Coaching Through Leadership Career Transitions in Corporations

By

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February 2015

Introduction:

Corporate Executives go through various career transitions within one or more organizations during their careers. This paper defines the kind of coaching needs that may arise as Executives move from one career transition to another. Recognizing such career transitions and coaching needs will help organizations provide "just in time" and appropriate developmental inputs to their Executives leading to more effective performance of the individuals concerned, and consequently, the organization.

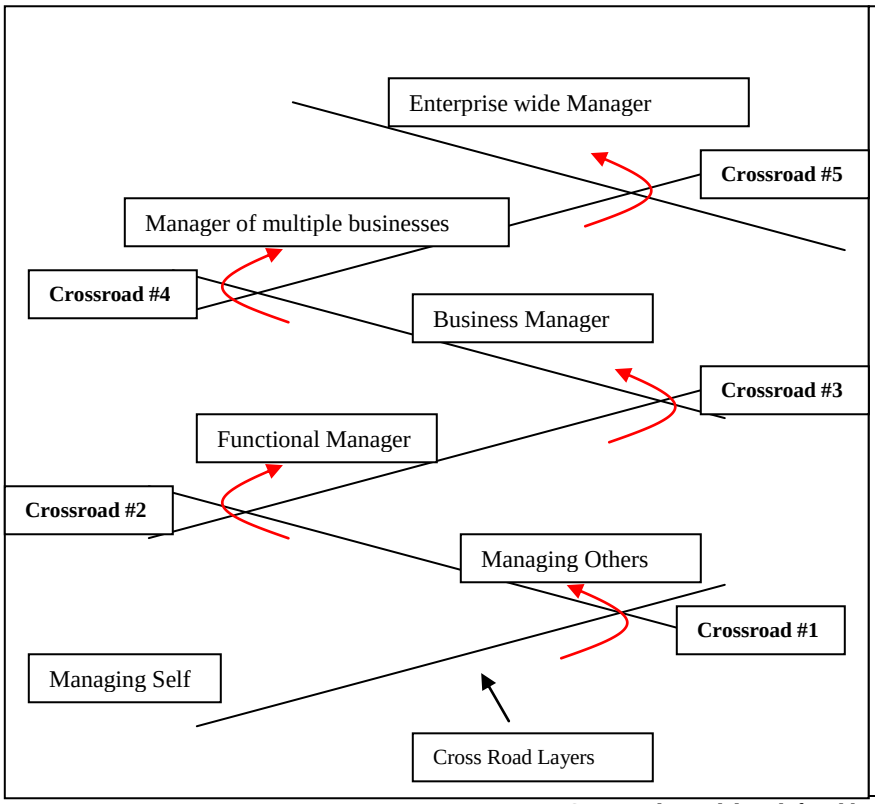
For the sake of clarity, "career transitions" in this paper refers to managerial / leadership roles that significantly differ from one another in terms of leadership competencies demanded of Executives in those roles. For example, an Executive moving from managing a sales function within an organization to managing the whole organization as the CEO, requires to recognize that the leadership skill sets, perspectives, and value addition demanded of the CEO's role is dramatically different than that of head of the sales function of the organization. This is an example of "Career Transition" for the purpose of this research paper.

Defining Career Transitions: The Crossroads model

The Crossroads Model of Leadership Development defined by Drotter, Stephen, Noel, James & Charan, Ram. (2001), *Crossroad model for Leadership Pipeline Development*, is a model that defines career transitions for Executives in Corporations.

The Crossroads Model (Figure 1 below) classifies the work done in an enterprise or corporation in terms of the key demands on the jobs by way of focus, time frames for results and essential value add expected from the jobs. The model described below could be used to classify all jobs in an enterprise along different crossroad layers as described in Figure 1 below. At each Crossroad, the nature of the jobs in terms of the leadership competencies required for success changes significantly. When one is "managing self", one needs to focus on excelling in applying the knowledge required to do the job, meeting deadlines, quality of output and work with others so that interfaces between one's work and that of others is managed smoothly and effectively. However, when one is responsible for the work of others ("Manage Others" Crossroad Layer) then the focus shifts to how to get work out of others effectively, in addition to specific individual contributions one makes. Hence at each stage of the Crossroads, the demands on role incumbents change significantly.. Jobs of various sizes could exist along the continum of a Cross Road layer. For example, on the Cross Road of Managing Self, one could have a job of an administrative assistant at one end of the spectrum and also that of a world renowned Proffessor whose job in the university is to teach students, at the other end of the continuum. The Crossroad is not necessarily a model that reflects a heirarchy of jobs in the enterprise – it merely classifies jobs along some leaderships demands that are made of different jobs in the enterprise.

