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# Vision without action is a hallucination: Group coaching and strategy implementation

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Thinking is easy, acting is difficult, and to put one's thoughts into action is the most difficult thing in the world.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A good plan implemented today is better than a perfect plan implemented tomorrow.

—George Patton

Even if you're on the right track you'll get run over if you just sit there.

—Will Rogers

## INTRODUCTION

The challenge for many senior executives is to get everyone, from top to bottom, on board to make their organizations work—to implement whatever decisions have been made. How to go about it, however, is another matter. Without the presence of a team culture, it is very likely that executives will do things their own way, often resulting in uncoordinated, even conflicting decisions and actions. But if executives behave like ships passing in the night, they may act in ways that are not in the best interest of the organization or themselves. Implementation of strategy will suffer. The following case study illustrates how group coaching can be a methodology second to none, to have executives sing on the same page—and accelerate execution. It is an intervention

methodology increasingly utilized by premier strategic consulting firms.

## SHIPS PASSING IN THE NIGHT: A CASE STUDY

Pushed to action by rapid evolution in the petroleum industry, the executive team of a global energy company knew they had to transform their solid but complacent organization into a high-tech, sustainability-oriented firm. To facilitate this transition, the CEO (chief executive officer) hired Jim, a brilliant professor of engineering, as the new chief knowledge officer (CKO). Around the same time, another executive was asked to join the team as vice president for technology, products, and services. John was an experienced executive in the petroleum industry who was transferred in a secondment from one of the major shareholders to put into operation a large offshore drilling project. These two new additions worsened, however, what was already a rather ineffective decision making body. True to form, within several months of Jim and John's arrivals, war had broken out between these outsiders and the other members of the executive team.

Many of the other members of the executive team complained bitterly about Jim's disorganized, undisciplined, and even rude behavior. In particular, his way of dealing with e-mails and other forms of communication was seen as irresponsible. He seemed to respond when he felt like it, or not at all. There was a similar problem with executive team meetings; sometimes he just did not show up. Furthermore, what aggravated the relationships among the executive team members was the rivalry between John and the CEO—the former coming across as a know-it-all. At each meeting, there

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seemed to be a competition between the two of them to determine who was right about minor matters instead of focusing on the real, important issues.

Within a short period of time, the two newcomers were labeled with all that was wrong with the organization, the assigned scapegoats for the company's mediocre performance. What did not help was that the company was heavily committed to its offshore energy project, making it necessary to meet specific deadlines—and pressures were mounting. Although overruns would be extremely costly, there seemed to be a lack of urgency among the members of the executive team to move forward with the project. Instead, turf fights for resources were more important than alignment and working for the common good. Open, constructive communication was missing. Trust was completely absent. All of the executive team members were failing in the execution of its intended goals.

### A 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.

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