Original Article

Developing Effective Top Management Teams at Vietnamese SMEs

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Abstract: Despite an increasing number of studies focusing on leadership at Vietnamese small and medium sized enteprises (SMEs), there is a lack of empirical research on collective leadership and development of effective top management teams (TMTs). The purpose of this paper is to review recent research on TMTs and analyze the current status of developing TMTs at Vietnamese SMEs in order to provide recommendations for developing effective TMTs at Vietnamese SMEs. Based on the survey results of 141 SMEs, this research shows that the common characteristics of an effective TMT at a Vietnamese SME are shared vision, optimal team size, role clarity, age diversity, functional background diversity, regular communication, solidarity and collective decision-making.

Keywords: Collective leadership, top management team, effective top management team, SMEs.

1. Introduction

The world is increasingly unpredictable, especially in the business environment, thus leading a leadership team becomes extremely complicated. Joining the global market, SMEs can purchase technology, management processes or sample products, yet it is impossible to buy leadership. Leadership becomes a key factor determining the success of SMEs. Investment in leadership development is necessarily a key investment in any enterprise [1].

Vietnamese society has a dominant power culture, in which people place high values on position and power, thus decisions usually come from the top leaders. SME owners are greatly influenced by the power culture. In these enterprises, the owners are the center of decision-making and they are supposed to build TMTs according to loyalty and honesty.

However, when SMEs have to compete with the ability to adapt to changes and solving complex problems on a global scale, their owners, with limited experience and capability, can hardly make the right decision. They need a team of top leaders who are diverse and effective to share leadership roles and make collective decisions together.

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Leadership is a topic that draws great interest of both practitioners and researchers. Leadership helps enterprises survive and thrive in changing environments [2]. There are three research approaches to leadership: leadership function, leadership action and the leader [3].

According to the behavioral theory of the firm, in the initial stage, the enterprise needs a leader, but in the development stage, enterprise needs a TMT [4]. According to the upper echelon theory (UE theory), an enterprise is a reflection of its TMT, and its performance depends on the TMT's decisions [5].

In the world, many enterprises cannot rely on top-down one-man leadership model, thus have transformed into an interactive and power-sharing collective leadership model [6]. The condition for enterprises to practice collective leadership is to have an effective TMT. One of the most important tasks of the enterprises is to build a TMT in the time being and prepare for such a TMT in the future [7].

For SMEs, leadership quality resembles a bottleneck for development [8]. SMEs' leaders are often about 15 years behind the world. What are the solutions for improving the quality of the SME's leadership? And is a SME's owner, with a personal leadership vision and experience, able to lead the enterprise toward sustainability without support from an effective TMT?

Building an effective TMT is a great challenge, especially for SMEs, which are managed in a family-style, without a culture of collective leadership. Research on SMEs has focused on the individual leader, such as the business owner, CEO or CFO, in which popular research surrounds leadership competency and KPI. Research on boards, TMT or boards and TMTs as a whole have its limits. Research on TMTs often takes the theoretical basis of agency theory, upper echelon's theory and behavioral theory of the firm. However, there has been no research on TMTs using all of these theories.

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, TMT's performance or achievements are measured through organizational performance. Therefore, many enterprises evaluate their TMT according to the business results. However, since the TMT's achievement is an output which depends on input and operation of the team, it should be evaluated based on the input and operation of the team.

This research presents the research results on the input and operational characteristics of an effective TMT so as to facilitate the development of TMTs at Vietnamese SMEs because they play a highly important role in keeping their businesses competitive in today's VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world.

2. Literature review

2.1. Collective leadership

Leadership is a multi-faceted process of identifying goals, mobilizing others to act and providing the necessary support and encouragement to achieve common goals [9]. Research has moved beyond the individual leader's characteristics to the characteristics of a TMT ([10]. The collective leadership (or shared leadership) is defined as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both" [11]. Collective leadership is an extensive sharing of the leadership role and the promotion of the collective decision-making process among TMTs [12].

Though SME's owner plays a crucial role, the TMT has the greatest impact on business performance [13]. In large corporations, there is just too much work for one person to do, and no one individual is likely to have all the skills needed to do it all [14]. Complex changes from the surrounding environment makes an enterprise unable to rely on one single individual [15].

