



WHITE PAPER

A WHITE PAPER BY

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As a species, we humans possess some unique capacities. We can stand apart from what's going on, think about it, question it, imagine it being different... We create what we want rather than just accept what is. So far, we're the only species we know that does this. As the world speeds up, we're giving away these wonderful human capacities. Do you have as much time to think as you did a year ago? When was the last time you spent time reflecting on something important to you? At work, do you have more or less time now to think about what you're doing?...If we can pause for a moment and see what we're losing as we speed up, I can't imagine we would continue with this bargain.
—Margaret Wheatley, *Turning to One Another*

EXECUTIVE FOCUS

HOW LEADERS LOSE IT, AND HOW TO REGAIN IT

A change has occurred in the landscape of business leadership. The challenges that executives face today are more numerous, varied, and complex than ever before. These forces have changed rapidly in recent years, and are having a dramatic impact on the lives of senior leaders and their ability to succeed in their roles.

At the heart of the issue is the absence of sufficient opportunity to **focus**. Focus, as defined here, is the in-depth, accurate, and truthful consideration of issues and priorities. These issues may be related to tasks, objectives, people, business, or self. As roles grow in complexity and leaders become inundated with information, the opportunity to reflect thoughtfully can be lost almost completely. When this lack of opportunity to focus persists over time, a deleterious effect occurs which can cause significant lapses in judgment and performance; objectives critical to personal and business success are compromised.

This white paper explores the nature, causes, and effects of the loss of focus among senior leaders, and how executives and leadership teams can seek to regain focus even during periods of intensity and ambiguity.

THE CONTEMPORARY EXECUTIVE'S PREDICAMENT

The following are real examples from recent work with executives in major corporations (individual and company names have been withheld for self-evident reasons):

- > The COO of a major health care corporation works tirelessly through major organizational upheaval to restore success. In his frenzied attempt to turn the company around, he assumes a tremendous workload, and becomes so unaware of his disruptive leadership behavior that he intensely alienates his entire staff. Over half are considering resignation, primarily to escape his tyrannical methods. The \$3 billion corporation teeters on financial failure. In a private coaching session he reports, "I never used to be this way. I don't know what has happened to me." Less than two years later, he is forced to resign by the board of directors.
- > An officer at the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank reports that the magnitude of her role has grown dramatically due to market demand, and has begun to involve so many decisions, in such short time spans, that she has begun losing the ability to make all these decisions effectively. "I don't know what I'm doing anymore," she says. "It's just too much, and there isn't anything to be done about it. There's nowhere to turn."
- > During coaching discussions with the CFO of a \$4 billion company, the organization's desperate financial situation is discussed. The fact that this bright and

talented CFO was recently lured away from a successful Wall Street position to help recover the situation underscores the pressure he feels. In the discussions, several critical business objectives are identified as essential to turning the situation around. However, upon close analysis of the CFO's daily work emphasis and personal tendencies, it becomes evident that little or no progress is being made on these objectives. Precious time is being lost. Conveying tremendous discomfort, the CFO remarks, "It's incredible how the demands of the day-to-day minutia can cause me to lose focus on the most important things."

- > An operations executive overseeing hundreds of associates and managing hundreds of millions in budget dollars breaks down during a private coaching session. She admits she is failing in her role. Concerned that her contributions may not be fully recognized by the senior team, she has taken on larger and higher-pressure assignments, assuming more responsibility for key initiatives, until it simply has become too much. "Keeping it together" every day in front of her staff, colleagues, and senior executive team requires a monumental effort. She has been overwhelmed by her role for some time, but given political realities and urgent business crises, elected to keep her desperation a secret.
- > A public relations executive is surprised and offended by the results of a psychological assessment that suggest that he lacks vision and does not communicate well with his staff. Rejecting the assessment's validity, he argues that vision and communication are the very skills that resulted in his professional success. He is angered that anyone could suggest that

he lacks these skills. Yet upon further exploration, he concludes that, in fact, it is true that he has not been leveraging these skills, which had been strengths in the past. After careful reflection and re-analysis, he acknowledges the assessment's accuracy. He recognizes that he has become so deeply immersed in the challenges of his role that he has lost touch with his own leadership capabilities, and has been working to become a different kind of leader—one unlike himself. He concludes that in the process of trying to prove himself within the organization, and in taking on an enormous workload, he has compromised his own leadership identity, and instead tried to become something that he believed others wanted him to become.

