



Executive Development: Transforming Performance

Singapore Management University's Steve Wyatt explains it's more about the 'how' than the 'what'

Today's turbulent and fast-evolving business context demands that high-performing executives continuously learn and adjust their behaviours. If the process of continuous adaptation is poorly managed, the outcome can be a Learning and Development (L&D) investment that yields little or worse, change-fatigue which undermines performance.

Fortunately, there is much that L&D officers can do.

SMU's Office of Executive Development draws from over 60 years of learning and behaviour change research in the design of its executive programmes and our experience with supporting over 4,000 executives each year. We have distilled four design elements – 4Ps – that we believe are essential for delivering transformational executive development journeys.

4Ps of behaviour change

The 4Ps essential for an executive development journey to be truly transformational are:

- Process
- Person
- Psychology
- Peers

Process - What are the steps through which our learners will progress?

Over the years many have attempted to describe the change process. Notable authors such as John Kotter and Kurt Lewin are but two who have described stages we move through when changing. As an example, one early model describes three such stages: letting go of an existing mindset, crafting a new mindset, and then locking in and reinforcing the new normal. Whether or not the new 'locked-in' mindset is part of continuous learning or an appreciation of episodic development, the key is to have internalised the truth that *what got you here isn't going to get you there*.

Do executive programmes in your firm rely on such stages? Or are they focused on the content with the expectation that the executives will learn and then figure out for themselves how to apply the new insights?

Companies that want to affect behaviour change should ensure that programmes move executives thoughtfully through the change process.

The first step is to help learners let go of the assumption that the experiences and behaviour-norms that helped them reach their current positions are the most relevant and appropriate models for the path ahead. With an estimated 50% of the jobs in existence today either not having existed 10 years ago or having been significantly transformed by technology, we can no longer rely primarily on our past experiences.

The new workplace should instil in your executives a desire for clarity regarding what change is needed and why. Clarity can first be created through messaging from both line managers and talent development officers, as well as providing executives with a mirror for their current performance. These techniques reveal the gap between the status quo and desired state, and in a way that compels executives to pursue professional development.

Next, executives begin crafting a new mindset by taking new processes or models and trialing them. The most recent research suggests this period of trial and development requires an average of 66 days for new habits to form. The same research showed a worst-case scenario where new habits required more than 250 days to take hold.

Throughout this period of crafting the new mindset, executives need steady feedback, coaching and support to minimise falling back into old habits.

As your firm invests in executive development expecting targeted, transformational change, then you need to measure programme outcomes. We find the more proactive L&D teams monitor executive behaviour changes at regular intervals, assess progress at the individual level, and tailor on-going support. Thus, whilst development is generally expected to be continuous, the targeted changes begin to impact your business when L&D programmes are combined with periods of on-the-job application for developing mastery.

At SMU we support both the L&D and on-the-job dimensions of executive development. We believe that executives receive greater benefit when they experience an integrated learning journey that is facilitated by trusted partners.

But GOOD process is NOT good enough

In addition to designing a good process, we must also consider the executive as a person who is being asked to change.

The development programme should provide a safe environment for trial and experimentation with the approaches being taught. We might, for example, help executives successfully perform new behaviours or analyses in an effort to build confidence that the same can be accomplished back at the office.

Thus, we might teach using an approach called *Hear-one, See-one, Do-one* in an effort to strengthen the participants' confidence with applying the new. Another adage is that *executives only remember the things that they themselves say*. Therefore, executive development programmes should design opportunities for the debate of competing ideas. Teach-back exercises, where the executive shares some of his/her newly acquired content skills with co-workers can further help to embed the learning and promote on-the-job application. All three approaches help create an experience that builds confidence and embeds behaviour change in an executive.

So the second step is to ask how your programmes include such confidence-building and workplace application.

Psychological insight enhances learning efficacy

Do you recall reading your first personality assessment report?

It probably helped you discover some useful insights about yourself. Perhaps you were fortunate enough to have an experienced coach take you step-by-step through the report and connect each element to your behaviours and beliefs. Maybe they set key directions for your personal leadership development, or perhaps they also provided you with on-going support.

SMU's Office of Executive Development believes that such support is most powerful when it is intertwined with development programmes, and the coach is well-versed with the tools and techniques. Frequently, personality assessments and coaching support are organised and managed separately to executive education programmes, thereby depriving the executive of timely support that is context rich.

A skilled coach who builds on insights from the personality assessment can accelerate an executive's ability to link the development with deeply held beliefs and values. This, in turn, can lead to behavioural change. For example, techniques such as motivational interviewing invite us to ask how a certain change in behaviour would help 'me' become a better parent, manager or person?

When the development programme links targeted changes with a learner's deepest sense of identity, we begin to tap into powerful intrinsic motivations that help sustain the growth.

The combination of psychological assessment mixed with coaching and feedback offers a rich basis for professional growth. These tools and the associated coaching support should always be interwoven with the education programme such that the development journey is transformational.

Tap into the power of peers for greater impact

As Professor Henry Mintzberg once wrote, "*You should not send a changed person back into an unchanged organisation, but we always do.*"

At SMU we stress the importance of the buddy system. The buddy system places each executive in a trio or quartet where they openly discuss issues with a mutual commitment to support one another. These buddies provide feedback and encouragement, thereby helping one another deliver the targeted goals.

Good programme design should help executives introduce any changes to the people around them and foster acceptance of new habits. In other words, relationships in the workplace need to be intentionally and slightly re-scripted so that the co-workers evolve alongside the executive.

How can you help co-workers become more accepting of a changing executive? Here are three questions you might ask to create a more welcoming context.

1. Has the direct supervisor been involved with and is he/she supportive of the executive's growth plan?
2. Have HR been involved to help adjust Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and performance reviews in a way that rewards positive professional development?
3. Has a group of immediate peers been actively brought into a conversation for re-scripting the relationship and welcoming the change?

All three questions can be built into the customisation process as early as the Request for Proposal (RFP) to help ensure that you are less likely to put changed executives back into an unchanged organisation.

When used wisely, the 4Ps will enhance any development programme. SMU's expertise can assist you to design and deliver transformational executive development, helping to empower your company's performance. We tailor our advice, designs and programmes to cater to your executives' needs. Our case writing team can also ensure that course content addresses your current business realities.

We stand by our promise *Focused on Asia - Transforming Performance*.

Steve Wyatt is Executive Director at Singapore Management University Executive Development.