

OUTGROWING SENSITIVITIES:

The Deeper Work of Executive Development

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The ideas discussed in this presentation were largely developed in collaboration with my colleague, Bob Kaplan. We have benefited greatly from the input and insight of David DeVries, Rebecca Henson, Denise Lyons, Sam Manoogian, Connie McArthur, and Amy Webb. Correspondence concerning this research may be directed to Rob Kaiser, Kaplan DeVries Inc., 1903 G Ashwood Ct., Greensboro, NC 27455. Electronic mail may be sent to rkaiser@kaplandevries.com.

Abstract

Just as in the world of sports, the inner game of executive leadership is pivotal. This paper develops this idea by describing how psychological wounds from the past sensitize executives to be anxious about getting hurt again. These vigilant dispositions—which are largely unconscious and invisible to the naked eye of onlookers—distort perceptions of organizational reality and lead to unnecessarily intense emotional reactions like anger, fear, and threat. In turn, this kind of emotional perturbation can throw off performance. A model is presented that provides a window into the world of private beliefs, expectations, and anxious concerns that often lurk beneath the counterproductive behavior of managers. Considerable attention is given to what development professionals can do to help their executive clients manage and, ultimately, outgrow the limiting effects of being hyper-sensitive to failure, rejection, dependency, and the like.

Outgrowing Sensitivities: The Deeper Work of Executive Development

Managers and athletes alike decide the success of their careers by the effectiveness of their behavior. But enhancing performance isn't just a matter of behavior alone, despite all the talk of behavior-based assessment, behavior modification, or behavior-focused performance coaching. What goes on under the surface of the behavior we see is as fundamental to performance as a solid foundation is to the structural integrity of a skyscraper. Let's look at a recent example from the world of Olympic figure skating.

The women's finals at the 2002 Salt Lake City games is our place. That night, Sara Hughes was a picture-perfect example of outstanding behavioral form in her championship performance. The cover photograph of most American newspapers the morning after she unexpectedly won the gold medal told the story. That picture portrayed an elegant Hughes gracefully angling her upper body forward, her right leg stretched backwards and parallel to the ice, her head gently tilted skyward and glowing with confidence. She executed every move in her routine with precision and seemingly without effort. Afterwards she was asked what she was thinking about during her gold medal performance. Hughes replied that as she prepared to step into the rink for her final routine, she figured she couldn't win a medal due to her weak performance in the first two rounds of competition earlier in the week. She said she told herself to, "Just go out there and have fun doing what you love to do—skating." With almost no external pressure and an internal mandate to "just have fun," Hughes was fully engrossed in her routine and her form was magnificent.

Now let's contrast the performance of Sara Hughes to that of the silver and bronze medallists, Russian Irina Slutskaya and Michelle Kwan of the U.S, respectively. Kwan was the silver medallist at the Nagano games four years earlier, where she was expected to win the gold. And again at the 2002 games, she was the favorite to win, with several television commercials suggesting her supremacy running the weeks prior to and during the games. Also, this year looked to be Kwan's last chance for a gold medal since she is expected to retire from Olympic competition. During her final routine in Salt Lake City, you could see the weight of these expectations on her face and posture. Wide-open eyes, tightly pursed lips, and tension in her neck and facial muscles betrayed her stress and worry. This inner turbulence was expressed in her outward form: she fell during the most difficult move of her routine, a move she consistently nailed in practice sessions earlier that week. The Russian hopeful, Slutskaya had a similar fate. After taking several years off from professional skating following a series of falls in high stakes competitions, she was eager to perform on the world stage again. Her team and countrymates were looking to her to help Russia reclaim its dominance in women's figure skating. But Slutskaya's attention was consumed with contending with the stress and anxiety from the pressure around her performance. You could see it in the serious, flat expression she kept on the ice. Her routine was remarkable for its lack of grace. And like Kwan, she fell to the ice during a complicated move. When form is off, performance indeed plummets.

How to account for the differences in performance? Two of the three skaters were threatened by the anticipation of losing, while the other, Hughes, felt fully invigorated by the challenge. That is, Kwan and Slutskaya perceived the demands before them to exceed the

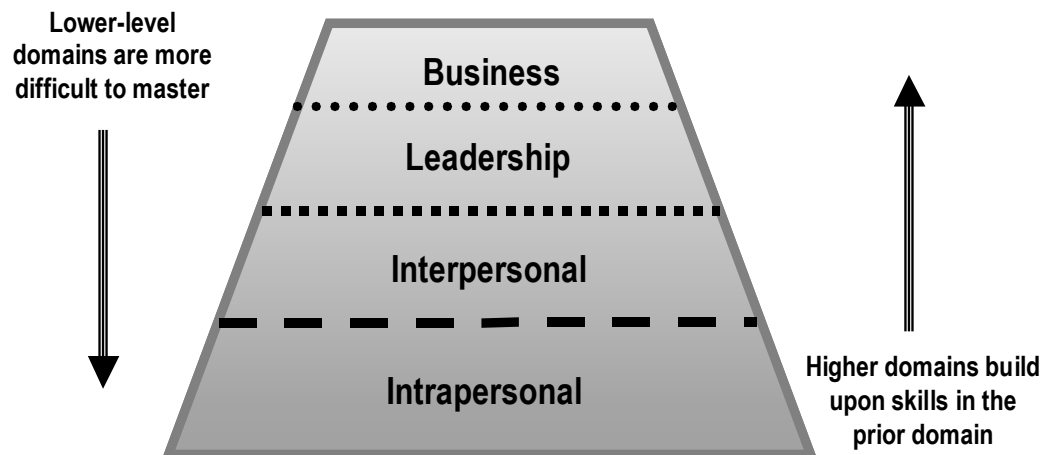
resources they had available in the pursuit of a goal that was a central part of each woman's identity. Evidently, they were not confident that their ability was equal to the task. Moreover, each woman had a painful experience in her past that may have amplified a sensitivity to coming up short. This is, I suspect, what produced the distortions in their behavior.

