



EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT: EVOLUTIONARY REVOLUTION

Evolution, revolution? Whatever is happening, **Jørgen Thorsell, Justin Bridge** and **Fiona Gardner** describe big changes in the way we are developing executives

Dramatic revolutions that happen with a “bang” are often less dangerous than evolutionary changes that creep in over time.

Such incremental changes often go unnoticed – with catastrophic consequences.

Think of Kodak and the evolution of digital technology. Kodak did not recognise and adjust to the mortal danger digital cameras and mobile phones posed to its business until it was too late. In January 2012, after 131 years being regarded as one of the world’s most unbreakable companies, Kodak filed for bankruptcy.

There is a parallel change, albeit somewhat less devastating, underway in executive education. In their article “Customised Executive Learning” in the January 2012 edition of *Global Focus*, Gert-Jan van Wijk and Jamie Anderson argued that new ways of developing executives are about to take over from the more traditional methods championed by business schools and academic institutions.

This is especially true for many advanced global corporations, which have for some time distinguished executive development from executive education and begun to favour the former as a means of enhancing business impact through executive learning.

What’s the difference?

While executive *education* is rooted in business schools’ classic methodology of teaching theoretical knowledge based on proprietary research, executive *development* has a behavioural focus and is aimed at improving the performance of managers, executives and their businesses regardless of the theories and teachers employed.

Corporations have long struggled with and complained about the task of transferring knowledge gained through executive education into meaningful actions and impact “on the job”. This is not because the knowledge is not valuable but because achieving significant, immediate and sustainable impact on the business is of even greater importance.

It is generally believed that the expense of gaining knowledge cannot be fully justified unless that knowledge is provided in the specific form and context required by the recipient to make a sustainable difference in his or her workplace.

And since executive education tends to take place in classrooms detached in time and space from the workplace, the likelihood of the knowledge being immediately relevant is low.

Over the past ten years or so, executive development has matured to meet the demand for immediate job relevance and sustainable impact. By making the executives’ own current job challenges the starting point of the learning journey, executive development provides a learner-led process that enables individual executives to realise what they must do to increase their impact and, even more importantly, *how* they can do it.

But, though a behavioural focus is a key feature, the approach is not solely about behaviour. The learner-led process still offers relevant theories and best practices to deepen an executive’s understanding of his or her situation and provide a range of different perspectives and insights. However, rather than being presented *carte blanche*, these are provided according to each executive’s unique challenge so theory and best practice insights are both immediately applicable and focused on results.

In a nutshell, modern executive development creates impact by supplying knowledge, insights and learning just-in-time to an individual executive’s specific job-based circumstances, making it immediately relevant and stimulating sustainable behavioural change. Thus, the classic challenge of transferring knowledge into meaningful action and impact is met.

If leadership is a relationship

Executive coaching, with its ability to enable executives to improve on-the-job performance, has gained tremendous popularity in the corporate world since the 1970s. In a recent global study (Mannaz, *Global Leadership Survey*, 2011), coaching was identified as the most powerful executive development practice alongside leaders teaching leaders and action learning.

Coaching is a good example of the modern concept of executive development because it provides just-in-time learning geared to the individual and is also highly relevant to his or her current professional reality.

Recently, more methodologies and technologies have emerged that move the effectiveness of executive development forward.

Among the most interesting are those that involve both the leader and his or her team in the learning initiative.

Traditionally, leadership has been considered a matter of personal traits, either learned or inherited. This idea has been supported by research that propounds the notion of the leader as a lone beacon of inspiration. Consequently, both executive education and development initiatives have, for the most part, been delivered to executives in isolation from their people and job reality.

However, there can be no leaders without followers (and *vice versa*) and this makes the relationship between the leader and his or her people a central pillar of leadership. It follows that effective leadership development is contingent upon the development of an effective leadership relationship and as such must involve both the leader and direct reports in the development process.

Over the past 20 years, “360-degree” survey instruments have elicited qualitative and quantitative feedback from an executive’s team and his or her superiors and peers. By using them the relationship dimension of leadership has (to some extent) been included in leadership development.

However, our long experience using 360-degree instruments suggests that most feedback on the results of such a survey is given to the recipient without the real-time sharing, intellectual involvement and emotional commitment of the respondents.

Not only does this leave the feedback open to (mis)interpretation but it can also lead to a “witch hunt” as recipients endeavour to track down “who said what”.

Even worse, 360-degree feedback is often “sanitised” to prevent such retribution, leaving it so bland that it leads to no more than a shrug of the shoulders and the observation that “no-one’s perfect”.

Involving team members in the leadership development process also not only encourages them to share responsibility for enhancing the leadership relationship but also avoids the “not invented here syndrome”. This is often faced by executives who come back from transformational development programmes and try to sell “new world” ways of doing things to colleagues who are still living in the “old world”.

In summary, we see that today’s advanced corporations demand that the entire “eco-system” around each leader is meaningfully involved in

executive and other development initiatives. They realise that true leadership development requires all relevant parties to commit to developing leadership relationships, not just the individual leader in isolation.

Killing two birds with one stone

Another significant trend is the integration of leadership development and strategy execution into one coherent, accelerated process.

If leadership is the single most important factor in successfully implementing a new strategy (and experience suggests it is) it follows that leadership development initiatives should be closely connected with the process of doing just that. Building a programme of leadership development that accelerates the execution of corporate strategy and improves leadership performance is like killing two birds with one stone.

