

EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

Self-Directed Leadership Development

Striving for Excellence

WHAT WE THINK

Few are willing to make the more demanding commitment that excellence requires—the commitment to relentlessly focus on the small incremental steps that move one toward superior performance.

If an executive wanted to strive for excellence, what powerful, everyday steps might be taken, and how can the company support the effort? A simple six-step process can help create the momentum.

In her office reading the morning's business news, a 45-year-old, newly minted vice president of a sizable manufacturing company noted that a university classmate had just been named CEO of a major multinational corporation. She thought back to the year they graduated from business school together, remembering that she had the better grades and a high-profile job already waiting for her. Her friend, the new CEO, was still trying to decide which company would be the "right fit" for him. How had her classmate so outpaced her? Hadn't she done everything she was supposed to do—gone to the right school, followed the expected path through the company, gone to all the suggested training programs, received favorable performance reviews? Admittedly, her friend had taken more risks and done some things she didn't have to do during her early career. Perhaps the job changes, the extra assignments, the special task forces, and the proactively sought mentoring relationships had paid off after all.

What is the difference between these two people who seemingly started out with the same opportunity? Many

people want to achieve the kind of excellence just illustrated and often they are willing to do things that are highly visible, easy, or short term in nature to get there. But few are willing to make the more demanding commitment that excellence requires—the commitment to relentlessly focus on the small incremental steps that move one toward superior performance.

Those who do are described in psychological terms as having an "internal locus of control." This CEO believed he could impact his life by accepting responsibility and taking action to better himself and his circumstances. This perspective is the result of the interpretation of experience by the individual.

Whether consciously or not, our new CEO continually identified skills he wanted to build and created learning opportunities for himself beyond those offered by employers as standard training—he directed his own professional development.

Similarly, all executives can attend training programs and participate

in commonly available executive development activities to improve their leadership skills and acumen. Truly outstanding executives, however, go beyond ordinary effort. They put in extra time, take personal responsibility for their professional growth, and make leadership development part of their everyday work. If an executive wanted to strive for excellence, what powerful, everyday steps might be taken and how can the company support the effort? A simple six-step process can help create the momentum.

Six Steps Toward Excellence

- 1. Examine Experiences:** Excellence-seeking executives are typically quite accomplished at self-examination. As part of their everyday lives, they reflect on their work experiences to more fully appreciate what they are doing well and also to discover areas for improvement. They might reflect on how well they conducted a performance appraisal, negotiated the allocation of scarce resources with a peer, or presented their proposal to the board. In each case, they look for learnings to incorporate into future work situations.

Importantly, self-examination should be positive, forward looking, and improvement oriented. Successful individuals do not wallow in the self-criticism that flows from such analyses or allow the criticism to affect them in negative ways emotionally but view it as a tool for improving their performance.

It can be difficult for many of us to be objective about ourselves when conducting such analyses because our own biases and emotions often obscure a realistic view of our behaviors. Defensiveness is a natural reaction.

- 2. Observe Models:** Observation can be applied in a number of ways. It can focus on individual behavior or be applied to group settings. It can be opportunistic, affording an executive a broad but more random curriculum over time, or more targeted. Targeted observation can provide a model of a desired strength or help an individual who has a certain weakness better understand his underlying behavior patterns by observing others who have the same weakness.

Targeted applications can also be made by providing settings that are rich with particular learning opportunities. For example, an executive who wants to be CEO might campaign to be on an industry task force composed of CEOs from other companies. This is a prime opportunity for him to observe in action those executives already in the position to which

he aspires. The potential CEO can use this opportunity as a priceless tutorial on how CEOs behave.

When good models are not available for observation, memories of influential experiences can sometimes fill the void. Every manager has worked for and alongside individuals who have shown brilliance in various aspects of leadership and management. For example, the behaviors of a terrific salesperson observed on difficult sales calls in years past can be applied after reflecting on and analyzing them with care. Early experiences with senior executives who handled conflicts deftly and gracefully can be called on and borrowed from as part of a mental rehearsal before a tense negotiation session. Every executive has a catalogue of such models. The trick lies in taking the time to reflect and in knowing which models are worth remembering.

To gain the most from observation, one needs to be cognizant of the interaction between the behavior pattern being manifested by the person you are observing and the situational variable associated with it. The executive-in-training may need to stop and consider which of these are situational variables in order to mitigate the risk that he will blindly imitate the behavior patterns irrespective of their appropriateness for a particular situation.

