

# Are Canadian Executives Getting Left Behind?



The business executive of the future will have strong leadership skills, better personal communication, more ability to think strategically and more capability to work within a team-based work place. These are some of the findings of a Future of Work Survey of HR executives and managers conducted by Drake, Beam, Morin - Canada Inc.

So what's happening on the executive development front in Canada to realise this vision?

For the past six months I have been talking to senior business executives, heads of HR and executive search professionals in Montreal and Toronto. With very few exceptions, I am finding the following broad themes:

- ◆ Senior executives are expected to either not need development (after all, why are we paying them so much money if they aren't already perfect?) or they are expected to get any development they need as a direct consequence of doing their job.
- ◆ When development needs are identified, it is seen as a remedial problem; something to be rather ashamed of and kept quiet. Consequently, any executive development that takes place is done in a cloak and dagger way and kept very quiet.
- ◆ Organizations are reluctant to invest in good individual executive development. At best, it is seen as a necessary evil to save a problem executive.

There are, of course, exceptions to this rather black and white picture. However, there is general agreement amongst business professionals that I speak to, that this is a pretty accurate snapshot.

In the UK and USA, best practice executive development has largely shifted in emphasis from correcting performance problems (remedial) to optimizing performance (developing strengths). Executive development is seen as a crucial part of an organization's people strategy. Consequently, part of an executive's key performance criteria for the year emphasises development of self and develop-

ment of direct reports, in line with the company business strategy. This is usually linked to salary assessment.

As an Executive Coach in the UK, I was seen as a significant business partner, hired by organizations to help senior executives develop their leadership and management skills. Executive coaching is seen by many as one of the most efficient methods of developing key executives who benefit from development targeted specifically at their individual needs within their particular organization. In direct contrast to Canada, the coaching is very much out in the open and it is seen almost as a status symbol to have your own personal coach.

The Future of Work survey paints a picture of the executive that organizations need for their future success. Currently, skills in leadership, human behaviour, communication and strategic thinking are not being taught in any significant way on most MBA programmes in North America (Strategy and Business, Booz Allen Hamilton). The Management Education Task force of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the major accrediting organization of U.S. business schools, issued a report in 2002 recommending that the business schools teach "basic management skills, such as communications, interpersonal skills, multicultural skills, negotiations, leadership development, and change management." At the moment, not only are we producing executive MBA's with inadequate personal skills to lead effectively in the future; in Canada they then join organizations where executive development is hardly on the agenda. If this continues, Canadian executives will be left behind their counterparts in Europe and the USA and Canadian business will reap the consequences.

A shift in orientation is needed by Canadian business. The macho culture of 'there must be something wrong with you if you need help' needs to change. Executives are human beings and they are not perfect. They perform better and are more successful in their work if they are given personal and professional development in areas where it makes the most difference. The platitude of 'people are our most important asset' needs to translate into more action if Canadian executives are to remain competitive within

the international business community. And executive development needs to come out of the closet to make this happen. ■

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