

Executive Development: Outer Goals and Inner Coaching

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If the Enron debacle has shown us anything, it is the apparent arrogance that exists at the executive levels of some companies. A "power dominates" belief system is responsible for the arrogance that drove the destructive behavior of the executives. An equally ineffective belief system of those witnessing the process prevented them from taking appropriate challenging actions. Reconstructing belief systems is a powerful tool in shifting behavior in a productive direction.

Many HR managers feel powerless to address dysfunctional behavior in the executive ranks. This is why it is critical to provide both executives and HR managers with a new pathway for executive development that addresses the inner resources that are related to the achievement of outer goals.

The Enron phenomenon isn't the only thing that has brought attention to how business leadership functions. The events of last September 11 have accelerated the need for today's executives to be more than managers. They must be compassionate leaders who are able to facilitate employees through some of their personal issues in order to maintain productivity. This requirement goes beyond the executive's ability to process his or her own emotions, not only through tragedy but also at the executive table where so many unproductive behaviors block the executive team's potential. The issues that influence these newly demanded behaviors become apparent with higher levels of awareness.

This article describes an executive-development process that gives executives and those interacting with them a framework in which to address important business goals and explore and restructure beliefs related to those goals. This process can virtually eliminate the business environment in which an Enron-type disaster can occur. It can also provide the skills and mind-set that executives need to address employee concerns, even in a crisis situation like the terrorist attacks on September 11. This is good not only for executives, managers, and workers, but also for the overall health of the company. The executive-development process includes these elements:

1. Establish an outer business goal.
2. Uncover and restructure potential blocking beliefs.
3. Shift to productive beliefs.
4. Create an external action plan.
5. Create an "inner coaching" plan.
6. Self-monitor until the goal is achieved.
7. Extract learnings and use them to achieve new goals.

AN EXAMPLE OF DYSFUNCTIONAL EXECUTIVE-LEVEL DYNAMICS

The management team at a company I was consulting with consisted of very intelligent individuals who also had large egos and sophisticated defensive routines in place.

This started with the president who was so intimidating that no one risked giving him any negative feedback. That impact was evident when someone outside the group asked the group a question—no one would answer until the president did. That way, the team knew which way the president was leaning and participated accordingly. Instead of supporting the president, the executives all had their own way of working around him and each other rather than pulling together. Their meetings were unsafe for open creative dialogue, let alone dealing with problems and setbacks. This could be followed down through the corporation, where camps were formed and unspoken—and nonproductive—protocols were operating.

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My experience with working with a VP and some of the directors of the company gave me insight into the executive table with views from that level and below. The impact of the dynamics that took place at the executive level rippled through the organization. There was a whole code of unwritten rules about whom you can't approach with certain topics and whom you have to work through to get something done in other areas. It was so extreme that, because one VP was upset with another, all of her reports needed to get clearance with her before they could give support or information to the other VP's department. It made the already hard work of the rest of the company that much harder.

In my discussion with the HR manager, we concluded that it was difficult for the HR department to deal with the resistance of the

executive team. This prevented the HR department from playing the role in the company that it was chartered to perform: to manage the human element in the overall equation of achieving the company's stated vision.

THE ROLE OF HR DEPARTMENTS

When we work with a company, it is our intention to encourage HR departments to participate at the executive table, where they can do their jobs: assisting at the highest level in enhancing the skills and qualities of the company's leadership. It is imperative for the HR department to be working with the top management in the company—the executives who set the culture and determine the work environment. If the executives are not open to learning, that sets the tone for the rest of the organization. Often, HR managers see what needs to be addressed, but they do not have the skills or willingness to challenge the highly developed defense mechanisms of the executives. When HR executives have these skills, they are able to shift executives away from defensive mechanisms and into a learning orientation.

Essential Elements of the Development Process

In doing executive coaching, it is important to incorporate two essential elements in order for any development to be effective and permanent:

1. All work must be tied to an outer quantifiable goal that represents a stretch.
2. The belief structure of the executive must be uncovered, acknowledged, and then restructured to support the accomplishment of the objective with ease and grace.

I say ease and grace because in most executives' repertoire of behaviors exist the personas of intimidator, manipulator, or politician. Injecting ease and grace into the process implies that there is and some degree of willingness of those involved to give a more productive process a try.

Working with One's Belief Structure

Uncovering one's belief structure can be a challenging process but it is a necessity if permanent growth is to be achieved. Here are some of the more revealing beliefs I've come across that lower productivity levels around the executive:

- Don't disagree with your boss at meetings.
- Don't challenge authority.
- Overpower any perceived threat.
- Don't express your feelings at work or become vulnerable.
- Look competent because you're not allowed a learning curve.
- Avoid embarrassment at all costs (even if it means shredding).
- You have to keep your job, so don't upset the apple cart.

