

Five Don'ts and Five Do's in Creating High-Impact Executive Development

Erik C. Olson, Executive KnowledgeWorks

It's no surprise that leading companies take executive development so seriously. While leadership is needed throughout an organization, mission failure at the top of the organization is hard to surmount.

But what does executive development look like in your organization today? Perhaps your strategy is intelligent, your last initiative featured good presentations and won polite and positive reviews, one or more senior executives remain vocal champions, and you are feeling pretty good about things. But, even though most executives in your company may readily admit having gotten real value from the last such initiative, do they seem to regard development as an interruption of their work? During executive development engagements, do their faces seem to be saying, "I'd rather be golfing"?

At Executive KnowledgeWorks, we think it's possible to change that. At the end of this essay you'll find a very different picture, a picture of how people might instead react to executive development in your company. Between here and there, we highlight some things to do—and not do—along the way.

Five Common Pitfalls in Executive Development Today

Despite some encouraging exceptions, much of what passes for executive development these days has little impact. Why? Here are some of the many common pitfalls:

Wrong Target

Despite apparently ubiquitous agreement that development should be "strategic" and "linked to real business issues," in many, many

EXECUTIVE
KNOWLEDGE
WORKS

4083 Ames Road Crystal Lake, IL 60014
815.356.3557 Fax 815.479.1187
<http://www.ekw-hrd.com>
info@ekw-hrd.com

companies it's just not happening. Too often the supposed "linkage" exists only in the minds of the professional development staff. Or it exists only at the level of worthy but hardly mission-critical micro-level tasks. Unless the executives themselves can get passionate about the target, you're not there yet. And even if your executives can get passionate about it, you still might not be there yet. Finding that magic target takes work, but the payoff in doing so is huge.

Wimpy Content

With all due respect to the thousands upon thousands of able content providers out there, the qualitative difference between truly world-class content and what many companies actually put before their executives is both vastly under appreciated and hard to overstate. At the same time, merely paying big dollars for an entertaining but canned and only marginally relevant presentation by a marquee name is not the answer either. To get world-class content, you have to ferret out first-rate raw materials and then aggressively manage them to hit the specified target. This takes good instincts, real know-how and a willingness to commit enough resources to make it possible.

Lack of Critical Mass

Many executive development planners succumb to the understandable temptation to go after many targets at once. Unfortunately, doing so often means the focus is so diffuse that no genuine business breakthrough is made on any of them. Determining what is needed to make such a breakthrough isn't easy, but it is essential, and the consequences are lasting. Achieve that breakthrough, and the executives will be itching to attack another target. Fail, and the executive development process can quickly be marginalized, along with the crucial competitive gains that well-executed development enables.

Inadequate Processing

Even if you've identified the perfect target, developed world-class content and brought a sufficiently critical mass of resources to bear on the target, inadequate processing of that content can gut the whole effort. Unfortunately, many companies assume this processing happens automatically and so they short change it, or they throw someone into the facilitator role who simply cannot establish sufficient credibility with executives. By contrast, effective processing normally requires generous allowances of processing time and a skillful facilitator, particularly someone who can deftly, but forcefully, put the onus on executives to take ownership for their development and to grapple fully and honestly with sometimes painful or even frightening business realities.

Wrong Tools

In too many companies, executive development efforts pick targets to fit a tool, rather than the other way around. Someone gets excited about this outdoor experience, that university program, this speaker, that simulation, or some growingly popular development methodology, and then starts looking for a target to use it on. Too much of this, and a company's executive development efforts quickly get bogged down in

formulas and dogmas, forfeiting chances for much greater impact on the targets that matter.

High-Impact Executive Development

By contrast, we at Executive KnowledgeWorks believe the highest-impact executive development first identifies key business targets, and then, via the best-suited tools, develops and powerfully processes high-value content in sufficiently critical mass to enable a business breakthrough. Furthermore, this general statement applies whether the development experiences look more like strategic business meetings, job rotations, coaching relationships, action learning projects, or anything else.

