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THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

SEPTEMBER 2010

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The Survivors



Like these African black rhinos, some leaders may be considered ill-tempered, anti-social, prehistoric throwbacks; but they tend to build strong bonds and enjoy relatively long tenures (30 to 40 years). Their poor eyesight is compensated by a strong sense of smell, good hearing, and imposing size (2,500 pounds, five feet tall at the shoulder).

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Executive Advisement

It goes beyond coaching leaders.



by Sheila E. Murphy

TODAY'S DEMAND FOR rapid analysis, swift vetting of choices, and

carefully honed communication strategies requires a sharpened approach for building intellectual and organizational capacity. Where *executive coaching* provided a base of support for the leader seeking to overcome barriers to performance, *executive advisement* (EA) represents a more in-depth process. At its best, EA yields a distinctive and energizing result that transforms the purview of the CEO to integrate *internal performance* with *marketplace opportunities*. The uniqueness of the firm, its intellectual capital, and innovation potential become clearer to the leader.

The professional who pursues EA is seeking increased breadth and depth in the interchange. I find that individuals at the top bring a firm sense of who they are and what they have done successfully. They are ready to move forward and face even more difficult hurdles, for higher-level positioning.

Senior executives require a different kind of discussion from that of coaching. The *coaching conversation* tends to emphasize a narrower scope, be more personal in nature, and examine internal performance challenges. The coaching process tends to identify an obstacle that blocks performance. In contrast, the EA process begins with an accomplished leader who seeks to facilitate higher utilization of assets. The process produces growth, enhancement, and higher-level performance.

EA requires higher levels of education and experience, a strategic focus on system-level versus process-level issues and opportunities, and an external view of the organization as a current or potential leader in the industry.

What should you expect from an EA?

- *The executive enlists an external EA.* I suggest confidential, off-site, weekly meetings. Securing the benefit of uninterrupted, focused and confidential sessions is critical. The process requires an external individual, to ensure no vested interest in a particular outcome. Such objectivity offers the leader an advantage when pursuing alternative

opportunities and courses of action.

- *The executive briefs the EA* on matters of current importance in categories as relevant and far-reaching as strategic initiatives, communication strategy, critical decision areas, talent development and succession, and innovation stimulus and implementation.

- *EA creates a framework* for examining particular ideas and opportunities to strengthen the organization as a system. This is when the executive starts to see the benefits of a strong collaboration. The questions illuminate ways to reverse thinking, demand greater systemization, or urge forward a basic way of doing business for all staff.

- *EA applies criteria to facilitate analysis* in a collaborative format. This process is the beginning of a visible increase in confidence on the part of the leader.



- *EA structures milestones and facilitates accomplishment* through structured dialogue and analysis. Executives should now recognize a measurable difference in day-to-day execution of business.

- *Partnership of executive and EA* expands decision power through external, objective setting. The end result is a refined perspective of what they want to achieve. At this stage, the engine of EA is functioning effectively and delivers more tangible results based upon the level of trust between leader and EA and the visible track record in place.

Profile of the Executive Advisor

The EA is a high-level consultant, who brings extensive educational background and executive experience. He or she evokes the executive's full range of thinking, and applies the EA's strong exposure to contemporary leadership. The executive's experience and thought process fortify the conversation. The EA guides the fusion of intellectual and pragmatic thought to

system-building and industry change.

The strategic orientation of the sessions is made rich by the depth that underlies each conversation. The EA enables the executive to examine conceptual feasibility: "How realistic is the acquisition of a new firm to enhance the successful businesses already in place?" "What is the best way to attract an unusual talent base to steer a fatigued business whose opportunity for re-invention has come?"

EAs are nimble in facilitating the executive's recognition of "pivot points" that can change the fate of the organization by identifying new directions to take in a challenging situation. Where *reaction* has been the norm, *re-invention* takes its place. The collaborative creation of possible directions can shape a shift in thought processes.

Executives typically identify unexpected opportunities or approaches through engagement in the EA process.

EAs offer a confidential buffer that allows for the free exploration of concepts that differentiate the leader from others. Rather than being restricted to direct reports, the EA provides an individual who is outside of the corporate ladder and who has no vested interest in dutifully saying "yes" to every idea.

To optimize the process, the EA is regularly briefed on critical scenarios in order to examine complex issues concerning positioning of the organization amid market challenges. The briefing is enhanced dramatically by moving the conversation to *collaboratively agreed-upon criteria*. The EA frames the conversation to yield excellent concepts for development and for system-level change.

The EA specializes in system functioning, talent development, communication strategy, and innovation. To ensure changes, the EA must demonstrate theoretical and practical knowledge, education and experience, as well as exposure to source information and people on matters of key importance both in policy and services.

The EA process is a potential game changer for the executives. EA capitalizes on the collaborative process to recognize and exploit difficult-to-discern turning points, re-conceptualizes these moments, and integrates changes that aid in redefining the organization.

The EA process affords the executive unlimited potential for vetting and refining decisions and meeting new challenges creatively and strategically. LE

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ACTION: Engage in executive advisement.