportunities for collaboration.
- **Maintaining high trust**—Members are confident that their colleagues will deliver what is expected and will learn what to do differently next time whenever they personally fall short of expectations.
- **Communicating with candor and directness**—Members expect nothing less than complete accuracy, transparency, and authenticity in their interactions with each other.
- **Valuing healthy conflict**—Members view differences of opinion that result from expressing deeply held views to be natural, inevitable, and valuable components of constructive dialogue.
- **Not opting out**—Members respect and fully support decisions made by others on the team (the CEO, individual colleagues, or the full team), regardless of whether those decisions are consistent with personal preferences.
- **Focusing efforts**—Members concentrate on the most relevant, critically important activities while minimizing time spent on less essential concerns and issues.
- **Selective membership**—Leaders are careful to extend invitations to join their team only to candidates who resonate with the organization’s overall mission, demonstrate exceptional functional capabilities, support the transformational changes at hand, can serve as role models for the organization’s desired culture, *and display a strong predisposition for operating in a synergistic fashion.*

Individually or in various combinations, any of these mindsets and behaviors can be beneficial to a team’s operation, but it takes the collective impact of them all for a team to cross the synergistic threshold. Furthermore, not only must all of these characteristics be displayed by the team, but they must be displayed by every individual on the team most—if not all—of the time.

This is another reason synergy is so uncommon: it is rare that every individual on a team will possess, never mind consistently exhibit, these characteristics. Yet any time a member of the team fails to embody any one of these characteristics, the team's synergy regarding the situation at hand is jeopardized. Sure, a team may still generate a degree of  $1 + 1 > 2$  output if most of the members display most of the crucial characteristics, but the maximum benefit of the leadership team dynamic can only be realized if all members demonstrate each characteristic to the fullest extent possible.

## SUMMARY

When INGO and nonprofit senior leaders are navigating transformational change that must be fully realized, their capacity to operate together effectively can be characterized as either self-destructive ( $1 + 1 < 2$ ), static ( $1 + 1 = 2$ ), or synergistic ( $1 + 1 > 2$ ). This paper focused on how synergistic relationships both conserve and liberate the resources (time, attention, effort, courage, discipline, etc.) needed to successfully guide organizations toward intended outcomes.

Synergistic relationships offer many advantages, but they are not easy to generate and sustain. Top executives who are willing to make the necessary "above and beyond" investments in each other are typically motivated by the intersection of three conditions: they are facing critical circumstances, they recognize that creative responses emerging from the team's variety of diverse perspectives are needed, and they not only share common outcome goals, but also acknowledge the necessity of interdependence to reach realization.

If these three motivating preconditions are in place, the senior team must then demonstrate certain mindsets and behaviors before maximum synergy can flourish. Each member must be clear on his/her own roles and responsibilities, as well as those of others. Members must all trust one another and operate with candor and directness. They must value healthy conflict, support one another's decisions, and keep their efforts focused on the most important issues at hand. Finally, they must only invite new members who can contribute to and advance the synergy of the team to join their ranks. If any member fails to embody any of these characteristics, then some—or possibly all—of the team's potential for synergy will be forfeited.

## NEXT STEPS

Based on the perspectives presented here, INGO and nonprofit executives who are interested in generating and maintaining high levels of senior team synergy should explore the following questions.

To what extent:

- Are we now or will we soon be called on to lead the organization through a critical period of dramatic change where nothing short of full realization of the objectives is acceptable and reaching the desired outcome is both a personal and enterprise-wide imperative?
- Do we have different ideas about how the transformation should proceed? If so, are they freely and fully expressed, valued, and, whenever possible, incorporated into final decisions?
- Is there unity among us about what the ultimate purpose is behind these changes, and do we treat each other as interdependently linked in accomplishing what must be achieved?
- Are we, as individuals and as a group, prepared to demonstrate the vital characteristics of a synergistic team: clarity of roles and responsibilities; high trust, candor, and directness; healthy conflict; no opting-out; concentrated effort; and selective involvement?

Strengthening synergy among CEOs and their direct reports is both incredibly powerful and extremely difficult to accomplish. The mindsets and behaviors that support  $1 + 1 > 2$  operations at the senior level are the result of ongoing personal development work by the individual executives as well as joint development work through the collective pursuits of the team.

To this end, discussing these four questions shouldn't be confused with progress toward synergy. The questions are simply meant to prompt a dialogue that will elucidate the current conditions under which the journey toward greater synergy may begin. The first three questions help determine if more synergy is warranted, and the last one suggests challenges that may arise if the path is pursued.



Use these questions as a springboard, and then be prepared for a long, arduous, but extremely worthwhile journey ahead.

Conner Advisory will continue to monitor and study the factors that are aiding or impeding the progress of INGO leaders and their organizations as they adapt to—and hopefully thrive in—this unprecedented environment of change and disruption. We invite you to download our other research papers and follow our future insights on our website, [conneradvisory.com](https://conneradvisory.com).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### Daryl Conner

Daryl is co-founder and Chairman of Conner Advisory, a consulting firm providing change execution support to civil society organizations who are advancing the quality of the human experience and who find themselves facing transformations beyond their capacity to successfully execute. Conner Advisory serves INGO and non-profit leaders addressing some of the world's most intractable and critical challenges of our day, including homelessness, hunger, medical crises, and healthcare. Representative clients include: Habitat for Humanity, Doctors without Borders, Pact, and YWCA.

During his 45-plus years of practice, Daryl has educated and advised strategic leaders and seasoned change practitioners in many of the world's most successful organizations. His focus has always been on helping them both understand and address the challenges and opportunities they face during transformational change.

Daryl's work is built on a strong foundation of research, extensive consulting experience, and a master's degree in psychology. He has authored two books—*Managing at the Speed of Change* (Random House, 1993) and *Leading at the Edge of Chaos* (John Wiley & Sons, 1998)—and more than 250 publications, including journal and magazine articles, monographs, book chapters, and videos. In recent years, his newer published work has been made available through blogs, essays, and white

papers ([Advisory Research](#), [Raising Your Game Blog](#), [Essays on the Mastery Path](#), and [Change Thinking](#)).

## Ed Boswell

With over 30 years of experience helping senior leadership teams around the globe execute major organizational changes, Ed became a founding partner in 2014 of Conner Advisory—a firm focused solely on helping leaders in the civil society sector execute their most urgent strategic priorities. He has advised leaders at World Vision, Plan International, BRAC, Terre des Hommes, ChildFund International as well as with associations like InterAction, the International Civil Society Centre and Humentum that support the global NGO community.

Prior to co-founding Conner Advisory with Daryl Conner, Ed served eight years as CEO of The Forum Corporation—a global leadership development and strategy execution firm. He was subsequently elected as a partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers where he led their People and Change consulting practice until 2014.

Ed earned his PhD in Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and serves as an advisor to the NeuroLeadership Institute—an international organization that applies the insights of brain science to organizational performance and leadership effectiveness.