Crossroads Model (Figure 1)



Enterprise wide Manager: Focus should be on defining road map of enterprise for the future. Vision, scenario building, ability to make long term, strategic decisions, providing road map to organization and ability to deal with key stakeholders are key attributes for success. Gains satisfaction from creating an institution.
Manager of Multiple Businesses: Focus on providing long-term strategy in line with vision, making trade off decisions with regard to investible resources amongst multiple businesses. Connects segments / businesses to the corporation. Gains satisfaction from others' successes.
Business Manager: Manages Profit & Loss of a business. Ability to develop business strategy and integrating plans and strategies of different functions in an organization to the overall business strategy is the key to success. Needs to understand nuances of different functions and how they can be leveraged effectively for business. Has to change perspective from "can we do it" (functional perspective) to "should we do it and how".
Functional Manager: Focus should be on developing and driving the functional agenda for the business and working with others in dovetailing the functional agenda to the business strategy.
Managing Others: Focus should be on planning, assigning work, coaching /developing others and measuring work of others for effective performance.
Managing Self: Focus should be on effectively utilizing "technical" capabilities to do the work in the most optimum manner.

Crossroads Model as defined by Stephen Drotter, Noel, James & Ram Charan

As Executives move from one role in a crossroad layer to another role at another crossroad layer, the Executive will be required to understand the shifts in focus demanded of him or her in the new role. For example, when an Executive moves to managing a business with P&L responsibility from being a functional manager, the focus shifts to managing business profitability and shareholder returns, allocating finite resources between competing demands amongst different functions and balance short term gains and long term sustainability of the business. This is very different from managing a function where the focus is on delivering the functional strategy. As Executives move into roles from one crossroad layer to another, the shift in focus demand different skill sets, values and a different time orientation to the roles.

The Leadership Competencies Required for Effective Performance at each Crossroad Turn:

Following the shifts in focus, given below are the key personal / leadership competencies that are required to be demonstrated for effective performance at each of the Crossroad layers. This list has been drawn up based on corporate experience of the author in leadership assessment and development.

Leadership Competencies Required with Crossroad transitions (Table 2)

Crossroad Transitions	Additional Personal / Leadership Competencies Required
Crossroad# 1: From Managing Self to Managing Others	• Greater self awareness of strengths and areas of development • Managerial skills: setting goals, communicating with teams, delegating, managing for performance, motivating people, developing people • Key interest in people for understanding others and their role in one's own effectiveness • Developing teams for effectiveness
Crossroad# 2: From Managing Others to Managing Function	• Defining functional vision and strategy • Assessing capabilities of people and building the right team with core capabilities • Inspiring people around the functional vision and strategy • Influencing seniors and peers to buy into the functional vision and strategy • Building networks for benchmarking and leveraging relationships
Crossroad# 3: From Functional Manager to Managing Business	• Shift focus and align values to managing for profitability and return to shareholders • Assessing people and organizational capabilities and building the right team with core competencies required • Understand the power of vision • The orientation to make tough decisions • Learn the power of focus – in thought and action • Ability to break down complexities to manageable areas of focus and action • Inspire team for greater performance • Influence various constituencies including external constituencies • Reexamination and alignment of values in the context of readiness to take tough decisions and focus on profitability and returns.
Crossroads# 4: From Business Manager to Manager of multiple Businesses:	• Value of entrepreneurship and focus on return to shareholders • Assessing organizational and individual competencies • Inspiring competent and capable people who may be better than you • Building effective and powerful networks • Leveraging power of the vision
Crossroad# 5: From Manager of multiple businesses to Enterprise Manager	• Defining and selling long term vision • Inspiring and influencing capabilities – internal and external to organization • Leveraging networks • Continue to focus on developing and maintaining relationships with stakeholders.

