

Success Story: Coaching for Senior Executives

<p>Situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • President of television station in role less than 1 year • Revenues flat • Costs increasing • Station ratings lagging the rest of the market
<p>Role of Coach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview direct reports • Create coaching plan linked to business strategy • Observe off-site planning meetings • 1:1 phone consultations • Sounding board regarding difficult performance discussions
<p>Results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Executive team began to work as a team • A major performance problem was replaced • Ratings improved • Financial performance of station improved

Background

John Rogers (not his real name) is the President and general manager of a television station in a major market in suburban Washington, D.C. His career path had been somewhat unconventional for a station President in that he had come up exclusively through the engineering ranks in prior stations where he had worked. Most station Presidents have had extensive experience in sales, marketing, and community relations prior to being appointed President, since these areas are an important part of the role of President.

After meeting John initially by phone, we agreed that I would come to the station, interview his direct reports and observe a meeting with him and his executive team. I did this over a two day period.

The executive team meeting focused on an ongoing problem: how to get out of a ratings hole with the 11:00 P.M. newscast. They seemed to be hopelessly stuck in 3rd place during this important programming time slot and nothing the news director was doing seemed to affect the ratings.

In the broadcast business low ratings reflect low viewership; low viewership results in lower advertising revenues; lower advertising revenues mean budget cuts, which can inhibit spending on things like promotions and new technology which have the potential to increase viewership. In short, they were in danger of getting into a death spiral that would affect the entire station, but it was only the news director who seemed to own the responsibility for boosting the ratings. There was no *team* ownership for the ratings objective.

The Need

In discussing this situation later with John, we concluded that John's leadership style had focused too much on 1:1 performance management with his executives and not enough on developing an enterprise view for the station. We also concluded that he needed to spend more time mobilizing the entire station around the urgency of improving ratings. In his coaching plan, we identified three initiatives where I could help him as a coach:

1. Build an enterprise perspective among each member of his leadership team.
2. Develop a stronger team commitment among his top leaders.
3. Create ways of engaging the entire station.

Approach to Coaching

In my experience, successful executive coaches do three things well: they listen, they give advice, and they bring ideas from the outside world. In John's case, we talked every other week for the first three months. During these calls I often acted as a sounding board. At other times I made suggestions based on my experience with executives in other situations. I also sent him a copy of *Execution* by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, which we discussed at length.

During one of the phone coaching sessions, we planned an off-site meeting which he then ran and I observed. During this meeting the group developed a strategic vision for the station. They also developed a 90-day plan that focused on how each member of the team could contribute to improved ratings in the 11:00 P.M. newscast. Finally they developed a communication strategy for involving the entire station in their strategy.

The first 90-day plan was so successful that John held another planning off-site in the following quarter. At this meeting they created another 90-day plan. As team members gained more confidence in their ability to execute, they also gained more confidence in John as their leader. Ratings slowly began to improve, and with it financial performance also began to improve.

There was one decision that John was slow to make. As we talked about his relationships with each of his people, it became apparent that his sales manager was a source of divisiveness on his team. Before John could take direct action to replace the sales manager, however, the sales manager announced that he was leaving to take a similar position with a competitor in the market.

John's feelings were mixed. Sales was not one of his strong suits, and this defection was leaving him vulnerable at a time when sales were starting to improve. On the other hand, this particular person was not performing at the level that John needed, so there was also an opportunity here. John used our subsequent coaching sessions to define clearly the type of Sales VP he needed for his strategy. I also spent time helping him navigate between the urgency he felt to get a replacement in that position and the dangers of expediency if he put the wrong person in the job. John also got help in this process from his human resources group. In the end he found someone who had the sales management knowledge he needed, but equally important he found someone who was enthusiastic about being part of a leadership team.

John and I worked together for slightly more than a year. At times we worked intensively, particularly as we were planning off-sites and then debriefing the results. At other times, the bi-weekly meetings were just check-ins. As we got to the end of our formal engagement, John sent me a graph that he was using to brief his management on station performance. The graphic plotted four variables over a 6 quarter period. Those variables were viewership, revenue, financial performance, and commitment of the leadership team.

The first three metrics were generated as part of the station's monthly management reports. To measure commitment, I gave him a tool to document his subjective assessment of his team's alignment to station strategy, support for each other, and existence of shared goals.

Results

John's analysis showed that commitment to the station was increasing on the part of individual members of the leadership team. What was even more powerful is that commitment to the leadership team appears in the graphic as a leading indicator. That is, as commitment increased in one quarter, viewership, revenue, and overall financial performance increased in the next quarter. John had not only turned the performance of the station around, he had discovered a way to leverage the talent of his leadership team.

In all coaching engagements, the credit for success must go to the client. I asked John if there were any specific ways in which he felt that coaching helped him turn things around. He identified three things, all related to building his executive team: First, I had pointed out to him early on that the lack of shared goals seemed to be contributing to a lack of commitment to the station's strategy. Second, I was able to help him structure engaging planning meetings. And third, by helping him think through his relationship with each member of the team, he was able to become a better coach for each of them.