

## **Preliminary Team Audit**

As matters were not getting any better, the CEO decided to bring everyone on the senior executive team together for what he called a high performance team intervention. The objective would be to reflect on their interpersonal relationships, work practices, leadership styles, and the organizational culture, guided by an experienced external group facilitator. The underlying agenda, however, was to create alignment and become more effective in implementing the corporate transformation process.

The chosen group coach had a solid business background, but also had training in the psychodynamic approach to executive coaching. This meant that not only was she interested in how individuals experienced the team's interactions, but she was also prepared to explore the less visible elements—the underlying behavior patterns and group dynamics that motivate behavior. Her main task would be, however, to help the executive team members to become more aligned and more effective in decision-making and implementation. To get a sense of what was percolating among the members of the executive team, the facilitator requested to interview each of the executive team members prior to the intervention.

Going through this interview process, it did not take the group coach very long to figure out that Jim and John had turned into lightning rods for all that were wrong with the executive team and the company. Although most of the people she interviewed admitted that Jim was brilliant and had come up with some truly innovative ideas, they also were unanimous in complaining that he was a difficult person to work with. The same comments were made of John, who was seen by all as a very experienced executive, but was also perceived as a company spy for the major shareholder.

Although the alienating behaviors of these two executives did not help towards group integration, many other factors were identified as responsible for the mediocre performance of the company and the stagnating transformation process. Several executive team members noted their frustration after a consulting firm specializing in strategy and corporate transformation had presented them with what seemed like a logical action plan. But when it came to strategy implementation, very little of that plan materialized. Each executive seemed to read from a different page, and this lack of alignment among the top team, as a consequence, had spread a blanket of confusion and disengagement over the rest of the organization. The absence of clear objectives and agreed processes resulted in unsuccessful execution of the organization's strategy.

While digging deeper during her interviews, the group coach identified many other problems with the executive team dynamics. To start with, most of them agreed that all too often their meetings were a waste of time, describing them as being calcified, unfocused, ritualistic, and ripe with unresolved overt and underground conflict. Participation was uneven, leading to false consensus. Collegiality and collaboration were completely missing. Instead, silo behavior was the norm, with each executive fighting for the scarce resources available in the company and protecting their own P&Ls (profit and loss figures). Responsibility, lines of reporting, and accountability for the execution of activities were not clear. Furthermore, knowledge sharing among the people in the key functions or divisions was non-existent. Clearly, the lack of coordination of their activities, divergent priorities, and an absence of specific guidelines to shape execution activities and decisions meant that each executive acted in his or her own way. Notably, most executives admitted that these problems were longstanding and had been going on for several years—long before Jim and John had arrived on the scene.

It was also pointed out that the existing corporate culture did not encourage their employees to really have voice. A recent survey had shown that the majority of the employees were very reluctant to speak their minds, or to constructively challenge management practices out of fear of retribution. Some executives even mentioned that the corporate culture had a Darwinian quality, in which each person was out for him- or herself. Subtly, some blame was even attributed to the CEO, who was described as being conflict-

avoidant, unable to put his foot down to properly manage group conflicts. It became clear that he preferred dealing with his executives on a one-to-one basis, , but was not able to create alignment and unify the team as a whole.

All in all, due to the executive team members' poor implementation capabilities, company morale was low, the transformation process was stalled, the offshore project was facing expensive delays, and they were on a fast track into the red. As the executive coach summed up in her own interview notes, the general consensus was that the executive committee was not really a team but a group of ships passing in the night, each with a different destination. They were unable to drive a consistent action plan deep down into the organization and to unify and fully engage their employees towards execution of its organizational objectives.

In her exchanges with the members of the executive team, the group coach had explained that she would ask each of them (as a way of providing her with more information) to complete two 360-degree questionnaires, one pertaining to the business environment, the other one being of a more private nature, to be completed by both family and friends. These feedback results were going to be shared and discussed at the team intervention, as a means of providing more information about each person's leadership style, working practices in the company, and contribution to the team. Most important, it was to bring them together for a real discussion on team alignment and strategy execution.

## **The group coaching intervention**

At the opening of the team intervention, the group coach gave a short lecture about high performance organizations and effective leadership. Subsequently (to break the ice and instill somewhat of a playful mood), she asked each member of the executive committee to draw a self-portrait, a picture of how they saw themselves as it related to what was in their head, heart, stomach, past, present, work, and leisure. After initial grumbling and skepticism towards such (seemingly useless) activity, all of the executives soon became quite immersed in this task. When all the self-portraits were completed and displayed on the wall, the group coach began the session by asking Jim if he would like to kick off the process by telling the group about his drawing. He readily agreed, as this was the type of creative exercise with which he was comfortable.