While executives transition from one such career transition role to another, they generally learn of the shift in focus through:

- Their own observations of people who have played such roles before and who they respect – maybe role models they aspire to emulate
- Their own experiences when they start performing the new role – what works and what does not work – and modify behaviors accordingly. For this, they need to be sensitive to their environment, have good self awareness and be willing to adapt to the demands of their new role
- Feedback received from supervisors or others as they perform in their new role
- Specific training programs they may attend to prepare them for the challenges of their new role.

However, it is well known that we all leverage and operate from our strengths. It is also well known that sometimes our strengths, when overused and in different circumstances, can actually become our weaknesses.[2]When the demands of the role changes, how effective are our strengths to deal with the new challenges of the role?

The learning curve for the new role can be shortened for greater effectiveness through structured inputs and interventions which can prepare the executive before or immediately after, the new role has been assigned. Such inputs can be numerous like specific training programs, mentoring within the organization, project assignments, shadowing a successful executive who has demonstrated success in a similar role or individual coaching.

We shall deal with the coaching interventions and their effectiveness in preparing an executive in dealing with a career transition role.

Coaching: how it can support Executives during Career Transitions

Coaching as defined by Thomas Leonard, ICF Founder, "A coach is your partner in achieving your personal goals, your champion during turn around, your trainer in communication and life skills, your sounding board when making choices, your motivator when strong actions are called for, your unconditional support when you take a hit, your mentor in personal development, your co-designer when developing an extraordinary project, your beacon during stormy times, your wake-up call if you do not hear your own, and most importantly your partner in living the life you know you are ready for, personally and professionally."

Essentially, the core elements that make coaching an effective developmental process for executives are:

a. Coaching is a systemic, *solutions oriented* process where the coach is a partner in accomplishing the *specific goals* along with the Executive. Hence, coaching as a development process can be targeted to the specific needs and goals of the individual concerned as opposed to generic needs being met through training programs or other interventions

b. Behavior change requires reflection, time, effort and commitment. The coaching process involves asking questions that make the Executive reflect, commit to change and allows for the time it takes to move forward to implement new behaviors. The coach acts as a conscious keeper when the Executive agrees on actions that will help him or her move forward.
c. Coach acts as a sounding board for thoughts and ideas which Executives may not have easy access to in the environments in which they operate
d. Coach is a neutral, impartial, objective and acts as an observer, which Executives often may not get or seek in highly competitive environments. Coaching provides feedback which enables their understanding of effective or ineffective behaviors that can be changed for greater performance. Coaching, by and large, is focused on behavioral change which is the essence of the incremental competencies that Executives need to display as they assume new roles in another crossroad layer.

How is Coaching more effective than other methods of development:

There can be various ways of developing the competencies required as Executives transition from roles at one Crossroad to another. Training programs, project assignments, mentoring, shadowing are other options that can also be used by organizations in addition to, or instead of, coaching. However, coaching provides the following advantages over the other methods:

a. Coaching, by definition, is focused on the individual's specific needs (as opposed to training which is targeted at meeting the general development needs of the group going through the training). Coaching is more targeted and recognizes the specific changes in attitude, perspective and behavior that the executive requires to be more effective. Training or projects can be more effective in developing knowledge or specific skills like managerial skills.
b. Coaching is more effective at dealing with attitudes and perspectives. When talented executives move from responsibilities at one crossroad layer to responsibilities at another, shifts in focus require new perspectives, in addition to specific skill, as can be seen from Table 1. Coaching addresses perspectives most effectively out of all other developmental inputs.
c. A coach acts as a thought provoker, sounding board and feedback provider among other roles. As Executives take on bigger responsibilities in an organizational pyramid, they get lonelier as they typically have fewer confidants they can share their concerns, issues and thoughts with. A coach can effectively provide an impartial and objective sounding board for the Executive to bounce off his or her concerns. As Peter Block, in his book *Flawless Consulting* has said, most organizations are a "wasteland of support" meaning that there is a shortage of support for most executives in most organizations. Coaching is a means of providing such support.
d. Despite all the management research and studies which stress on how important feedback is for improving performance, a McKinsey study in 2000 found that only 39% of executives surveyed by them had received candid feedback on performance. A coach, as a sounding board and feedback provider, can enhances the Executive's

awareness of implications of his or her thoughts and actions which helps in aligning perspectives leading to appropriate action.

