



# Blame the Boss?

## *Who Really Needs Executive Coaching?*

by **Stephen Xavier**

*President/CEO, Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc.*

**H**ere's a personnel development challenge that is pervasive and happens with much more frequency than one might imagine: an executive coaching engagement is set up for an employee, but the employee's biggest problem lies in the lack of guidance and leadership received from his or her own boss. In such cases, executive coaches are often relied on to take the place of leaders or managers who lack the ability to manage the employees themselves. Fortunately, well-trained coaches know how to uncover hidden truths about management shortcomings and avoid assuming any leadership responsibilities.

### **Why Do Leaders Fail?**

Many in leadership positions fail for any number of reasons:

- **Individuals were never taught to manage or lead.** It's common for employees to be promoted with little or no training in the area of leadership. Most people are promoted to management roles based on their expertise in a given area, not necessarily based on their potential as a manager. This commonly occurs when a leader transitions from an operational leadership capacity to one that calls for enterprise leadership skills. Leadership prerequisites in operations often focus on "hard" skills like experience with various inventory control methods. Enterprise leadership calls for "softer" interpersonal skills, those that translate into a trustworthy ability to communicate clearly and execute continuously.
- **Individuals were never driven by a need to lead or manage effectively.** Employees who reach positions of leadership without having to prove themselves never really develop the need to lead or manage effectively. Corporate America is known for justifying promotions based on an employee's superior productivity, savvy political skills or natural ability to develop strategic relationships. Unfortunately, promotions don't usually occur because someone exhibited exceptional leadership skills — at least not at the earlier stages of a career.

- **Individuals never learned how to address the issue of leadership skills.** Leaders who struggle with leadership, yet still manage to avoid seeking help, usually practice this avoidance intentionally. They realize there's a gap between where they need to be and where they are, but they've managed to avoid it this long and plan to continue doing so as long as possible. One circumstance where this scenario is likely to occur is with employees who start with a company in its infancy. Being part of the team that grows a company to its success typically means being rewarded with promotions along the way. Unfortunately, those most skilled at start-ups aren't always the best candidates for keeping the business running.

### **Turning Around Leadership Failures**

Once a person begins to struggle in a leadership position, situations like this begin to occur more regularly: An executive coach was called in by the president of a large, mid-western non-electric utility to address a situation where complaints were stacking up about a senior vice president (SVP). All complaints were directly related to the SVP's introverted nature, poor social and interpersonal skills and ivory tower mentality. Before meeting with the SVP, the coach asked the president how long it had been since the SVP was given feedback about his performance. The president answered, "He's never really been given feedback."

Sadly, this example represents the norm. If leaders don't talk to their people about their performance, how will those directly reporting to these leaders ever find out what they're doing wrong? Short of marching in and begging for some kind of evaluation, many employees' only option is to assume they're meeting management's expectations.

Often, attempts are made to turnaround such failures in leadership, but not always successfully. The greatest likelihood for success occurs when the coach insists on working at some level with the coachee's boss, to help the person understand his or her critical role in the process. When a coach can constructively broaden a leader's understanding about how even the smallest deficiency in leadership skills can profoundly impact a

corporation's entire management chain, it makes a difference. Leaders who can at least embrace an awareness of their deficiencies are those who are most open-minded to doing whatever it takes to support coaching engagements and leadership development programs.

The toughest leadership turnarounds are those where any degree of resistance triumphs. Not only must the resistance be eliminated, but it must be replaced with motivation and commitment if any benefit is expected to come from the coaching engagement. Another obstacle to coaching leaders effectively comes in the form of retirement bubbles – large groups of employees retiring over a short time period. It's very common for employees who plan to retire within five years, to feel indifference toward professional growth. The problem is that corporations cannot allow for the luxury of indifference when they need to set their sights on replacing some of their most knowledgeable people.

One example of a retirement bubble came when a corporation in the aerospace sector figured out that from 2004 to 2009, it would lose 48 percent of its workforce to retirement – which includes the firm's most seasoned, knowledgeable managers and upper-level executives. Under these circumstances, coaching is still a great tool, but some hard decisions must be made about which employees represent the best coaching investment. Should the future retirees receive coaching to learn how to train their replacements? Or, should executive coaching be reserved only for those who plan to be around more than five more years?

### **Influential Components of Successful Turnarounds**

Attitude, attitude, attitude. While there isn't one personality type most conducive to successful executive coaching engagements, leaders who are willing to come out of their own comfort zone and reach a middle ground tend to be the greatest contributors to organizational and leadership models. It also helps to have leaders who are skilled and experienced. When a problem occurs, they know how to solve it.

The downside to skills and experience comes when leaders know only one way to approach conflict or solve problems. Such leaders try to mold others to be like themselves, and door after door gets closed on creative

solutions that may have been worth trying. In contrast, leaders who hire, engage and encourage employees who are noticeably different from one another tend to end up with stronger teams because they're more set up for looking out-of-the-box when solving problems.

### **So...Who Really Needs Executive Coaching?**

When it comes to determining who really needs executive coaching, two very common misconceptions prevail. The first one deals with the idea that, in business, the desire is to fix people who are broken. In reality, a much deeper assessment has to occur before it can be clear who needs coaching and to what degree it's needed. The truth is that some people simply aren't worth the investment in coaching.

Secondly, when a company has a top producing employee who is doing a great job, usually the last thought is that any "fixing" needs to occur. In other words, "...if it isn't broke, don't fix it." Unfortunately not everyone knows or believes that we all could use some degree of improvement. Again, an experienced executive coach is the curious one who asks penetrating questions and uncovers the reality of any situation. By unearthing hidden agendas, executive coaches save time by moving directly to the most critical problem areas.

### **Rethinking the Quest for Executive Coaching**

Executive coaching, when used properly, is a very powerful and effective tool. To get the most value out of the process, more scrutiny must be employed at the onset of the engagement by senior level management in human resources and organizational development departments. Tough questions need to be asked of the person requesting the coaching. What is that person's goal in having the employee go through a coaching engagement, and where do they think the employee most needs to improve? Also, why does the leader believe the employee needs coaching versus simply working with someone in management? Having a deeper assessment of what truly needs improvement, as well as understanding the motivation behind the person requesting the coaching, usually speaks volumes. Chances are the person making the request to have an employee coached, is in fact the one who most needs to participate in a coaching engagement. ■

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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