

Are you at risk of losing execution effectiveness?

It is relatively easy for a leader to lose execution effectiveness. The top performers are not immune from this risk as our talent agenting work has shown us. The worst mistake that we can make is to continue to operate in the autopilot mode and to be willing to put in more hours into our jobs instead of reviewing where we may have lost execution effectiveness.

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In this second article on “extreme jobs”, we address the important subject of execution effectiveness. Obviously, the less effective (and efficient) a leader is on the execution dimension, the more his job will tend to be “extreme”. Although many factors can derail the execution effectiveness of a leader, our talent agenting work has revealed that the following six factors have by far the most impact:

- 1) Not evaluating enough (or not seeking to influence) organizational readiness
- 2) Operating with insufficient strategic clarity
- 3) Not getting the message across
- 4) Possessing inadequate people judgement skills
- 5) Failing to keep people mobilized and engaged
- 6) Not knowing how to coach followers.

Not evaluating enough (or not seeking to influence) organizational readiness

In today's world, leaders constantly have to take people from point A (where they are now) to point B and then to point C and so on; and they have to do this at a higher speed than 30 years

ago. In doing so, leaders have to overcome a key force: human inertia. We like to shift too quickly to “autopilot” mode. And the more we see that we have to change, the more we tend to resist. This is a very natural human behavior. Of course, we can also move with speed (overdrive), quite far and with unbelievable energy during a time of crisis. However, we wouldn't really be able to cope if we had to go from one crisis to another

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without a period of stability and reflection in between. And, not surprisingly, during those periods of stability, we tend to “reground” ourselves in new habits fairly rapidly. This in itself is not a bad thing. Indeed, these periods of stability (and autopiloting) enable us to become efficient in what we do well. However, they can also lead us to do the same mistakes over and over

again. Worse yet, we may be working very efficiently, but not effectively at all.

The challenge that awaits leaders then is to ensure that employees (and managers!) do not operate in an autopilot mode for too long. What our talent agenting experience has shown us is that many leaders forget that they can greatly influence the readiness of their organization to change by ensuring that there is a sufficiently high number of “movers” or change-agents within their team or division.

We all know it: some people are more willing to explore new avenues and to quit their autopilot mode than others. One of the best ways therefore for a leader to increase his execution effectiveness is to manage his talents, i.e. his human capital base, in a very strategic manner. He must anticipate and alter the recruitment mix of his organization on a regular basis. Otherwise, his organization could soon develop sclerosis or paralysis.

This leads us to an important point: companies would be well advised to incorporate

new criteria in their recruitment and selection processes in order to influence appropriately the “mover/grounder” mix. If they do not do this, then the company’s leaders will surely have to spend a lot more energy than truly necessary to move people to the next point. Their efficiency will then be hit significantly. And when this happens, they will pay the price cash (i.e. immediately); the level of extremity of their jobs will increase sharply and unnecessarily, and the risk of managerial or organizational burn-out as well as of missing key strategic opportunities that should have been captured will also increase dramatically.

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Operating with insufficient strategic clarity

Leaders must ensure that they step back frequently in order to determine the critical activities that they must involve themselves (and their people) in. Not doing this can lead to serious execution ineffectiveness and inefficiencies. Strange as it may seem, many leaders have lost a sense of what constitutes a priority. Some have trouble distinguishing the important from the urgent. They are so busy that they cannot see any longer the forest from the trees. And when this happens, they are at great risk of losing their strategic

clarity. The top performing leaders are not immune from this risk. Organizational matrices have great advantages, but they can also reduce the strategic clarity of leaders by slowing down decision-making and involving far more people than necessary in decision-making. Projects or initiatives that should be stopped, for example, are maintained alive too long, distracting leaders (and their teams) from the important ones. When everything is deemed important, then nothing is. And with little strategic clarity, employees at lower levels are at a loss to know where to focus their time and energy.

Not getting the message across

Our experience shows that many leaders do not realize that the key in every communication is to get through, and not to deliver speeches! A leader must understand that if he is not getting his message across, no amount of communication will help him raise his execution effectiveness! Furthermore, whenever a leader is not getting through, strategic clarity is impaired and so is his execution effectiveness.

How can we get through? In many different ways; for example, through our behavior, relationships, emotions, values, body language, consistency, level of compassion and empathy. If we do not walk the talk for instance, then we won’t get others to do what we are advocating. This is a cliché, but so true. Many leaders fail to see that they are out-of-sync with their talk and do not understand why people don’t get it. Additionally, we must emphasize that many

executives are caught off-guard with their body language, which many times contradicts what their mouths are saying. Can you reach a high level of effectiveness if you do not come across in an authentic way? We seriously doubt it. How easy is it for a leader to see by himself what’s happening? Very hard, according to our experience.

Too often, leaders also forget that they can communicate far better by listening and reflecting.

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As we know it: what took us to where we are now may not be what will keep us there and, above all, help us climb further up. This is especially true with the way we communicate. We must continuously improve our communication skills. Otherwise, we simply depreciate ourselves and should then not be surprised when a major promotion passes us by.

Possessing inadequate people judgement skills

Without top people judgement skills, a leader cannot really appoint the right persons in the right jobs at the right times. And if he cannot do this matching process well in at least 80 percent of the cases, then his execution efficiency will inevitably suffer, making him

incur unnecessary cost, not to mention the loss of precious time.

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And if he does not have the courage to remove a person wrongly appointed to a job on a timely basis, his team's effectiveness will again suffer. And worse still, the whole organization will pay a price from this delay. Some top performers may decide to leave rather than to stay under a "wrong" manager.