Of course, my purpose here is not to dissect the performance of world-class athletes. Actually, I am intent on sharing what my colleagues and I have been learning about the key levers for enhancing executive performance. But first, let's locate this approach in the broader field of management education.

Mapping the Landscape

Hogan and Warrenfeltz (in press) have provided a solid contribution to the field of management development with their domain model of management education. This taxonomy provides needed clarity to a varied field that has neglected to clearly map its subject matter. To briefly summarize, this domain model identifies the four broad buckets of what can be developed in individual managers as intrapersonal skills (regulating one's emotions, attitudes, and motivation), interpersonal skills (building and maintaining relationships), leadership skills (building a team and motivating it around a vision for outperforming the competition), and business skills (planning, budgeting, coordinating, and monitoring organizational activity). Starting with the intrapersonal domain, this ordering presents the relatively more difficult domains to master as preceding the easier ones to develop. Skills in each successive category also build on those found in the previous one. The primary contribution of this model is that it helps us to appreciate how development in one domain is linked to development in deeper domains (see Figure 1). Understanding the sequence of development across the full spectrum of what is required for success in a managerial role, for instance, helps us to redirect development efforts when attempts to improve leadership or interpersonal skills head on aren't working.

Figure 1. The Hogan & Warrenfeltz (in press) domain model of the skills that can be learned through executive education



It seems fair to say that most management development interventions are aimed at the more surface domains of this model—change attempts that zero in on interpersonal behaviors, leadership behaviors, or, most often, technical business knowledge (Burke & Day, 1986; Csoka, 1997). Less prominent are executive development interventions that explicitly get at the underlying drivers of behavior (Kaiser & DeVries, 2000). These approaches hinge on the assumption that growing as an executive requires growing personally (Kaplan, 1990; Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1991). In terms of Hogan and Warrenfeltz’s domain model, work on this deeper level is a matter of digging into the lowland of intrapersonal skills, the province of one’s basic beliefs and assumptions about the self and the world as well as strategies for regulating one’s impulses and drives. The potential leverage that improving intrapersonal skills holds for improving interpersonal, leadership, and business skills is evident in the current fascination with “emotional intelligence.”

There is a pragmatic basis for addressing the intrapersonal domain at the proper time and place in executive development. It is that improving performance involves not just modifying behavior but also contending with the distorted beliefs, biased expectations, and emotional overreactions that throw off behavior in the first place. It is only practical then to work not only at a behavioral level but also at a deeper level that is directly tied to behavior.

In the following pages, I’d like to elaborate a model my colleague, Bob Kaplan, and I have been fleshing out (see Kaplan & Kaiser, in press - a). It fits nicely in the intrapersonal domain. The key idea is that many executives—like most regular, everyday people—carry around a sensitivity to being psychologically hurt by a repeat experience of a painful event from the past. This anxious disposition can distort an executive’s perception of organizational reality causing unnecessarily intense emotional reactions like anger, fear, and threat. When the individual’s intrapersonal skills for regulating this kind of distress are under-developed, the result is counterproductive behavior of one form or another. This framework is a kind of pragmatics of personal functioning that can shed light on the internal causes of many executive performance problems. And it helps to identify the key levers for helping executives make sustainable improvements in how they fill their organizational roles. For those consultants who presently take a purely behavioral approach, our purpose has been to demonstrate the utility of also working on the individual’s personal development. For those who already work on both the outward and inward levels, we have tried to elaborate a practical view of inner dynamics that are behind the behavior we see from the outside.

The following ideas about executive performance and development are drawn primarily from our firm’s extensive experience consulting to senior managers about their leadership (see Kaplan et al., 1991, and Kaplan, 1998 for a summary of the approach). We have also looked to the literatures on stress and coping, emotion and motivation, and adult development to further inform our understanding.

Performance as a Function of Form

To help executives tap into that “last 20%” of performance potential, it helps to start with an explicit conceptualization of performance. Bob Kaplan has helped me to see how it is helpful to think of executive performance as a matter of form (Kaplan & Kaiser, in press – a). When an

athlete is extraordinarily effective or “on,” she is said to be in top form. As articulated in the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), having good form means being fully engaged with the task, where mind and body are moving with little or no friction against the outside world. The mechanics of putting, or shooting a jump shot, or swimming a freestyle race are executed with smooth precision and the individual is able to manage a delicate coordination between the self and the unfolding events on the course, court, or in the pool. There is a dynamic balance between responding to the presenting challenge as well as the internal state of the self.

When form is “off,” things aren’t quite so smooth. Physical action is tense and abrupt. Concentration is broken. The individual loses focus on external demands and the execution of form and falls into a reactive mode in an effort to manage internal demands—primarily self-protection. The person is apt to panic, primed for “fight-or-flight.” And form becomes distorted, a primitive approximation of what it is supposed to be. The grip is too tight, the follow through isn’t there, or the stroke is choppy.

Moving from the sporting arena to the executive suite, we find that the “off-kilter form” description of ineffective performance still works. When an executive’s form is off, it is usually a matter of going to the extreme. The tendency for ambitious people to go overboard is all too familiar. Senior managers must take stands and make their presence felt but it is not uncommon for executives to cross over into abrasiveness. Just ask the people that work for them. To empower is vital to running a portfolio of businesses or an entire enterprise, yet many hands-off executives trust and delegate to a fault. Strategic thinking is probably the most sought-after skill in top managers, but it is all too easy for the strategic reach of some expansive visionaries to exceed the organizational grasp, the capacity to implement. And nothing else counts unless you can execute, yet it is so easy for executives with a track record for getting things done as a general manager to get mired in operational detail when they get to the top of the house.