2.2. Top management team

The concept of a team is commonly used in businesses, for example, a TMT. A team is small and it shares a common goal. The team is organized into one unit, whose task is to solve a problem set within a specified period of time. A TEAM is an abbreviation of the words Together, Everybody, Achieves and More. According to Finkelstein, Hambrick and Cannella (2009), a TMT is defined as "the relatively small group of most influential executives at the apex of an organization - usually the CEO and those who report directly to him or her" [16].

One of the major challenges for enterprises today is maintaining the harmony between the benefits of the TMT and the corporate owners/shareholders [17]. Enterprises with members of the board of directors who do not concurrently hold positions on the board of management have a higher rate of return on equity [18]. There is a positive relationship between the separation of ownership and management and business results [19]. However, SMEs are characterized by difficulty in separating ownership and management [20]. TMTs have four main roles including developing strategies and business plans, organizational development and leading and controlling the enterprise [20].

2.3. Effective top management team

Research on TMTs often focuses on the collective characteristics of an effective TMT. Indeed, there are many factors affecting TMT's performance such as the working environment (market trend, competitors, owners' leadership style, remuneration policies and empowerment mechanisms among others), the interaction mechanism in the team, the collective input factors of the team and the individual input factors of team members (e.g. work capacity and motivation). The major challenge in leadership research is to identify the key characteristics forming an effective TMT [21].

Leadership is a process and leadership effectiveness is a result [22]. A TMT's effectiveness is measured through organizational performance [23]. Enterprises need to assess the performance of their TMT not only through financial indicators but also sustainable development indicators such as the ability for the enterprise to earn its place in the market and innovation and human resource development [24]. In addition, enterprises need to assess their TMT's effectiveness based on their satisfaction, motivation and the commitment of subordinates. An effective TMT always has a number of basic common characteristics [25].

Therefore, the question is what common characteristics does an effective TMT have or can be improved? According to related research results, the main characteristics can be divided into three groups: top management team size, demographic diversity of the top management team and top management team cohesion.

a) Top management team size

A reasonable size of a TMT is seen as an element for increasing the competitiveness of an enterprise [26]. An effective TMT is synonymous with a team of a reasonable size [27]. According to Finkelstein et al. (2009), a TMT should be a relatively small group [28]. The TMT must have members who are knowledgeable about strategic management and financial management [29, 30]. A TMT should gather together members who are competent in business, marketing, finance and production [31]. The responsibility of the head of a TMT is to specify the roles and tasks for each member. Each task must aim to bring meaning, to motivate and align with the accountability of the team [32]. In fact, the assignment is influenced by the expectations of the head and the "collectivism" of the team.

b) Demographic diversity of the top management team

Many enterprises realize that to lead the market, it is necessary to accept diversity, including diversity in their TMT. According to McKinsey & Company, based on the survey of 366 enterprises from Canada, the US and the UK

in 2005, enterprises with diversification in their TMTs earn a profit 35% higher than the industry average. Research on diversity often focuses on demographic diversity, including age, gender, education, experience and seniority [33]. The demographic diversity of a TMT becomes important when the business environment changes [34]. In the face of complex management problems, the TMT will be more effective if there is diverse thinking capacity, skills and knowledge [35]. Enterprises that want to retain and improve the contribution of their TMT should increase the diversity of the team [36].

c) Top management team cohesion

When studying the cohesiveness of a TMT (understanding, interaction, role clarity, coordination, mutual support, etc.) many authors applied the functional approach [37-39].

Accordingly, the cohesiveness of a TMT is assessed simultaneously from an enterprise's perspective through organizational structure and from a staff perspective through shared vision, regular communication, solidarity and collective decision-making.

The vision of an enterprise is the enterprise's expression of an expected future state [40]. Understanding the common goals

and sharing the core values of the enterprise are two important conditions for the coordination process of the team to be highly effective [41].

Regular communication, coordinated action, interdependence, role clarity and value-sharing affect the performance of the team. The process of information sharing and collective discussion increases the commitment of the team [42]. The collaborative spirit of a TMT influences the performance and growth of the enterprise [43]. Unity is the key for a TMT to successfully conduct a new business strategy [43].

Collective decision-making is a leadership style in which leaders have the right to delegate power to, and make decisions for, partners and subordinates. An effective TMT is able to make collective decisions. However, the "leadership" characteristic of the TMT leader will be less significant when engaging other members in the collective decision-making process [44]. Therefore, TMT leader should tactfully handle disagreements towards stimulating creativity and reducing conflict in the team [45].