To ratchet the impact up to higher levels requires a process of analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation that is up to the challenge. Here is some of what we have concluded about this process:

Analysis and Assessment

Though speed and rigor are each to be prized, many needs assessments weaken, frustrate, and prolong the subsequent design and development phases by erring in one direction or the other. At either extreme, they do so by failing to provide an accurate and compelling picture of the key business issues and development targets to aim for. Some fail by rushing to a conclusion based on limited input and/or preconceived notions. Others fail because their reliance on overly formalized assessment devices actually blocks the ability of the designers to recognize and digest sometimes subtle but highly important signals.

In our experience, the most penetrating assessments usually involve an iterate dialogue between an objective business generalist from outside the organization and each of several key players inside. Intelligent, probing questions adjusted in real time – along with time for subsequent reflection – normally yield discoveries not only for the outside analyst but also for the organizational insiders. Well used, these dialogues can bring to the surface those emerging business issues whose importance might have been only partially appreciated before.

One tip: avoid reducing your discoveries in this phase to those one- or two word generalizations that jam the covers of business magazines. Yes, we know that leadership, teamwork, vision, and so on are essential. Pity the organization that is without them, and pity the executive development effort that doesn't strengthen them. But if you are striving for impact, they make second-rate design centerpieces. Instead, look for those business issues that, once surfaced, are so clearly important for that organization that they make people squirm.

Design

Once a mission-critical business target has been identified, design can begin. Here again, we caution against shortchanging this phase. From our vantage point, great designs seldom emerge by reducing this to a classic instructional design exercise. Instead, such designs are

conceived—at least at the outset—within a mix of deliberately maintained creative tensions, some of which seem almost like oxymora—focused diffusion, intentional non-sequiturs, calculated indecision. By bringing together inside and outside expertise into a sustained environment of disciplined creativity—in some ways comparable to a jazz session with a set of experienced musicians—great possibilities begin to emerge.

The best of these possibilities are captured, elaborated, refined, tested at a conceptual level with various key players in the organization, and refined and elaborated again. The result is a proposed set of highly integrated development experiences which, if properly executed, will help drive and shape the organization's response to its key business challenges.

Though I have left mention of it until the end, one question that must be answered early on is whether the primary development aim is organizational or individual. That is, you must help the organization's leadership to determine whether the most pressing need is to define the game or to strengthen the players. You must also help them recognize the difference in the implications for the executive development process. Even though many of the business-driven learning experiences might look alike superficially, their micro-designed objectives for those learning experiences will differ importantly. As a result, so must the selection and development of the resources used to provide those learning experiences, and so must the manner in which those experiences are processed.

Without going into all the reasons, we have found that the good news about this choice between organizational vs. individual development is this: design with one as the main focus, and you'll normally get both. But divide or confuse your efforts (another form of forfeiting critical mass), and you may get neither.

Development

No matter how powerful and exciting the design, the impact usually will be compromised unless you can secure first-rate raw materials and then manage them to the specified target.

In some instances, resources available in the market can serve commendably with only minor tailoring. But finding the best of these and managing the tailoring to the specifications are arts in themselves. And if you're not watchful, the tailoring may actually be only superficial, with the final product not addressing your target.

In most instances, you will get the highest impact with full customization. This sounds daunting, and it can be, but if you've

pinpointed the best-suited raw material, customization is much more straightforward.

Suppose your company is under threat of a hostile takeover if it cannot get its stock price up, and the needs analysis suggests the market is hammering you for failing to strategically manage costs. Accordingly, the design calls for a critical mass of content and processing on various facets of this topic. Most likely, certain categories within the larger domain of strategic cost management fit your company's situation especially well. Find the needle-in-the-haystack expertise or learning experience that matches those categories, and customization should be much more straightforward.

Lest I misrepresent it, the bigger trick is finding that ideal needle. It takes a real network, a solid understanding of the nooks and crannies where the best resources are to be found, exceptional research skills, enough understanding of the issue to distinguish the real thing from pretenders, and a fair amount of resources to support the hunt. This is all the more true with a tight delivery deadline.