Executives are also likely to go the other way—to underdo things—despite how counterintuitive that may seem to those who think of executives as bold, aggressive people. Some senior managers have trouble mustering the courage to address performance issues with their team and so avoid the confrontation—or deal with it only when the problem becomes a crisis. Others are short on praise and struggle with expressing appreciation for their peoples’ contributions. And some executives spend almost no time tracking trends and contemplating the implications for their strategic position, while others get lost in the big picture and neglect the managerial blocking and tackling needed for their organization to execute.

In each of these examples, we see one of the two basic types of problems executives have with their form—overdoing or underdoing. In both cases, an otherwise vital role is distorted. This conception of performance problems is important because it helps us to define the developmental agenda as a matter of pegging the golden mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess—by either ramping it up or toning it down (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2002). It is also helpful in setting up our proposed explanation for many performance problems.

Sensitivities, Threat, and Distorted Form

So if this is how an executive’s form is off, then what throws it off in the first place? As

with an athlete, it can be something as simple as fatigue or illness. Low on energy, it is harder to be sharp, one's tolerance is lower, one is more likely to overreact. True enough. But in addition to factors like these, we have also found that an individual's "baggage" comes into play.

Lurking below the surface of poor form is, oftentimes, what we call a sensitivity (Kaplan & Kaiser, in press - a). In everyday conversation, sensitivities are referred to as peoples' "hot buttons" or "issues." More formally, we define a sensitivity as a dynamic pattern of emotionally-charged beliefs and expectations generalized from experience that function to protect the individual from repeating a painful injury, physical or psychological. They constitute the adaptive learning aspect of our internal alarm system that warns us when danger is afoot.

These cognitive-affective-motivational networks operate below the threshold of awareness in the nonverbal experiential information processing system that automatically interprets environmental cues through associations (Epstein, 1990, 1994). That is, sensitivities work by matching stimuli in the present perceptual field with encodings from the past without us being aware of them. They create a vigilant disposition to anxiously expect, selectively perceive, and intensely react to symbolic cues associated with a prior hurt.

When an executive carries around a sensitivity, it has its roots in bad experiences in the individual's past. These are events or episodes from which the person came away feeling extraordinarily inferior or incapable or unworthy or vulnerable. Familiar examples abound, from having one's trust in others grossly abused, to being rejected socially by one's peer group, to not doing well in school, to being the unfortunate child of negligent or abusive parents. Although experiences that leave lasting effects classically occur in childhood, they can also happen to adults, such as when tragedy unexpectedly strikes. In effect, these experiences injure the body psychologic to the point that the wound remains sensitive to the touch years later. The person is "once bitten, twice shy" as the saying goes. Overlaid on top of the person's innate survival system is a learned vigilance to be on the lookout for anything that even vaguely suggests the harmful experience is about to happen again (Mischel & Shoda, 1996). The human brain is evolutionarily engineered to work this way: after intense fear or injury, we become biased to perceive the early warning signs that predict a recurrence (Damasio, 1994). This sets us up to misinterpret a range of objectively benign environmental cues as potentially dangerous. The survival value of this tendency in our evolutionary history is obvious and, although the threats we face in the modern world are more psychological than physical, our system is still wired to function like this (Simeons, 1961). Ironically, it is the very same mechanism that accounts for how exquisitely adaptable we creatures are.

Thus, sensitivities are automatically activated by the features of situations that serve as symbolic representations of past hurts. Once triggered, the danger alarm is sounded and perceptions get exaggerated and self-protection takes priority because something of significance is thought to be at risk. Appraisals of situational demands and personal resources get distorted. The person's sense of what it will take to protect his well-being are overestimated while his sense of what he can bring to bear on the matter is underestimated. This is the definition of threat: when something of central importance to a person like well-being, self-concept, reputation, or a loved one is in jeopardy and the demands of putting it out of harm's way are seen as exceeding the resources needed to do so (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

When a person is psychologically threatened, the physiological stress response kicks in to protect her. This amounts to an intense parasympathetic preparation of the body for “fight-or-flight” (Benson, 1975; Cannon 1932; see also Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993). Motivational urges for fight-or-flight manifest in reflexive, self-protective behaviors that appear to observers as curious and noteworthy. They have the rigid quality of a fixed action pattern: the individual becomes excessively distressed if he is blocked from executing the sequence of behavior (Epstein, 1990). Self-protective actions following the “fight” principle appear aggressive and under-controlled; those following the “flight” principle look like avoidance and over-control. Whether the threat response leads to either overdone (fight) or underdone (flight) behavior depends on the individual’s motivational regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997). A promotion regulatory focus, where the preoccupation is with doing all that one can to prevail, produces compulsive “overdone” behavior. A prevention regulatory focus, where the emphasis is not provoking or otherwise steering clear of harm’s way, engenders inhibited “underdone” behavior.

Figure 2 (on the following page) lays out the major components of how sensitivities produce distortions in managerial form. It is a summary of the sequence of events that follow the activation of a sensitivity, from exaggerated appraisals through emotional arousal and motivation to the two types of distortions in form, behaviors that are overdone and underdone.

Underneath performance that is off the mark, many executives are sensitive one way or another—sensitive in the sense of being quick to feel threatened and react accordingly. If you buy the popular idea of executives as supremely confident people, then the suggestion that many of them hold sensitivities that make them vulnerable to feeling threatened may be wildly incongruous. The fact that sensitivities are not visible to the naked eye, however, doesn’t mean they don’t exist.

