

MOTIVATING EXECUTIVES TO LEARN AND CHANGE IS A BOARD RESPONSIBILITY



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Boards of Directors should feel involved and committed to a company's success. But traditions sometimes limit their possible contributions. Adhering to the long-standing view of "noses in, fingers out" relative to corporate governance often leaves boards on the sidelines peering into the financials of the organization, but having little impact on important activities such as the development and growth of company executives. Directors can be motivating forces for learning, change and adaptation, but not if they hide behind financial reviews and asset discussion.

The Board and its members should be a part of the leadership that drives the organisational climate of the firm through their interactions with a number of key operational executives. The climate drives engagement, organisation citizenship (doing more than your job), innovation and energy. The degree to which the climate is experienced as developmental, helping people to grow and expand their capability and experiences, enhances people's motivation to join, and remain in the company, and to use their talent to the fullest, maximizing their contribution to the success of the organisation. Although this focus on development may start with the Board's impact on a few specific executives, it can soon cascade to everyone in the company.

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One of the major, if not THE major factors that cause declines in employee engagement in an organization is underestimating the motivational possibilities of developmental activities. Contrary to popular belief, most people do not work just for the financial compensation. They work for a sense of purpose and meaning. Neurologically, two dominant networks in the brain that are both needed often get misdirected and inhibit motivation, even that of executives. One network is the Analytic Network as studied and defined by Professor Tony Jack of Case Western Reserve University (i.e., technically, it is the Task Positive Neural Network) that is activated during non-emotional tasks such as financial analysis, reporting and problem solving. The other is the Empathic Network as studied and defined by Professor Jack (i.e., technically, it is the Default Mode Neural Network) that is activated during activities such as coaching, mentoring, relationship building, learning and creative thinking. The Empathic Network enables us to be open to new ideas, other people and emotions. We need both of these networks in order to function effectively as professionals and executives. But these two networks suppress the other neurologically.

While focusing on financial performance is necessary, it is sad that all too often Boards of Directors spend the majority of their time with executives discussing financials to the exclusion of learning, motivation and purpose. With this overemphasis on operations and financials, and the ensuing battle going on in the executive's brain between these two networks (analytic and empathic), they often do not see others in terms of their desire for development or their potential to learn and grow. Instead, they are more likely to see them in purely in an instrumental context. Others become simply a means to task accomplishment and reaching goals.

A risk, therefore, is that Directors see an executive who has an issue as a “problem bearing platform!” The focus is then on the problem not the person. This precludes the Director from seeing the development of others as a main priority in their daily activities. So, when the Director becomes overly task focused or consumed with numbers and results, they do not see the other people around them, nor appreciate their desire to grow and develop.

When a Director is in this mindset and offers help, it is often in the form of corrective actions or “constructive criticism.” We began studying this specific process in the 1990's. We call this type of “help” coaching for compliance. With coaching for compliance, we try to get others to act in a way we want them to act, to improve, to be motivated. In the case of a Board, an executive may sense the obligation to follow the instructions of the Director, even if they don't think it is the best solution. Most management training and management education is organized around this principal. Someone else points out your deficiencies and tells you what you should do.

In our book, *Helping People Change: Coaching with Compassion for Lifelong Learning and Growth* (published by Harvard Business Review Press), we tell stories of managers, executives, physicians, teachers and parents trying to help motivate others to learn and change. What they often do not notice is that any effort at complying with their wishes is short-lived. The change or learning is not sustainable. People's motivation and sense of engagement drops over time; they lose hope and stop bringing all of their talent to work every day.

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Coaching with compassion does not mean you become a social worker or therapist. It means you act like a caring human being,



not a taskmaster or a machine. There are enough terminators of human energy around. Boards that expand their focus to include the personal development of executives will infuse life and energy into the executive team. As this focus on development cascades through the organisation, it can have a positive and sustained impact on organisational performance.

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