- > A publicly recognized automotive executive nearing retirement begins to reflect on his career. He has a well-known reputation as a man not to be crossed. His aggressive, often brutal management tactics have become part of his division's cultural lore, and he is known to be at once reviled and respected by his staff. A confidential discussion with an executive coach uncovers the fact that he is privately highly uncertain of himself, and uses his draconian tactics to ensure that he does not lose credibility or authority with his staff. When asked if he advocates this approach among his direct reports, he notes that his style would never work among the "younger" generation of leaders, and that today's leaders must be more collaborative and involving of their people. He acknowledges that for years he has been working to present himself as something that he does not entirely believe in, but that it is now too late to change.

What has happened when a COO is unaware that he has alienated his staff? What makes a CFO unaware that he is not making progress on core strategic initiatives? What causes a senior executive to lose an understanding of what she is contributing to the organization? What causes a respected veteran executive to model a leadership approach that he recognizes to be a poor one?

In the mayhem, confusion, and pressure of executive leadership, it is not uncommon for leaders to simply lose focus. Hard work persists, but it is often misdirected. Like arms flailing at a bee swarm, many executives find it difficult or impossible to gain perspective on the holistic nature of their work. Over time, the result of hard work fails to benefit the business, the leader, or the people they lead.

If this phenomenon were rare, the problem would be of minimal concern. However, it is not rare. Examining the current work conditions and leadership challenges faced by leaders across organizations throughout the world, the problem of “lack of focus” begins to appear to be something of an epidemic. Time and time again, we see otherwise-talented senior-level leaders overwhelmed by their roles. Focus problems (i.e., lack thereof) have become very common in the senior ranks, often affecting entire teams of executives. What is causing this loss of focus?

Through DDI’s work with executives, we have observed a series of commonalities, many of them very recent phenomena that provide more clarity around the challenges that leaders face. Perhaps some of these five themes are not new. But, when considered together, they paint a picture of the contemporary landscape of executive leadership and the need for focus.

THEME ONE: WORK AND INFORMATION VOLUME IS STAGGERING.

Executives today deal with tremendous volumes of information from voicemail and e-mail, cell phones and palm units; endless meetings; frenzied airports; evening and weekend work; and schedules that leave little time to stop. The day-to-day work of a senior leader is crammed with a multitude of job challenges ranging from issues associated with clients, partners, and Wall Street, to issues of specific operations, people, technical details, etc. It is not unusual for leaders to report to us that they participate in between 30 and 50 meetings per week. Add to that 20, 30, or 40 phone messages per day, and an equal or greater amount of e-mail messages. Soon the volume of work dwarfs the amount of time available to complete it, and the volume of information dwarfs the human mind’s ability to understand it. For executives, these pressing forces not only are becoming more numerous, they also are more direct and personal. The consequences of executives’ actions have impact that reaches far beyond themselves. In fact, these consequences can impact other people, resources, enterprises, and even national and global issues, including the economy, environment, politics, government, and humanitarian causes. One senior executive who oversees a large division in a major international printing company recently remarked, “Sometimes when I stop and think about what happens every time I make a big decision it scares the hell out of me.”

THEME TWO: JOB DEMANDS STRETCH LEADERS BEYOND THEIR CAPABILITIES.

There are many capable leaders, but there are an even greater number of challenging roles for them to fill. At DDI, we have conducted assessments of thousands of leaders and executives from around the world. There is no question that many highly skilled leaders are at work in the global marketplace. Yet, for every talented individual, there is more than one place where his or her capabilities could be leveraged. Executive talent shortages persist throughout the global marketplace, requiring organizations to promote leaders into major leadership positions with far less experience than might be desired. As a result, larger numbers of leaders are finding themselves stretched by their roles and are struggling to be successful.

THEME THREE: JOB DEMANDS CHANGE QUICKLY AND OFTEN.

The “shelf life” of leadership answers is becoming shorter. Executive roles are more dynamic than ever. What is necessary for success in a role today, could be radically different tomorrow. Mergers, acquisitions, technology changes, competitive threats, terrorism, and a host of other such forces can result in major shifts in what would be considered the most important tasks that a leader must accomplish in any given month, quarter, or year. Leaders in today’s environment must develop the agility to respond immediately to these changing circumstances, and they must do so in a way that remains consistent with the direction of the business.

THEME FOUR: TALENT IS NOT ENOUGH. KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE CAN BE DANGEROUS THINGS.

What’s true of most human beings is of course true for leaders. They tend to “go with what they know.” But given a decreasing shelf life for the right answers, it can be a significant deterrent to success if leaders become over reliant on past approaches. It is also true that being good is not enough. Even the most talented leaders will fail if given a challenge for which they are not prepared or well suited. We have seen many highly skilled leaders find unexpected failure on the job, not because of a specific skill deficiency, but rather because of personal attributes that caused cultural mismatches (e.g., executive derailers), and/or because of misguided efforts (i.e., focusing on the wrong things). Having a well-developed skill set is, unfortunately, not sufficient to guarantee success.