In conclusion, characteristics of an effective top management team from outcomes of a literature review are shown in Figure 1.
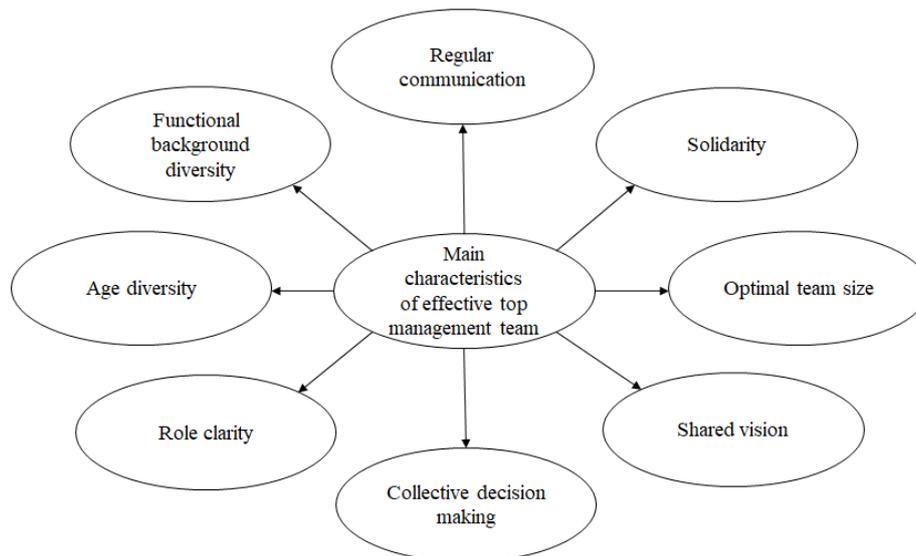

Figure 1. Characteristics of an effective TMT (theories).
Source: Author (2018).

3. Research methods

To study and analyze the current status of SME's TMT development, a survey with a structured-questionnaire was conducted. The theory-based questionnaire was designed with a focus on today's challenges for TMTs-leadership development, TMT effectiveness and TMT characteristics. Two common types of survey questions, yes/no questions and rating scale questions, were used to measure SME's top leaders' opinions and attitude towards TMT development. The likert scale contains five points of agreement: 1 - Strongly disagree; 2 - Disagree; 3 - Neither agree nor disagree; 4 - Agree; 5 - Strongly agree.

Regarding the survey sample size, top level executives from 187 SMEs were asked to participate in this study and 141 agreed. Respondents were invited to fill out the survey online (using free online Monkey Survey software). Giving the name of the respondent was not compulsory.

Most of the SMEs in the survey are of small size (under 100 employees); 50% are from 5 to 10 years old, and 93% achieved their business goals for the past 3 years. Regarding the TMTs in these SMEs, the survey results present that, in terms of TMT size, 72% have 3 members, 24% have 3 members and 2% have 1 or 4 members; in terms of the TMT members' average age, 70% are from 30 to 40 years old and 30% are from 40 to 50 years old, and none are under 30 or over 50 years old. Among the 141 SMEs in the survey, 16% have family members in the TMT and 88% are owner-managers (owner is also a member of the TMT).

4. Results

a) Opinions on developing TMTs at SMEs

Table 1 presents the importance of developing TMTs at SMEs. The majority of respondents (91.48%) agree with the need for building an effective TMT and implementing a collective leadership model. The big challenges for developing effective TMTs at SMEs are: hiring and retaining high quality talent (100%) and shifting the owner's mindset from individual leadership to collective leadership (95.74%)

However, the small scale of business (of the SME) is not seen as a big challenge for developing an effective TMT (63.82%).

b) Challenges for TMTs

Table 2 presents the results of identifying the key challenges for TMTs nowadays, which are: growing the business, quickly reacting to changing markets and application of new digital technologies, respectively. These challenges all come from the external environment, so SMEs must increase their TMT's diversity and effectiveness to be able to solve challenges.

c) Main characteristics of an effective TMT

Table 3 provides the results showing that SMEs' TMTs in the survey are quite effective. The respondents agree with 9 out of 10 characteristics of an effective TMT, except educational level diversity. The sub-characteristics that strongly influence the TMT's effectivness are the TMT leadership involving other members in the decision-making process, TMT leadership recognizing the achievements of team members equally for their efforts, TMT members sharing a strong common goal and being committed to succeed, TMT members seeking to make decisions by consensus, TMT leadership resolving conflicts by helping team members respect differences and TMT members engaging in open dialogue and communication.

d) Current status of TMTs at SMEs

Table 4 presents results evaluating the current TMTs at SMEs using 9 main characteristics of an effective TMT as a set of evaluation criteria. Although the TMTs are quite effective, they can only meet 3 out of 9 main characteristics of effective TMT. These are regular communication, role clarity and solidarity, respectively. According to respondents, the current SMEs' TMTs are not diverse enough in their functional background and quite weak at collective decision-making.

