LEARNINGS

Having conducted hundreds of executive assessments over the past 20 years, we wanted to share what we have found to be the most common development challenges among the executive leaders we have had the opportunity to assess.

Perhaps not surprisingly, rarely are executives' so-called "hard skills" their biggest developmental challenge. This makes intuitive sense given that most executives achieved their position based on those skills; e.g. a vice president of sales is unlikely to hold that position if she doesn't understand the sales process. The 'soft skills', or what we prefer to call 'followership skills', are by far the most common development challenges the leaders we've assessed face. In this paper we explore the top five followership development opportunities we've discovered through our work.

#1 – Self-deception.

Without question, self-deception is the root cause of most leadership dysfunction and underperformance. It is by far the most common, yet perhaps most misunderstood, development challenge. It is a relatively common phenomenon in which leaders, despite having the best of intentions, can jeopardize results by how they choose to lead. Essentially, I'm a part of the problem but I can't see it. I have the best of intentions, I want to have a positive impact, but how I have chosen to lead is impeding progress. When faced with problems, developing the
awareness and the personal discipline to first ask what I may have done (or not done) that is contributing to the problem in front of me, is a vitally important enabler of executive leadership growth and long-term success.

Self-deception puts the achievement of shared objectives at risk (i.e. those objectives I share with my team, my boss, my peers, and the overall organization, etc.). Overcoming self-deception requires recognizing when I'm not honoring my inner sense of right and wrong, or when I ignore what I know is required of me. The result is, I focus on myself, instead of others; I become consumed with justifying my choices. My pursuit of this justification becomes more
important than achieving shared objectives; I'm blind to the impact I am having because I'm self-deceived.

#2 – Talent Management.

Enabling organizational capability (and ultimately organizational success), by facilitating the acquisition and development of talent is a core leadership skill. There is nothing leaders do that is more important – nothing. It is fundamental to effective leadership. Hiring well; developing and promoting top talent; teaching and coaching; providing effective performance and developmental feedback; and being decisive when corrective action is warranted, are all critically important elements of talent management. Leaders enable organizational success by expanding the capabilities of people, building their skills and understanding to achieve shared objectives. Similarly, providing people timely and impactful performance and developmental feedback strengthens their ability to contribute. All too often we find leaders justifying not prioritizing these responsibilities. They argue they have other "more important responsibilities"; we think not.

Moreover, most leaders grossly overestimate their ability to assess talent. To illustrate our point, we once audited a CEO's interview process. He claimed he could "peer into a candidate's soul" in a 45-minute interview. In five interviews that we observed, the CEO spoke for all but 10 minutes of the interview; this left little if any opportunity for 'soul peering' let alone assessing the candidate's fit for the role. Developing strong selection and talent assessment disciplines is an important leadership skill – it will go a long way toward determining a leader's success. Like our CEO example, all too often we find leaders who practice very poor selection methodologies -they literally put more management rigor into buying a new copier than they do hiring a vice president.

Weak performance and talent development skills are also barriers to leaders' success. Often executives avoid providing effective feedback either because they don't prioritize it, or more often, they don't like how it feels to give people constructive feedback. They rationalize not providing timely and clear feedback with a litany of lame excuses, but in doing so they are failing in a fundamental leadership responsibility. They fail to honor their people and fail to fulfill their responsibilities by avoiding difficult discussions. They 'pulling their punches' or otherwise make it difficult for their people to understand what they need to do to grow and improve. They fail to articulate 'what good looks like". Such leaders actually put their own personal comfort ahead of providing their people what they need to grow, to contribute to the achievement of shared objectives, and to advance their career. This is an act of self-indulgence, not leadership.

#3 – Upholding accountabilities.

Many leaders struggle to be decisive when corrective action is warranted. They fail to act because at some level they know that they have not done what they needed to do to enable the individual's success. They may not have provided them good feedback, may not have coached them adequately, or they may not have built a trust-based relationship. This is not to say that some people underperform or fail to meet performance expectations even with adequate support - of course they can. However, if I'm hesitant to hold an individual accountable, it may be that I know I'm partially at fault. As a result, I avoid the tough discussion, I avoid the difficult decision, I fail in my responsibility to uphold personal accountabilities (including my own).

#4 – Creating clear line of sight to an inspiring vision.

Most people strive to be a part of something meaningful; something bigger than themselves; something they can connect with, be proud of. Leaders have an obligation to set a compelling vision for their areas of responsibility, whether that's a business, a function or a department. Failing to give people a reason to not hit the 'snooze button' in the morning or failing to ensure everyone has 'line of sight' (i.e. understands how what they do everyday contributes to the achievement of that vision) is another fundamental responsibility of leaders.

There is a tendency to think that setting a vision is exclusively the work of CEO's – not so. Every leader has the responsibility to set a compelling vision for their organization. The vision may be as simple as: "Be recognized as the best customer service team in the industry". Such a vision facilitates the development of specific objectives to achieve that vision; it provides an opportunity for the leader to explain to everyone on the team how what they do every day, contributes to the achievement of that vision.
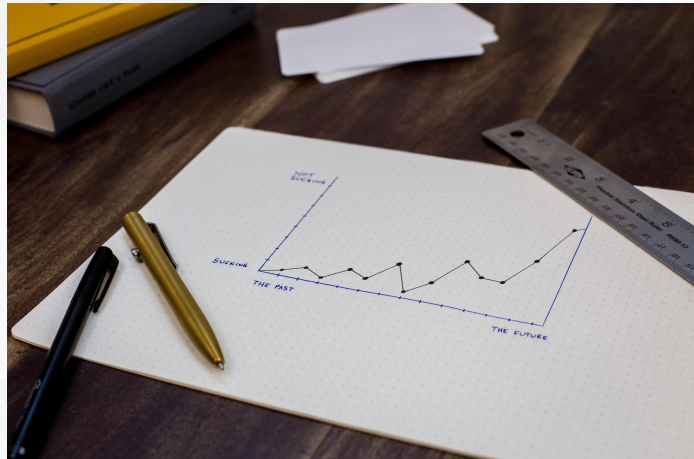
#5 – Over-playing strengths.

Development opportunities are often our strengths taken to an extreme. For example, if I have a passion for problem-solving, and I'm good at it (or I think I am at least), I may be too quick to take over meetings or to prescribe answers. Similarly, if I am trained to pay close attention to details (engineers, lawyers, accountants, scientists, etc.), and I'm good at it, I can be prone to micromanage or nit-pick. These traits, which can be strengths, taken to an extreme, can have the effect of stifling others' ideas, diminishing their ownership, and even stunting professional development.

KINSLEY GROUP INC

When we provide our clients their 360-degree feedback, they often want to jump to a discussion of the development opportunities that we've identified. In our experience, this is a mistake. It is equally if not more important to understand our strengths, our natural tendencies. These tendencies, particularly when we're under stress, can manifest as development challenges. While it is true you want to "play to your strengths", it's equally true you don't want to over-play them.

We hope this very brief review of the common development needs we've identified through our work provide the reader helpful "food for thought" and perhaps even reflection. In any case, we invite your comments, insights and experience.

Richard J. Kinsley
CEO & Managing Director
rkinsley@kinsleygroup.com
317-759-2005

KINSLEY
GROUP INC