THEME FIVE: SELF-DEVELOPMENT IS RARE.

It is rare that we come across an individual who possesses full awareness of his or her strengths and weaknesses. Many understand partially, some even mostly, but most are surprised to find, upon their own closer examination (typically assisted by some form of objective assessment), that things they never previously considered are either hidden assets or liabilities to their own work performance. Often times, this exploration of “the truth” can be so captivating that it overshadows the more important matter of what to do about it. In fact, it is far easier (and more common) for people to acknowledge the truth about themselves than it is to take action with

respect to those truths (see “*What Now? The Little Guide to Using Your Targeted Feedback Results to Make Big Things Happen*,” DDI’s new publication on how to take productive action after formal assessment). From our experience, this is not due to a lack of desire; rather, it is due to a lack of understanding just how to develop one’s personal leadership capabilities in a practical way.

Considering these powerful forces in combination, it comes as no surprise that senior leaders in today’s environment are routinely fatigued. The demands create a situation that is both mentally and physically taxing. Leaders feel intense pressure and have very little time to think. Precious energy must be spent in the right places, accomplishing the right things. ***As a result, it has become clear that the ability to focus (or lack thereof) differentiates leaders in today’s environment.***

THE FOCUS FACTOR

Focus is a thinking process. An enormous component of leadership and personal effectiveness is driven by how one thinks. As work becomes more complex and harried, a cognitive challenge emerges. Myriad meetings and conversations, objectives and priorities, pressure and stress, voicemails and e-mails, all combine to have two primary effects on one’s focus:

1. Focus is pulled to many different topics, for very short periods of time, day after day.
2. Focus is forced outside of the individual (i.e., to the environment) for long, sustained periods of time, day after day.

Whatever you are thinking about at this moment is your focus. For example, although your eyes may be scanning the words on this page, the meaning of the words may or may not be your “focus” (i.e., I may be boring you to tears and you may be daydreaming about what you’ll do when you’ve finished reading this). In the typical business day of a corporate executive, one’s focus changes innumerable times, often from moment to moment, and to a highly varied range of topics. In fact, focus changes so constantly that it creates a cognitive “mode”, which I refer to as **focus change mode**. Like a high-speed full motion camera used to capture a sporting event or ballet, focus must change constantly to follow moving subjects. As such, the lens is designed to support focus change mode, and the camera’s primary energy is spent changing focus.

Contrast this action to a different photo application: the portrait. In this instance, it is likely that a different type of lens would be selected, and the primary action would not be focus change, rather, it would be what I will call **focus depth mode**. The objective is to achieve the maximum possible granularity and clarity. In a portrait, we desire to see the nuances of the subject, and know its specific features as they are in reality. As such, more time is taken to focus the lens, ensure that lighting is appropriate, and that the resulting image will be the most accurate depiction of “the truth” possible.

Returning to the job of an executive, the opportunity to operate in focus depth mode is a rare luxury. Decision-making windows are brief and information volume is enormous. Judgments about what to do

and how to behave must be made quickly and often, and the opportunity to sit, ponder, and reflect on “the truth” is difficult to obtain. Focus depth requires that one’s mental energy be turned inward, within one’s self. Others can certainly support this process, but clarity of mind and purpose requires some degree of independence in establishing “what one thinks.”

Key points are:

1. Executives typically are in *focus* change mode.
2. Executives are rarely in *focus* depth mode.
3. *Focus depth* results in greater accuracy and better insight.

When one is constantly in focus change mode, it becomes difficult to adjust to focus depth mode. If a leader spends a brief moment thinking about an employee whose performance has suddenly slipped, one set of judgments will emerge. If the same leader spends 20 minutes thinking quietly about the same topic, making a few notes about the issues, different judgments are likely to emerge. These latter judgments are much more likely to reflect a well-prepared, appropriate response than the former. As one’s mind learns to fly from topic to topic, it becomes adept at “swatting bees,” but progresses little in the ability to gauge the swarm in its entirety or devise a plan for escaping it. In making important work judgments, issues addressed in focus change mode are handled at a level of lesser clarity and granularity (which is assumed to be a necessary part of any job, at some level). In many organizations, the nature of executive roles, and the norms associated with how leaders behave, causes this to become habit. Many reading this

will regard focus change mode as unavoidable—a reality of modern executive work that must be accepted. Yet, even when these leaders find time to work toward greater depth, it is common for them to not have the energy or patience to do so; discretionary time is filled with multiple topics of focus as well, perpetuating the tendency.

