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Time for a consigliere, not a vain alpha CEO



By Andrew Hill

Teams sharing leadership will be more productive than those with a traditional status-based model

Self-castration was such a popular path to a high-flying advisory career in China's imperial court that the Ming dynasty ended up having to employ lots of eunuchs it could not afford.

Plenty of deputies, sidekicks, fixers and henchpeople have had to endure accusations that they do not have the balls for the top job. But Richard Hytner, whose book *Consiglieri* contains this striking historical aside, wants to rehabilitate the influencers in the back rooms and corridors of power.

The seconds-in-command, team coaches and assistants he interviews all seem oddly happy with their place in the shadow of limelight-seeking chief executives and team captains. Suspicion about the motives of those who choose the role of *consigliere* is normal, the author told me. When he chose to exchange a big executive leadership role at Saatchi & Saatchi for a job as deputy chairman, with no direct reports, half his colleagues at the advertising agency wondered if he was just waiting for his moment to become a chief executive. The other half assumed he was not up to the task.

But the quiet counsellors may be about to come into their own. Teams that share leadership will in the end be more creative and productive than those obsessed by the traditional status-based model.

It is about time for a change. The more I observe alpha executives, the more I think how pathetic their jockeying for titular status looks and how damaging it can be. Earlier this month, the [Omnicom-Publicis](#) deal foundered, partly on the absurd notion that the companies' two bosses could cohabit in the chief executive role. Last week another merger of equals – between the British retailers [Carphone Warehouse](#) and [Dixons](#) – lumbered into view with a teetering top-heavy superstructure. Little evidence anyone volunteered for auto-emasculation there.

What are the alternatives? Instead of fretting over where they are in the hierarchy, managers should develop a “heterarchy”, according to a new paper in the latest *Academy of Management Journal*. In such a structure (it is a neurobiological term for how the brain is organised), relative power shifts according to who has the most relevant experience, knowledge and resources for the situation.

The study refers to one multinational, for example, where the previously self-effacing chief financial officer (a classic *consigliere*) shocked everyone by becoming, in the words of a colleague, “suddenly dramatically more emphatic” as recession hit. The finance chief's job was at risk if the business ran out of cash, so his sudden and vocal devotion to the task was perhaps not so surprising. But in the researchers' experiments, teams where such shifts took place – and where other team members recognised the changes as legitimate – were also more creative.

As other studies of power suggest, some people naturally seek status while others seek influence. Switching between the two roles is not always easy. Think of Chuck Prince, long-time legal adviser to Sandy Weill at [Citigroup](#), who failed when he took over as CEO. But Mr Hytner deduces from his interviews that it is valuable for leaders to serve time as advisers and assistants, and vice versa. The research backs up his intuition.

Companies need not make a straight choice between chiefs and deputies, though. Saatchi & Saatchi sometimes uses a well-known project management framework based on the acronym Rasci. One team member is Responsible for the outcome, one is Accountable and holds the rest of the team to account. Another group provides Support, a fourth group is Consulted, and a final group is Informed, though not involved. In such teams, as the AOM Journal study says, the usual role of the named leader in setting goals and strategy is less important than the team's ability to adapt to changing situations. Having taken the emphasis off hierarchy, more than one person can lead, and the team can draw on different styles and knowledge – from the *consigliere*'s subtle influencing to the alpha-manager's autocratic powers.

Whether the ideal structure is a heterarchy, a Holacracy (the manager-less system being tried out by Zappos, the shoe retailer), or even just a looser type of hierarchy, teams prosper when eunuchs and emperors can change places. Perhaps, one day, Publicis chief Maurice Lévy's over-optimistic claim at the time of the ill-fated Omnicom announcement – “who is at the top, we don't care any more”

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– will come true.

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