- 3. Benchmark:** After analyzing one's performance and observing models, it is time for some objective

benchmarking. An executive might ask himself several questions. How do my leadership skills stack up against the examples I've been observing? What effective leadership practices do I already have finely tuned, and which of these should I attempt to take to an even higher level of proficiency? Are there areas of leadership in which I need improvement? This is an opportunity to create a roadmap for achieving excellence.

With reference points now in place, one can set goals for the aspects of leadership to improve on. Having a benchmark and a goal allows one to analyze the gap and then plan a series of steps or activities to close it. Those steps might include specific training, a special project, or a new role in order to provide the experience to improve skills.

- 4. Practice:** The excellence-seeking executive also has to look for and create everyday opportunities for practice and be alert to upcoming meetings and interactions as opportunities to work on both enhancing strengths and mitigating weaknesses. Without anticipation and initiative, these opportunities can go by unrealized and the necessary practice may not happen.

However, creating and implementing such a plan may not be as easy as it sounds. There are reasons why people have not demonstrated certain behavior patterns in the past, and these same reasons may make it difficult to practice new behaviors.

5. Debrief the Practice: Review the practice opportunity as soon as possible while the experience is still fresh. Just like the earlier self-examination, the debrief has to have a positive and forward-looking tone to it. One should reflect on what aspects of the practice went well and what could have been better—with the goal of applying learnings to future interactions. Further benefit may be gained by conducting the debriefing with a boss or trusted peer. As difficult as it may be, excellence only comes with such objectivity and self-examination.

6. Repeat and/or Expand the Process: For excellence-seeking executives, building leadership ability is a developmental and lifelong journey with few boundaries. After an initial cycle of self-examination, observation, benchmarking, and practice, the process can be repeated as many times as necessary or desired. New rounds of learning can be opportunistic, focused on enhancing strengths or working on specific weaknesses, or geared toward learning opportunities unique to a particular setting. Each individual will decide how far and how wide he or she wishes to go.

Pros and Cons

There are many advantages associated with leadership development designed and implemented by self-directed individuals to meet their own needs. First and foremost, it is effective in teaching new behaviors and overcoming impediments to their manifestation. It is also cost effective, with little time

spent away from work or cost incurred to attend training programs. The six-step process can help an executive minimize weaknesses as well as leverage strengths. When approached opportunistically, these activities can expose an executive to leadership behaviors not even considered, expanding the breadth of the executive's thinking about leadership.

The way executives ask for feedback and model self-examination can be a powerful tool in setting a culture of learning within a company. Not only does the public reflection provide opportunities for learning from others, it sets a tone of openness and introspection that encourages everyone to continually improve. If a leader is genuinely concerned about improving performance and gracious in accepting feedback and incorporates that feedback into subsequent behaviors, colleagues will be more likely to follow suit—to the benefit of the entire company.

Naturally, there are also challenges to effective development when leaders' progress is left entirely up to them. Not everyone is willing or skilled enough to engage in the kind of self-examination and observational practices necessary for this to have impact. While these skills can be enhanced in anyone, this process is likely to be most beneficial to those who are highly motivated and/or very high-potential individuals—typically those who innately believe they can influence their own outcomes.

In addition, it is very challenging for a person to be objective about

themselves. It is a special type of person who can take a cold, calculating look at their attributes, even with help.

Creating Momentum

Self-directed leadership requires a significant amount of initiative on the part of the individual, but companies can catalyze and foster that energy. First, avoid imposing a one-size-fits-all system and appreciate that the impact comes from each individual executive doing the work. The corporation can be no more than the impetus, and it has to be comfortable with the fact that each executive decides how much time and effort to commit and in what direction to work.

Second, recognize that people often need help in figuring out how to get past the *content* of interactions to focus on the *process*. This is true in every discipline, not only in business. World-class athletes rely on a team of specialized coaches; world leaders employ countless advisors; renowned musicians study with masters throughout their lives to perfect their craft. To support business leaders willing to invest the extra effort, consider making a psychologically astute person (a colleague or coach) available to work with them on fine-tuning their observation skills, engaging in objective self-analysis, or overcoming emotional and motivational impediments to the manifestation of new behavior patterns.

Powerful and cost-effective opportunities for executive development occur all the time and are too frequently missed by individuals and corporations.

To optimally develop leadership in your organization, encourage executives to take personal responsibility for their own progress. When they are provided with such a stimulus and supported by additional resources aimed at helping them get the most out of these steps, rapid and powerful improvements in leadership capabilities can occur. In the aggregate, individual improvement throughout the organization can significantly increase the overall caliber of leadership in the corporation.

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