Overcoming this problem of focus is central to the ability to succeed as an executive. The reality of operating in focus change mode means that over time, the context for individual judgments can erode, and large sets of actions can be made in unproductive ways. Courses of action that do not support company objectives may be pursued. The impact one is having on colleagues may be missed or ignored entirely. Personal preferences, capabilities, or even values may be overlooked accidentally because of the simple lack of opportunity to reflect on them. Over time, and through intense experiences (which often cause adrenaline to flow freely and the feeling of accomplishment to persist), many simply lose touch with what they are doing, why they are doing it, and even who they are as professionals and human beings. The overarching purpose for their work can be lost in the haze of the day, and they begin to operate on some version of reality that only approximates the truth. Ultimately, the most important matters are not regarded as such, as less important matters take their place.

ACHIEVING GREATER FOCUS

How then do we restore the ability to think with more depth and clarity about our work, so that we can place our energies on the things that will return the greatest

DECEPTIVE APPEARANCES

It is important to note that executives who struggle with focus do not always appear stressed or fatigued. In fact, many leaders who are operating in unfocused ways seem quite content, perhaps energized, and convey few signs of stress (i.e., unaware that they have lost focus). Many have learned to thrive on the adrenaline rushes that high-pressure situations tend to spark. “Surfing” from one adrenaline “wave” to the next, they learn to work through the most uncertain of moments, and fight their way toward greater clarity by simply doing the best they can to manage the complexity of each successive trial. However, for many, greater clarity never comes—only new and different challenges, which are dispatched in the same ways, through harried and intense effort and stamina. Over time, matters central to the business and the individual begin to blur, and are superseded by mechanisms that allow for the rapid dispatching of each new situation. Ultimately, the act of completing tasks is reinforced, as opposed to the high-quality completion of tasks.

impact to our companies, our colleagues, and ourselves? Recognizing that we cannot wave a wand and create more time to make judgments, it is possible to create mechanisms, which more regularly reinforce and strengthen the depth of focus in executives’ work lives. It is also important to recognize that to achieve focus requires far more than effective planning and organizing. Many highly organized leaders operate entirely out of focus. Focus is far more than planning. Focus is about taking the time, and using the right process to understand important matters in greater depth. Like the lens that takes the portrait, we must occasionally take the time and energy to carefully examine the nuances of our environment, so that we can retain clarity and consistency during the times of pressure and ambiguity.

To achieve focus, it is critical to periodically achieve focus depth in three areas, such that actions taken while in focus change mode will be more consistently appropriate and well targeted. Specifically, three areas must be brought into focus and aligned to ensure enduring productivity, success, and personal health.

Business Focus—This area refers to the issues most central to the management of the entire enterprise, and requires alignment among senior executive team members on these key issues. Questions like, “What are we trying to accomplish as a company?”, “What are our most critical business imperatives?”, and “What are the most critical priorities in executing our business objectives?” are at the heart of Business Focus. Executives (and, ultimately, all associates) must have a clear and complete understanding of the strategies that have been adopted, and how each strategic objective fits into the larger company game

plan. Note that simply *establishing* strategic objectives is very different from establishing a clear business focus, which implies clarity on the relative importance of various objectives and/or initiatives.

Role Focus—Each executive must also clearly recognize and understand the specific manner in which his or her role contributes to the business enterprise and the people in it. Taking into account the current realities of the work environment, leaders must look carefully at how their work activities contribute to the overall business direction. Key questions include, “What is it that my role contributes to this organization?”, “What are the key outputs of my contribution to this company?”, and “My job is critical to meeting our company objectives because...?” This, in addition to a number of other additional areas to be probed, requires an analysis that details each and every activity in which the leader is engaged, and evaluates the relative contribution of each action to success at both the role and enterprise level. Only with a very granular work activity analysis will there be opportunity to restore full focus on the impact of one’s role.

Self Focus—Finally, self focus involves a clear and enduring understanding of self. Self focus requires accuracy and honesty in regarding one’s own ability to deal with leadership challenges. With the support of valuable (professional) assessment to heighten accuracy and insight, leaders must exercise maturity and courage to reflect on how their individual strengths and weaknesses play into their ability to execute in their roles. Self focus also must extend beyond what one is capable of, to include personality, work values, career aspirations, and family and life circum-

stances. The clearest self focus is one that results in behavior that is most consistent with who one is as a human being, while simultaneously driving teams and the business toward success. Much like the focus on one's role, a clear focus on one's self will systematically analyze all work activities to yield clear judgments as to those activities that are more and less consistent with who we are as leaders, and what we are capable of accomplishing. The role of an executive is far more than a one-person job. It is, therefore, critical to understand ourselves fully so that we can know exactly how to enlist the support of others in reaching our goals.

