

Topic: Leveraging the Strengths of the Executive Team

The Premise

The executive team as an entity, and the members of that team in their individual leadership capacities, are the keys to making things happen within any company. Leveraging the talents and maximizing the performance of this group of individuals is especially important in initiatives for strategic planning, organizational renewal, enterprise transformation, or the rollout of any major initiative (performance improvement for example).

The Need for Enhancing Competencies

The need for new and/or improved competencies on the part of at least some of the executive team members and improved performance on the part of the team as a whole are very common – especially in conjunction with the initiation of some major new company program or endeavor. The importance and value of these needed improvements in performance increase in proportion to the significance of the challenges facing the company. Leveraging the strengths of the executive team should be addressed in a positive and healthy manner and should *not* be viewed negatively nor detract from the current (and usually significant and obvious) talents and valuable contributions of this team.

The task of assisting the members of the executive team to add to their competencies and/or improve their performance is not easy for anyone inside of the company. Let's face it, anyone in the company – save one of the executive team members – will ultimately report to someone on that team. And, think of the difficulties that any one member of the executive team would have in being accepted by other members as a coach for performance improvement. The obvious solution is a senior external consultant who can assist in the process of helping the company deal with current business challenges and act as a catalyst and coach for executive team performance improvement at the same time.

The case study described here is actually a composite built from several experiences with competent and forward-looking executive teams.

Ingredients for Success

Experience indicates that any effort to leverage the strengths of the executive team will fail unless certain ingredients for success are present. The most important of these are:

An important business challenge: All improvements in performance require change. That is, *improvement*, by its very nature, requires doing something more than, or something different from, our present performance. It is a fact that most people resist change and everyone needs a good reason to expend the energy required for change. In the context of the performance of the executive team the most compelling rationale for change comes from the need to respond to some new business challenge perceived to be important to the success of the company. For example, we need to improve our profitability; increase our share of the market; respond to a technology shift happening in the industry; address quality issues; and/or fix productivity problems. Dealing with these challenges can include everything from process re-engineering to a bold new vision for the company necessitating enterprise transformation. These new initiatives will provide the specific answers to the questions about what we need to do differently in order to achieve success.

Individual commitment: In addition to being important to the success of the company, the reason for change must also encourage individual commitment. That is, each individual on the executive team must see personal value in putting out the effort to acquire new knowledge, cultivate new skills and/or change their behavior in some way(s). Perceived value can vary widely from individual to individual. For some it is money, power, and/or status; for others it could be still having their position a year from now. The bottom line is performance improvement will not happen without the commitment of the individuals involved in the process and commitment does not happen without good reason. To gain commitment each person must have a good answer to the question, "What's in it for me?"

Sponsorship: There must be sponsorship for the efforts to improve performance and leverage the strengths of the executive team. And, that sponsorship must come from THE leader – the CEO, the Division President, whoever is ultimately in charge. Anyone else can support the effort and be an advocate, but

only the leader (who can commit the resources and require the needed attention of the individual members of the team) can be the true sponsor. The sponsor must also be prepared to continue with the endeavor in the face of competing priorities to ensure success for the team and for the company.

Dedication of time and resources: With executive team member status also comes more than enough work to do – there are always competing demands. Implied in sponsorship is that appropriate time and attention from each member of the team will be dedicated to the process, and that the necessary resources will be identified and committed. Two of the most important items on the list of resources are:

- An appropriate and talented person to design and facilitate the process(es) with the executive team;
- Opportunities for the executive team to meet together, appropriately screened from interruptions, to deal with significant and sensitive issues.

Facilitator: An appropriate and talented person to design and facilitate the process(es) with the executive team is noted above. This person must be empowered with the ability to ask the difficult (and sometimes impertinent) questions and to get things on the table for discussion that members of the team may not ordinarily choose to deal with. Ideally, this person should have:

- Significant experience in assisting teams with problem solving in the business context;
- Extensive knowledge of the performance improvement and coaching process;
- “Boardroom presence” and appeal to business leaders (credibility);
- Exceptional facilitation skills and a good understanding of business issues;
- Appreciation of the human dynamics of change and the developmental process.