Sensitivities and the Performance Issues they Produce

Specific Examples

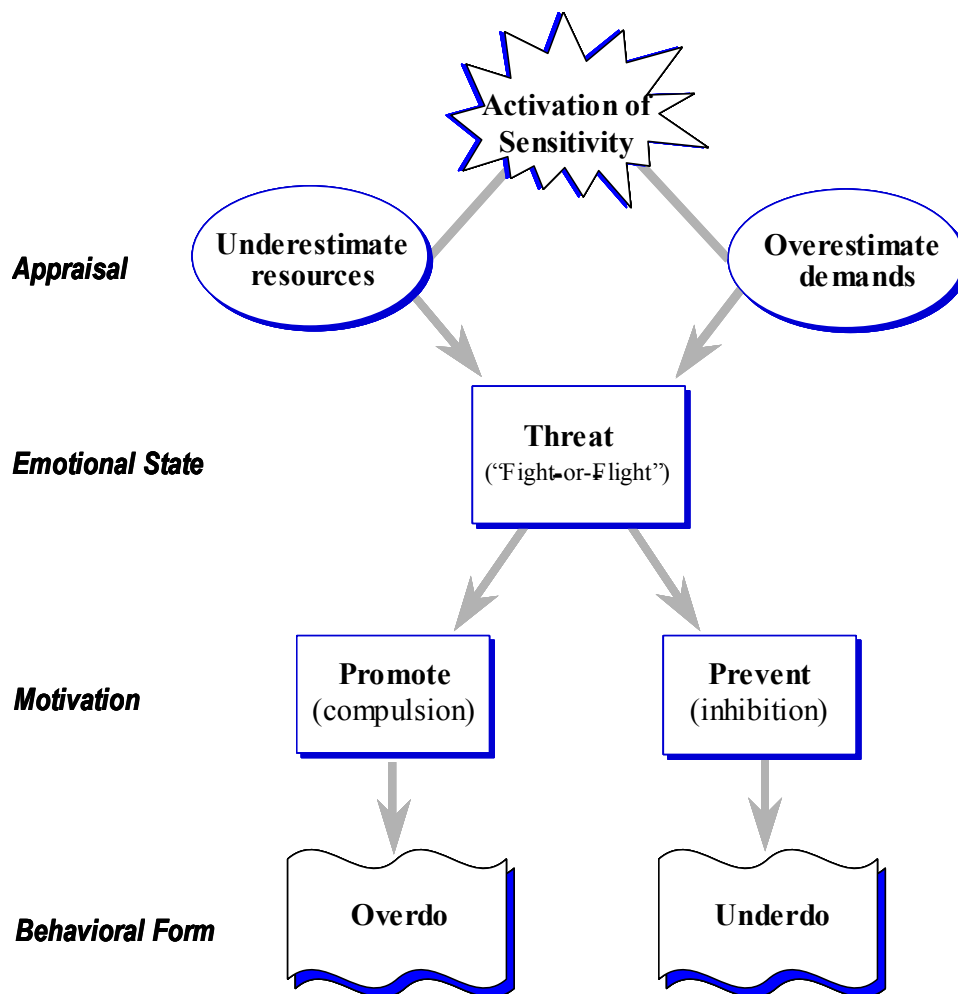
Having conducted a theoretical analysis of what sensitivities are, how they originate, why they persist, and how they effect behavior, let’s now look at some examples of specific types of sensitivities along with common distortions in the form of overdo and underdo that they cause in performance. A caveat: I do not mean to suggest that underlying every performance issue is a sensitivity. In many cases, ineffective performance can simply be a matter of a lack of experience and/or skill in that area, poor organizational structure and support, or a person-organization misfit. Nonetheless, sensitivities are often at play, more often than the casual observer might expect.

Sensitivity to being weak. The standard implicit expectation for people who hold leadership positions in a male-dominated executive culture, where the order of the day is out-performing the competition, is that they be strong, dominant figures (Lord, Foti, & DeVader, 1984). And at least some of the attraction to positions of power and authority in organizations comes from a need to compensate for feelings of inferiority. It is no surprise, then, that some executives are anxious to prove their strength. When problems arise, they swoop in and take charge, crowding out their

staff. They can hog all of the airtime in meetings, making it a one-way flow of information that holds others captive audience to a monologue. To mask uncertainty, they can present themselves in an overly confident way that comes across as sheer arrogance. And sometimes they are so concerned with “being right” that they’ll run roughshod over others in an anxious effort to prove their point. To say that all of this can be intimidating to others may be an understatement.

If going overboard in asserting oneself is one reaction to a complex about appearing weak, others include putting too little emphasis on enabling others to assert their selves and not treating them with due consideration. Executives worried about not measuring up personally often won’t seek input on important decisions. And when others take the initiative to serve up solutions or suggestions these managers can be nearly impossible to influence. They are also challenged to sit quietly and listen to someone else, frequently giving in to the compulsion to interrupt a speaker with their own opinion or with a midstream criticism of that person’s point. They can have trouble stepping back to let a direct report learn by working through a tough problem by himself. And they are frequently sparing with words of encouragement and praise.

Figure 2. Sequence of how an activated sensitivity distorts performance



Sensitivity to disapproval. Executives who are acutely concerned with being liked often find it unbearably difficult to hold people accountable for meeting expectations. They equate being firm with being harsh and hold back when an individual's performance isn't cutting it. They'll also procrastinate in removing a person from his job, even when that person is clearly in over his head. Others with a fear of being rejected have a hard time drawing boundaries around participation. Not wanting to offend, they'll allow decisions to stall while giving everyone ample opportunity to weigh in. When a consensus isn't forthcoming, they have a hard time taking a stand and moving forward. They can also have difficulty with influencing. At the first sign of opposition, the tendency is to cave in and avoid the conflict.

One executive my colleague coached kept himself holed up in his office and avoided walking the halls and having informal conversations with his staff. He feared forgetting someone's name or what project a person was working on and made the assumption that this would be an inexcusable faux pas, leaving the other person "totally deflated." The shame of it was that he was very well liked by his staff and he had a lot of credit with them. But as a result of sky-high expectations for what it takes to be likable and his insecurity about being able to meet those self-imposed standards, he scared himself away from opportunities to regularly check the pulse of his unit and make a personal connection to his staff.

A sensitivity to disapproval can also lead to overdoing it. One example is when an individual is indiscriminant with praise and flattery as an ingratiation technique. Over time, these kind words lose their currency. Managers with an excessive concern about being accepted also tend to take constructive feedback personally, no matter how respectfully delivered. If they don't internalize it and go into a tailspin, they will react defensively, perhaps even with hostility toward their "accuser." They overgeneralize from the feedback about a specific instance to inferring that an indictment has been made about them as a human being.

