# Unique Perspectives on Executive Development

Effective executive development programs are transformational. Many executive development programs are weighted toward the development of business acumen, delivered in an academic setting, and intended to develop the individual leader (eg. Executive MBA programs). Other programs are weighted toward the psychological development of the leader. These programs are intended to drive self-awareness and self-development via assessments and coaching (eg. CCL). Yet another type of executive development approach is the competency based approach to executive development (eg. Internally developed programs).

All three approaches above have pros and cons from a content and process perspective.

From a content perspective: Academic executive development programs deliver wonderful business acumen by leveraging insightful academic instructors. On the flipside, executive development programs often lack practical application, a perspective on the psychological and emotional development of the leader, and the critical cohort or networking effect for internal leaders. The advantage of the more psychological based approach delivered by firms like CCL or RHR enable the leader to gain mechanisms for introspection and self-development. While these programs often develop the interpersonal skill of the leader they are noticeably silent on developing business acumen and a networking or cohort effect. An advantage of the internal or competency-based approach is that leaders network with one another from various aspects of a given organization and develop specific skills around an organizations specific competencies. A disadvantage of these programs are that the development is often focused on an internally set of behaviors, accounting for neither the psychological aspects of development nor an external or industry view of executive leadership.

From a process perspective: As for the aforementioned executive development programs, and psychologically-based programs the process is often set by an outsides expert or outside organization offering little flexibility and customization. While internally built programs can be customized for a given group often individual needs aren't addressed readily (eg. specific coaching needs). Across the spectrum many leadership programs commonly focus on instructor led sessions as a primary driver of development.

Our unique perspective on executive development is the integration and combination of best practices from a content and process perspective. From a process perspective we believe that by blending instructor led modalities with executive coaching and assessment; with simulations and case studies; and with social learning we can obtain a perfect blend of approaches to engage groups of leaders and individual executives. An equally important factor is peer/cohort engagement that enables the leaders to share best practices, gain peer feedback, and engage across disciplines on experiential exercises. From a content perspective we believe that by integrating an organization's internal competency model with a competency model associated with C suite executive skills, and with a best in class external competency model appropriate for a given
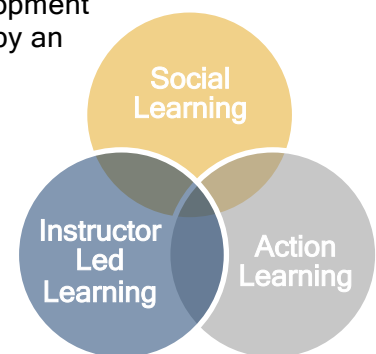
industry will allow the sourcing and building of highly impactful learning content.   Additionally, from a content perspective we believe that by blending best in class assessments, best in class executive leadership practices (eg. Porter's 5 forces or Lencioni's model for team functioning), and with custom built learning content we can blend the right learning content for the level, type, and industry of the individual and group of leaders. Finally, using a blended approach for leadership development delivery is critical to the success of any executive development program. By leveraging internal subject matter experts to teach, by leveraging technology and online learning delivery mechanisms, and by engaging external experts and/or facilitators one can keep the leaders engaged, stimulated, and provide just-in-time blending of theory and practical application.

Through obtaining the perfect "blend" of these content and process design practices, one is able to develop the "secret sauce." This article examines best practices, explores new thinking in design and implementation, and discusses the return on investment of meaningful and measureable executive development initiatives.

Best Practices

Many executive development initiatives focus only on "closing" developmental opportunities, which is not a thorough approach to true executive development. Executives are often complex thinkers who have some level of experience in the world of "practiced leadership." Despite the angles of some best-selling books, one has to be willing to face all elements of oneself to truly gain the ability to self-coach and develop. While I understand the popularity of the 70-20-10 model (Lombardo 4), taking it further, in all parts of that "pie-chart" one must learn to identify "triggers", or external and internal cues, that lead to a given behavior or thought pattern. Once that cue is identified the leader can develop "choices" to behave, or what Collins referred to as "disciplined thought" (1). From there the leader can sense the impact, intended and unintended, of his or her leadership action(s). The leader can then be self-correcting, and/or "double back" to win or recover a given situation.

We as designers need to resist the urge to believe "it must be built here." We must not only help executives integrate competencies that have been developed internally to an organization but we must also help them integrate competencies that have an industry or social impact. A full functioning executive is often a "boundary spanner"- meaning they have many internal and external stakeholders and that their actions often impact an entire industry, not just the organization. The key is to develop executives as leaders within the organization, leaders within the industry and leaders among their peers. For a deeper look at executive competencies, I direct you to one of the best recent articles on the topic, "Return on Leadership" (Zender et al. 3). In their article, the authors consolidate many interviews and assert a very robust competency model for executive performance.

