



Organizational Coaching Helps People Rise to Their Level of Leadership

Coaching develops in-house leaders for succession. What many do not realize is that a quality program also improves individual position performances specific to the organization, enhancing business results long before succession takes place.

It was not surprising to company insiders that Ursula M. Burns became the CEO of Xerox in 2009, a company with sales half in and half out of the U.S. Thirty years ago, she was recognized as a leader almost immediately and now has deep industry knowledge and highly developed technical skills as a mechanical engineer by training. What was surprising to people outside the company was that she is an African American, making her the first to assume the top position of a Fortune 500 company operating worldwide. Several days after the announcement of her promotion, she flew to Europe to meet with staff and get their ideas on how to rebuild Xerox's customer base. The fact that she did not take time to celebrate her historic accomplishment was indicative of her focus on leadership.

This discussion begins with the story of Burns rise to the top because she is an outstanding example of why organizational coaching should be a strategic imperative. In-house leadership potential is identified early, as are the people with the right skills and talent to oversee specific business initiatives within a specific organizational context. A talent pipeline filled with competent people is not enough for multi-level succession planning. It must be filled with people contributing to team performance throughout the organization now and able to eventually fill future positions essential to business success. As doing business has become more complex in a globalized environment, employee development must focus on helping people maximize performance at their current level, while coaching them to move ahead within the organization.

Coaching People to Stay with the Organization

Coaching has a specific agenda and concentrates on improving a person's performance in their job and as a team member, while also helping them develop the particular skills needed on their career path within the organization. It is not intended to prepare people to advance in their careers with another company, a problem often associated with mentoring. In the early days of the coaching concept, people were said to be "groomed" for a particular position. She never expected to become CEO and had planned on leaving Xerox at one point. Mentoring helped her develop strong, natural leadership skills first, leading to earning



increasingly responsible positions. After Anne Mulcahy was named CEO in 2000, she forged a partnership with Burns because of her exceptional performance over the years, and together they led the company back to profitability after years of decline. In 2007 Burns was appointed President and became the designated CEO successor.

Mulcahy coached Burns over the next two years to become her successor. Coaching teaches the nuances of leadership not taught in the classroom. For example, Mulcahy taught Burns how to listen in a meeting, while keeping a poker face, so that team members are not discouraged from contributing. A seemingly small point, but Xerox would not get on firm footing financially unless the senior management worked as a team. A single person is limited in their ability to solve problems, and it is critical that the rest of the organization is lined up.

The Xerox story clearly showcases how executive coaching contributes to high performance before succession, a point often overlooked by companies. Coaching can begin while people are in the lower ranks but show leadership qualities. It begins with performance management to help talented people align and focus on strategy development and execution within the larger corporate context. However, it is not enough to coach individuals in a vacuum. Burns had to develop her understanding of team behaviors before she was ready to head the company in its pursuit of strategic goals.

Waiting until an executive or senior leadership position, or any critical position for that matter, needs to be filled and then frantically search for a replacement is not good management. The stunning characteristic of an organizational coaching approach is that everyone is given the opportunity to rise to their level of leadership. Some people will be coached into mid-level management positions, while others will be coached into senior management, or like Burns, to the executive level. Coaching based approaches to drive business initiatives for success will also move into activities like group coaching and team coaching, in addition to individual leadership coaching. Team coaching develops a unit of people so they can achieve breakthrough performance in any area.

[Asking the Right Question](#)

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimates that companies around the world spend approximately \$1 billion annually on executive coaches. Formal coaching programs, like leadership academies, include a mix of perspectives and topics. Some are expected, like team building and motivation, managing cultural diversity across borders, critical thinking, and financial management. However, an executive coaching program may also include topics like developing a leadership philosophy, accountability, risk-taking, role modeling, assessing future needs, management influence, and decision execution...and listening...to others.



Some companies take advantage of leadership development programs offered by universities. Companies like General Mills develop in-house formal assessment and training programs. Each person employed by General Mills works with a manager to design an individual development plan and is given the opportunity to attend the General Mills Institute development programs. The Institute gives new employees an executive led introduction to General Mills' mission, values, and functional areas. At career transition points, additional formal training is available for employees following various career paths like marketing, technical, sales, human resources, and more. The fact the employees are developed in specific areas of the business as they advance, like cereals marketing, turns ordinary development into coaching.

Though the General Mills program is not specifically designed to develop the next CEO, a natural result of the program is the identification of the next generation of leaders who are already in-house. The people with the highest potential will emerge, and successful companies focus on everyone so that all talent has equal opportunities to advance. A good test of the success of succession planning is the ability of each executive and manager to answer the question: Who could succeed you? When they can answer that question, the company has a culture of succession planning.