e. Coaching is action oriented and is focused on bringing about change in the client's perspectives, thoughts and behaviors. Sustainable change requires that an Executive recognizes and understands deeper motivators for his or her behavior. This is what a coach does by definition. Therefore, coaching is much more effective than other methods in bringing about sustainable change.

Some real life coaching examples:

1. In one case where I was coaching a functional head who had been designated as the CEO, the focus of coaching was on helping the coachee realize the need for, and develop the ability to delegate more and move away from continuing to focus on his function at which he was an expert. The coaching also revealed the need to make the executive comfortable in being more demanding of his team and feeling comfortable in saying "no" given the challenging circumstances of the business and conflicting demands for resources. These conversations required uncovering and understanding deeper motivators of behavior which is best dealt with through one on one coaching. The outcome was his success in dealing with some critical business challenges and being seen as an effective leader despite having taken over the role from a highly regarded and respected predecessor.

2. In another case of a coachee who had become a CEO, conversations revealed how his passion, which had been a key strength all along, was coming in the way of effectiveness as he needed to deal with multiple stakeholders outside the country who misinterpreted his passion, and in the way it found expression, as intransigence. The focus of coaching was to help him realize how to channelize his passion more constructively which helped him become more effective over time and build relationships with his overseas stakeholders. This was acknowledged by his manager in the closing stakeholder conversation.

3. In one case, the coachee had Asia wide regional technical role which required him to build an effective network and relationships with many of his stakeholders he was expected to influence. He was not coming up the curve on this dimension as quickly as required. Strangely, networking was not an issue when he had a national role dealing with people in the country but became an issue when he was assigned the regional role where he had to deal with senior peers in different countries. It emerged that the coachee took a lot of time in building relationships as he (a) did not give it the importance it deserved and (b) he was an introvert who needed time to establish a rapport with people he had not met before. The coaching required to focus on giving a different perspective on the importance of relationships especially in context of his role and overcoming some perspectives and beliefs he held about being open and trusting with strangers. Being a very bright and focused individual, he

realized how he himself was coming in the way of his effectiveness and was quick to take the actions agreed upon. His boss commented at the closing that the change he observed in the coachee was remarkable.

As can be seen from these examples, the key motives that guided behavior were embedded more deeply and needed to be uncovered and dealt with. Coaching is about helping change at the level of beliefs and perspectives which drive behavior. Such change can only be brought about by working with the individual, on specifics to the individual and partner with the individual on specific actions the individual has to take which leads to changed behaviors over time

Conclusion:

In a world where talent is considered one of the critical success factors for organizations, and at a time when various researches have concluded that shortage of leadership talent is one of the biggest concerns of corporations globally, planned and targeted executive coaching for executives and leaders will help organizations build a leadership pipeline to provide talent as organizations grow and evolve. The McKinsey survey referred to earlier revealed that the top performing leaders increase productivity, sales, revenues by as much as 40 % plus depending on the role. Coaching, as a developmental initiative can be structured to develop leaders in the organization, especially as executives make career transitions moving from one crossroad layer to another, enhancing the overall leadership effectiveness in organizations.

Profile of Author: Pradeep Mukerjee is a certified Executive Coach based out of Mumbai, India. Pradeep has always had a passion for developing people and institutions, which made coaching an obvious choice when he decided to venture out on his own as an independent consultant in 2007. A strong believer in the power of the mind, his approach to coaching enables individuals focus on core outcomes they desire and perspectives that help them find alternate paths to their goals. He brings to his coaching a strong ability to understand people and the organizational context in which his clients operate given his wealth of corporate experience, and a pragmatic, action focused approach which enables his coachees to walk a path that help them realize their goals.

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