



Executive Coaching, For a Change

By Michael O'Brien and Andrea Kay

*Is your company struggling to change?
Find out why your executives might be part of the problem*

If your company is like most others going through change, it's a mess. There's probably no clear business strategy. With all the talk of the bottom line and shareholders screaming for results, the rumor mill is wild with stories of pending layoffs.

There might even be mixed opinions on what kind of company you are. There's a good chance revenues are flat and productivity is down even though people are working harder. Morale might be at an all time low. Marketing blames accounting. Accounting says it's marketing's fault. Executives point fingers at workers. Workers say the executives are bumbling idiots who don't know what they're doing.

How to fix it? Lots of efforts that take an enormous amount of time can master this messy phenomena including making major changes in strategy, structures and people. But there's one thing that should be considered earlier than later--usually before structural changes occur: a change in thinking. Executives' thinking, that is.

Your executives set the tone for the rest of the organization--most likely, a tone that's not very harmonious today. They probably aren't even aware of it. For example, if they think the people in your company aren't productive or are inflexible about changing the way things are done, in their minds, they proclaim: "I'm the boss, I am right. If people aren't productive, it's not about me." That's part of the whole problem. And from our point of view that's where the work needs to start.

As executive coaches, we help executives examine their attitudes, thinking, emotions and behavior then hold that up in front of them to decide if anything needs to change. To see if indeed, they are part of the problem.

Odds are you're thinking: "Our executives would never be open to doing that. That stuff is way too touchy feely for them."

There's no doubt about it--many of the executives we work with are skeptical at first. They don't see how their emotions affect their work, claiming that the work part of their life is not personal. They are emphatic that they don't bring their emotions to the office and that there is no place for them there. But you can't separate intellect from emotions. It's neurologically impossible. You bring the whole package to the office.

Take Kenneth, President of a software company, who we work with. He's extremely intelligent, analytical and intolerant of mistakes. In his mind, if a mistake is made by any of his employees, as the leader, he will be perceived as stupid. As a result, he is constantly anticipating every detail of where things are and what can go wrong. If a hardware system goes down or his staff misses a deadline, he gets stressed, becomes sarcastic and pulls rank on people. When people leave a meeting where he does this, they feel bad and as if they did something wrong. When we first met him he thought of himself as a supportive, collaborative leader who always listened to people and took responsibility for everything. Which was true at times. When he was stressed--which was much of the time---his behavior was another story. That's when he would look at his people, cock his head, and with a wry smile on his face, use words dripping with sarcasm.

Since he was the boss, his employees backed down, acquiesced and didn't give him their best. Even with that "smile" on his face, they could feel his anger. Then he would complain that people aren't thinking outside the box. That they're not productive.

Through our work with him he began to notice the assumptions he made and beliefs he held based on his past experiences--and how they colored his behavior. He saw that if he didn't acknowledge his emotions, his demeanor and words would be emotionally charged. His emotions would control him and take away his power. He became open to seeing that he was part of the problem—that he was actually holding people back and reducing productivity. But this did not happen overnight.

We showed him tools he could use to become more aware: a journal for keeping track of what was working and not working to identify unconstructive behavior. We gave him structures and techniques to incorporate into his life. He learned, for example, the difference between a request and a demand.

A demand sounds like this: "I want \$80,000 trimmed from your budget. This is a problem you've had and I want it fixed within two days."

A request is: "We need to trim \$80,000 from this budget. I'd like to have this by the end of the week for the following reasons So please get back to me by Friday with your ideas."

The demand and the energy behind it would probably elicit a "the hell with you" response with no results, leaving people feeling diminished and put upon and not challenged. The words and energy behind the request will give him the results he wants. Having heard the request, they may not be sure how they're going to accomplish it, but they attack the problem with openness.

We followed Kenneth around to his meetings, pointing out opportunities for him to demonstrate to his staff how he's changing and suggesting new ways of dealing with people. The more Kenneth showed his staff that he was willing to be vulnerable and examine his own thinking and behavior and then change, the more successful he has been in asking the tough questions his organization needs to wrestle with. Now his presence encourages open discussion and questions. People do things with understanding not just because someone said to do it. They are creative and take ownership of problems.

At his last staff meeting, they discussed questions like: How do we deal with the fact that what was a highly valued service we provided the marketplace is now a commodity? What do we need to do now that we have several competitors with equally good products? How can we reduce waste? How can we produce better results for our clients? Slowly but surely, his staff is coming up with creative ways to solve these issues. Before, they would have just blamed him and the rest of the executives, just like Kenneth blamed his staff.

Kenneth still struggles with accepting mistakes. This is an old record that plays in his head. But now he notices when it's playing. He's much more tolerant of uncertainty and frustration. He doesn't let his fear take over and give away his power. In short, he has started the process of mastering his personal development. And he can now lead by example and help his staff strike a balance between feeling overwhelmed by change and by the need to change.

As personal coaches, we help executives realize how much they blame others and don't take accountability themselves. We help them see that even when they're right, it doesn't matter; if people feel blamed, and thus, bad, they're not going to be creative.

It's not easy to be a leader today. Everything is changing quickly, which requires leaders to change the way they do things. Executive coaching gives them a structure to help them adapt to all the changes they're experiencing in their businesses. It's a technique that helps executives become the leaders they need to be.

This work does require courageous executives who are willing to examine themselves. They have to be big enough to realize that if they're going to lead others, they may need to make changes to themselves first. The result is that people will see them take accountability and responsibility in a personal way, not just through their position, and will follow suit.

The CEOs who bring us in to do this work with their executives are definitely making a bold move. They are driven to being effective leaders. They are willing to challenge the status quo. Change is their top priority.

If you think your executives should consider a change in their thinking, here's the question to ask them: As the leaders of this company, is anybody following you? If the answer is "No," or "I haven't checked in a while," they are part of the problem. So who's going to make the first move? It's their jobs as leaders to take the lead.

Contact Information:

O'Brien Group achievemore@obriengroup.us 513-821-9580 1276 Sweetwater Dr. Cincinnati, OH 45215
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