

## A NEW EXECUTIVE CURRICULUM

BY MICHAEL O'BRIEN

**W**hat is the most valuable contribution executives make to their companies, expertise or leadership? I say leadership. Knowledge and technical capabilities, no matter how broad, are the threshold skills everyone must have to do the job. Leadership is the distinguishing competency that star performers exhibit that the average performers do not. But leadership takes judgment, which involves something of a sixth sense—a high performance of personal mastery.

This analysis raises interesting questions about the best training for today's business leaders. As former *New York Times* science writer Daniel Goleman suggests in his book, *Primal Leadership* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), the latest scientific findings indicate that brainy but dogmatic bosses rarely rise to be stars in an age when organizational speed and flexibility are the key to survival.

Likewise, in a cover story several years ago, *Time* magazine sifted through the current thinking and reported, "New brain research suggests that emotions, not IQ, may be the true measure of human intelligence." The bottom-line significance of what *Time* called "EQ" was suggested by management expert Karen Boylston: "Customers are telling businesses, 'I don't care if every member of your staff graduated with honors from Harvard, Stanford, and Wharton. I will take my business and go where I am understood and treated with respect.'"

If the evolutionary pressures of the marketplace make EQ, not IQ, the hot ticket for business success, it seems likely that both individual executives and boards of directors need to know how to cultivate it. I have a modest proposal: embrace a highly personal practice aimed at improving these four adaptive skills:

**1. Practice Self-Awareness.** Psychologists call this discipline "meta-cognition"; Buddhist monks know it as "mindfulness"; Socrates referred to it as the "examined life." I think of it as thinking differently on purpose and noticing what you're feeling and thinking. Whatever you call it, practicing this skill is a way of escaping the conditioned confines of your past.

Raise your consciousness by catching yourself in the act of thinking as often as possible; routinely notice your emotions and ask if you're facing facts or indulging biases.

**2. Use Imagery.** This is what you see Olympic ski racers doing before they enter the starting gate. With closed eyes and swaying bodies, they run the course in their minds, which ultimately improves their performance. You can do a similar thing by setting aside time each day to dream with gusto about what you want to achieve.

**3. Frame and Reframe Events.** When the Greek Stoic Epictetus said 2,000 years ago that it isn't events that matter but our opinion of them, this is what he was talking about. Every time something important happens, assign as many interpretations to it as possible, even zany ones. Then go with the interpretation most supportive of your dreams.

**4. Integrate the Perspectives of Others.** Brain research shows that our view of the world is physiologically limited by our genes and the experiences we've had. Learning to incorporate the useful perspectives of others is nothing less than a form of amplifying your senses. The next time someone interprets something differently than you do, pause to consider that a gift of perception is being offered, if you'll only accept it.

Mastering the emotional components of these four practices often

proves to be the most difficult for senior executives, but as Goleman has emphasized, doing so can yield "Resonant Leadership"—emotionally intelligent leaders. By practicing self-awareness, leaders notice their moods and emotions and how these are influencing their behaviors. By using imagery, they can go beyond the intellectual data to make smart choices that look to others like "leaps of faith." By framing and reframing events and integrating the perspectives of others, leaders can manage their own reactions, thereby improving their emotional state and that of their organizations.

Although the recommendations suggested above may appear simplistic, they are based on what we know about the mechanisms of the mind. The bad news: it's hard to change power of habits—the electromagnetism of established neural pathways will literally pull you away from changing your practices. This may be why history repeats itself. The good news is that not only is it possible to change our behaviors, it's actually easier than overcoming a chemical dependency such as alcoholism. But you must have a discipline for doing it. Hence, the method recommended here.

No, it's not a curriculum in the sense that an MBA is. But what the latest research seems to imply is that without the software of emotional maturity and self-knowledge, the hardware of academic training alone is worth less and less. ■

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