WHY TOP TALENT SUCCEEDS IN TURBULENT TIMES

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The prosperity of the last decade had given some executives false security. Success could be achieved by merely riding the wave. We are now in a different climate where the pace and consequences of change are accelerating. Globalisation, new business models and rollercoaster markets are just a few of the complex challenges.

Jobs are more intense than before with ongoing waves of new demands. For some, it can feel as if they are on a sandbank in the middle of a river looking nervously at a rock and a hard place. The pressure to remain agile, competent and relevant within these new landscapes can trigger personal dilemmas and tensions. An executive is now in the realm of not-knowing or no longer being in control of a situation. They are dealing with half-knowledge, ambiguity and uncertainty.

Why do some executives cope better than others in this turbulent environment? Our executive coaching agenda with these high-impact performers develops their thinking and tactics to expand the space in which they operate (context and positioning) and extend their personal and professional reach (voice, connections, energy.)

Rather than waiting for the next whitewater rapid, top talent already have their strategies in place to realise their potential and leave their mark. The have continuously worked on their career and not just in their career.

EXPANDING THE SPACE

Insight: Being macro- and micro-centric in their perspective, these astute individuals view the action from both the balcony and the dance floor. They continually adjust their mindset about the future, while striving for exemplary results today. SWOT analysis of the personal, role and industry context in which they operate enables them to assess a range of options so tactics can be identified, prioritised and realised.

Solution: Without the right context there is no canvas on which to paint. Context embraces a number of notions - what you stand for (vision, goals and values); where you are going (your personal mandate, what you are paid for and the push / pull factors for change); and how you expect to behave (how you will compete, your stance on issues and what limits.) This is articulated into their strategic personal action plan.

Insight: Intelligent people know how to solve a problem. The most talented know how not to get into the problem in the first place. There is a normal life cycle of nurture, growth, peak and decline. This is not schadenfreude. To break the road to decline, they start a second curve before the first one reaches its peak and before any distinctive competence becomes a liability.

Solution: Elite talent are smarter about the career curve recognising when to go upstream to develop a new strategy or further options. If not paranoid, they are highly aware and alert. These traits give them the insight to recognise a pending inflection point, triggering the necessary actions to avoid derailment or worse, a career crisis.

Insight: Having come to terms with the fact that some skills, while effective, have a use-by date they look for ways to renew capabilities, up-skill and re-position. Operating outside their comfort zone and pushing the boundaries of their ability to adapt, they create parallel paths to experiment with new possibilities and test new directions.

Solution: The ability to recombine skills, competencies and experience gives them increased options to move between functions, divisions, industries and secure their career if needed. Their strategies are fundamentally about choice, difference and advantage. Rather than limiting their perspective, they adopt an expansive view. More than just repackaging their background, they stretch assumptions about how their career will evolve. They are more prepared as they develop new skills with a strategic eye toward emerging business models.

Insight: In charge of their careers, they find segues to suit their needs and unique capabilities. Using their track record to validate who they are and what they have done, they self-select, pursue ambitions, make their goals known and proactively make their career happen. It is as much about deciding what not to do as it is about what will be done. They have inherent resilience to move ahead, even in difficult times.

Solution: Independent and action oriented, they are committed rather than compliant - they own the outcome. Being great advocates of accountability they take responsibility for their actions calculating the risk and actively managing it. Discerning, they trust, but verify.

Insight: Top talent are not only clear about their purpose. Clarity regarding their identity and how they want to be perceived is vital.

Solution: Knowing their signature strengths and what makes their personal brand distinctive positions them more effectively within their organisations and among external communities. They use this to frame, control and influence others' views of who they are and what they can accomplish. Leadership brand is an essential means for focusing attention. It represents who you are and what you stand for. It leads you to make constructive change towards a future you want.

Insight: While everyone has multiple intelligences that impact on potential and self-esteem in different areas at different times, top talent does have a self-determination and optimism that they will succeed. Their optimism leads to a belief that they can achieve, and importantly will achieve. They feel in control and rarely are victims of fate, luck, muses or chance. They believe there is a meritocracy. This modus operandi means that they are more likely to achieve results.

Solution: It might be a cliché but that doesn't make it any less true that "success breeds success." They see opportunities where others see threats. Rejection is one more way for them to demonstrate their skill, innovate or test the status quo. With high levels of self-efficacy and a greater comfort for ambiguity these "movers and shakers" willingly try more different things to achieve greater returns. Their internal locus of control gives them confidence to make things happen.

Insight: Seizing the opportunities that change presents and using them as a source of advantage, while overcoming any natural resistance to change, is often a challenge.

Solution: Top talent uses change as a time to make decisions and do something different. For them change is an iterative process as each action taken causes more change and a new reality - then a new set of problems to solve or opportunities to exploit.

