

THE EDUCATION OF AN EXECUTIVE COACH

In October 1996, I met with a regional director of operations at McDonald's Corporation to discuss putting on four half-day workshops on leadership and teamwork for a group of his department heads. A month later, he was promoted, and I thought my first chance to work with a major corporate client was going to disappear before I even started. Fortunately, two months later, his replacement brought me in to complete the project.

In July 1997, I followed up with my original contact and offered to go over the material in the workshops on a one-to-one basis as a thank you for bringing me into McDonald's. He then asked if I would serve as his executive coach. Little did I know how that moment would change my life.

My first executive coaching relationship at McDonald's evolved into me working with more than 50 individuals at McDonald's. In addition to the director of operations, I worked with restaurant managers who ran a single restaurant and area supervisors who were responsible for 15 restaurants. I would ride with them and observe them in the restaurants and in meetings and offer my insights.

After proving that I could add value that drove real business results, I worked with regional and divisional executives responsible for a billion dollars or more of the business. The challenges for these executives ranged from overseeing the performance of 500 McDonald's restaurants to interacting with McDonald's owner/operators to communicating with their bosses back in the Oak Brook world headquarters to managing a staff of 65 employees.

And then this thing really started to spread.

Here's a typical month of how I interacted with my clients.

Early in the month, I worked with an operations team within McDonald's to clarify its specific goals, tactics, and planned activities for an upcoming initiative. Later in the month, I did a workshop on innovation for a group of McDonald's marketing people as well as their advertising agencies. In between those two events I interviewed ten people at the Coca-Cola Company in preparation for a workshop on teamwork for a cross-functional team within Coca-Cola made up of people from operations, marketing, and account services.

The next day, I rode all day with a truck driver for Cassens Transport to better understand the challenges that drivers and union members face. A few weeks after that experience, I facilitated a series of discussions between 80 truck drivers and the top management of the company.

At the end of the month, I provided a coaching session for a senior-level executive at ANDEO Nalco Chemical, a large chemical company working in the paper treatment industry. He was in charge of the pulp and paper division, and we discussed the impact the internet was having on the paper industry. The day after that I met with the CEO of a newly founded biotech company and we discussed how to create an effective board made up of scientists, private investors, and management personnel. The next day I spent several hours observing the head of operations at a large Marriott hotel and then shared my observations of his performance with him.

This variety of events with various organizations has gone on continuously for ten years.

I've watched and offered my input on a variety of projects. I coached the top two executives in one McDonald's region for a period of seven years as they generated the longest consecutive streak of positive annual comp sales growth of any McDonald's region in the country. I worked very closely with the director of new business development at GSD&M, a national advertising agency, during the entire five-month, three-phase winning pitch for the \$100 million BMW account. Since I know nothing about advertising, my role was

to observe her in action, give her feedback, and collaborate with her on how to effectively influence a variety of key moments.

I worked for a year with the vice president of ticket sales for the St. Louis Cardinals as he and his team broke the all-time record for preseason ticket sales. I worked with the leaders of Mackey Mitchell & Associates, the architectural firm, as they prepared the winning presentation for redesigning the University of Notre Dame's campus.

I coached the vice president of risk management for Marriott USA. He was responsible for all the insurance claims filed at all the Marriott branded hotels across the United States, which represented about \$6 billion in hotel revenues. Anything from sexual harassment to a guest slipping on a wet floor to Hurricane Katrina was his responsibility. He had teams of 30 to 35 people set up in five offices spread across the United States. I sat silently through a three-day meeting with his direct reports and watched the human dynamics involved in running such a complicated situation. Then I gave everyone feedback.

Over the years, at any given moment I would be coaching a group of people responsible for anywhere from \$2 to 5 billion worth of revenues. My clients included division vice presidents for the Coca-Cola Company, a national manager for Toyota, the president of a billion-dollar construction company, and the division president for a billion-dollar chemical company. Through it all, not only was I observing the people I coached, but I also saw hundreds of other executives and managers interact in very diverse, real-life business situations. Each of these clients added their wisdom to my continually expanding knowledge of what makes managers successful.

As you might expect, my role with these executives has been much like that of a business quarterback coach. I held many sessions with them behind closed doors and over the phone to prepare for important meetings and critical decisions. The topics included key personnel moves, strategic maneuvers, critical communications, developing innovative approaches for creating improvements throughout their business units, adjusting to massive changes in market trends, dealing with difficult people, managing the flow of talent, and a host of unexpected crises both locally and nationally.

