

Promoted Too Fast: Overcoming the “Big” Syndrome

Marcia Ruben, CMC, Principal

Ruben Consulting Group

520 Pacheco Street

San Francisco, CA 94116

(415) 564.7135 (phone)

marcia@rubenconsulting.com (e-mail)

Jan Schmuckler, Principal

Jan M. Schmuckler PhD Consultation

3921 Burckhalter Avenue

Oakland, CA 94605

(510) 562-0626 (phone)

jan@lignumvitae.com (e-mail)

Introduction

In his 1988 hit movie “Big,” Tom Hanks portrays a 12 -year old boy who asks a mechanical swami at a carnival to grant his wish to be grown up. Instantly, his wish is fulfilled and he finds himself as a little kid trapped in the body of a grown man. The trouble is, he has skipped several natural development stages and misses, what one *Washington Post* reviewer called, “the coded social language of adults.” Cues and behaviors that he would have learned in school and young adulthood went over his head. The disconnect makes for good comedy.

In the business world, skipping development steps isn’t always a laughing matter. As difficult as it is to go from being 12 to 28, it is equally hard to go from being a manager to a senior executive without going through necessary developmental experiences. Typical missing ingredients include gaps in interpersonal skills, an inability to manage systems and processes, a discomfort with conflict, difficulty playing the political game and an inability to appropriately motivate, delegate and develop staff. When an executive client exhibits these development gaps, an external leadership coach is usually brought in to work with the executive to enhance the chances of success and to help the person gain the necessary skills or behaviors to operate at the executive level. The following are some challenges and tips for coaching an executive who has been promoted too fast.

Challenges

Unaware of Performance Issues

Often, clients who are promoted too quickly don’t know what they don’t know. Tom Hank’s character simply didn’t know how a 28 year-old man would behave in a romantic situation. Often newly promoted executives have similar growing pains. Stephanie, an executive client, was the type of person who felt she was not authentic if she did not address what she perceived as injustices. In a couple of cases, she made public statements in meetings that were construed as negative. While her concerns might have been valid, her method of addressing of them was seen as politically insensitive. Stephanie wasn’t aware that there were other ways to influence the situation without creating as much noise in the system. The challenge is to educate the executive client about a range of

possible behaviors and help them appreciate that their prior experience might not have prepared them for all situations.

View of Self Differs From View of Others

People who move up the corporate ladder quickly are ambitious and usually receive positive accolades and praise along the way. They perceive that they were rewarded for past performance, and repeat what has been successful for them in the past. Their view of themselves and self-esteem is often closely linked with their current title and success. When they reach a certain level of leadership, the behaviors that got them to where they are do not always work. It is not uncommon for the executive to be totally unaware that others now do not share the same high-level view of their performance. They are now on a bigger playing field and certain behaviors that helped them achieve their phenomenal success no longer set them apart. The coach must be sensitive to these issues of self-esteem, and also find a way, often through 360-degree feedback results, to point out the misunderstandings in perception and reality.

Acting Within A Comfort Zone

Just as Tom Hank's character acted like a 12 year old when he offered the bottom bunk bed to the seductive female lead, because that's what a 12 year old would naturally do, so do executives, who have risen to the top quickly, fall back on behaviors that have gotten them to high places. For example, one executive made it to the top by focusing solely on getting results, and get results he did. However, in his new role, his ability to motivate others to get results was more important than his ability to drive for them by himself. The challenge here is to get the client to be aware of the need for change and learn a new way of thinking and behaving.

Five Tips for Coaching Those Promoted Too Fast

- Don't expect instant results—closing developmental gaps takes time
- Set expectations upfront regarding length of time and commitment required
- Initially concentrate on easier to achieve results
- Focus on and magnify Strengths
- Attend as much to changing client behavior as changing perceptions of behavior

Don't Expect Instant Results

Behavioral change takes time. In certain situations, change can take longer than expected, because the executive client usually needs to become aware of how the behavior is hindering his/her performance in the new role before being willing to change. After awareness, the client can begin to make some changes with the help of a coach and the internal HR team. Mike, an engineering vice president at a large high tech company was given feedback by his coach that certain staff thought that he was rude and abrupt. He was startled to learn this information, because he did not recognize his own behavior and

thought of himself as a warm and friendly person. He realized that he did not speak to the administrators or receptionists, because it would “waste everyone’s time.” What he thought was efficiency, they considered rude. He finally recognized that in his zeal to always complete tasks on time and within budget, he blocked out everything except the task. Other people were not on his radar screen nor had he cared or noticed how many ‘dead bodies’ he had left behind. To change this sort of behavior takes time, patience and practice. The star performer needs proof of the ineffective behavior through a 360-degree feedback process and time to make the changes necessary after gaining awareness.

Some skills are more difficult to develop than others. Skills that can easily be learned in a classroom and require just a few behavioral adjustments include but are not limited to presentations skills, writing skills, and negotiation skills. Other skills that require a new mindset, new way of thinking and complex understanding of human behavior take longer. Learning to think strategically, motivating others, and becoming adept at organizational politics are among the key leadership competencies that are more complex and take longer to master.