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Insight: Corporate environments are highly interconnected within organisation structures and how they work with external partners - such as suppliers, customers, universities and service providers - in the effort to move innovative ideas or business objectives forward. This means power increasingly is derived through people - through relationships, authenticity and alliances.

Solution: Power-to is replacing power-over. Top talent use the authority of their executive leadership in broader ways and for broader purposes. They use their influence, create change and build teams to develop sustainable approaches. They pass on what they have learned and create meaningful collaboration through shared experiences. They foster a kind of power that nurtures power-with and power-within.

EXTENDING THE REACH

Insight: Protecting their franchise is paramount. They want their voice to matter. They actively seek to secure their special position with those who count, drawing on their consummate stakeholder management.

Solution: Voice is about being heard, clear visibility and the weight to negotiate prized career moves, key assignments and the right level of reward. They assess their value, credibility and currencies based on inclusion in key decisions and how close they are with the most senior leaders. Executive decision-making is not just about strategy and technical expertise - it relies strongly on authority, political savvy, conflict management and trust. This builds on their power.

Insight: Top talent is highly connected with intricate network maps and coveted levels of social capital. Most on the fast-track learn that the higher they are the more important are trusted and diverse contacts.

Solution: It is not surprising they appreciate the confidential input, reliance and connection of their trusted advisors, mentors and champions who form their advisory board. These relationships are valued at a premium. They reciprocate not only on referrals, but act as candid thought partners helping each other to resolve specific problems, work through issues of change and transition, assess strategy options or provide expertise and special knowledge. It is a very potent coalition.

Insight: Work-life balance is elusive. High-achievers accept this. Instead, they focus on and actively manage their energy levels, wellbeing and engagement for greater effectiveness and satisfaction.

Solution: Given what they want to achieve in all domains of their life, high-achievers have come to know what truly matters, have a 'personal why' and then set their choices accordingly. They recognise what makes them energised, what drains them and where their imbalance or stress comes from. They become better at pacing themselves. They have a set of renewal strategies. Effective at setting priorities, they regard time as having as an opportunity-cost. They can identify and work on those most critical activities that produce a real and significant business outcome.

Insight: Some leaders in conflict situations are 'hostages' to their fears and negative emotions, failing to see the opportunities or the damages being caused to results or reputations.

Solution: The most talented know and recognise how intellectual and interpersonal conflict differ. Conflict is constructive when it enhances deeper thinking and stimulates ingenuity. In high-trust cultures people debate rigorously, but they also cooperate easily, viewing others as equal partners who readily commit to the best overall outcome.

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Insight: Actions under change and pressure are watched closely by others, impacting culture and team behaviour.

Solution: Successful leaders are aware of their own triggers under pressure and consciously modulate their behaviour to make sure they act in ways consistent with their beliefs and core values. The lessons learned from dealing with uncertainty, can transform good executives into leaders. *Per ardua ad astra* - through difficulties to the stars. Those who have endured adversity are most likely to be the ones with the resilience and resolve for even higher levels of achievement.

Insight: The difference between successful leaders and others is not that they have never experienced failure or been wrong, but that they are able to recover and learn from that experience, then move ahead.

Solution: In executive work, qualities as the ability to recover, learn from diverse situations, un-learn and re-learn are critical. Performance counts, but success also depends on knowledge, learning and insight from a range of experiences while achieving results.

Insight: Leadership is highly personal and leaders will make important business decisions in their personal way. Fulfilling leadership careers are founded on being clear on whom you are, listening to your moral compass and following a personal meaning for success and happiness.

Solution: Real motivation stems from making a difference, doing interesting and challenging work that has meaning, making a particular choice at a difficult moment with professional integrity and having done something of which they can be proud. It is not primarily about financial reward – the best people can always get that.

FROM INSIGHTS TO ACTION

The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic. (Peter Drucker)

Astute talent knows that success comes from more than performance ratings and hard work. They do take charge with proactive and adaptive responses to changing environments. They: **1.** Analyse their context to act on future trends, threats and options. **2.** Rework career strategies and proactively develop new capabilities with a strategic eye on emerging business models and segues to suit their needs and unique capabilities. **3**. Shape a distinctive leadership brand based on signature strengths. **4.** Act with optimism, self-determination and resilience while managing any inherent risks. **5.** Seize the opportunities that change presents. **6.** Use power-to, power-with and power-within. **7.** Capitalise on their franchise by stakeholder management, being heard, clear visibility, weight to negotiate and inclusion in key decision-making. **8.** Value connections and social capital at a premium. **9.** Work on what truly matters in all domains of life with tactics for pace, energy and renewal. **10.** Differentiate interpersonal and intellectual conflict. **11.** Know their trigger points to modulate their behaviour under pressure. **12.** Recover and learn from mistakes or failure. **13.** Personalise their leadership and gain motivation from meaning, making a difference and integrity.

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