



Executive Coaching

By Merna Skinner

Face-to-Face With Your Management Style

It can be difficult to get a frank, useful assessment of your management skills. But with the help of a good coach – **and videotape** – you can take a long look at yourself and discover what in your professional presence, demeanor, and style needs improvement to enable you to better lead, manage, and motivate.

The expression "it's lonely at the top" certainly rings true for the senior executive who does not always have a built-in mechanism to know how he or she is really doing. Most senior executives have the discipline and initiative to set their own goals and gauge their performances throughout the year. These leaders certainly can show the overall business results that they and their subordinates have achieved by citing revenues, returns on investment, and other hard, numerical data.

But on a qualitative level, how can these individuals really know how they are performing?

Politically Awkward Assessments

How a senior manager leads, motivates, and interacts with his or her staff and communicates with external audiences is not always easy to articulate, much less quantify. Politically, it is awkward for subordinates or even

peers at the same level to tell this person what they really think about the executive's workplace behaviors.

Many companies have started using 360-degree feedback measurement instruments to get a better handle on management style and specific behaviors. Everyone who interacts with this executive completes an anonymous rating of various competencies.

Unfortunately, the results of such questionnaires really only directionally show which skills need the most attention, and do little in the way of providing either anecdotal or qualitative information that will be helpful for understanding what was behind the numerical grades. Even when these instruments provide sections for open-ended qualitative comments, most coworkers fear that the language they use or specific critical incidents they cite will immediately reveal their identity and put their own careers at risk.

So how does this senior leader get honest and constructive feedback? Getting advice from the company's board members certainly isn't an

option. They may have colleagues at similar levels at other companies or associates in trade organizations with whom they can interact. But the proprietary nature of much of the subject matter makes it difficult to really discuss any of these critical issues in depth.

A Look in the Mirror

The solution to this dilemma often lies in hiring an outside coach who can objectively and confidentially assess the executive's behavior, suggest

Merna Skinner has developed and taught various communications programs, and has prepared top executives for major speaking engagements and media interviews. She also has helped executives improve their communications with employees, shareholders, investors, and community members. Skinner has worked with such clients as Bristol-Myers Squibb, Unilever HPC, Calvin Klein Cosmetics, Nickelodeon, Olin Corporation, and Pfizer Pharmaceuticals.

improvements, and provide guidance in mastering new behaviors. In a series of focused sessions, executives can truly "see themselves as others see them." Typically, executives are videotaped in real-life business situations with the coach playing various roles.

Afterwards, they view the tape and, with the coach, draw their own conclusions as to what needs the most work.

Actually seeing their behaviors on tape is an illuminating experience. The "ah-ha!" phenomenon definitely kicks in when they realize how, for instance, their brusqueness or lack of eye contact or sarcastic tone of voice bruises others.

Many times executives fall into the "iceberg" situation - they may go into coaching thinking one particular behavior needs work, when, in fact, videotapes show more deep-seated ones that need attention.

A good coach will help the executive prioritize one or two behaviors that need work and then develop a follow-up program. Between sessions, the executive has an opportunity to practice new behaviors before reporting the results.

Interacting With Direct Reports

Senior executives can become more effective in a number of areas. Many



Rather than feel obliged to act in the role of what a typical president "should be," he learned to engage his fellow workers on a more **human, individual level.**

seek to interact more effectively with their direct reports. In particular, one director of human resources for a consumer products company had difficulty with "influencing skills." As the most senior HR executive, she was a top performer who consistently surpassed her business goals but was inflexible, rigid, and impatient with the large staff that reported to her. The result of this behavior was widespread complaints and high departmental attrition.

A quantitative ranking identified that she needed to develop more patience, learn to control her own hostility, adopt a better way of reacting to the hostility of others, give credit to others, and develop better problem-solving skills.

An initial coaching session had her re-enact a typical project briefing session with a subordinate. Viewing her taped performance uncovered a number of things: impatient body language, constant interruption of the staff member, sarcastic remarks, and an overall condescending demeanor.

The role-playing, which was to approximate a face-to-face discussion of the project objectives, quickly degenerated into a dictation of orders. Instead of allowing for a give-and-take discussion of options, she insisted on announcing, "Look,

here is what you do ..., " followed by an extensive list of tasks and due dates.

Coaching revealed that she gave her subordinate little opportunity to voice opinions or discuss pros and cons of various strategies. While she had been praised in the past for efficiently achieving results, this director neglected to understand that her way of solving problems was not the only way to work. Over time, she learned that collaborative problem-solving would not diminish her authority and actually would allow the person assigned the project the chance to grow by having more input.