Understanding each of these three areas is the first of two critical components to achieving focus. The second is to align the three in a way that results in more consistent and targeted action, and provides a solid benchmark against which new situations and challenges can be checked to determine the best path forward. Heightened focus results in a greater ability to execute in complex work environments, and also provides clear direction for how to develop the skill needed to do so effectively.

Many leaders, especially those with the most taxing roles, will need support in achieving this understanding and alignment. The process of stepping back from a highly complex role to establish focus on the most important matters requires a clear, facilitated process which structures observations and insights appropriately, and ensures that focus is sustained beyond a single moment or event. Achieving a clear Business Focus, and subsequent Role Focus may seem straightforward, but we encounter many who have not fully connected their roles to the most critical business objectives.

In addition, Self Focus seldom comes without the support of formal, professional assessment, and the perspectives of others with whom one works. Perhaps most difficult for individual leaders is the task of determining which of their responsibilities will be most/least challenging to accomplish given their personal tendencies, and where they need to grow and change as leaders in order to adapt and prepare for new situations. I have lost count of the number of times, after some guidance in evaluating the work situation and analyzing individual assessment data, an executive has recognized that his or her focus has been off target. These types of realizations are common in our work, and remind us that the work of an executive far exceeds the capabilities of one person.

FOCUS COACHING

As the business landscape for senior leaders has become murkier, a cottage industry of executive coaches has taken root and flourished. Former industry executives, technical experts, psychologists, and human resources specialists have all joined the ranks. It is a practice area that has become so widespread that nearly 60 percent of organizations currently offer some level of coaching support, according to a Hay Group study, and growing at a 40 percent annual rate. Currently, there are an estimated 10,000 executive coaches—a figure projected to reach 50,000 in five years (International Coach Federation, 2003).

Along with the upsurge in the number of coaches has been a dramatic increase in coaching discussions in human resources books, journal articles, magazine articles, and even the mainstream business press. Our observations indicate that most coaching

literature concentrates on *how coaching should be conducted*, as opposed to the *specific results that coaching is attempting to achieve*. Coaching books typically refer to process models, skills needed among coaches, methods of carrying conversations, developing a coaching style and presence, and a host of other forms of advice on how to approach coaching *from the coach's perspective*. Considerably less attention is given to the specific nature of the problems that coaching is seeking to solve, or the specific results that coaching seeks to achieve. Having spent so much energy determining the “right” coaching model shifts emphasis away from the more pressing objective: impacting business performance as quickly and dramatically as possible.

The primary goal of Focus Coaching is to improve leadership execution by aligning individual and team activities associated with Business, Role, and Self. In short, the ability to execute is driven by the ability to focus one’s energy on the right things. This begins with the needs of the business and the executives leading it. Focus Coaching considers the challenges faced by executives to be the variables that must define what actually takes place in a coaching relationship. Rather than creating a fixed approach, which is similarly applied to all individuals, Focus Coaching begins with the specific situation faced by an individual and/or team of executives who are working together to make a business successful. Through a series of interactions, which penetrate the work situation in depth, individuals and teams of executives are coached to realign their activities, and develop personally in ways that help to sustain focus through times of stress and confusion.

Individuals who have not recently had the opportunity to participate in an objective assessment process (typically including at least multi-perspective behavioral feedback and some basic assessment of stable personal attributes such as personality and work values) will first do so in preparation for the engagement. The more accurate and in-depth the assessment, the more immediately productive coaching activities will be. To fully assess the capabilities of executives, research shows that using multiple assessment methods yields the greatest accuracy and validity. Simulations, *Targeted Selection*[®] system interviews, multi-rater feedback, personality inventories, cognitive tests, learning styles inventories, experience assessments, and other similar tools are among best practice methods. An effectively designed battery of instruments leveraging these methods will yield accurate insights that will dramatically improve Self Focus, and better target activities. Coaching then proceeds through a series of phases:

- > Chartering and Objective Setting
- > Current Business and Role Analysis
- > Self Analysis
- > Work Priority Analysis
- > Development Priority Analysis
- > Development Action Planning
- > Work and Development Monitoring
- > Progress Measurement

Implicit to the process are frank, honest discussions that illuminate the realities of business and personal situations. Leaders are guided through an analysis, using simple tools and honest conversation, which present a summary of the entire current situation, work and self alike.