Support: There are a lot of little things that can be lumped into the larger category of organizational support. If this support is not provided the success of efforts to leverage the strengths of the executive team can be seriously compromised. Among the important items in the organizational support list are:

- A competent executive assistant to help with logistics and to screen executives from potential interruptions during meetings;
- Assistance in the areas of human resources and learning & development to help with obtaining developmental assistance for individuals with specific needs;
- A cadre of competent senior and middle level managers to support the process by providing informational input and/or taking on additional tasks to free a bit of time for those on the executive team and/or to contribute to the extra efforts always involved in a strategic planning or other major initiative;
- More assistance from HR and learning & development to support the cultivation of major company change initiatives through training, education and developmental activities, and attention to organizational development items;
- Internal communications and other forms of media and communication support to assist in the rollout of major initiatives, the production aspects of major company meetings and/or other types of company-wide communication. This can include print, video, teleconference, webcast, and a host of other vehicles.

Selected Features in the Process of Leveraging the Strengths of the Executive Team

Each company and each executive team is unique, so the process of leveraging the strengths of the executive team is never exactly the same. A number of elements can be addressed in the process. In the cases in which executive teams made the most progress – both as a team and individually – the following features were usually included:

The wake-up call: Even with a very credible and senior external consultant/facilitator the executive team responds best to actual data from the organization. In the normal day-to-day operations, many times data and information going to senior executives gets “filtered.” Conducting interviews and focus group sessions to obtain accurate data about the performance of the executive team is very valuable. Even though there is usually a great deal of positive data, many times this information also serves as a “wake-up call” to the executive team regarding the need for performance improvement.

Clear vision: Perhaps the most important function of the executive team is providing a clear vision of the purpose and direction of the company. This is particularly true in times of major change, a major new company initiative, or some type of industry transition. The executive team must spend time together to identify, define and carefully articulate this vision. They must formulate a *compelling business rationale* for

all new initiatives and programs, and each member of the team must be accomplished in being able to persuasively explain this compelling business rationale to anyone at any level in the company.

Commonly shared purpose: In the definition and articulation of the vision, direction and purpose of the company individual executives must be given an opportunity to test and understand the extent to which that purpose, etc. is personally shared by each individual on the team. Appreciation of the shared elements of the vision (there are usually many) has the effect of bringing the individuals together as a true team in the accomplishment of a common purpose.

Personal goals: It is a powerful thing when individuals are given the opportunity to define personal goals and then to examine how the accomplishment of company goals supports the achievement of their own personal goals. Individual and team commitment are increased; excitement and enthusiasm are generated and these translate into more successful company initiatives.

Appreciation of mutual interdependencies: As the members of the executive team go through the process of discovering commonly shared purpose and the alignment of personal and company goals – together – they also begin to appreciate the many mutual interdependencies that exist. These interdependencies exist among individuals on the executive team and between individuals and the company. Individuals see how helping someone else accomplish their goals will support the accomplishment of their own goals. These interdependencies bond the team and support the company's success.

Identification and definition of specific competencies: One of the most difficult steps in the process of performance improvement is identifying and defining the specific competencies (knowledge, skills and attributes) needed for achieving new goals and objectives and/or operating the business in a new way. The consultant can provide a valuable service by composing an initial draft that enumerates and describes these competencies. However, the members of the executive team must also spend some time with this to ensure that the suggested competencies really are those critical to success. Each team member must also gain a thorough understanding of each new competency that he or she is expected to perform toward achieving the goals that the team has set for itself and the company.

Honesty and candor regarding developmental needs: Once team and individual competencies have been defined, needed programs for team and/or individual development can be designed. Some of the best developmental assistance for senior execs may well be available from fellow members of the executive team. But asking for, receiving, and also providing, this type of coaching often times does not come easy. One of the reasons for the difficulty is that very few companies have cultivated cultures in which this type of coaching behavior is practiced or accepted. But, when executive team members can be candid and honest with each other about development needs, a kind of magic can happen and individuals and teams often exceed even their own lofty expectations of what they can accomplish.

Communication skills: It sounds rather basic, but it seems that we all (senior executives included) need to refresh our communication skills from time to time. And, there are some special communication techniques that are extremely useful in the context of giving and receiving meaningful feedback about peer performance at the very senior level. This type of peer feedback can be extremely valuable. Think about it; how would you like to get “coaching” from some of the most talented individuals in the company? These skills support the peer developmental process and are also applicable in the development of the next tier of management talent (usually required as executive team members take on greater challenges).

Conclusion

Major strategic initiatives require changes within the company – changes in processes, procedures, systems and structures. Changes can also include the competencies and behavior required of individuals at all levels throughout the company.

Change is a top-down process. Company leadership must model and drive the change process and is responsible for the success of strategic initiatives. Leveraging the strengths of the executive team to forge strong and capable change leadership will accelerate company successes and, on a continuing basis, will improve company performance. The elements enumerated and described in this case study can provide valuable guidance to the process of leveraging strengths and improving performance.