

Executive Coaching; a Highly Effective Way to Enhance Leader's Performance

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Abstract— Finding effective leaders who have the skills and behaviours required to drive businesses is ordinarily a difficult and demanding mission. In the highly complex business environments of today, this becomes a very difficult undertaking. The judicious and well-framed use of executive coaching for senior executives and budding leaders can make a huge difference in developing leaders and giving them an advantage in the delivery of their demanding key performance indicators. This paper provides real examples of how executive coaching has been applied creatively within various businesses to produce transformative results.

Keywords: Leadership. Executive Coaching. Business Performance. Competitiveness. Challenge. Smarter. Faster. Better.

I. INTRODUCTION

True leadership development requires much more than traditional 'leadership' training courses.

With business environments becoming increasingly challenging, even to the most competent of managers, what is sharply in high demand (and mostly in short supply) are true leaders of business who are able to navigate the rough seas of change and challenge, and take their business from one safe harbor to the next.

II. THE PREMISE

Companies and organizations are, more than ever, searching for leaders with the ability to motivate and inspire their workforce, to display a heightened level of emotional intelligence, to exhibit thinking agility and flexibility, to adapt to rapid change and to apply their unique individual strengths to lead businesses to sustained growth and success.

More often than not, those leaders have to be developed from within an organisation rather than be 'head-hunted' and hired from the outside. Well-conceived, well-structured and well-delivered executive coaching is a highly effective approach to developing true leaders from within an organisation.

The fundamental concept that underlies executive coaching is a straightforward one; it is simply that leadership is rarely

ever an innate or a 'born-with' trait. Each and every person can step up to become a true leader, given the opportunity, the challenge, the ambition, the true desire and the coaching.

In business, effective leaders develop and acquire abilities and behaviours -throughout their careers- that they learn to apply consistently to give themselves a clear advantage as they lead from the front. Those abilities allow them to work smarter, faster and better. However, in order to be able to work in these ways, true leaders are required to understand and embrace the paradoxes that working smarter, faster and better entail.

III. WORKING SMARTER

To work smarter, effective leaders must become adept at subduing their urge to always be the smartest persons around, and to be able to identify smartness in others around them, and to deploy that collective (or singular) smartness to achieve more for their business. Executive coaching comes into play to help those leaders to confront their biases, and to harness and rein in their natural competitiveness, to identify brilliance in people other than themselves. Coaching helps the leaders to acquire or to sharpen their aptitude to invite free flow of discussion, to encourage contradiction, to accept alternative ideas and to recognise and reward breakthroughs when they occur. When the skills of appreciating smartness in others are mastered by a leader, the outcome is a surge of energy, creativity and innovation throughout an organisation.

An excellent example, of how executive coaching has worked to enrich an organisation by promoting smartness, is one that took place in an important but troubled large regional division of an international company. The prevailing culture across that company was a command-and-control, top-down, senior-leaders-know-best culture. A new executive, appointed to head and turn around the fortunes of that division, was a proven veteran of the company who had made his mark consistently in many roles and various functions over the span of a 20 years career. Shortly after taking over, the newly appointed leader –and lets call him

Monzer- observed that morale was low across his organisation, with most of his direct reports exhibiting signs of mental and physical fatigue. His overall impression of the division was that the employees had lost the belief in the possibility of winning. They seemed to continuously lurch from one initiative -pushed down onto them by the company headquarters team- to another without any significant performance improvement. After several attempts at prescribing solutions and initiatives that delivered no tangible signs of recovery, Monzer realised that something different was required. He sought the help of a highly respected executive coach.

The coach worked with the leader mostly to persuade him that, since his smart (and well-tested ideas) have not delivered the desired outcomes, he should try to sincerely seek ideas from his team. Taking the coaching to heart, the new leader embarked on a 4-week series of non-stop meetings across his division. He met and spoke to at least 80% of the employees. He openly invited their opinions on how the division can transform itself, listened generously and intently, discussed and debated their ideas with them and captured the ideas that he judged smart. The outcome was a novel 'grass-roots' idea to reorient the organisation into a cellular structure around customers, where each customer was served by a dedicated team that was closely attuned to their exact needs. That was a truly radical and smart idea that emanated from the organisation not from its leader. However, the leader had the smarts to recognise a great idea when he found one. Within 6 months of implementing the new structure, the division started to win again. The new division culture of listening, consultation, enticement of smart ideas, encouragement of open discourse and contradiction, recognition of brilliant ideas by putting them into action and rewarding the contributors became the whole mark of the division which continues to grow and thrive. The previously underperforming division has become a beacon for the rest of the company, where many of the smart ideas pioneered within it have made their way to implementation company-wide.

IV. WORKING FASTER

To work faster, effective leaders develop the ability to distinguish between speed and haste. They allow themselves the time to think and plan before deciding and acting, and in their deliberate approach they focus more on long-term outcomes rather than on short-term exigencies. Those leaders avoid getting themselves or their businesses into wrong turns and blind alleys. Executive coaching helps leaders to counter uncertainty with serenity. It encourages them to constrain their urge to jump into action before they have had the chance to understand and weigh the options available to them and the risks that those options may lead to. Coaching promotes within leaders a bias for planning and

scenarios development instead of just generating quick action plans. The shift by a leader, from a ritual of snapping into programmed action in the face of challenges into a practice of studied analysis and the development of sober plans for action based on the best available information, allows an organisation to pace itself and to be more effective in addressing challenges.

