



HOLDING PATTERN

Why some executives are surprised when they hit a career plateau.

by **Stephen Xavier**

President/CEO, Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc.

Executive coaching engagements typically occur with top performing executives. In fact, their enduring ability to perform is often the primary force that drives the quicker than average climb up the corporate ladder. The challenge, however, is for these employees to become good managers or leaders. Fortunately, executive coaching can typically fill what is often times a significant gap between top performers and great leaders.

Common Profile of the Top Performer

There is frequently a major “disconnect” between a top performer and the skills required to be a great leader. The personality of the former tends toward a ‘know-it-all’ and “just get it done” attitude. These individuals believe they must know plenty to have climbed so high, so fast. Since high performers cherish their accumulated knowledge and experience, they have a difficult time understanding why they have now reached a plateau and their careers have stalled. They’ve been seen in a positive light for so long because of their ability to perform. As a result, their natural managerial or leadership skills are wrongly assumed as being proficient when, in fact, they are often quite under-developed. As such, they commonly face these shortcomings:

- **They are culturally unaware.** This type of “innocent ignorance” comes from never having worked in a culture where self-development and improvement of skills was promoted. Instead they’ve been in an environment where success was determined by performance alone.
- **They have not had the benefit of good role models.** When a top performer’s direct boss or manager lacks the skills or the foresight to recognize where an employee could improve, it limits the individual unnecessarily.
- **They are overly confident.** Top performers tend to be egotistical, mainly because they’ve found a way to rise above the norm and have been celebrated accordingly. Confident of their ability to undertake any task or fulfill any expectation, they eagerly take on any responsibility before realizing they too have their limits.

Role of the Executive Coach

When a company’s top performers are promoted to positions that require management and/or leadership skills, it’s only a matter of time before their underdeveloped skills become blatantly obvious. Since most top performing-types have had little if any management or leadership training, what happens to the employees who are suddenly deprived of that support? They become bitter and resentful, and unfortunately it can go unreported far too long. Inevitably something has to change, whether it means revoking the promotion or bringing in an executive coach to help the top performer become a stronger leader. When the choice is the latter, it’s critical for the coach to be highly respected by all involved. Successful coaching practices and approaches that breed respect and successful results include:

- **Establishing alignment with senior executives.** The astute executive coach kicks off an engagement by going straight to the top to identify if any negativity exists in relation to the practice of executive coaching. Coaching engagements simply cannot succeed if they occur in a skeptical environment or if they fall upon dubious minds. Further, having support from the top can ensure even greater success for the coach and client when “roadblocks” may occur – who better to remove them than the CEO!
- **Building enthusiastic perception.** When a stigma has developed throughout a company around coaching, the executive coach needs to rely on senior management to instigate a change in the culture’s thinking about the value of coaching. If it doesn’t begin with senior management, it’s not likely to go anywhere. Really, who better to influence employees about something positively and enthusiastically? Also, it’s more advantageous if coachees do not keep coaching engagements secret. A more constructive attitude comes from being upfront and honest to direct reports by thoroughly explaining the process being undertaken and the goals. They can begin by sharing the

highlighted results of their 360 assessment and thanking direct reports for their input.

- **Working through the boss to become the coachee's advocate.** By working as an advocate for the coachee, an executive coach adds a positive element to the whole engagement – from all perspectives. Also, the coach is responsible for working closely with the coachee's boss to ensure managerial support and to make sure the coaching is being referred to in the best light possible.
- **Anticipating problems with the boss.** Any coach worth his or her salt knows that even mild resistance on the boss' part is a red flag that calls for the coach to take additional measures. It doesn't matter if the resistance is only a function of the manager's style. Resistance tends to breed resistance. What often happens is the coachee isn't getting the help needed from the boss. Offering excuses that dwell on the coachee's great performance or autonomy usually tells the coach the boss doesn't know how to manage the person effectively.
- **Addressing every last detail.** A skilled coach leaves nothing to chance. Additional precautionary steps may also include circulating informative articles about executive coaching and providing management with sample memos and e-mail messages about executive coaching that can be distributed among staff. These communiqués share supplementary information about the purpose for and benefits of the coaching process. Most importantly, a professional coach has a plan that covers all bases and details for each engagement.
- **Painting pictures of success.** Above anyone, skilled executive coaches know how to identify the face of success in a coaching engagement. They know the "before" and "after" scenarios, and they can describe what success feels and looks like from previous engagements. As such, many have found that painting a picture of success is useful as a tool for gaining additional buy-in from a coachee. It's that special something

about visualizing success that makes someone work that much harder for it. A coach can also offer testimonials from previous clients that described what it felt like to reach success during their engagements.

Steep and Rapid Learning Curve

Once high performers or employees tagged with high potential buy in to the process and understand the need for coaching, they typically begin to develop a high level of trust in the coach's ability to support them. Then, it's only a matter of time before they see the value in the coach's skill, knowledge, intellect, experience and political savvy. The learning curve is said to be very steep at the early stage. Coachees then learn and accelerate that learning very quickly, tackling what challenges they must overcome, and they tend to reach them fast.

The challenge comes when it's time to sustain the newly learned behaviors. Even as coachees embrace a new way of learning, the tendency is to regress to old behaviors as the coaching engagement comes to an end. That's why it's also important for executive coaches to nurture the relationship over the long haul, even after the engagement has ended. Not only is it the right thing to do, but such efforts will also establish tremendous credibility for the coach in the eyes of others at the company and open pathways for future engagements within that organization.

Commitment to Change

Unfortunately, the changeover to exceptional manager or leader is rarely a smooth, simple or speedy one. Some of the most difficult areas for top performers to modify are those areas they believe to be their own best practices or strengths. Through coaching, they learn to acknowledge that the skills, attitude and tools they counted on during their climb to their current level are not always the same skills, attitude and tools they need to move to the next level and beyond.

Top performers must come to a simple realization: success requires a commitment to change. If they don't, they are likely to plateau or even worse, fail miserably. To help top performers become great leaders, it's time they are trained with the management skills necessary to succeed. The faster they embrace executive coaching as a tool to accomplish this goal, the quicker they can gain knowledge and skills, which in turn translate to higher productivity and ultimately to a greater return on investment for the company. ■

Executive Coaching ■ Leadership Skills Development ■ Team Building & Team Development

Cornerstone
Executive
Development
Group, Inc.

3717 E. Thousand Oaks Blvd., Westlake Village, CA 91362
direct: 805-492-8263 ■ web: www.cedg.com



Stephen Xavier is President/CEO of Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc., a global firm specializing in executive coaching and related leadership development.

xavier@cedg.com