In addition, respondents are not sure if the current SMEs' TMTs have high age diversity, high tenure diversity and strong shared vision.

5. Recommendation

Today's business world is fraught with complexity, so SMEs need to respond accordingly. SMEs must compete at the speed of adapting on the fly to fast-changing markets and technologies. In such a world, SMEs must change their leadership mindset and model.

Collective leadership is a leadership model that promotes and enables adaptation, diversity and innovation. That is why collective leadership is the way forward.

Collective leadership and effective TMTs are inseparable. SMEs should aspire for team effectiveness and for developing a TMT that has optimal team size, demographic diversity and an effective combination of the specific individual strengths of the team members.

Table 1. Opinions on developing TMTs at SMEs

(n = 141)

		N	%
1	A TMT is a team comprising the CEO and those who report directly to him or her	130	92.19
2	An effective TMT is a team accomplishing business goals given by the owner	141	100
3	An SME needs for development an effective TMT implementing collective leadership	129	91.48
4	A big challenge for developing an effective TMT is the small scale of business	90	63.82
5	A big challenge for developing an effective TMT is hiring and retaining high quality talent	141	100
6	A big challenge for developing an effective TMT is shifting the owner's mindset from individual leadership to collective leadership	135	95.74

Source: Author (2018).

Table 2. Challenges for TMTs at SMEs

(n = 141)

		Mean rank	SD
1	Formulating right development strategy	3.575	0.443
2	Entering international market	3.687	0.698
3	Improving innovative capacity	3.746	0.164
4	Quickly reacting to changing market	4.275	0.414
5	Applying digital technologies	4.013	0.956
6	Growing the business	4.414	0.319

Source: Author (2018).

Table 3. Main characteristics of an effective TMT

(n = 141)

		Mean rank	SD
1	Optimal team size		
1.1	Good proportion between TMT size and enterprise size	3.414	0.384
1.2	TMT size must be large enough to ensure the effective implementation of the strategy and business plan	4.352	0.831
1.3	TMT size must be small enough to achieve team consensus in dealing with issues in complex business environment	3.914	0.517

2	Age diversity		
2.1	At least one member is over 40 years old and at least one member is under 40 years old	3.715	0.174
2.2	A good proportion between members aged over 40 years old and members aged under 40 years old	3.614	0.716
3	Tenure diversity		
3.1	At least one member is senior to share organizational culture and values and build trust inside the team	3.931	1.024
3.2	At least one member is junior to accept risks and engage in innovation	3.044	0.715
4	*Educational level diversity*		
4.1	*At least one member holds a degree from world's top university*	*3.144*	*0.815*
4.2	*At least one member holds a master degree*	*3.385*	*0.614*
5	Functional background diversity		
5.1	At least one member has background in economics or business	4.244	0.764
5.2	At least one member has background in finance or accounting	3.335	0.415
5.3	At least one member has background in natural sciences, technology or engineering	4.437	0.614
5.4	At least one member has background in law, social sciences or humanities	3.143	0.711
6	Shared vision		
6.1	TMT members have strong shared values and beliefs	4.314	0.572
6.2	TMT members share a strong common goal and commit to succeed	4.541	0.744
7	Role clarity		
7.1	TMT members discuss differences in what each member has to contribute to the work	4.219	0.542
7.2	TMT members understand member roles, relationships, assignments and responsibilities	4.135	0.663
8	Regular communication		
8.1	TMT's members are encouraged to ask questions and raise ideas in the meeting	4.414	0.741
8.2	TMT members give and accept feedback in an non-defensive manner	4.322	1.091
8.3	TMT members engage in open dialogue and communication	4.474	0.914
8.4	TMT members feel free to express themselves	3.966	0.541
9	Solidarity		
9.1	TMT members together face up to conflict and work through it	4.431	0.741
9.2	TMT members together promote group cohesion	4.216	0.399
9.3	TMT members respect, trust each other and tolerate other member's mistakes	4.448	0.834
9.4	TMT members enjoy regular interaction as they have similar interests and goals	3.362	0.659
9.5	TMT members together create of a team atmosphere that is informal, relaxed, comfortable and non-judgemental	4.133	0.814
10	Collective decision making		
10.1	TMT members are satisfied with their jobs	3.493	0.195
10.2	TMT members seek to make decisions by consensus	4.534	0.535
10.3	TMT members are accountable for their share of the work	4.401	0.795
10.4	TMT leadership resolves conflict by helping team members respect differences	4.531	0.751
10.5	TMT leadership involves other members in the decision making process	4.664	0.715
10.6	TMT leadership recognizes achievements of team members equally for their efforts	4.561	0.335

Source: Author (2018).