Sensitivity to being dependent. Managers who fully subscribe to the saying, "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," run into a lot of problems in large, complex roles. A history of being let down in some significant way makes it hard for people to trust others. An inability to delegate important tasks leaves these managers spread thin. They find that there just isn't enough time to get everything done and only get a fraction of their people's potential contribution. Or once they have reluctantly handed over responsibility, their tendency to constantly check up on their direct reports' progress becomes alienating.

Some suspicious executives have difficulty in cross-functional collaborations because of the worry around being let down by the other party. They might let an issue escalate, preferring not to ask for help lest the helper come back with a request for an even bigger favor of his own. Or conversely, they may be unwilling to make sacrifices for other people, expecting the favor will go unreturned, unappreciated.

Sensitivity to challenging authority. Incumbents of senior leadership positions are expected to take their seat at the table and be a real player with their peers and bosses. But some who have had bad experiences with parents who believed influence only moves top-down or who had a habit of reacting with volatility to disagreements can have trouble with engaging in dialogue and debate. In some cases, they are too quick to defer, fearing dissent could get ugly. In other cases,

expecting resistance, they'll attack with counterpoints, bludgeoning their position rather than simply offering an another perspective to factor into the discussion.

One senior manager I worked with grew up in an alcoholic family with little means and a physically abusive father. The feedback we gathered for him from his executive committee peers indicated a unanimous concern that the needs of the R&D function, his area of responsibility, were regularly neglected in strategic discussions. In particular, one person said, "I'd like [him] to be more assertive, to call me on my assumptions, and challenge me to understand the needs of R&D. I've always been in an operations role and don't have the research perspective. I need him to educate me." When I asked him questions to unpack the assumptions behind his choosing not to point out how his colleagues' ideas for running the company were not optimal for operations, he said, "If I challenge them, they'll skewer me. They won't fight fair. And if I take on [his boss], I might lose my job. I grew up poor ... it's something I'd never want my family to have to go through." In the throws of an emotional hijacking of his otherwise clear thinking, he was unable to accept that his colleagues were asking him to push back and challenge them. And he seemed to forget that his personal financial situation was quite comfortable. But that is what happens to our perception and judgment when we are subject to our greatest fears.

Intrapersonal Skills as the Bedrock of Performance

Hogan and Warrenfeltz (in press) claimed that intrapersonal skill is the foundation on which management careers are built. And in the preceding examples, we saw how failure at regulating an activated sensitivity can pose problems in interpersonal relationships, in fulfilling important leadership roles, and in applying basic business skills.

The disruptive influence of unregulated threat in relationships is transmitted through behaviors that appear curious and idiosyncratic, even down right annoying, to coworkers. Sometimes observers make an attribution of malicious intent on the part of an executive who is, under the surface, actually trying to protect himself from an anticipated threat. This doesn't bode well for a management career.

Sensitivities also account for one-sidedness or a lack of versatility in a manager's leadership style. Executives who tend to be too forceful, for instance, also tend to not be as participative or empowering as they need to. Similarly, executives who shy away from strategic responsibilities tend to put too much time and energy into the operational aspects of their jobs. Since versatility and balance across major dualities like these is integral to overall effectiveness (Kaplan & Kaiser, in press - b), failure to contain the polarizing effects of a sensitivity can also limit a career.

And the effective application of basic business skills like budgeting, monitoring, and coordinating resources depend on clear judgment—when the emotional perturbation kicked up by threat clouds one's thinking, these become difficult to effectively apply. Again, sensitivities are often at the root of problematic behaviors that undermine a career in management.

It is apparent, then, that without the requisite intrapersonal skills to regulate the effects sensitivities have on behavior, motivation, and judgment, performance deficits will show up in

the interpersonal, leadership, and business skill domains. Education and development efforts to remedy these needs will be only partially effective, at best, to the extent that they neglect consideration of an individual's functioning in the intrapersonal sphere. This raises the question of how does one develop these skills. Part of the answer can be found in the techniques that can help executives who are struggling to gain a measure of control over a sensitivity of one type or another.

Addressing Sensitivities in Executive Development: Short- and Long-run Strategies

“All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble...
They can never be solved, but only outgrown.”

C. G. Jung, 1976

By the time development professionals begin working with an executive whose performance is hampered by a sensitivity, many habits of mind and behavior have been firmly established. Indeed, we frequently hear from clients who receive a hefty amount of confidential feedback describing their shortcomings something along the lines of, “This isn't new—I've heard this message before.” What is most helpful to the individual at this point is a more complex understanding of the causes of her counterproductive behavior patterns and a rich array of strategies to facilitate change.

In determining whether a sensitivity is in fact the culprit, it helps to have a comprehensive assessment of the client's leadership in the context of his life history. Data on early life, current personal life, and previous and current job performance supplemented with a battery of psychological assessments provides the unique pieces to the puzzle. Jointly sifting through all of the data, consultant and client inductively build a theory of the individual's leadership strengths and limitations as well as motivating factors (Kaplan, 1998). Once the pieces are laid out, it is instructive to guide the client through the dynamics of how sensitivities play out so the individual can have authorship in how the pieces are put together. This step is crucial because the final picture has to feel legitimate to him. This can be a powerful reflective exercise. It is not uncommon for the individual to report being significantly moved from assembling a view of lifelong issues in a way that explicitly connects earlier events to powerful unconscious needs for self-protection and the unrealistic assumptions and expectations that come part and parcel and then link up with performance problems in the leadership role.