In our experience, integrated development kicks-off with top executives deciding what “best leadership” should look like when they begin the journey of implementing a new corporate strategy. Then all managers, with the requisite support and preparation, conduct the process of identifying and closing the gaps between current leadership capabilities (both for themselves and also within their team or teams) and those demanded by the new strategy.

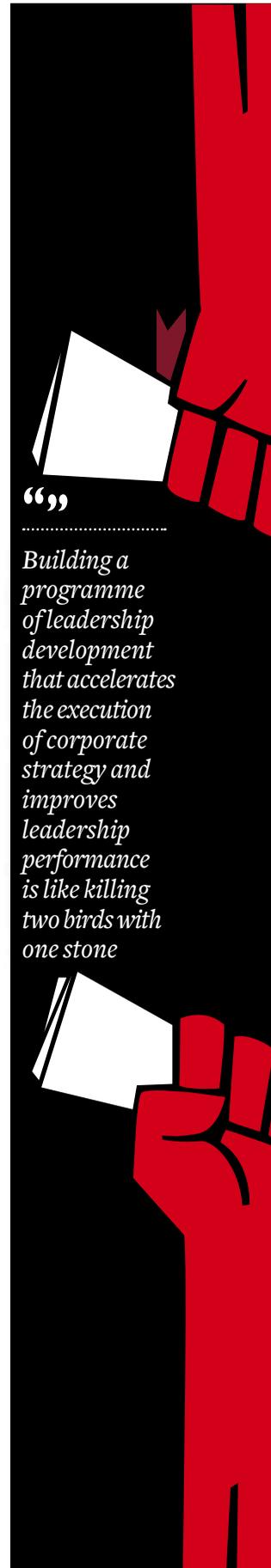
Getting much more for much less

The economic crisis that began in 2008 has engendered an understandable theme in executive development: corporations are demanding much more from executive development but are prepared to pay much less for it. And while this has placed enormous pressure on providers of executive learning, it has also driven numerous innovations, many of which have been technology based.

However, it is still early days in the development of technology-based tools and concepts for facilitating and enabling behavioural change. In particular, e-learning programmes still struggle to capture the full commitment and attention from the learner in the way a face-to-face programme can.

Despite this, we are likely to see considerable advances in the world of virtual learning in coming years, which will enable a far deeper level of trust building and better two-way communication in the virtual setting, leading to greater commitment and learning.

A unique way of taking the best from a number of technologies and adapting it to an on-the-job, learner-centric and multi-location approach is a methodology called “Flexible Learning”.



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Through it, clients, both individual and teams, experience more learning for less money. We discovered the key to success is to minimise face-to-face interventions while maintaining the same high learning output.

Flexible Learning achieves this via a virtual kick-off followed by an e-based competence screening for each participant. This helps them realise – for themselves – the competency gaps they have and which they need to close. For each individual a set of focused learning sources (e-learning modules, literature and webinars to name a few) is then identified according to their unique learning objectives.

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What is around the corner?

As the evolution of executive education and development gains momentum, it is interesting to anticipate what awaits us in the future. While most executive learning and development experts agree innovation will continue to be driven by an urge to improve the impact of executive learning for less expense, they expect this innovation to be focused on the nature of the content, not how it is delivered.

However, in our view, the field of content is not where the next significant breakthroughs in executive development will come.

Instead, we expect to see innovation in the creation of sustainable on-the-job learning, delivered in a way (and in a learning environment) where all parties in the leadership equation take an active role.

The key challenge is how to capture job-based, participant-led learning in a qualified and meaningful way. The key question is how to make on-the-job learning a deliberate act that will serve as a fact-based platform for more learning that is relevant to and can be readily shared with other managers. Social media may be a feasible solution here.

From our studies in effective leadership development (*Innovation in Leadership Development* 2009 and the *Mannaz Global Leadership Survey*, 2011) we have recognised the importance of learning being readily available to individual managers just-in-time to meet their specific, role-based needs. This objective is still a long way from being met and we are seeing the more traditional approaches of mentoring and coaching growing in demand.

However, we believe more platforms need to be discovered and developed in order to fulfil the need for learning “right when you need it”. According to the same studies, the concept of real-life/real-time experiential learning is regarded as one of the most powerful approaches to executive development. Consequently we expect the demand for this approach to grow as well.

Executive development is not only about improving leadership and management competency in an organisation; it is also about creating an impact on overall business performance. Therefore, we foresee another significant push for more sophisticated ways of ensuring both direct and indirect impact on performance. This raises the perennial question: how to measure the effect of executive development.

We believe this will not be limited to mere bottom-line number crunching but will be inspired by work at the frontiers of behavioural science and how behavioural change is measured.

A revolutionary evolution?

Recently, we have been working with one of the world’s largest multinationals investigating ways to “refresh” its development programmes. Its learning and development executives have asked potential vendors only to document the depth of their expertise in designing and delivering programmes of experiential learning. They did not expect any suggestions for learning solutions.

We are now into a stretching and mutually enriching design process with this organisation that will bring executive development to new heights and widen the gap with executive education even more.

This is how the frontiers of executive development are being pushed to new levels; leaving us in little doubt that executive development is in the midst of an exciting evolution that to some might appear quite revolutionary. **gf**

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jørgen Thorsell, Justin Bridge and Fiona Gardner are respectively CEO, Managing Director and Consultant at Mannaz, a consultancy specialising in capability development of executives and key employees.

Mannaz was founded in Denmark in 1975 under the name DIEU (Danish Engineers’ Post Graduate Institute) and is among Europe’s largest and oldest companies in this field.