What does it mean to have top people judgement skills? Well, to be able to determine who will be best able to take a team or unit to the next point given all the challenges that this person will have to overcome and his ability to fit quickly into the new position and to be coached. We are not just talking about drive, passion and energy here, but also about the level of humility and emotional maturity that a manager has acquired as well as his ability to unlock the individual and collective potential of people and to mobilize them. We are also making reference, of course, to the capacity of a leader to: a) operate effectively in the situations that he will have to confront; and b) transform a raw diamond (a person with great, but unproven, potential) into a refined diamond. Last, but not least, we are also factoring in the ability of a leader to identify the hot buttons of a person and the best way to activate

them. What our experience has shown us is that you cannot acquire great people judgement skills by attending classes. You can get some basic understanding in a classroom setting, but you develop top people management skills best through experience, observation and coaching from a competent person.

Failing to keep people mobilized and engaged

As Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones said in their March 2007 Harvard Business review article: "if you try to push your 'clever-people', you will end up driving them away". It is already difficult to inspire, excite and motivate people to act in today's world. But it is an even greater challenge to keep people mobilized over long periods of time.

Nothing should be taken for granted. A leader who fails here can only be sure of one thing: his job will become more time demanding. In our role as talent agents, we routinely have to address this issue, and our experience tells us that leaders cannot just pull one lever to succeed in this dimension: they have to play on several factors concurrently, and in an authentic and caring way. At the end of the day, what moves people the most and keeps them mobilized the longest is the knowledge that they are cared for, that their work is meaningful and gives them a sense of purpose, and that they can make mistakes and be forgiven. No financial incentives can meet these basic human needs.

Not mastering the art of coaching (and mentoring)

One final key factor that can have a significant impact on

the effectiveness (as well as efficiency) of a leader is his capacity to coach people and, in particular, his direct reports. For example, many leaders do not know when they can be direct with an employee and when they must use an indirect way by creating the conditions that will help the direct report come to the right conclusion himself. If a leader does not know when to move from a direct to indirect mode and vice-versa, then he risks building huge walls of defensiveness within his direct reports that will do nothing but delay the process of change. In the end, all he will have succeeded in doing is to make it harder for people to change and grow. And the longer it takes for his direct reports to change, the longer it will take for their own direct reports to change. Under such conditions, how can you expect not to have an extreme job as a leader?

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What leaders have to realize is that coaching is one of the best ways to keep people mobilized when it is done in a caring way: i.e. with the sincere aim of trying to help people reach their true potential. Unfortunately, many managers spend too little time coaching and mentoring. For many, the underlying reason is due to a lack of coaching skills. However, for others, the

reason must be found elsewhere: they simply believe that spending time coaching does not generate an adequate return on time invested. But they could not be farther from the truth. It is the opposite that is true in fact: i.e. the less time you spend coaching, the more extreme your job will tend to be and the less efficient you will become. Why? Because employees who are coached (appropriately) tend to have more strategic clarity, are energized and remain mobilized for longer periods of time.

However, the best has yet to come: the coachees tend to model their managers by coaching in turn their own people, leading to another group of employees who have strategic clarity, are energized and so on. As you can imagine, these cascading loops (or the lack of) can impact tremendously the execution effectiveness of a leader.

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All in all, we have seen how easy it is for a leader to lose execution effectiveness, have a more extreme job than necessary, and impact negatively the long term chances of success of an organization. In our view, the worst mistake that a successful executive can make is to be willing to put in more hours without questioning his execution effectiveness first. We can make an analogy here. When learning to pilot an airplane, students are normally asked to observe the 3C rule: i.e. climbing, communicating and confessing. The 3C rule tells them that unless they take some altitude at defining moments, they increase

dramatically the risk of collision. It is the same for a top performer: unless he takes some altitude in order to see things from a new perspective (instead of just automatically continuing to put in more time), he is in danger of losing significant execution effectiveness. Additionally, what he needs is to be able to communicate with someone who can play the role of an objective mirror and provide him with timely advice. Finally, he will have to confess whenever there is a problem or challenge in front of him. Otherwise, the change process will have no chance of succeeding.

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Our experience clearly shows that a competent talent agent is one of the best persons that can help a top performer successfully go through the 3Cs. Why? Because the talent agent can help the top performer review the areas where his execution effectiveness is not at the level where it should be - in an edifying (not destructive) manner. Furthermore, our work has revealed to us that we cannot really develop great people judgement skills without some coaching from a person who is already strong in this area. This is why it makes sense to work with a talent agent who is also a recruiter: it maximizes the chances that the coach

possesses top people judgement skills.

Coaching is also one of the most effective methods in order to strengthen one's mobilization skills. Indeed, these skills are again best developed on the job through one-to-one coaching, and not in a classroom! You may think that this responsibility should be assumed by the direct manager, and not a talent agent, but you would be making a mistake. A top performer is usually more willing to open up, reflect honestly, consider suggestions and take risks when he works with a talent agent than with his direct manager(s). In the end, the process of change happens faster and in a way that builds the relationship between the top performer and his direct manager rather than damaging it. Talent agenting also allows the direct manager to focus her (coaching) time on the areas that will generate the highest returns on time invested. When working appropriately, the coaching done by the direct manager and the talent agent is complementary and has very few overlaps.

Last, but not least, we would like to mention that by helping top performers increase their execution effectiveness and strengthen their personal brands, talent agents also help a company increase the market value of its human capital. It is no wonder that talent agenting is now seen as one of the best forms of management development (and talent retention) by an increasing number of companies and chief executives.