Fresh from having their eyes opened to a new way to understand and appreciate issues they have struggled with to little avail, characteristically action-oriented executives often feel a pull to get to work on “solving the problem.” It's the coach's responsibility to calibrate expectations. For one, the work of outgrowing a sensitivity is a long term process and demands a different mentality than executives typically bring to the problem-solving table. For another, there is a wide range of things that can be done to promote such development. This can be sorted out by helping the client develop action plans tailored to her specific issues and preferred learning style that run on two parallel tracks, one for the short-term and one for the long-run.

Before diving into strategies and techniques, it is worth mentioning one more expectation

the coach needs to manage. It is hard work that requires a significant investment of time and emotional energy to outgrow a deep psychological wound, if indeed it can be outgrown. The literature on how people actually change addictive behaviors and other powerful habits is clear that it takes sustained effort over a long period of time. Moreover, people cycle through the stages of change, making substantial progress for a period, then having an episode of relapse, and cycling back to making progress again and so on. People go through this cycle several iterations before making a lasting change, which then requires ongoing maintenance (for an empirically-based and validated transtheoretical model of how people change, see Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Understanding the implications of a commitment to this kind of personal transformation is necessary to keep developmental goals in perspective and persevere through inevitable setbacks and frustrations.

Short-term Corrective Actions

Although I suggested that outgrowing a sensitivity is a long-term proposition, there are things that can be done to contain their effects in the here-and-now. In the near-term, developmental goals are focused on damage control—on becoming aware of one’s sensitivities, learning to recognize their onset and how to interrupt the sequence, establishing better habits for managing one’s energy level, and seeking the support of a colleague. These five specific things an executive can go straight to work on are elaborated below.

Become aware of the sensitivity. The basic grammar underlying development is the movement from being utterly subject to something to being able to take it as object (Kegan, 1982). Being subject to motivational forces amounts to being unaware of them. Being able to take that something as object means being able to be consciously aware of it in the moment, able to recognize it as it happens. This is the importance of insight—when we are subject to a sensitivity and the network of assumptions and beliefs that grow up around it, we are under their control. They have us. When we can recognize them, though, we have shifted the balance and now they are something we can have and therefore control in some measure. So the first step on this developmental path is bringing the unconscious fears, anxious expectations, perceptual biases, and exaggerated response tendencies into conscious awareness.

It can be difficult to penetrate the wall of rationalizations and defenses that shelter a sensitivity from conscious accessibility. For one reason, it is painful to poke at a psychological wound and so this system of defense is usually well-fortified. For another reason, accepting one’s vulnerability can conflict with a preferred way of seeing oneself, especially if that idealized image is one of confidence and capability. Nevertheless, an individual saddled with a sensitivity must accept that fact in order to learn how to contain its disruptive effect.

Learn to recognize the bodily signals of threat. Emotions evolved in humans to serve an adaptive function, namely to prepare the body for action appropriate to the interpretation of what is happening in the environment (Plutchnik, 1980). We call them feelings precisely because we can physical sense the vibrations and excitations various emotions produce.

The emotions of fear and threat have characteristic physiological correlates (Tomaka et al., 1993): increases in heart rate and vascular resistance produce a dramatic increase in blood

pressure and bodily tension. Helping executive clients recognize these emotional signals helps them to detect the onset of threat and the triggering of a sensitivity. It's a matter of moving attention from the head to the body, of settling into oneself. When executives learn to do this, they are in a prime position to "catch themselves" before the fight-or-flight response kicks in and leads to counterproductive behavior.

Learn to short-circuit the fight-or-flight reflex. Learning to recognize when one is falling into the sequence of experiencing threat and the motivational urges for fight-or-flight is a necessary precursor for bleeding off the tension that produces exaggerated behavior responses. But now the question is once one senses the pattern is set in motion, what to do? One technique is simple to employ—redirect the tension and urge to act from something counter-productive to a benign activity. For example, one executive had a habit of interrupting people in meetings. She was compelled to raise her concerns or objections spontaneously. After she learned to recognize when she was about to fall into this habit, we worked with giving her a behavioral alternative. Now she writes her comments and objections to a speaker's message on paper instead of blurting them out. It took practice to re-route this tendency, but she has managed to minimize its occurrence. And to boot, she has a written record of her thoughts and responses to refer to later—after having the chance to reconsider if they really are worth mentioning after all.

Another way to short-circuit anxious behavior is to develop skill at calming the mind and body at will. There are two approaches to this that have been experimentally demonstrated to work (Seligman, 1993): applied relaxation and transcendental meditation. Through repeated practice, people can classically condition their bodies to calm down at the sound of their internal voice saying "relax" or some other phrase (see Ost, 1987). People can also train themselves to substitute a "relaxation response" for a threat response with the breathing and passive mindfulness techniques employed in centuries-old meditation rituals (Benson, 1975).

Managing one's energy. As noted earlier, when an individual is fatigued or ill, it's harder to cope with demands, demands in both the external and internal environment. It requires energy to catch oneself in the act of falling prey to the threat response. So another thing executives dealing with a sensitivity can do is take care of themselves by actively managing their energy level. This includes the usual list of things we know we ought to do: maintain a healthy, well balanced diet with plenty of water; get a good night of sleep; don't overindulge with alcohol or smoke cigarettes; and make regular time for aerobic exercise.

Another less known technique to add to the list comes from sport's psychologist Jim Loehr, who works with world-class athletes on maintaining what he calls an "ideal performance state" (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001). There are two key components to his model of energy management. First is what is called "oscillation"—the rhythmic movement between energy expenditure (stress) and energy renewal (recovery). What Loehr has found is that the primary enemy of high performance is not stress, but rather the lack of a disciplined recovery regimen to punctuate periods of stress. The second component includes rituals that promote oscillation. These rituals are regular and highly precise sequences that need to be established as habits. An example is making it a golden rule to take an uninterrupted short break between meetings rather than dash from one to another. Another example is to take regular vacations—especially following intense periods at work.