Set Expectations Upfront

Executive clients need to know that the commitment to work with a coach is a long-term one, because deep behavioral change takes time for positive and lasting results to occur. Star performers are accustomed to achieving their goals rapidly and are not as comfortable taking a long time to get results. It is equally important to remind the manager that the process is lengthy and that the organization should give the person the time it takes to fill these development gaps. Not all companies are ready to allow the executive that needed time. Henrietta was a VP hired by the president of the company because of her expertise in a field that the company lacked. She was extremely knowledgeable and a real go-getter although this was her first corporate job in a Silicon Valley firm. The company expected all its vice presidents to manage a staff of at least seven to twelve people. She had never managed people before this assignment and had many gaps with regards to management and leadership skills. The coach was asked by the VP of HR to work with Henrietta only to discover after several weeks that the President did not think that Henrietta could change fast enough. The company wanted to put her in an individual contributor role and not make the commitment to allow her to change at her own rate. The coach in the contracting phase needs to ascertain if the organization is ready to make the commitment along with the client.

Concentrate on Easy to Achieve Results

A coach can help an executive client focus on a handful of behavioral changes that will be the easiest to get results from and that will most quickly close the development gap. This will build the confidence of the client, his/her manager, and the organization. It is important to show some early successes so that everyone can see the initial results and commit to a lengthier process. When an organization recognizes productive behavioral change, the person is considered more valuable to the company. In one case, Peter was seen as a person who got results but had no meeting management skills. His idea of a good meeting was to do all of the talking and make all of the decisions. These behaviors

were at odds with the company culture that was very collaborative. A few techniques from the coach and support from HR in the meetings helped the executive client be viewed as more effective. The organization was also very satisfied. This easy to achieve result was the first step in a series of behavioral changes that Peter had to make. The initial success helped him commit to a long -term process.

Focus on and Magnify Strengths

Joan was a senior executive whose major strength was her action orientation. She could be counted to get things done. However, sometimes she was so action oriented that she over managed her direct reports. By thoroughly analyzing situations in her past in which she excelled, she and the coach were able to determine that when she took the time to listen and be patient, she got better results. Joan devised a plan to remind herself to practice these behaviors when she was in the heat of 'battle.' Focusing on and appreciating strengths is energizing to the client and often yields results that are visible to others much more quickly.

In order for an executive to get to a position of power and authority quickly, he/she clearly excels at important behaviors and competencies. It is essential to quickly identify strengths and what the client does well. Equally important is knowing how to best use these strengths in his/her new role. What often gets executives into trouble is not the strengths themselves, but either overusing them or relying solely on them without developing other compensating behaviors. Coaching results come more quickly when executives are clear about what they do well and can make subtle changes that support their strengths.

Attend As Much To Changing Perceptions As Changing Behavior

Negative perceptions of behavior, whether true or not, can be devastating to one's career. Perceptions are more difficult to change than the actual behavior. It is never enough for a coach to help a star performer change his/her behavior, because the person with the changed behavior is still judged by the first impressions of the organization

Larry, a young, senior executive who had risen quickly through the ranks while his company was in a double-digit growth expansion was aware that perceptions are as important as reality. Larry had just been assigned to manage a new team, and his executive manager was concerned, because Larry was seen as effective at managing up, but his direct reports complained that he was not managing certain performance problems and also not providing development opportunities for his team. Larry created bad feelings and resentments by retaining a team member whose performance was marginal at best. As soon as consequences were put in place and the team member ultimately managed out of the group, Larry's direct reports changed their initial perceptions of him.

The coach spent several sessions coaching Larry on the observation and communication skills necessary to manage performance problems. The coaching plan involved a feedback loop to determine if and how perceptions were changing. At the end of the

coaching process, a telephone assessment with Larry's peers and direct reports was conducted. The perceptions of Larry shifted tremendously.

Summary

“With patience, and practice, and time, change will come.”
Dalai Lama

The boom of the 1990's led to unprecedented opportunities for businesses and the talented leaders that helped them grow so rapidly. These performers had the chance to take on larger responsibilities either within their own rapidly growing company or within other companies hungry for talent. Other high potential employees shot up through their companies at a very young age. Sometimes, like the lead character in 'Big,' people found themselves in business situations without having the wisdom of time and experience as a guide to help them.

An external coach can accelerate the learning process. Coaches must clarify the expectations and commitments of coaching someone with the 'Big' syndrome and management must make a commitment to the time and support that is required for long-term, deep behavioral change. All of this is only possible when the client acknowledges the need for change and commits to the process.

About the Authors

Marcia Ruben, principal of Ruben Consulting Group and a Certified Management Consultant, is an organizational consultant who helps individuals, teams, and companies achieve higher performance. Her firm focuses on organizational change management, leadership and team effectiveness and executive coaching. She has worked with leaders of Fortune 500 high technology and financial services companies for over twenty years. She is a Lominger affiliate, certified in all of their products, including the Voices 360-Degree feedback process. She is also certified in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and uses a variety of other tools in her practice. Ms. Ruben graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of California, Berkeley, and received her Master's of Science degree in counseling from California State University.

Jan M. Schmuckler is an organization psychologist and leadership coach who helps executives and managers achieve results by aligning vision, developing staff, and by individual coaching. Her expertise, drawn from 25 years of experience in the education, business, and non-profit sectors, brings a unique perspective, which enables organizations to meet challenges and compete more effectively. Dr. Schmuckler holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology from the Wright Institute, Berkeley, and a B.A. and M.Ed. from Temple University. She is certified in the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and the Manager as well as the Executive 360-degree feedback process of Personnel Decisions, Inc. (PDI).