With a more holistic perspective as a starting point, the work of determining how to best proceed can begin. Role objectives are discussed in relation to business goals, and personal behavioral tendencies are discussed in relation to role objectives. Strategic approaches to work are examined, tradeoffs are considered, and specific plans are made for both the short and long-term. Ultimately, the “to-do” list of each leader is reconstructed and managed over time to reflect the priorities that best support the business and the individual.

As with individuals, this process can apply to teams of executives as well (and in the best cases, precedes individual coaching). A team may encounter several coaches who work in tandem to help drive execution. These coaches begin by facilitating team discussions that challenge the relationships among the many competing priorities that the team faces, and clarify the organization’s *Business Focus*. Individual executives then pair with coaches to align their priorities with the priorities of the enterprise. *Role Focus* and *Self Focus* are simultaneously considered as the process unfolds. For each executive, work activities are realigned and personal developments goals are established which optimize progress for the business and growth for the individual. Over time, coaches work with individuals using critical follow-up and measurement mechanisms. Meetings may occur frequently (perhaps weekly) during key developmental experiences or through intense work situations, with somewhat longer intervals during less intensive periods. The key is that the actions taken by individual leaders as part of the Focus Coaching engagement are driven by the needs of the business, the objectives of one’s role, and the characteristics of the individual leaders.

ABOUT THE COACH

A great deal has been published about the characteristics of great coaches. Yet, much current literature portrays executive coaches almost as “mystical” in their abilities to make a difference; as though the best coaches hold certain highly unique qualities found only in the rare individual.

We see it differently. Certainly, some individuals have the “DNA” that makes them more suited to the role of an executive coach. However, we believe people can be great coaches if given the right tools and training, and if focused on the objectives sought by the business and the individual. For example, DDI uses a highly rigorous process for certifying coaches in the Focus Coaching process to ensure the ability to achieve results for our clients.

More than anything, a good coach is an objective third party who holds no internal biases or organizational agendas. As such, a coach is a person with whom “the complete truth” can be shared.

Great coaches serve a number of key roles:

- > **Catalyst**—Sparking action that would not have otherwise been taken.
- > **Facilitator**—Monitoring, reminding, and ensuring that progress is being made.
- > **Integrator**—Linking ideas and activities to build synergy across individuals and teams.
- > **Listener**—Listening to confidential information and serving as an unbiased resource.
- > **Independent in Perspective**—Voicing independent opinion in order to consider varying ideas.
- > **Honest and Accurate**—Gathering objective and accurate information, and ensuring it remains central to all conversations.

WHEN THINGS GO OUT OF FOCUS—ZONES OF CONFUSION

As leaders gain more responsibility and play a larger part in managing an enterprise, they face more challenging leadership “transitions.” Leadership transitions represent distinct changes in what is required to be successful as a leader. Because they so frequently cause leaders to struggle to be effective (and often to fail), and because achieving focus is particularly difficult during these transitions, we refer to them as “Zones of Confusion.” When in these “zones,” leaders may lose focus, misdirect energies, and fail to achieve critical objectives. It is during these times when working proactively to achieve focus is most critical:

Large leaps of responsibility—The de-layering of organizations, and the rapid promotion of leaders who show potential, commonly results in transitions of responsibility that radically alter the success profile for leaders. More responsibility typically means greater span of influence, less tactical control, more visibility, greater consequences of failure, and new and different constituents. These changes require very different leadership approaches, but are often not anticipated by leaders, and frequently cause performance to decline while making the transition.

Joining a new organization from the outside—Adapting to a new culture, while at the same time working to be an effective leader inside it, often causes leaders to struggle through the transition into a new organization. Not only do leaders need to learn exactly what they have to do to be effective, but they also must learn how to do it in a new organization, where their typical actions may not work as effectively as in the past. This requires tremendous ability to re-focus, which many leaders fail to do effectively.

Leading through a business crisis—Desperate situations (e.g., financial crises, downsizing, integrity breakdowns, etc.) often leave leaders feeling highly strained and responsible for the organization’s future (and personally vulnerable). The intense pressure of these situations causes many leaders to become overwhelmed, making it highly difficult to focus effectively.

Adjusting for one’s derailers—It is a well-known axiom that under pressure our “true colors” show more clearly. This is certainly true among executives, where “derailers” tend to emerge. Factors such as arrogance, volatility, argumentativeness, and other such variables have been heavily researched and shown to cause failure among senior leaders. When these tendencies begin to dominate, performance erodes quickly. It is especially precarious that these tendencies may not play as significant a role at lower levels of leadership. Because of the changing nature of leadership, executive “derailers” can cause leaders to misdirect their efforts, and lose traction on the most important issues.

