

## Wanted: Confidants for senior HR people

*A vice-president of HR often serves as a sounding board for the CEO and other executives, but who plays that role for HR executives?*

BY LES DAKENS

**T**op HR executives occupy a unique spot on the senior management team. Often confidants to their peers and the CEO, they fill the role of an informal coach, which makes them the go-to individual when a sounding board, trusted advisor or mentor is needed.

To ensure effectiveness, a vice-president of HR must master this delicate balance with both the CEO and other senior members of the executive team.

It can be hard for peers to give frank feedback to an HR executive, out of a concern it might upset the person who has input on succession or promotion and holds the key to confidential personnel files. Similarly, depending on how open her relationships are, a vice-president of HR may feel constrained in seeking confidential input from the CEO and other senior managers.

Who, then, can play the role of confidant for an HR executive?

A CEO can provide direct feedback on performance, but as the CEO is also usually HR's boss, there are some constraints on what an HR executive may feel comfortable disclosing. The chair of the board of director's human resources committee (HRC) is a likely mentor, provided he has both the skill and the interest. But the chair of the HRC is also a member of the board and the HR executive may feel uncomfortable disclosing coaching challenges she may be having with the CEO or members of the executive team, as the chair is influential in assessing the performance of the CEO, executive team and the organization.

In some cases, a strong and credible peer on the executive team can serve as an internal coach and provide another source of feedback.

Yet, all of these possibilities may not be enough if an HR executive needs a free-ranging dialogue without the baggage of internal politics.

An external coach might be the best solution. A coach provides an objective voice, is a source of straight-talking feedback and can be a safe and trusted sounding board. It is within the coaching relationship that frustration or disappointment can be aired, different perspectives examined, roles and relationships discussed, advice on improving personal effectiveness can be

obtained and where "Should I go or should I stay?" conversations remain private.

"When talking with my coach, I felt as though I was talking with a wise 'Yoda.' That is, as a coach, he was part oracle, part father confessor and always had practical, put-in-action advice," says Doug Cable, senior HR director at Cangene Corporation, a Winnipeg-based biopharmaceutical firm.

A coach does not replace feedback or advice from a CEO or HRC chair but is another separate resource. If there are messages on performance that need to be delivered, it is not the role of the coach to relay them. But a coach can help an HR executive deal with such feedback and decide the best way to respond.

Beyond getting a handle on feedback, a coach is an important developmental resource for HR executives who want to continue to grow in their roles.

### Possibilities for coaching

There are a variety of scenarios where a specialized coach for an HR executive is useful.

**On a development track:** Some senior HR executives believe it's important to continually raise their personal performance bars. In this case, it is a straightforward developmental exercise for an HR executive to engage an external coach and find one with the right skill set and HR successes. As there are different coaches available, who offer a range of services in HR coaching, it is important to select one who matches an individual's development needs or aspirations.

"As a senior vice-president of HR, engaging a coach was the most relevant personal development initiative I have taken. Learning from someone who has 'been there' is one of the best ways to develop yourself professionally," says Diane Nyzistor, senior vice-president of global HR at SNC-Lavalin, a Montreal-based engineering and construction firm.

**Succession planning:** Many CEOs believe promoting from within for the top HR position has the greatest chance of success. An external coach, with senior HR experience, can work with the designated internal successor to prepare for the senior HR role. Chances of a smooth transition are improved when a coach works with an incumbent vice-president of HR and the CEO to "tag team" the execution of the new vice-presi-

dent's development plan, which helps co-ordinate the hand-off of responsibility.

**Performance issues:** Not everyone is open to feedback and an HR executive may be no exception. If there is reason to believe the individual has value to offer, but some personal or leadership behaviour is getting in the way, an external coach can be a practical answer.

A coach can deliver very specific performance feedback to an HR executive and work with her to make changes in behaviour. A very useful exercise can have the coach undertaking a 360-degree feedback process that helps to highlight areas of strength and obvious problems to be explored in the coaching relationship.

"It's very easy for an HR executive to develop a functional blindness to their own defects. It's not that they can't resolve them, it's that they can't see them. A great coach, in my experience, has the insight and proven HR track record to help any HR executive resolve these blind spots," says James Grossett, senior vice-president of human resources at Agrium, a Calgary-based fertilizer producer.

**Maximizing HR leadership:** Some senior HR executives have a deep understanding of the HR field but may have some barriers in communicating their knowledge and connecting with staff or the senior team. When major business challenges are confronting an organization, and deep change will be needed, it can be helpful for the vice-president of HR to work with a coach on how to communicate ideas, set a pace that gives staff a fair chance to execute plans and develop a process to measure effectiveness. Other leadership aspects, such as evaluating staff objectively, setting a realistic strategy, learning how to support rather than stay hands-on and enhancing strategic leadership skills, can also be addressed through coaching.

Coaching, like many forms of developmental assistance, shows results over time, rather than immediately. For a senior HR executive who wants to go to the next level in her professional performance, it is a choice that will benefit her in both the short and long term, both personally and professionally.

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