### *Using Narrative*

Through the narrative of his self-portrait, the group of executives learned some surprising and adventurous facts about Jim. There were even a few laughs as Jim recounted some of the outrageous things he had done as a student. Next, the group coach focused on Jim's 360-degree survey feedback reports, which Jim, like the others in the group, had been given the night before. She asked Jim what puzzled him about his observers' feedback, and if there was anything in the report that was not new to him. Spontaneously, he responded that he had been quite shocked to discover how he came across to other members of the team. The group coach gave Jim time to express his doubts and confusion about the reports. She referred back to his self-portrait drawing, asking Jim if he could say more about himself. What got him to where he was now? Reflecting on his life, what were some of the highlights and lowlights? What might account for the group's perception that he was irresponsible, uninterested in others, and hostile?

Through further exploration of Jim's personal narrative, the members of the executive team learned from Jim that although his grandfather had been a brilliant academic, his father had followed a different drum—his life marked not by success but by failure and the disappointment of one job after another. Jim explained how he had spent a great deal of time with his beloved grandfather, who found in young Jim the enthusiasm and curiosity that his own son seemed to lack. Clearly, the grandfather had been Jim's role model, encouraging him to pursue an academic career. Jim told the members of the executive team that his identity as an academic had always been the most important thing to him—something not always easy to nurture within the pragmatic business environment he was now working in. Particularly in his present role, he felt that his creativity could be quickly stifled, so he did whatever he could to protect what he called the “spark.”

### *A Psychodynamic Lens*

Listening to him, it became quite clear that Jim's father represented some kind of “negative identity.” Jim had an underlying fear that he would become like his old man—wasting away his talents. Also, from his presentation, the group could see that two systems—family and organizational—were in conflict within Jim. The memories of his grandfather supported and rewarded his persona of the free but absentminded genius, whereas the organizational system he had just joined was trying to shackle that creativity. In order to protect his “spark,” he reacted aggressively, albeit unconsciously, and kept his fellow executive team members at bay and resisted all feedback to change his behavior. Now, looking at the information from the 360-degree feedback reports, and listening to the challenging but supportive comments from the group, he came to realize that not only did other people see this behavior as obstructive, but it also aggravated existing problems with the team and the company. In protecting his independence, he made it even more difficult for the executive team to come together as a team. Furthermore, his behavior negatively affected the organization.

As for the other members of the team, over the course of this discussion they realized they never really understood Jim. As he talked about how he experienced the organization, the other participants gained a better understanding of how to make the most of the genius in their midst. It was true that he did not think the way they did, but it was obvious that he was as dedicated as they were to turning the company around. Now the challenge was how they could use his considerable talents to their advantage. How could they get the best out of him, drawing out his strengths and minimizing disruptive behavior?

### *Giving Feedback*

One of the outcomes of the team intervention was that Jim realized that he was part of a larger system and that his behavior reinforced already prevalent silo behavior, prevented alignment, and hampered execution. Now, encouraged by the other members of the group, Jim listed several specific behavior changes he would focus on to facilitate communication and collaboration with the other team members. He confirmed that he was truly committed to effective execution of the company's intended strategy and to bring about the transformation process. In response, the others voiced their understanding and support of his need to protect the “spark.” After all, it was Jim's ability to think differently that could become a powerful source of new ideas and competitive advantage.

Subsequently, each member of the executive team, including the CEO, went through the same process. Each one took the “hot seat” to tell his or her story and was given constructive feedback by the group. Each individual session was concluded with an action plan to identify ways in which he or she could personally contribute to the team's alignment and become better at execution.

John was given feedback about his perceived overly competitive behavior. He was also told that he could come across as patronizing to others, a behavior he himself was unaware of. For his part, he expressed that he often felt excluded from the other executives' meetings. This confession led to an open and constructive discussion wherein team members shared their fears that he may have been a “spy” for the major shareholder. This exchange gave John the opportunity to assure the team that his first priority (and according to him that was also true for the shareholder) was to make the offshore project a success. But what was most encouraging during this exchange was that the other team members were able to clarify John's motives, which turned out to be strongly aligned with theirs.

The CEO also received some direct but constructive feedback on what he could do to be more effective. In particular, he was asked to run his meetings with a shared agenda that would engage all parties involved and with specific action recommendations at the end to ensure clear process and accountability. Comments were also made that he could be less “nice” and more prepared to say no to people, when necessary. He came to realize that his tendency towards conflict avoidance created conflicts.

By going through the group coaching process, all of the executives gained considerable insights into their own and others' strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the session, all the executive team members had developed personal action plans for change—based on their individual feedback reports as well as the comments from the group. They promised to coach each other whenever one of them was straying from his or her specific action points. In addition, for the team-as-a-whole, they had their first real debate to obtain clarity as to where the company had to go in order to be successful, and committed to a number of actions to take to become better at execution.

Through the intervention, the executive team started to act, for the first time, like a real team. They were now also prepared to work together—to align themselves behind the intended action plan—realizing that implementation, and not protectionism, was the most difficult part of their job. They were now able to communicate consistently to their employees where they, as a team, were going. Their corporate transformation plan had now become a living document. They were singing from the same page.