How One Organization Recaptured Over 100 Hours per Week of Valuable Senior Executive Time

BY FRANCIE DALTON

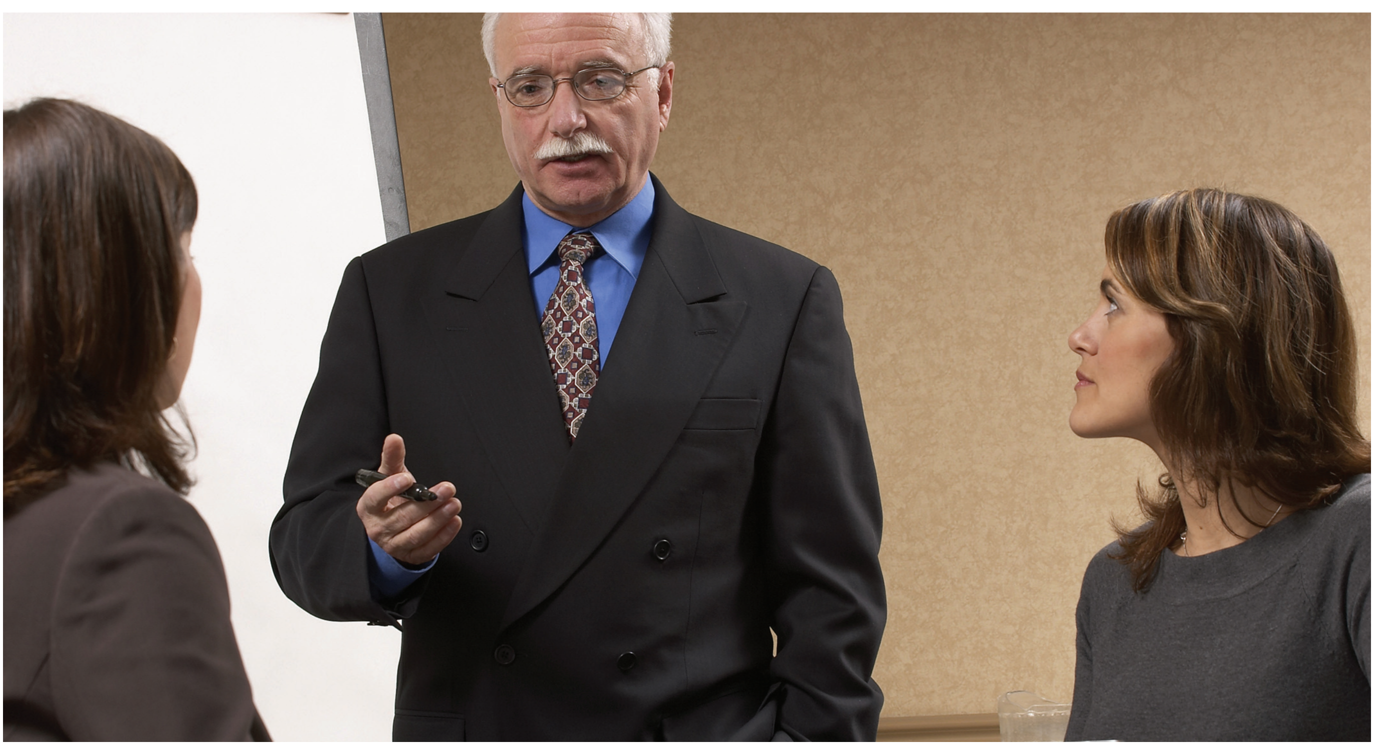
Even in the current economy, the organization described in this article was remarkably successful. Its client base was growing, business metrics were continuing to break records, employee retention was stable, neither salaries nor bonuses were frozen, and no layoffs were planned.

Indeed, the organization had even added several new positions over the past year. Promotion from within was the norm, employee suggestions were welcomed, cross-departmental collaboration was fluid and easy, and morale was at an all-time high. The senior executives were a top-notch team of robust contributors who oversaw about 65 people. Management retreats were conducted twice annually, during which vulnerabilities were assessed and leveraged and opportunities were identified with attendant plans to mine them. While the industry in which this organization operated was hemorrhaging badly, reserves in this firm were healthy, and its board was delighted with the outcomes achieved. Absolutely nothing was awry. So what motivated the CEO to seek outside management consulting?

What indeed? This organization clearly didn't need a management consultant. One could quite persuasively argue that the CEO was ill advised to expend additional resources when the potential benefits were nothing more than a "gut feeling." Then what could possibly have motivated the CEO to seek outside management consulting for his organization when all was operating so smoothly?

Before answering that question, it is important to know a bit more about the CEO. In particular, five characteristics about the qualities of his leadership are germane.

First, in his own words, he is driven, demanding, and hard to please. He was perfectly willing to set expectations at seemingly impossible levels that made his executives uncomfortable, yet he consis-



tently catalyzed extraordinary results.

Second, with an uncanny knack for recognizing talent, he had repeatedly placed in positions of authority those whose track records had not yet been established. By creating such opportunities for fledgling leaders and expressing confidence in their ability to succeed, he accessed their discretionary energy and their commitment.

Next, he interviewed and hired for more than competencies and organizational chemistry—he hired for "hunger." He looked for people who were willing to take considered risks; to stretch both themselves and others. He looked for people who were hungry to surpass themselves.

Fourth, he was willing to prune out of his organization those who didn't lead well—even if they were delivering the business outcomes required of their positions. He understood what committed individuals can achieve, and worked hard to prevent the crippling, corrosive impacts of retaining toxicity and negativity.

