

Coaching high achievers

The Calm Zone

Two years ago I wrote a paper called Corporate Turbulence.

The thesis was that as corporates get ever more buffeted by events in the business world, so Executives in the corporates are also buffeted. Two years later I've changed the word Turbulence and replaced it with Hurricane. As far as I am concerned, the pace has picked up significantly over the last two years, the buffeting is stronger and more persistent both for companies and for executives.

Hurricane-type events are a threat to corporates and individuals. However, my point is that they are also opportunities.

Let me give you some examples of some recent hurricanes;

1. 9/11
A threat to major airlines.
An opportunity for the low cost airlines.
2. Sharp practice at the top
A threat, probably fatal, to Andersen's.
An opportunity to other audit companies and consultancies.
3. Lousy strategy
A threat to Marconi.
An opportunity for ?
4. Doing a lousy deal
A threat to ITV Digital and Kirch.
An opportunity for perhaps Greg Dyke and Rupert Murdoch.

These are major hurricanes. But mini hurricanes – the threats and opportunities of modern corporate life – occur every day. A hurricane in a company may well be a threat to that company and an opportunity to its competitors, but it's also an opportunity for key executives to exercise leadership, clear thinking, creativity and good management. The executives who do exhibit these qualities will be far better placed to withstand the threat. They will also stand a far better chance of spotting, and acting on, the opportunity.

So, the conclusion from this is that business is ever more demanding, but this accordingly creates ever more opportunities.

The Nineties effect

Following on from the recession at the end of the 1980's, a number of significant things changed in corporate life, the effect of which has been to make life ever more lonely for executives.

Continued

Coaching high achievers

I am talking about:

- *Delaying, which makes a promotion a bigger and more difficult leap.*
- *People are promoted faster and younger, and, in consequence, senior executives have less experience and less variety and depth of experience to call on.*
- *The boss is busier, as a result of delaying and the ever increasing pace and demands of corporate life. In consequence, he or she is less able to provide support to subordinates.*
- *Demands on CEOs and Directors are greater than ever. No honeymoon and no learning time.*
- *The “removal” of the 50+ year-old executives means that there are fewer opportunities to learn from good role models, and fewer informal coaches around.*

So, the corporate environment is less supportive, as well as being more demanding.

However, executives do need help and support. You do need calm in the eye of the Corporate Hurricane. You do need A Calm Zone!

The Calm Zone (in the eye of the corporate hurricane)

The Calm Zone is our phrase for the place where executive coaching takes place. It's a place where the coach and the executive being coached form a partnership whose purpose is to help the executive to perform to his/her full potential in the job and the environment in which they find themselves.

The second, very important, purpose of this partnership is to help the executive not to get stressed. Basically, pressure is good and stress is bad. The dividing line is often a very narrow one. The coach is there to help the executive to stay on the pressure side of that line.

Under what circumstances should executives come into the coaching Calm Zone?

Below is a list of the more obvious reasons.

- *A promotion*
- *The need to add leadership skills to management skills*
- *A move to a new company*
- *A new parent company*
- *A frenzied, task orientated, environment*
- *An individual with high potential*
- *A good, but under-performing individual*

So what happens in the Calm Zone?

To answer that, let me give you an example.

It's actually a hybrid and the names have been changed to protect the innocent!

Continued

Coaching high achievers

The situation is an independent plc, which has been sold to a large group. The executive concerned is the chief executive who now finds himself with a new boss and a new parent company.

The coach and the executive establish the key challenges that face the executive over the next 6/12 months. The challenges listed include to:

- *Find a way of dealing with the new boss, who has a reputation for being non-confrontational, poor at communication, and slow to make decisions.*
- *Understand the culture of the new parent company.*
- *Identify, apart from the boss, key people in the parent company who can and will influence the success of the CEO and develop appropriate relationships with them.*
- *Create and agree a vision for the business within the context of the new parent company.*
- *“Educate” the parent company about his business, which has significant differences from the parent company, despite being in the same sector.*
- *Improve significantly the morale of management and staff, who have been deeply de-motivated by the sale.*
- *Clarify the personal objectives of the CEO in the new environment in which he finds himself.*

Having agreed the challenges, the coach and the executive then work on the actions needed to meet each of these challenges. The challenges form the basis of the coaching contract.

However, in addition, the contract necessarily includes the need to deal with the occasional Exocet (another hurricane type event).

Why does coaching work?

- *It is specific to the needs of the individual in the environment in which he/she works.*
- *It is flexible and can change and develop to meet changing needs.*
- *It is regular, typically twice a month, and medium to long term, and hence can constantly re-enforce the learning.*
- *It is also time flexible and can be fitted around diary needs, and it does not require the executive to be out of the office for extended periods of time.*

What is the role of the Pitkeathley coach?

The role of the coach is to:

- *Stimulate*
- *Challenge*
- *Support*
- *Pass on knowledge*
- *Suggest alternative options and alternative behaviours*
- *Proactively identify “what might happen next”*
- *Help deal with Exocets*
- *Keep the executive pressured but not stressed.*

Continued

What's different about Pitkeathley & Partners

We only operate at very senior levels, basically defined as Chief Executives, Directors, and potential Directors.

We have a very wide breadth and depth of experience at board level, across a wide range of functions and industry sectors. "We have been there, and we have done it".

We have very strong analytical abilities. Coaches have to take in a huge amount of information in a short space of time, and to place that information in the context of the company.

We have the ability to empathise with a very wide range of senior executives, in a very wide range of circumstances.

We use our experience, analytical ability and our empathy, pro-actively to suggest alternative options and behaviours, and to go through "what if" scenarios.

We can help executives to grow in confidence, in ability and in potential.

A final question

Whatever form your particular corporate or personal hurricane, do you have your Calm Zone in place?

Bill Pitkeathley