Enlist a confidant. We have found it surprising the extent to which executives don't take full advantage of the social support available to them from their colleagues. So another thing we recommend to our clients working to curtail the effects of a sensitivity is to enlist a confidant. Forming such a relationship with a trustworthy colleague provides at least three advantages—keeping the client focused on developmental issues, providing a source of advice or counsel, and defining an open space in which to vent or process disturbing emotions.

There is a pragmatic basis for encouraging an executive client to share with a trusted coworker what she is learning about herself and working on developmentally: it's a way of holding herself accountable to staying focused on the developmental agenda. It is noteworthy here that clients of executive coaching who share their development plans with coworkers are more likely to show performance improvements (Fulmer & Goldsmith, 2001).

Having someone in the workplace to turn to for advice when one is struggling with an emotionally charged issue is highly advantageous. Tapping into that person's experience, knowledge about the situation, and understanding of the issues the client is working on can broaden her view of the situation and possible solutions. The colleague can also provide a safe way for the client to check her assumptions and see if her assessment is out of alignment. She can also authorize the confidant to provide real-time feedback when she is over-reacting.

A confidant also provides opportunities to blow off emotional steam in a safe setting. The process of giving voice to unsettling emotions and doomful expectations has an uncanny way of helping us to see straighter about the reality of a situation. The mere process of talking about something that is feared can be relieving. After having been listened to, and listening to yourself speaking out loud, it is common to experience a release of pent up tension and stress.

Personal Transformation Over the Long Haul

Adult development is fueled by an iterative sequence of reflection and action. That is, introspection into one's experience provides inspiration for trying new ways of doing things while trying out new behaviors provides grist for the mental mill to generate ways in which one might think of things differently. Most adult learning is incremental—it's a matter of adding knowledge and facts that fit into one's existing mental container. Transformational learning is different altogether—it is all about fundamentally changing the shape of the mental container. Informational learning changes what we know; transformational learning changes how we know (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). And transformational learning is the key to outgrowing a sensitivity because it promises to reconstitute the nature of how a person conceives, perceives, and experiences the self and the world.

By no means am I suggesting that outgrowing a sensitivity requires one to radically alter his identity. What I am suggesting is that achieving a developmental milestone requires a character shift (Kaplan, 1990). Such a shift is not a revolution in who a person is, but an evolution significant enough to be considered fundamental.

What follows are steps that build on the incremental learning from the short-term corrective

measures above that can be taken to facilitate the natural course of adult development. I emphasize that using these techniques takes time, patience, and discipline. Counterproductive patterns established by a sensitivity are powerfully resistant to change and have become deeply ingrained habits through years of repetition. This doesn't mean that it is impossible to make a transformational shift, but it does mean that the resolve to grow must be fierce. When approached with discipline and steadfast commitment along with a sense of humor and compassion for oneself, following these guidelines can result in expanding the complexity of one's way of knowing and being in the world, making her more adaptable to cope with the exigencies of life and work.

Articulate basic beliefs and operating assumptions. To get a better handle on how to manage a sensitivity requires an understanding of how it is set off by how one makes sense of his circumstances. People construct their understanding of the environment by drawing upon the contents of their mental models—the basic beliefs and tacit assumptions they hold about the nature of the self, other people, and the world more broadly. To move this kind of knowledge from subject to object, the individual can build off of the skills at using biofeedback established earlier to monitor for the fight-or-flight response. Now he takes this one step further by carefully noting the circumstantial contingencies that are paired with the fearful feelings that crop up. The goal is for the individual to get a clearer sense of what it is about how he interprets events that threatens him.

As the person gets better at short-circuiting the fight-or-flight response, she can devote attention to identifying the appraisals that immediately precede the shot of anxiety that comes with being threatened. Here it is important to identify the thoughts about what of personal significance was thought to be at stake in the encounter, what was assumed to be the demands for ensuring it's security, and what were the estimates of one's efficacy to meet those demands.

This exercise is designed to identify and unpack tacit beliefs and operating assumptions that shape appraisals and determine emotional experience. The reason is that those assumptions will need to be carefully examined. Assumptions get an executive into trouble when she forgets that they are assumptions and instead takes them to be self-evidently valid facts. The learning opportunity is that when tacit beliefs are recognized as assumptions and not facts, they then become open to disconfirmation. There's no point testing the validity of something one holds to be true. Learning to distinguish between facts and assumptions breaks the seal of self-limiting ways of interpreting the environment that contain a person.

The basic course of learning is to begin with a fuzzy boundary around a principle and to slowly establish a more precise definition through repeated experience and contemplation. Because the beliefs associated with a sensitivity are acquired under conditions of high arousal and fear, they tend to be broad overgeneralizations. And because they reside in the nonconscious experiential part of the mind and are vital to a person's sense of security, one is typically subject to them. Thus, these beliefs and assumptions are unlikely to have been rationally scrutinized. Being able to tamp down the excessive distress associated with threat, the individual is in a strong place to begin exploring the validity of these assumptions, articulate boundary conditions, and make his mental model more accommodating.

Conduct behavioral experiments. Exploring revisions to one's mental models opens the door for trying out new behaviors. As a person grows somewhat more comfortable with being in a situation that has traditionally been threatening, she is ready to experiment with new ways of acting. This includes freeing oneself up from inhibitions to not doing something because of a fear of increasing the likelihood of harm (doing the underdone) as well as holding back on compulsions that were thought to be vital to overcoming the threat (not doing the overdone).

This process is best taken one small step at a time by capitalizing on naturally occurring, relatively low-risk opportunities to try out new behavior. The purpose here is to test the network of implicit beliefs and assumptions identified in the previous exercise according to the scientific method or manipulation and observation. Being able to recognizing assumptions for what they are, the person can seek out disconfirming evidence. It is important to take stock of when the expected negative consequences don't occur—and guard against rationalizing away the reasons for disconfirmation.

