

# FAST-TRACKING UK PRODUCTIVITY

Roger Evans explains how succession planning and coaching can get the UK's chief executives and their businesses back on course

**D**emonstrating to the board the value of investment in strategic HR is difficult at the best of times, with incessant budget wrangling growing fiercer as finance directors and chief executives slash costs.

Boards don't need reminding that their people are their most important asset in this age of intense globalisation, in which manufacturing capital increasingly is shifting to low-cost, developing countries such as China.

Therefore, strong leadership is vital. But in this tough environment, our leaders are not lasting long. Our own research, *Turnover At The Top*, shows that the UK is suffering from one of the developed world's highest turnovers of chief executives and has a poor record of succession planning. Sixty per cent of our CEOs last fewer than three years, and that's taking into account the fact that 90 per cent are recruited internally.

Internal heads of people development and HR play a role in getting our succession planning back on track and providing our companies with the strong leadership skills they need.

## TACKLING THE CHALLENGES

Central to the solution is executive leadership coaching structured around business objectives within specific time frames.

The problem is that executive coaching has become one of those catch-all concepts that most top-level executives associate with woolly fire-side chats that have little to do with business productivity. The first hurdle

for training and HR departments then is to educate the board that executive coaching can add significant value to a company's performance.

The second challenge is targeting those who should receive coaching. There are three types of individual who qualify – those already in mission-critical roles, those 'on-boarding' or about to take up such positions, and 'high potentials' for senior roles.

Our experience is that companies today favour the last two categories of execs-to-be over the once-popular mission-critical executives. With coaching, on-boarders can quickly become effective in their new roles, and high-potentials can fast-track to senior leadership positions.

We have worked with clients who were expected to become senior leaders within four years, but with coaching, stepped into those roles within a year. It is clearly in the interest of companies and their targeted personnel to start the coaching process early.

## FUTURE BEHAVIOUR TODAY

So what does it mean to be coached if you're an on-boarder or high-potential? In essence it means 'practicing future behaviour today'. However, there are two common hurdles – behavioural and attitudinal approach.

Going forward, senior leaders will be judged on a different set of skills and behaviours than those that earned them their senior roles. Instead of needing to be technically brilliant at what they do, they will have to take a more strategic view of



Roger Evans is Director of Coaching for the Centre for Executive Coaching at strategic HR consultancy DBM

the business and know how to make others successful.

For many, this is a painful process. People often fail in senior positions when they cannot make the mental shift and realise their old behaviour will not determine their future success. I worked with someone who was promoted to senior partner at a professional services firm. He had been the firm's strongest player in tax, but in his new role he had to delegate the technical problem-solving and focus on strategic issues, such as developing people and cultivating new business.

My client had no experience in these areas and found it difficult to adjust. We helped him step out of his comfort zone, shift his approach to his new role and develop the strategy skills required to transform him from a 'doer' to a 'creator' and leader.

## ABSENCE OF ROLE MODELS

One of the greatest challenges our future leaders face, however, is the absence of role models. When we asked on-boarders and fast-trackers which of their bosses they most aspired to be like, many had difficulty coming up with a name. This is a damning indictment of the state of leadership and morale in UK business, and even more reason for companies to focus on leadership development.

Educating budget-holders on the value of executive leadership coaching is tough, and significant hurdles remain. But our businesses cannot afford not to invest in the development of aspirational future leaders who can drive the performance of their companies, and hence our economy, in an increasingly globalised business world.

'The first hurdle for the training and HR departments is to educate the board that executive coaching can add significant value to a company's performance'

