

Success Story: Bench Strength Coaching

<p>Situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start-up division of a well-established company • Senior management in new division were a mix of old blood and new blood • Leadership capability was inadequate to support the company's growth plans
<p>Role of Coach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a 360° feedback tool to focus on leadership behaviors • Provide half-day consultations to each member of the leadership team • Identify organizational issues that required President and HR director action
<p>Results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More focused leadership performance among leadership team • Stronger platform from which to grow the business • Development plans for each individual • Greater attention to leadership team development on the part of the President and HR director

Background

I had been working as an executive coach in one company for more than a year when the head of Executive Development introduced me to the HR director of one of the company's start-up divisions. This division had been set up to encourage innovation, complete with a mandate to operate semi-autonomously from the rest of the corporation. Its mission was to find ways to leverage the power of the Internet and to create products and services that could migrate to the rest of the organization.

The President and one of the senior executives of the division had come from the parent company. The Chief Financial Officer was brought in from the outside because of his experience in taking start-up companies public. Six other managers rounded out the leadership team; three of these came from the parent company and three from outside because of their specialized knowledge.

At the time that I met with the HR director, the division had been operating for just over a year. The President spoke with pride about the “healthy debate” that they had in their Thursday morning staff meetings. The division had just turned profitable in its most recent quarter, another point of pride. The view from the top was one of a company that was well positioned to achieve its mission.

The Need

When it came to individual leadership behavior, however, the President and his HR director shared a concern. They felt that members of the management team didn't have the necessary skill to lead a growing company. Individuals did not seem to know how to resolve conflict among themselves. There were also times when individuals needed to interact with their counterparts in the parent company, and these interactions were often emotionally charged events that had to be resolved by the President.

The challenge was to provide each of the eight members of the leadership team with a coaching experience that would help them learn new behaviors they could put to use immediately. An added constraint was to accomplish this objective using only four days of the coach's time.

The Approach

The process we developed had four components:

- Completion of an on-line 360° feedback questionnaire, coordinated by the HR director
- 2-hour coaching sessions with each member of the management team
- 1-hour development planning sessions with each member of the management team
- Follow up with the President and the leadership team coordinated by the HR director

One week before I was scheduled to meet with individuals, a package of reports arrived at my office. This gave me ample time to review the reports and identify questions to explore with each individual. Then for two days I occupied a conference room in the division's office, holding 2-hour individual conversations with each member of the management team. During these confidential sessions we discussed a wide range of topics, depending on the objectives of the individual and the patterns that I observed in the results. Each session concluded with a discussion of development options.

Two weeks later I returned to the same conference room and met with each person to discuss development planning in more detail. During this meeting we also clarified the process that each person would take in discussing his or her plan with the President.

In short, during the coaching process each person was able to develop insight into his or her leadership style and to develop an action plan that built on both strengths and weaknesses.

Other Outcomes

After listening to the leadership challenges of each member of the leadership team, two organizational issues emerged.

First, the “healthy debates” that the President was encouraging were not seen as altogether healthy. In fact they had evolved into showcases for the more dominating individuals on the team. Over time a pattern emerged where the dominators dominated and the others passively watched. Something needed to be done to encourage broader input and more importantly to put closure on issues. There was general agreement that the debates went on too long.

Second, the lack of prior management experience on the part of several rising stars on the team meant that they needed more coaching, particularly in the areas of developing their staffs and in resolving conflicts among each other.

I discussed these observations with the President and the HR director. They concluded that the HR director would take a more active role in facilitating team meetings. The President committed to using the development plans as a tool that he could use in coaching each person on the team. These two decisions enabled the President and HR director to extend the impact of the coaching without the need for the coach to be present.

Arguably each of the people that I saw in this compressed time period would have benefited from more extensive 1:1 executive coaching. But often companies are looking for a cost effective way to reach a large number of managers quickly. The Bench Strength Coaching process is an effective way of defining leadership for a management team and for helping individuals set their own development plans. Beyond that, it can also provide critical insight into the workings of the leadership team and identify ways of improving its overall operation.