These are some of the more costly beliefs that sabotage productivity and potentially fruitful relationships in the workplace. Unless these unproductive beliefs are recognized and dealt with, they will drive the bus, so to speak, whenever the tension becomes a bit high. All other approaches to development that don't root out and address these beliefs will only camouflage the underlying temperament. Those involved will experience the behavior as insincere—even if they don't see it that way

consciously. Trust will drain from the relationship, and with it, productivity.

Once this unproductive belief system is in view, a replacement set of beliefs must be created and adopted that will support the advancement towards the outer goal or objective. The new belief system must counter the old system, acting as an antidotal belief. This will ensure that permanent change can take place.

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Though it is easier said than done, this restructuring of beliefs is not merely an option, it is a necessity if you want to see meaningful change. Unless this foundational step is taken, the likely result is one you have undoubtedly experienced or observed. Most executive-development programs provide great information and maybe even a great experience in the area of leadership but with no lasting result in the area of changed behavior. Participants go back home and put the binder on the shelf!

Emotional Dispositions

Along with this belief restructuring normally come the emotional dispositions that are a result of the belief structure. The belief structure determines the emotional response. It works something like this: If threatened, express anger through sarcasm to intimidate; if hurt, withdraw and plan to sabotage at a sidebar conversation with the boss, and so on.

To counter this, the correlating emotional disposition must be addressed along with the belief structure. Some executives uncon-

sciously attempt to control their environments through various unproductive behaviors. Because they achieved their success using these behaviors, they feel their effectiveness is validated. The end result is that others are not safe to discuss things that might hit a nerve.

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PROCESS APPLICATION

The team I was working with involved the CEO, Alan; the CFO, Bill; and the remaining executive team. This section of the article describes both Alan's and Bill's process of using inner coaching to raise their productivity levels. The actual situation was that Alan was selling the company and wanted the executive team to take up the task of running the company.

Working with the Company's CEO

Alan was brilliant in strategic thought processes and moderately good with tactical planning. He thought very quickly on his feet and came to conclusions almost instantly: your typical ESTJ profile (extrovert, sensing, thinking, judging—from the Myers-Briggs profiling system), effectively producing results. However he would frequently run over his team and barely have the patience to listen completely to their ideas before negating them and telling them what decision he had already made.

From this behavior, the team learned that Alan didn't really want to hear their ideas, so they stopped offering them. The experience of not having any suggestions or challenges

brought to Alan was disappointing him. He liked to argue and debate options for handling different situations, so he deemed his executives as weak and not creative.

This is when I entered. Observing one of the team meetings quickly brought me up to speed about the group dynamics and some of the inner coaching that needed to be done in order to increase the productivity of the group. The group goal was determined to be a specific sales target with a certain profit margin while turning the responsibility of running the company over to four specified executives.

Alan's Outer Goal

Starting with Alan, we first had to identify Alan's goal, which was to turn over the day-to-day activities to the team, using a coaching style. He wanted to accomplish this by the end of six months. So we developed a weekly plan for the logistics of how this transition was to occur and determined the behaviors that would be implemented (see **Exhibit 1**). One of these behaviors included the gag rule: Alan could not make any decisions in any area or tell the executives what to do. Instead, he was to ask questions that would elicit information so the executives would make productive decisions themselves. He would also incorporate weekly feedback for each executive and impart his perspectives on what was working well and what could work better, bearing in mind the gag rule. That, in a nutshell, were the strategies that were selected to achieve Alan's outer goal.

Alan's Inner Coaching

The inner coaching was much more difficult. Alan began working with his *patience*, which

Goal: Turn over day-to-day operations to management team by 6/30/01

Behavior needed: Gag rule (see article) and listening

Belief System Restructuring

What will I tell myself if I fail?
(Blocking Beliefs)

1. They aren't smart enough
2. They are too slow
3. They aren't strong enough

What do I need to tell myself to succeed?
(Supporting Beliefs)

1. They are smart enough, need info and coaching
2. They work differently than I do, but get it done
3. They are skilled professionals—I trust them

Outer Goals—Action Steps

1. Delegate all authority to make decisions regarding complex maintenance to Bob
2. Step out of logistics meetings so that Lou handles the meeting and all situations
3. Make no decisions for management team (ongoing)
4. Only express opinion when reviewing revenues, margin, and expenses with the team
5. Review standards and expectations regarding management team's performance

Exhibit 1. Integrated Executive Development—Alan's Goal Action Plan

he wanted to "learn fast." Breaking down his old behaviors and asking questions about his reasoning for them unveiled a belief structure about his relationship to other people and how one must deal with them to get them to do the right thing. "I know more than them," "They don't have the spine to do this," "They are too slow to decide," and "Time is slipping away" were some of the beliefs that surfaced, which were the driving force in his selection of behaviors. (That approach seemingly had worked up to this point—the company was very successful, so he had proof they were effective, right?)