Operating in a strategy vacuum—We often hear leaders lament the absence of clear business strategy, and it is certainly true that aligning one’s efforts to higher-level goals is difficult if business strategy is vague or nonexistent. Yet, we find that strategy is almost never perfectly clear, and that the expectation of perfect clarity is unrealistic. The execution of strategy will always involve considerable degrees of ambiguity, and navigation of complexity.

Recovering from political catastrophes—Among senior leaders, individual agendas often conflict and political collisions inevitably occur. Examples include advocating unpopular viewpoints, failing to include key stakeholders in important decisions, or taking actions that others perceive as self-serving or destructive to other objectives. For

some leaders, these collisions are more difficult to avoid because of lack of experience or insight. For others, performance tendencies simply make these conflicts more likely (e.g., the results-focused leader who fails to notice when he has interfered with a peer’s objectives). Regardless of the reason, recovery from critical political damage can be difficult, and can cause leaders to lose focus on the most critical issues.

Re-emerging from failure—Leaders with courage will sometimes face challenges in which they do not perform well. Most will agree that without these trials leaders can scarcely be expected to grow. I challenge the reader to find one great story of leadership success in which there is not some degree of failure (which is typically profound) in the individual’s experience. Yet, while failure may be intellectually accepted, organizations have a way of rejecting leaders whose failures have been public. Leaders working through such re-entry have a unique opportunity to leverage the learning they have gained, but they may become preoccupied with trying to restore their reputations. This may lead to behavior patterns that are not centered on the most critical issues and do not sufficiently leverage the learning acquired in the prior experience.

Most leaders have mastered at least a small set of skills upon which they rely to be effective in many different circumstances. However, when the situation changes dramatically (which happens regularly in senior leadership roles), these well-honed skills may not be sufficient to drive continued success. Anticipating these transitions, and working proactively to enhance focus in these Zones of Confusion can help to more effectively navigate the complexity of the situation, and avoid the leadership failures that are so common in today’s environment.

With a skilled coach, and an emphasis on achieving focus on self, role, and the business, activities can be realigned and made more manageable, more productive, and more beneficial to businesses and individuals.

WHEN COACHING WORKS

A major technology company approached us over a year ago with a concern that millions of dollars were being spent each year on executive coaching. However, there was no indication of why coaching had been identified as the appropriate solution, how coaches were being identified (many coaches and firms were engaged with the company), what coaches were specifically doing, and what, if any, results were being achieved. We have found this to be a common situation, perhaps propagated by the tendency for executive coaches to operate in highly private ways. Hallway conversations about executive coaching often begin and end with comments like, “He’s working with an executive coach.” But further exploration of exactly what is happening in those engagements rarely occurs, often out of respect for the personal nature of the process. Certainly there is some justification for privacy (i.e., confidentiality, personal issues, etc.). Yet, it also is imperative that organizations be able to monitor the business impact of such critical investments. Toward that end, DDI recommends consideration of the following key factors before engaging an executive coach:

Business Relevance—Coaching must be for a business purpose as well as a personal purpose. We should be able to answer the question, “What does the business gain if this coaching engagement is successful?”

Sponsorship—If left only to a leader and a coach, without support from others in the organization, coaching is unlikely to achieve its maximum benefit. When managers of individuals being coached are involved to help craft action plans, secure resources, or eliminate barriers, significantly faster and greater impact is achieved. Actions are also considerably more likely to be well-aligned with core business objectives.

Openness to Development (desire to change/grow)—Without question, there are some who simply have little or no compulsion to develop new skills, or change their patterns of behavior. Little will be accomplished when this is the case, so it becomes essential to qualify coaching engagements by questioning leaders in this regard before coaching begins.

Strong Coaches—Coaches need not be industry or technical experts to help leaders achieve greater focus and attain higher levels of performance. However, coaches do need to be skilled interpersonally, insightful about the nature of executive roles, and tenacious in their facilitation of progress that helps both the business and the individual. (*The previous section, “About the Coach,” characterizes the key roles that coaches play.*) Organizations supplying coaches should be expected to consistently certify and maintain the skills of coaches, and provide detailed information about the manner in which coaches are hired and developed.

Accurate Assessment—Effective coaching requires a rich understanding of the person being coached—his or her knowledge and experience, skill strengths and weaknesses, personality, and career motivations.

This requires that some level of objective assessment be brought to bear. Using well-validated tools and coaches who are certified to interpret them is central to addressing personal development in the most appropriate ways.