After three half-day sessions over a period of two months, this executive had relaxed her rigid management style considerably and departmental loyalty and motivation improved.

Addressing External Audiences

Dealing with external audiences is another area where senior executives can benefit from one-on-one professional development. Whether they are addressing shareholders, a board of directors, or other senior industry colleagues, how they communicate is crucial. Most people at this level

have excellent command of presentation content but aren't necessarily as polished, persuasive, and personal when it comes to actual performance.

In one case, a chief executive officer of a technology company had developed a very negative reputation with the press. On repeated occasions he had been sarcastic, abrupt, and impatient with a number of reporters. This same behavior also was manifested when he addressed industry audiences.

This individual's coach was able to view first-hand these behaviors via a simulcast during which the senior officer served on a panel of industry experts. When viewing the tape, he realized that he came across as stiff, overly serious, and monatomic. Additionally, his delivery was flat and he did not know how to pause in order to maximize humor. During question-and-answer periods, he interrupted the questioners and did not really listen to their questions before barging in with long-winded responses.

Improving his behavior meant teaching him to spend more time preparing for speeches rather than "reviewing the script on the plane." The CEO learned to interject some personality into his presentations by improving eye contact, varying vocal energy, and using more pauses

to build audience anticipation. He realized his "personal best" not by becoming a different person but by flexing more toward the style of the people he was addressing.

When it came to the press, this meant understanding how the reporters have to do their jobs, how they process information, and the best way to give them relevant and consistent key messages about his company and its activities. This new congenial approach of treating the press as professional colleagues contrasted markedly with his old attitude of treating them like subordinate foes. Positive press coverage followed.

Many executives often find themselves rising quickly within organizations to senior posts where they suddenly are responsible for managing much larger staffs. While they may be technically proficient, many are not as skilled in adjusting to many different subordinate work styles.

Overcoming Rigidity

One example of this scenario involved the youngest senior vice president of an insurance company, who had just been promoted to the presidency of a large business unit. He thrived on precision, structure, and management regimentation. His approach to work was based on the focused and efficient completion of tasks - without much regard for the people who were accomplishing them. Everyone who dealt with him found his manner distant, stern, and inflexible.

HOW TO VIEW YOURSELF

- **STEP BACK FROM YOUR EGO:** When viewing yourself on tape, see yourself as a third party representing a company. Take yourself out of the equation and be ready to analyze the person on camera objectively.
- **PRETEND YOU ARE A SUBORDINATE:** Ask yourself what it would be like to interact with the person on tape. How would what that person says and the way it is said make you feel? Would you be motivated to perform better on the job? What about the person's communication style do you find needs improving?
- **GO WITH YOUR FIRST INSTINCTS:** The first impression your actions make is usually the most authentic. Don't over-analyze every movement or rationalize what is captured on tape. Rather, learn from what you see and move forward.
- **IDENTIFY STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES:** Don't focus only on mistakes. See what your strengths are and then identify what needs work. Choosing one or two behaviors to work on initially makes more sense than trying to tackle too many at once.

In viewing the tape during a coaching session, he quickly realized that his rigidity made him come across as cold and uncaring. In a conference that was purposefully designed as informal and interactive, he was not conversational and made others participating with him feel uncomfortable by his formality.

During coaching, he realized that much of his executive behavior had been learned at an early age. He was raised by a top military father who from a very early age had taught him how to converse. The verbal behavior he developed was all centered on protecting himself and making sure that he fit in. This way of communicating had served him well during his earlier career, and had been reinforced through continual promotions. At this career juncture, however, he could not afford to ignore the negative effects his behavior was having on all levels of the company.

This young president was trained to be more engaging while speaking. He learned to speak more softly and not as brusquely. He learned to use more facial expressions and gestures to give him more personality and charisma. He would of course never be a "happy-go-lucky guy," slapping people on the backs. What he did

become, however, was looser in communication style and more confident in his ability to carve out a distinct personality.

Rather than feel obliged to act in the role of what a typical president "should be," he learned to engage his fellow workers on a more human, individual level. What's more, he learned to read his subordinates' styles better and flex more in their direction, not always uniformly acting in an autocratic mode.

Senior executives face a tough challenge when it comes to getting quality feedback. Receiving such information in a timely, productive, specific, and actionable manner is often best accomplished using an executive coach. Not as clinical as a therapist nor as remedial as a counselor, this professional can objectively guide the senior executive toward realizing what in his or her professional presence, demeanor, and style needs improvement to better lead, manage, and motivate.

For senior managers, pausing to better understand how others see them, literally, goes a long way toward improving how they perform - both internally with their employees and externally with shareholders, boards of directors, and the press. **ET**