Even if you find the ideal match, managing the development and integration of all the resources into a coherent package aimed at the target is also essential, and requires an exceptionally disciplined process. Without such a process, when the day comes to implement, the sound of your "high-impact" experience may be a loud thud. This is unfortunate for more than someone's career; it can also disillusion executives about the value of development experiences available to them within your company.

Delivery

Probably no group is more intolerant of weak delivery than executives. By delivery we mean everything from the pre-experience communications, to on-site logistics, to transitions, to the core of the development experience itself.

The last of these is the greatest challenge. Echoing our earlier discussion, the credibility of every thing and every one the executives encounter is essential. If for any reason they come to believe that some experience lacks excellence or is a waste of their time, the whole development effort suffers. Thus, the skill and the instincts to properly evaluate design elements and resources before the delivery phase are essential.

Just as essential are the skills and instincts to adapt to executives in real time during the development experience itself. In particular, we have found that a having a highly skilled facilitator involved throughout is a key requirement for success. This capacity to adapt in real time is not merely a capacity to accommodate. Indeed, in some instances, the key contribution an attentive facilitator can make is to appropriately

challenge the executives to grapple with the issues at hand more forthrightly. For this, an objective outsider thoroughly familiar with the design and rationale for the executive development experience is usually best. Such a facilitator knows where to lead when guidance is needed, and has less at risk when a CEO, for example, needs to be challenged to get honest.

Evaluation

A final point may seem to contradict what I've said so far: sometimes during the course of an executive development experience a moment comes—and it is a moment you should hope for—when the very design you so carefully crafted and developed should be jettisoned. This is that moment when the impact of the experience has been so powerful that it has made possible a new target—a target more real, more urgent, more central to the future of the business. While the requirements are too many to elaborate here, when that moment comes, you must be ready not only to leave one design behind but—in almost real time—to generate a better one.

Throughout this discussion I have spoken of impact. This presupposes, of course, that impact is measurable. Most human resource development professionals are familiar with the prevailing models of measuring impact at four or five levels, running from participants' subjective reactions to real business results, particularly return on investment. In this, our position is fairly mainstream: high values on all measures are desirable, and real impact at the business level is the ultimate goal.

At the risk of sounding somewhat immodest, what perhaps distinguishes EKW's philosophy and approach to evaluation is the confluence of one conviction, two distinctive capacities, and another seemingly contradictory conviction:

- **Conviction One:** We believe that making a breakthrough at the business level—not just an impact, but a genuine breakthrough—is what executive development (and, indeed, any human resource development initiative) should be all about.
- **Capacity One:** Toward that end, our firm has maintained a practice that fortunately with unusual frequency has accomplished just that—business breakthroughs.
- **Capacity Two:** Correspondingly, we can provide as rigorous and valid an evaluation as a company could want, at whatever level, over what ever duration.
- **Conviction Two:** Yet ultimately even the best results on the most rigorous evaluation mean little if the senior executives of an organization can not feel the impact themselves.

The implication for evaluation: we recommend identifying early just which measures of impact will have meaning to an organization's leadership, and then measuring no more and no less than that.

Moving Forward

Near the beginning of this essay I promised a picture of what executive development could look like in your organization. While the components will vary, imagine the following: One of the senior executives anxiously corners you during a break and demands that you find a way to put together more on this as quickly as possible, and to reschedule the next initiative to launch twice as soon as you'd planned. Meanwhile, the participants, rather than wishing they were golfing, cannot wait for the break to end so they can re-engage. They now view this development experience not as an interruption, but as vital to their work—so vital that there's almost an insurrection striving to wrestle the agenda in a new direction.

Sound like fiction? This is real. And at Executive KnowledgeWorks we believe you should not be satisfied with less.

This essay has been about the background philosophy and approaches we use in creating high-impact executive development, but the approach here has been general and informal. On each of the pieces we've discussed, as well as on specific styles of executive development—from sit-down business meetings to coaching to action learning—there is much more to say.

We invite you to contact us at info@ekw-hrd.com or 815.356.3557 to discuss ways we might collaborate to make the greatest impact in your organization.