Another good example of how executive coaching can assist leaders in this area is that of a successful company that suddenly encountered a major threat to their business from a change in government regulations. The new regulations suddenly opened up one of the company's most lucrative markets to a group of much larger international competitors. The new development resulted in a completely new competitive landscape that was very different from where the company was used to competing. A sense of frenzy mixed with genuine panic overtook the company's executive and management team. Initiatives were launched to recruit managers from the competitors and to sign up new distribution channels. The situation did not ease. As a matter of fact the business results continued to deteriorate and the sales pipeline winning rate continued to decline. The CEO, realising that the actions taken so far were not delivering the desired result, and at the suggestion of the chairman of the board requested advice from a senior executive coach.

The executive coach, herself a retired former CEO, was able to act as a sounding board that the CEO could not find within the ranks of his panicked team. She helped the CEO to get back to a more serene space and to focus on only two aspects of the business and how they should evolve over the next three years. The first of those aspects was to work with the major company clients to identify which unique value propositions, that the clients would like to have in the newly deregulated market, but that were not yet available. The second aspect was to study and describe the company's end-to-end interactions with its clients. This work was not outsourced to outside consultants. The coach advised the CEO that he and his senior management team must go out into the field, meet customers, personally interact with them and gather the required information. This approach initiated new types of conversations the CEO and his team had never had with their clients previously. The executive coach was on hand to facilitate a new style of executive interactions and to help the executive team to design an effective way to spread the message throughout the company. Over a three months period she assisted the CEO and his team to develop a new course for the business with specific mile-stone-bound plans to build the processes they needed to succeed within the new business reality. The work of the team was highly intense yet calm. Fast recruiting was stopped and channel expansion was slowed down.

The solution to the company woes, they realised with the benefit of the reassuring influence of the executive coach, was not to be found in outside recruits or more numerous

sales channels, but in reinventing a unique value proposition for the company and in conceiving a more effective way to closely interact with the clients. They learnt the important lesson that agitation cannot be a substitute for deliberate and well-thought out action. Six months after the new plans were implemented, the company took part in 3 large long-term tenders, against their much bigger competitors, and won two out of the three tenders.

V. WORKING BETTER

Finally, effective leaders develop the ability to subjugate their egos and focus not on being “better than” but on being “better with”, thus utilising the full strengths of their organisations instead of just their own personal strengths. Substantial as a leader’s personal strengths may be, they are normally a small subset of the much larger strengths of the whole organisation. Executive coaching helps leader to develop and enhance their communication techniques and to refine their skills at enrolling others into their vision of the organisation and its values. Coaching assists leaders in bringing a higher level of authenticity into their dealings, with the people they manage and work with, to create a shared sense of purpose and ultimately set up effective teams where all members help other members to succeed.

A brilliant case study was one where the business verticals of a major multinational company which, after experiencing some very trying times, was on verge of being wound down. A fateful mix of declining sales, negative cash flow and losses necessitated harsh turn-around actions. A seasoned turn-around specialist was brought in for a last attempt at turning the business around before wounding it down. However, from the start the new CEO encountered high resistance from all layers in the organization. After all he was the 5th CEO in in the past 6 years who was brought in to fix the problem. For a while it appeared that he may be the last CEO. That his fate would not be any different from his predecessors. The group CEO suggested to him that an executive coach could be a worthy idea to consider.

The new CEO was highly competent, experienced and confident, and had an impressive track record of success. He believed that he will be better than his predecessors. The executive coach worked with him to persuade him that being better than his predecessors was not going to be enough to pull off a miracle, and that he would be more likely to succeed by having the whole team perform better than

before. The CEO had quickly identified immediate measures that needed to be taken to attempt to stem the bleeding and start the repairs. Amongst the measures was the need to cut costs by 15% to temporarily stabilise the business. He had however decided that he should aim for a much deeper 25%-30% cut to help finance growth avenues, and to force deep changes into the organization. The executive coach convinced him that he should clearly and openly communicate and explain his plan to the employees before he embarks on it, in order for them to understand that the purpose of the cuts was not only to stop the bleeding, but also to build a sustainable future for the company and its employees. The coach also encouraged the CEO to solicit the employees help to enable him to identify obvious waste and expense in the company that can be avoided to save as many jobs as can be saved. Many sceptics scorned the initiative and refused to take part, however, the honest and candid approach of the CEO convinced many more to participate and to do their part.

The lay-offs were aggressive and painful yet only 13% of the savings achieved had to come from downsizing. Another 12% came from changes in processes, behaviours and old previously unquestioned practices. The newly established low cost base allowed investment in new ideas, several of which came from the newly energised employees. Eight quarters later, the business had started to grow its revenues and returned to profitability and a positive cash position. The business was saved.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Executive coaching is one of the arrows in the quiver of executives to help them reach their target. It is by no means a certain recipe for success, but it is proven to make a difference to the performance of leaders, even leaders with great credentials. Executive coaching cannot turn a bad leader into a good leader. For one thing, bad leaders are not usually good at accepting coaching. However, executive coaching is known to help good leaders and new leaders with good potential to become excellent, even, great leaders.

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