



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

BY COACH AND TRAIN

Envisage, if you will, a professional football team that recruits the best players, puts them through a rigorous training camp to hone their technical skills & learn the plays, and then lets them loose to play the entire season without a single practice session or team coach. There's not a club owner in the world that would ever expose such a major investment to that kind of risk. Yet most business organisations blithely do just that!

I was assigned a job the other day to assess potential CEO's for a large organisation. I saw some great men and women, and put them through the test battery, which revealed a group crackling with potential but 'not quite super-league ready'. Disappointing really, especially as each one was asked what they had done in the past few years to prepare for the position for which they had applied and the unanimous answer was nothing. Equally disappointing, I reckon that if I asked the top echelon in the organisation the same question, relating to their effort in preparing their senior management to fill the CEO's shoes I would have obtained the same dismal response.

There are many ways to get talented managers ready for more responsibility. The most effective way is undoubtedly through executive coaching, a tutoring method that has been around forever. Even as far back as the Stone Age young hunters would have been taught to make spears, arrows or other weapons and use them effectively, all learned skills passed on by the older and more experienced. Mediaeval knights went through a rite of passage under the guidance of skilled chevaliers before they were considered battle-ready. Seventeenth-century merchants turned to "cunning men," or wizards, for guidance. And entrepreneurs today turn to their more modern counterparts: executive coaches. For centuries man has effectively passed on his skills and knowledge, not in books but, hands-on, taking others under their wing and acting as expert, consultant, trainer and counselor.

It is a well-recognised and effective leadership development technique all over the world which makes me surprised that it has scarcely caught on in Botswana.

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Elsewhere today's business world uses personal coaches to help executives one-on-one to broaden their knowledge and to make the most of learning that has already taken place. Because these encounters involve executives in different stages of their careers and in varied settings, coaching represents a continuum of roles. We coach executives for skills, performance, development and coaching for the executive's agenda (learning focused on the executive's role and function in the broadest sense).

But here instead of making use of coaches we tend to throw executives into the deep end without offering them the help and support to not only do their job effectively but to prepare them for more senior management positions and increase capability.

I think that we have not only down-played the value of coaching, seeing it as a 'nice-to-have-when-you-have-time' tool, but have also failed to highlight its critical role in executive performance and as a post-training intervention. One of our biggest errors has been in providing coaching for free or pro-bono. In other words you enter into a loose, non-business relationship with a friend, mentor, boss etc and ask him to give you a few handy hints when he or she has the time. Nothing wrong with that per se but it's a bit too casual.

Instead we need to switch our perception of coaching as an optional extra or a part-time intervention so that it becomes an accepted skills development function, preferably an outsourced one for the organisation. Okay, so now you are paying for a service but then you can demand results on performance and send a clear signal to you executives that you are providing the support they need to get the job done.

Where else is the boss supposed to look for help? After all, it's lonely at the top. At many small companies, chief executives are the only people who truly understand the big picture in their organizations, and every major decision falls on their shoulders. And since the CEO is the one who signs the pay cheques, it's tough to find employees brave enough to provide honest feedback, but an outside coach can and will.

Another benefit is that paying for coaching motivates people to make the most of the intervention. A friend, colleague and no-fee coaching relationship presents a unique set of challenges especially in the area of buy-in and expectations. When there's no fee, some managers might take it less seriously and expect less of themselves, so they accomplish less. You have to have your coaching covenant as a no work/no-coaching clause – in other words, when a manager consistently fails to do his or her action steps, your agreement should call for bringing the relationship to an end. It is no fun to coach someone who refuses to work and fails to capitalise on the opportunity! Frustrating for the coach and even more so for the organisation which provided the investment.

Not all companies are in the dark however – switched-on decision-makers at Botswana Power Corporation (excuse the pun) are embarking on a policy of executive coaching. They have had the insight to recognise that even though they have attempted to attract good managerial talent and have tested their managers' competence levels there is a need for someone to stand beside the executive and help them improve in their specific corporate environment for the future good of the corporation. Clearly they've seen the light! Barclays Bank and Debswana are two other examples of local organisations that have instigated robust coaching and mentoring systems, routinely appointing coaches/mentors solely to look after learning and development on the job and help executives maximise their performance.

These are all organisations following the successful soccer teams' example. Ask any top footballers and if he's honest he will tell you that you can have all the raw talent in the world but without a knowledgeable coach behind you, you'll never develop into a David Beckham or a Thierry Henry and your on-field performance will forever be nothing more than merely adequate. It used to be said that 'behind every successful man is a woman' but perhaps that should now be amended to 'behind every successful executive is a personal coach'!