I would sit for hours and hours observing an executive in situations ranging from huge conferences to private strategic planning sessions. We would then discuss what had just happened and identify what worked well and what could have made the scenario more effective in terms of moving the business forward. Many times, I was asked to facilitate difficult meetings on hot topics with the manager's direct reports and colleagues. I soaked up every observation, every conversation, and every process being used. I filtered every piece of input through the screen of what was actually improving important business results and what was not.

Meanwhile, I continued to do keynotes and workshops for a variety of organizations. In preparing for every presentation, I would interview 10 to 15 people in the organization to learn more about their industry, the opportunities they faced, and the dangers they dealt with. In this manner, I learned about companies like AT&T, which was SBC at that time; Eli Lilly; Boeing; and Albertsons.

Oftentimes I would spend entire days next to employees in these corporations while they did their normal day-to-day work in order to learn their business from an internal perspective. I spent a day working as a crew member at McDonald's and several days riding with department heads from over a dozen different functions; two days at Marriott next to the concierge, the housekeepers, the people at the front desk, the people in the kitchen, and the valet drivers; and four days with sales managers at Toyota Financial Services, meeting with a variety of people at Toyota dealerships in four different cities.

Another added bonus in my development occurred when the managers I coached told me about the books and magazines they were reading. Every time something was recommended to me, I read it. Without realizing it, I was becoming a warehouse for ideas on what I came to call "the discipline of business acceleration," which is the field of study of how businesses generate significant, sustainable, and profitable growth.

I've now provided over 1,500 executive coaching sessions for more than 100 managers in over 20 industries, and invested more than 3,000 hours on-site observing executives and managers in their

jobs. With each interaction, I picked up one more insight into what it takes to successfully run a business unit. You might be surprised how often success came down to doing and saying the little things.

The biggest lesson I've learned is the managers who are most successful in terms of accelerating their organization's desired short-term and long-term business results are very practical.

Here is a brief summary of some common traits of these practical managers.

They simplify their businesses rather than making them more complicated. They work with their staffs and business partners to clarify the two to three most important business outcomes for their organizations to achieve. They collaborate with people from various functions to identify what needs to be done and how it will be accomplished to achieve the desired results for both the short term and the long term. They ask difficult questions and listen for the answers. They follow up with people to ensure that commitments are being kept, and they provide positive or negative consequences depending on the situation.

These practical managers remind everyone in their organizations of the importance of really understanding consumer needs and demands. They focus the people in their organizations on executing the few items that are critical to driving the desired outcomes. They are relentless about getting people in their organizations who think clearly, communicate effectively, and get things done. They are equally relentless about letting go of employees who are rude, constantly theoretical, and don't accomplish what needs to happen.

They maintain lives outside of their business lives. They realize that burnout is a real issue that needs to be carefully avoided. They also carve out time away from their families, employees, and customers just to think about the key issues that will move their organizations forward. In all situations, they avoid business rhetoric and management buzzwords.

Most importantly, they don't try to be someone they're not. They know what they're good at doing and what they're passionate about

doing. Then they spend the vast majority of their time leveraging their strengths and passions in ways that generate better sustainable results for both their organizations and their customers.

This book provides in detail what I have learned about how to be a practical manager from the extraordinary group of teachers I've had the honor of working with as an executive coach. I hope the ideas in it will help you to accelerate the achievement of your most important business outcomes. I hope it helps you to accelerate your career, as well. Throughout this book, I will share with you what I've learned in trying to find the answer to these four major questions:

1. What makes a manager effective in terms of his or her individual performance?
2. What makes a manager effective in terms of improving a group's performance?
3. What makes a manager effective in terms of improving an organization's performance?
4. What can be learned from consumers and how can those lessons be used to improve the future performance of an organization?

In this book, I share a couple dozen stories from my executive coaching sessions. All the dialogue in the stories is based on actual experiences, but I have changed the identity of the individuals in the stories.

A few years ago, I taught an MBA class on managerial leadership. The department head wanted me to focus almost solely on business theories. I did it his way for two weeks, and then I tossed out the theories and gave the students practical advice based on real business situations. Interestingly, things went much better when the students got information they could actually use. Instead of receiving a diploma, my goal is for you to gain something from this book that could be more useful: practical ideas on how to generate better sustainable results in your most important business outcomes.