Transparency of Process—Too much secrecy in coaching engagements can be counter-productive. While there are certain pieces of information within coaching engagements that must certainly remain confidential, there also must be some public output in order to leverage the engagement for its full value. Two components of public output are

- specific steps in the coaching process (i.e., anyone should be able to learn about how it works)
- development objectives of the person being coached. (Development which occurs in secret is highly unlikely to yield meaningful, sustained growth.)

Clarity and Relevance of Action Plans—While executive roles may at times be complex, actions toward development need not be. Recent development actions we have been involved with have included such things as:

- > Restructuring the weekly senior staff meeting agenda to drive a different way of engaging members of the team (and avoiding dominant leadership behaviors).
- > Documenting one’s learning objectives as part of an active strategic planning committee (so that learning associated with strategic thinking is more intentional and likely to sustain).
- > Reorganizing the launch plan for an upcoming initiative to build more involvement among key stakeholders (and to build empowerment skills).

- > Constructing a “meeting cheat sheet” to help build coaching skill in several upcoming meetings with direct reports.

These actions are all central parts of the normal “to-do” lists of the individuals for whom they were crafted, yet they also are aimed at the development of skill sets that are critical to success. Development actions that are relevant to one’s role, relevant to the development need, and clearly defined are most likely to have impact.

Focus on Realizing Results—Key questions to ask at the outset of any coaching relationship include:

- > What will we be able to observe when we have been successful?
- > How will developmental progress be gauged?
- > How will we report progress to other key stakeholders?
- > How does progress impact the individual’s ability to contribute to the business? How does progress impact personal career goals and aspirations?

Answering these questions helps ensure desired outcomes are explicit, and that proper metrics are in place to measure outcomes.

EXECUTIVE FOCUS AND AUTHENTICITY

In a wonderful new book, “*Authentic Leadership*”, Bill George, former CEO of the well-respected Medtronic, Inc., a leading maker of implantable biomedical devices, presents a vision of the type of leadership that is needed to conquer modern-day business challenges. In his book, he espouses the notion of authenticity as the central tenet to which the greatest leaders adhere, and he details five qualities of the authentic leader:

- > **Purpose**—Upholding one’s fundamental purpose as a leader.
- > **Values**—Behaving in ways consistent with one’s personal values.
- > **Heart**—A willingness to share one’s self with others in a genuine manner.
- > **Relationships**—The ability to develop close relationships that endure over time.
- > **Self-Discipline**—Maintaining consistent and predictable work habits on which others can depend.

This depiction of authenticity evokes a simple and resonant message that reminds one of the more basic human elements of leadership, which often seem to be lost in the madness that characterizes so many business situations today. We have seen many talented leaders who are unable to sustain the pattern of authenticity. Individuals with firm principles and values, who attempt to lead in a truly genuine manner, and work to build lasting relationships can still find themselves struggling to succeed.

In short, the loss of focus results in an erosion of one’s ability to sustain the qualities of an authentic leader. It is certainly not the case that authenticity is something that one simply has or does not have. Instead, as George suggests, authenticity is the product of a lifetime worth of experiences. I would add that it is also the product of actively sustaining focus on those core human qualities and professional objectives that act as a compass when the right direction seems unclear or when we lack the time to think.

The health care COO who remarked, “I never used to be this way” lost focus on his *purpose* and *values* in the midst of

financial crisis. The CFO who was not making progress on key strategic objectives could not sustain the *self discipline*, nor did he have the relationships needed to remain focused on these tasks (he did not see these *relationships* as central to his financial charge). The volume and intensity of the leadership task simply becomes too taxing at times and focus erodes. Over time, day-to-day judgments make larger and larger departures from one’s leadership “core.” To maintain a consistent and forward direction toward organizational, individual, and human success, leaders must sustain the strength of that core. To do so, the leader’s focus must be sustained and strengthened by ensuring that opportunities are preserved which allow for **depth** of focus on such critical factors such as those of the authentic leader.

CONCLUSION

Practically speaking, restoring focus helps leaders get things done. Philosophically speaking, restoring focus helps leaders behave in ways that are more consistent, more balanced, more controlled, more productive, and more human. Associates working for focused leaders will find greater clarity and a more welcoming and productive work environment. Executive teams who achieve focus will more easily and effectively coordinate their activities, and will reduce the number of tasks, which distract them from their central goals. Organizations with focused leaders will find success more quickly and more often. And finally, leaders who become focused will find that they accomplish more, build stronger relationships, heighten their satisfaction, and more easily balance their lives.

Ultimately, focus is about addressing the truth—the accurate truth. To do so takes more than an honest conscience. Achieving focus takes effort, courage, honesty, persistence, responsibility, and

care. In a world where there is so little time to think, perhaps we must introduce more intentional ways to restore our focus on those things that are most important.

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