By conducting increasingly more “risky” behavioral experiments like these, the person is following a proven method for overcoming fears and phobias called systematic desensitization (Seligman, 1993). By doing the thing that fear precluded—and doing it not just once but consistently—people gradually learn subtle nuances that indicate when their fears are and are not warranted. "Phobias" become self-sealing by depriving the individual of the very experience that could disprove the fearful assumption. Therefore it is no small accomplishment to get over this barrier. The way to reduce one's fear is to do what one is afraid of, safely.

It is naïve to assume that all experiments will prove the individual's self-protective beliefs and assumptions are wrong. That is why it is imperative to conduct the initial experiments when the risk is relatively low. As comfort with conducting them grows and the mental models become more differentiated, one is then ready to raise the stakes—slowly and deliberately. This is another instance of where the help of a coach or confidant comes in handy.

Systematically reflect on experience. To capitalize on the potential learning from behavioral experimentation, it is useful to take time to think through the results. One technique for doing this is to establish a habit of journaling. Writing out one's experience and observations is more than a kind of exercise in discipline—it's a way of processing the lessons learned at a deeper level. When a person has to take the time to articulate an idea or a lesson, the mental model is strengthened.

Journaling doesn't have to be a big deal like writing a dissertation. It's not intended to be read by a critical audience. Actually, it is only intended for the author. There is no imperative to toil over grammar, structure, and composition either. The habit of regularly structuring thoughts to some minimum degree and committing them to paper is enough.

There is documented evidence that journaling about one's development can in fact facilitate transformational learning. A study of MBA students who were trained in the journaling and reflection method of “autobiographical self-awareness” found that a significant proportion of these adults actually made a developmental stage transition over the course of a year (Torbert & Fisher, 1992).

Explore values and the self-concept. Values and ideas about what “is me” and what “is not me” derive from learned beliefs about what is the subjectively right way to be. And because individuals are motivated to appear rational, those things that a person finds threatening tend to get devalued in the process of justifying one’s behavioral choices. Behavioral choices in the context of a sensitivity owe themselves to one of two basic motivational strategies for dealing with threat: the prevention regulatory focus that causes avoidant, underdo behaviors and the promotion regulatory focus that produce aggressive, overdo behaviors.

As self-awareness of the emotional basis for preferred ways of behaving expands from following the prior steps, an executive has the opportunity to cast her value structure in a new light. Let’s look at this in the case of how values are expressed in one’s leadership style.

We routinely find that the leadership style of an executive is often lopsided because the individual polarizes on fundamental dualities like forceful versus enabling leadership or strategic versus operational leadership (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2002). The pattern is to overdo one side and underdo the other side of the equation. The overdo side is highly valued by the person, a central way in which he defines himself. The underdo side is devalued and is often viewed by the individual as a caricatured version of the vital organizational role that it in reality is. If the person defines himself by embodiment of the overdo side, he also defines himself by not embodying the underdo side. And through the process of justifying one’s leadership behavior, values and beliefs about leadership in general get formed.

One way that growing as a person is central to growing as a leader is by coming to recognize when the distortions in implicit beliefs about leadership effectiveness spring from the same network of assumptions and beliefs wrapped around a sensitivity. As an executive gains greater perspective on this, he can entertain the possibility that the need for protecting himself from threat has influenced his beliefs about leadership effectiveness more so than the reality of organizational needs. This puts the person in a prime position to reformulate his leadership values.

The effect of reforming the structure of one’s values is that it frees the individual up to be more versatile. Behaviors that were once out of the realm of possibility become accessible. And behaviors that were taken to the extreme continue to be seen as important, but the negative consequences of their rigid intensity can be considered. So the person can reallocate emotional investments in the way he understands leadership. Another benefit here is that roles that the individual heretofore undervalued and so may be absent from the team he has staffed can be appreciated and filled accordingly.

Form a support system to sustain the effort. Finally, some measure needs to be taken to provide social support for the individual’s ongoing effort to bring about personal transformation. It is all too easy to slip back into old habits, especially in periods of chronic or intense pressure. Also, the human mind has an innate mechanism for moving unresolved issues into the unconscious recesses. What can be most effective in keeping the developmental agenda on the radar is forming a network of other people to sustain the effort. This is an extension of the reasons for enlisting a confidant discussed earlier.

A coaching relationship is one way to build social support. But the danger here is in becoming dependent on the coach. The coach's role is not about giving the client a fish, it is about teaching him how to fish. Further, a formal coaching relationship is time limited. An additional, more sustainable support system can be found in the people an individual works with.

In the right environment and organizational context, one can form a "learning community" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). The purpose of such a group is to create a holding environment where people can jointly work on their development. A learning community needs to be a trustworthy and safe place where individuals can share what issues they are grappling with, what they are learning about themselves, and find support for the inevitable growing pains that come with development. Challenge is another essential ingredient. It takes a good colleague to be able to feel both empathy for the struggle and the comfort to keep you honest.

In the spirit of dialogue and continuing commitment to development, the group should meet on a regularly scheduled basis. Beyond supporting individual development, this technique also holds promise for promoting development at the team or organizational level as individuals come to understand each other more completely and mutual trust and respect deepens.

Conclusion

At the root of many executive performance problems are sensitivities that dispose the individual to be threatened when he or she doesn't have to be. Unless these motivational sources of distorted behavior are acknowledged and the individual learns how to regulate them, significant and sustained performance improvements are unlikely. The deeper work of executive development requires becoming aware of one's sensitivities and learning how to minimize their disruptive influence. In the best case, through a variety of means, relationships, and sustained effort, one may outgrow the sensitivity and attain a greater peace within himself that is reflected in the actions we observe from without.

Looking over the course of a human life that has made such a journey can be like examining a cross section of an old tree. In the rings representing the earlier years of life we might find evidence of a wound, a distortion in the circle where the tree was cut into. For several succeeding rings, the distortions persist and are even amplified. But as we move our eyes to the outer rings, we find that the years have been kind. The once prominent distortions have given way to a smoother form, one that approximates a perfect, unbroken circle, save for the slight asymmetry reminding us of the journey the gentle old perennial has made.

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