Table 4. Current status of TMTs at SMEs

(n = 141)

		Mean rank	SD
1	Optimal team size	3.144	1.036
2	Age diversity	3.277	0.968
3	Tenure diversity	3.138	0.358
4	Functional background diversity	2.144	0.464
5	Shared vision	3.350	0.565
6	Role clarity	3.743	0.715
7	Regular communication	3.823	0.564
8	Solidarity	3.517	0.939
9	Collective decision making	2.245	0.713
10	In general, the current TMT is effective	3.556	0.774

Source: Author (2018).

Globalization, industrial revolution 4.0 and brain circulation bring big opportunities for SMEs to build an effective TMT. Business owners should take responsibility for effective TMT development. The proposed solution for the SME owner is to use the characteristics of an effective TMT as a tool to analyze his/her SME's TMT, to define gaps (between as-is characteristics and to-be characteristics) and to make improvements and changes. Based on the results of this research, eight main characteristics of an effective TMT are recommended to help SMEs to build a comprehensive framework for TMT characteristic's analysis.
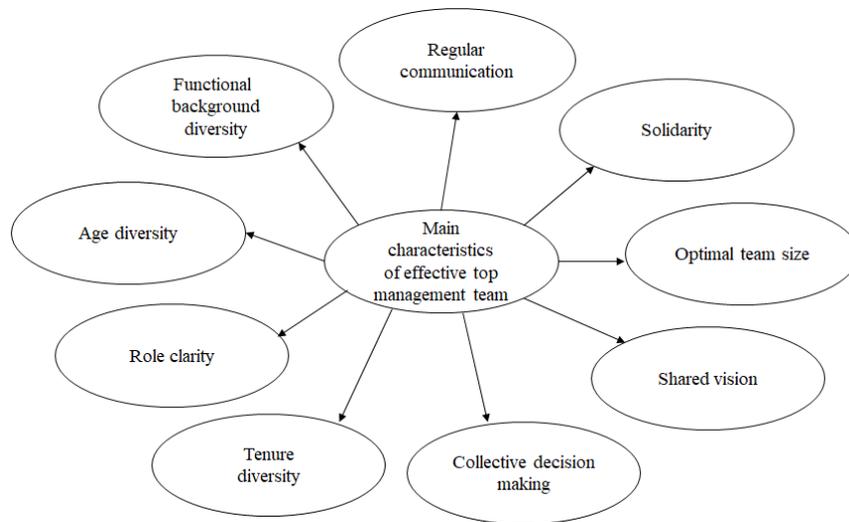

Figure 2. Recommendation for main characteristics of an effective TMT at SME.
Source: Author (2019).

It can be argued that collective leadership and effective TMTs are inseparable. To increase the TMT's effectiveness, decentralization is really important; the leader must get team members involved in decision-making. Moreover, TMT size influences the team's effectiveness. A small TMT size is more autonomous and tends to come up with more innovative solutions. An ideal TMT has 4.6 members [46]. For SMEs, an ideal TMT has

from 2 to 4 members with shared vision and goals. A large-size TMT may encounter more problems of absenteeism and turnover, and members may be less satisfied with work.

In addition, the TMT leader should have the authority to establish and assign roles and responsibilities among all members. In reality, role clarity depends on the firm size. Role clarity becomes important when an enterprise reaches 50 employees (50 is a magic number in human resource management). Role clarity helps to reduce stress and misunderstandings, and increase motivation and self-responsibility among TMT members. Role clarity in the TMT has a positive impact on promoting collective decision-making in the team.

In this study, I addressed the problem of identifying the inputs of an effective TMT using UE theory. Development of an effective TMT is different from the development of an effective individual leader. There are several gaps in my knowledge about the development of TMTs at SMEs that follow from the findings in this study, and would benefit from further research, including measuring and testing the impacts of a TMT's main characteristics on firm performance.

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