The weekly inner coaching involved internal activities on all levels (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual). There were activi-

ties like positive self-talk, free-form writing, visualizing desired outcomes, and sitting in silence for short periods of time. What he avoided doing in his inner work we then emphasized, because avoidance was a sign that the new behavior was foreign or uncomfortable and discounted by his old belief system, even though it promised new and positive results.

Working with the Company CFO

Bill was a very smart and tactical executive who had been with the company six years. Once given the big picture, he immediately could see the steps necessary to make it happen. He had been trampled over once too

often for him to have any desire to run anything in the company, so he settled into a role supporting Alan.

Bill's Outer Goal and Inner Coaching

Bill's outer goal was to reduce 30-day receivables to a specific amount and to take responsibility for overseeing arrangements with customers past due on payment. As with Alan, we developed a plan that included the behaviors that Bill would have to work on.

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Bill's inner work revolved around building up his internal belief that he was worthy and able to make a larger contribution to the company, and that his ideas were worthy of seriously being considered. He began working with his *confidence*. Part of his internal work involved getting to the point where he could tell Alan when he felt he was run over in conversation or not listened to. He had beliefs around the importance of (1) keeping the peace at all costs, (2) avoiding conflict, (3) withdrawing, and (4) giving up personal goals. At the bottom of his behavior was his experience of not feeling worthy enough to be respected. His inner work involved items addressing the four areas of his belief structures and focused on validating his contributions through an acknowledgment journal, affirming his problem-solving capabilities, and releasing his emotional fear of conflict.

BREAKTHROUGH

Though there were several positive shifts and improvements once the new process was

implemented, one noteworthy breakthrough happened in the seventh team meeting. We were talking about feedback, when Alan made some comment about the team not having any good ideas. I casually looked over at Bill. I had been role playing with Bill for weeks about standing up and delivering some helpful, honest feedback to Alan. Bill hesitated a moment, took a breath, then said to Alan, "I stopped offering ideas long ago since I didn't feel you wanted to hear them." Alan responded quickly with an edge to his voice, "What do you mean not open to feedback? That's silly." Though obviously uncomfortable, Bill stood his ground. "That's just what I mean. You dismiss so many of my ideas that I've stopped giving them to you."

The tension in the air could have been cut with a knife. I can still hear the quiver of Bill's voice as he delivered his message. The room was silent a moment longer, then to our surprise, the general manager chimed in, "Yes it's true. I've withheld many an idea because I thought you would dismiss it before I got it out of my mouth."

It was like someone just dumped a bucket of cold water on Alan. The room was silent for what seemed like an eternity. The feedback landed and was corroborated by others. Then Alan responded, "Well I'll have to do something about that."

No, he didn't fire them all. In the face of evidence that he could not discount or ignore, he found a positive action. He started to increase his patience through a weekly inner action plan addressing that specific quality.

IMPORTANCE OF INNER COACHING PROCESS

Alan's plan included talking to himself whenever he wanted to interrupt someone or

when their ideas didn't make sense to him. This plan, which was very much a part of what we had already worked out for him, would have four different behaviors that he would do internally to assist himself in becoming more patient and listen more intently to what is being offered to him. He got to the place where he would do this if for no other reason than to honor the person who was speaking.

We added a few more rules, such as the gag rule, that applied to patience, listening, and eventually validating someone's contribution and experience. This was not easy for him and took vigilance. In the beginning, he considered it all a silly waste of time and actually tried my patience in the process. His old belief system had labeled this type of approach unnecessary, so, of course, it fell between the cracks in the beginning of the coaching program. It wasn't until he experienced some early wins with his newly developed listening skills that he began to appreciate everything. Up until that point, he was simply hard to work with. We needed to do more work on restructuring his belief system into one that supported listening, patience, and validating the efforts and perspectives of all the employees.

What is important here is to recognize the amount of inner work that is required to make permanent and productive changes in executive development. Any benefits gained by working on the surface and only with behaviors last for short periods of time and disappear under stress, in my experience. In the above instance, with everyone working

on their individual belief structures and emotional dispositions in the direction of a shared goal, they became tied together in an intense team situation. With each team meeting, the amount of personal disclosure increased to the point where disappointments and broken agreements were naturally addressed and processed in the group. The distance between Alan and the executive team became less visible and the creativity returned to healthy levels, which enabled the passing of the mantle to be accomplished with ease and grace.

REFOCUSING DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

So much of the orientation of busy executives today is focused outwardly through strategies and tactical plans that the executives' inner worlds are ignored. So many executives think that if they just work harder and longer, they'll get where they want to go. That is like being lost in the forest with an inaccurate map and simply moving faster. You will just get more lost faster.

If you pick up any executive-development program, hardly any course addresses individuals' inner worlds. No matter how many strategic seminars someone attends, unless his or her belief structure supports a productive framework of behavior, work productivity will shrink, and work will require more time and energy and result in less creativity. This can be avoided when inner-world issues are addressed, creating functional behaviors and relationships among executives, managers, and workers.

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