Design

The ideal executive development process involves learning through multiple modalities, a combination of executive assessments, social and action learning and instructor led sessions. Executive assessments are used to identify growth opportunities and take a data-oriented approach to self-awareness. Specific, constructive feedback is critical to individual success and to the company's ability to achieve its goals for the future. When managers receive feedback from others, they expect to use this information to change or improve. Because these assessments and feedback are comprehensive, clear, and relevant to managers' jobs, results are readily translated into actions towards improved effectiveness. In addition, individual

development plans enable each executive to target specific strengths to leverage and specific weaknesses to address. These plans act as a roadmap for their leadership journey and provide a framework for them to be coached to success.

In addition to assessments and individual development plans, the powerful combination of social learning, action learning assignments, and instructor led modules creates awareness of strengths and skill gaps while simultaneously developing a social network that sustains growth and allows for application of new leadership techniques in daily practice. Instructor led sessions take the executives through a series of modules drawing on material that is based off of theory, research and years of experience, delivered by an expert facilitator and tailored specifically to the executive audience.

Social learning is promoted through the use of an online learning portal. Between instructor led modules participants access the portal and develop a community through online discussions, Q&A with their facilitator, pre and post homework assignments, activities and access to resources, including white papers, articles, recommended books and videos on related topics for "fast facts."

Finally, action-learning projects not only promote individual and cohort growth, but organizational growth as well. These projects are mission specific strategic initiatives developed in conjunction with the company's senior executives, that leaders work together in peer groups to accomplish. Their skills are stretched individually and as a team as they work to achieve these highly visible and strategic goals. At the culmination of the development program, each team presents the results of their projects to other executives and/or board members as appropriate.

This innovative approach to executive development is anticipated to drive growth at three levels within the organization:

- ▶ **Individual Growth:** Develop executive presence and leadership acumen while increasing leverage and scale of the leaders throughout the company.
- ▶ **Cohort Growth:** Greater networked peer learning and shared learning experience where leaders can draw from each other's knowledge and experience.
- ▶ **Organizational Growth:** Create a culture of consistent language and practices around leadership and apply leadership techniques to strategic objectives to drive execution

Return on Investment (ROI)

Executives impact performance, engagement and culture in all cases, good and bad. For this reason, ROI in terms of executive development actually becomes relatively easy. Following the Kirkpatrick model (2) as well as simple ROI calculations, the HR leader is able to demonstrate impact when providing custom, thoughtful, innovative, and integrated development. We work together with HR leaders and their companies to define organizational performance metrics that ought to be impacted by both negative and positive executive leadership behaviors, such as throughput metrics, financial metrics, and customer metrics.

Engagement has consistently been shown to positively correlate with organizational performance (Kruse 5). When calculating ROI we are able to measure the level of engagement of those employees following certain leaders. That engagement is yet another indicator of effective executive leadership performance. Additionally, when a cohort of developing executives begin to practice better decision making, more inclusivity, more coaching and development and better relationships one can begin to measure the impact on a culture over time. Return on leadership development is handled analytically and impact variables are to be defined in the specific language of the organization. When these things are accomplished measuring ROI becomes easy.

"Behr EXCELerate, through Brainard Strategy, has enabled our executives across the continent to work closer together and connect at a much deeper level. In working collaboratively on the final action learning projects, our leaders are operating at an even higher level in bringing bring innovation and new business ideas to further advance our business. I am very proud of the change that continues to take place at Behr."

Wynnie Phipps
Sr. Director, People Services
Behr Process Corp

Finally, the investment in executives pointed at their individual development enables those executives to further engage with the organization and therefore limits their turnover. We can measure both the engagement of the followers of the leaders we develop and the actual leaders themselves. This engagement is easily correlated with both organizational performance and individual performance. In the Q 12 meta-analysis conducted by the Gallup organization there are many examples of the strong correlation between development of the individual and engagement of the individual. Engagement of the individual leader clearly is correlated with engagement of the people whom they lead. That engagement is clearly correlated to individual, team and organizational performance.

Conclusion

Effective executive development is not only about building strengths or development opportunities. Effective executive development is about blending and integrating best practices from a content and process perspective. The most effective executive development comes from a combination of development modalities in the form of instructor led sessions, multi-rater and introspective assessments, social learning and action learning. This approach drives growth among the individual, the cohort and the organization while bringing the organization a positive return on investment that can not only be felt financially, but has long term affects on an organization's culture and performance.

Brainard Strategy is a management consulting firm that specializes in partnering with clients to create and align strategies in order to enhance growth and innovation, operational excellence, profitability, and employee commitment and productivity. Our custom facilitated process works pragmatically, in a phased approach, to assist senior leaders in the creation, clarification, and linking of strategy to business results. We leverage "best in class" leadership development tools and methods to ensure a sound initiative is developed, and most importantly, that implementation of the development approach is successful.