AN EXECUTIVE LESSON: REMEMBERING TO LEARN

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DR. RON COHN
Ralston Consulting Group

Dr. Ronald Cohn is a senior consultant for the Ralston Consulting Group, a 20 year old organization development firm. He specializes in helping people work together in many different industries through many services including executive coaching, team building, leadership development, work process redesign, and strategic planning. He can be reached at rcohn@getralston.com or through the company website at www.getralston.com or at 801-328-1820.

It's often said it's lonely at the top. It's also pretty busy there. The daunting demands of senior executives often don't allow many personal development opportunities. So, you send your key people to training, seminars, and industry specific conferences frequently investing in their growth while ignoring your own. It's the high stakes, corporate way the shoemaker goes without new shoes.

But what about you? If time is a valuable commodity and your company's most precious resource, does your learning have to take a time sensitive, second seat? Of course shareholders, stakeholders, and banking relationships are important. Quarterly financials, ensuring that performance expectations are met, and identifying new growth potential are also critical. Yet are you overseeing all those requirements at a personal development cost? If confronted with your development or "managing the business" as an either/or proposition it's a hands down answer, "I've got to stay on top of the business!"

But, it doesn't have to be one or the other. There is a host of non-seminar based learning that couples a nominal time investment with potentially high quality returns.

Training, as one example, can provide powerful learning and great motivation. It can also be considered a "sunshine enema"-a warm, but equally fleeting experience. To avoid the latter, when you send people to training, first, identify your expectations for post training. It could include their briefing you, your holding them accountable to demonstrate their new knowledge or skills, or having them actually train others. Should you opt for expecting them to brief or train you, you obtain the "abridged version" of their collective experience without the deep time investment.

A California based company uses the "trickle up" theory of learning. Instead of senior people directly learning the latest in cleaning technology or products, site managers are sent with the expectation that they share their wisdom with area managers and others. They also require that managers who attend the BSCAI national convention or the International Sanitary Supply Association (ISSA) annual tradeshow offer their equipment or cleaning system knowledge upward. In a time sensitive fashion, training, tradeshow, or conference attendees can offer product specific, development options for their company's senior leaders.

In addition to janitorial specific learning, senior executives can learn much from other industries. Many large cities have executive forums where CEOs can dialogue about issues they are facing in their own companies and obtain insights not constrained by only looking at the janitorial business. Ronnie Baker, Chairman of the Board for Kansas City, Mo. based BG Service Solutions, attends lunches or breakfasts quarterly with other Kansas City CEOs. "With my voracious appetite for self improvement, I seek out venues where I can learn from anyone. I have gained a lot from these other CEOs specifically in marketing and business development." Ronnie also mentioned how he informally draws on his BSC senior colleagues which he feels is a uniquely satisfying part of the industry's continuous professionalization. For example, he remembered somewhat sadly, Baxter Lee from Southeast Service Solutions. "Baxter taught me more about management development and how and why to bring in new people to refresh your company than any book or professor. I now am very conscientious about Baxter's lessons."

Learning about yourself, in addition to product or industry based learning, is another often overlooked senior leader growth opportunity. More and more leaders are contracting with "executive coaches" for the purpose of helping them expand their capabilities with both daily issues and longer range quality of work life concerns. Executive coaches typically work face-to-face for an hour every two weeks, or bi-weekly by telephone for a half an hour. Their role is to assist executives with the "loneliness at the top feeling" and to offer a safe haven for their client "not having all the answers." Executives typically bring messy personnel issues, difficult strategic choices, and work life balance concerns to their coach, work through the options, and arrive at a course of action.

Barney Gershen, CEO of Associated Business Services headquartered in Houston has been using executive coaches for more than a decade. "I use my coaches in two ways. In one manner, I use them for on-going business assessment purposes, for example, to ensure that I am continually developing my top people and their potential successors should a key person decide to leave. I also use them for a single, sticky situation, such as helping me prepare difficult feedback for one of my staff during performance review time. I really think that some of our company's tremendous growth in the past 3-4 years has been my coaches reminding me of a key business principle which I may have forgotten, or one that I never learned, or giving me a needed piece of feedback that in my role as

CEO, no one would have ever given me."

Another learning option is the 360 leadership assessment, which solicits written, formalized feedback from the boss, peer, and direct report perspective. The process is based on the unawareness theory, which states that people can't change or overcome their "leadership blind spots" when they don't know what they don't know.

The President of a large, multi-state, diversified, BSC company found himself in that circumstance. The company's CEO was dissatisfied with the President's delegative behavior with his area managers, inability to follow through on a previously agreed upon plan, and sharpness when dealing with key colleagues. The CEO became frustrated when the President didn't fully understand nor "own" his feedback which the CEO offered. Together they initiated a 360 questionnaire based, leadership assessment to assist the President obtain feedback from his professional peers, area and regional managers, and from the CEO himself for the purpose of overcoming his blind spots, and moderating his behavior. An external consultant assisted the President interpret the assessment results, explored alternative ways of working with his staff and colleagues, and prepared him to discuss the data with the groups who filled out the questionnaires. The President, then had fully candid, face-to-face separate conversations with his peers, area and regional managers, and his boss. He learned what he didn't know, made the necessary behavioral changes, and is now the CEO of one of those diversified companies.

You don't have to be the CEO of a $40 million company to have individual development needs. Nathan Parkinson, President of 30 employee Cleaning Specialists, Inc. in Salt Lake City, reads everything he can find. "I stay current in the industry but that's not where my greatest personal growth opportunities lie. I have recently read, Think and Grow Rich, by Napoleon Rich, books on time management, and managing people. I also spend time each day refining my business dream and strategizing how to make it happen."

Senior Executive's on-going learning as a vital business aspect is too often overlooked or rationalized away with the imagined time commitment. With options such as trickle up learning, attending local CEO forums, using executive coaches, 360 leadership assessments, and reading all the literature available, Barney, Ronnie, and Nathan don't feel that way. You don't have to either.