Finally, he was not long at rest, even when current and desired states were aligned. Instead, he persistently mused and encouraged others to muse about how much better the organization, a department, a function, any outcome could be. While always at the ready to share how proud he was of his executives, he continuously sought input, tapping the intellectual and experiential capital of his employees, adhering to the centuries-old advice of a Latin saint: "Good, better, best; never let it rest; until your good is better and your better is best."

Within this context, it is perhaps easier to understand why the CEO chose to deliberately disrupt already high organizational performance to excavate additional opportunities for improvement. Another motivation for intensifying operational scrutiny was his increasing certainty that the quality of work submitted to his executives by subordinates fell far short of that ultimately submitted to him. Therefore, his executives were spending considerable time engaged in rework. When executive time is spent in this way, strategic thinking is blunted, innovation and creativity wane, and competitive edge diminishes. To fix this problem, he brought in a management consultant to study what and how his executives were delegating. Outlined below is the three-step process that revealed and redeployed over 100 hours of senior executive time *per week* toward value-added work.

Step 1

In private meetings, each executive was asked a series of questions, including:

- What functions do you find most aggravating or banal?
- Which functions take up most of your time?
- What functions don't require your level of intellect or experience?

The purpose of these questions was to identify what functions they performed well, but should not be performing. Six themes emerged from their responses:

- Accepting incomplete work from staff whose existing competencies were sufficient to produce completed work,
- Retaining functions when the provision of explicit instructions or templates would equip staff to perform them,
- Failing to progressively develop within competent staff the acumen prerequisite to taking on more substantive work,
- Following up with staff to learn the status of previously assigned tasks,
- Attending/leading meetings where their attendance/leadership didn't add value, and
- Choosing to be involved in enjoyable work that didn't require their intellectual capacity.

Step 2

Executives were then asked to estimate the number of hours they were currently devoting *per week* to each of the functions identified in Step One. Here are the results:

- Executive #1: 25 hours;
- Executive #2: 8 hours;
- Executive #3: 13 hours;
- Executive #4: 17 hours;
- Executive #5: 10 hours;
- Executive #6: 7 hours;
- Executive #7: 4 hours;
- Executive #8: 9 hours.

Needless to say, the totals took their breath away. Yet when pressed to explain having spent so many hours performing functions they should not be performing, they each had seemingly coherent rationalizations. Perhaps because they had taken on the functions slowly at first, a little at a time, they had become conditioned to doing them and never realized they had the option not to perform them. Indeed, those who were struggling mightily under the heaviest workloads slammed brain-first into the inescapable realization that they were largely complicit in becoming overwhelmed.

Step 3

Securing commitment from these executives to redeploy their time commensurate with their capabilities required one final question: "What outcomes could you achieve for the organization if you were no longer bogged down in the functions identified in Step One?"

It is important to note that their responses were immediate and detailed. No urging was needed. They had already thought about and were fluent with initiatives they knew to be of compelling value. In fact, they had for some time been longing to redirect their attention toward those initiatives. But

they were trapped by their own perception that they alone could perform the necessary rework. Failing to require decision-ready work from their subordinates perpetuated both subordinate incompetence and the cannibalization of unique value-added executive intellect by rework.

This process allowed the executives to consider afresh the various initiatives they had put on the backburner. Once reacquainted with the richly substantive challenges they could be pursuing (if only...), getting their cooperation in developing specific steps to follow to free up the requisite time was quick work. Most prevalent among those next steps were the following:

- Stop fixing incomplete staff work and following up on assignments;
- Stop overlooking poor performance—confront it, impose consequences;
- Segment complex processes and delegate them;
- Learn to develop and articulate explicit, measurable performance expectations;
- Require staff to engage their executive only after exhausting all logical next steps;
- Require a quality of support from staff equaling that provided to the CEO; and
- Equip staff to handle the flow of work resulting from this exercise and provide training as needed, but realize that they're likely already capable.

It should also be mentioned that the CEO himself endured the same invasive questioning. In fact, he allowed himself to be ruthlessly, iteratively badgered with questions for an entire day. As a result, he realized the need for and hired a COO, and created two additional management positions. He realigned workflow among his executives, rallied the organization around two key multiyear strategic goals, and commissioned a specialized client survey that subsequently drove all work initiatives.

He also identified and provided for newly revealed professional development initiatives, and helped his executives align subordinate performance with expectations through the use of evidence-based performance measures.

These results aren't unusual. The same underperforming assets, along with the attendant opportunity costs, may very well exist in your organization. However, based on a business consulting career spanning 20 years, I know that until the catalytic questions in the above process are asked, many functions performed by executives masquerade very effectively as being legitimate work. Further, these results cannot be elicited in a team event, or in a meeting with the CEO. Instead, this sensitive and highly individualized process requires a skilled third party who can extract substantive responses and constructively confront talented senior executives.

It should be noted that this process is almost always uncomfortable, primarily because attendant to the application of the necessary scrutiny is the expectation of change. But comfort *cannot* be the yardstick by which we measure success—whether personally or organizationally. "Comfort" simply isn't how we as professionals get to the top of our game, and it's not how we lead our organizations to peak performance. Indeed, the more we mature, the more we realize that it is the very antithesis of comfort that produces success. And in the current business climate, it is essential that we be willing to subordinate "comfort" to the pain of meaningful, substantive change.

CEOs can't afford *not* to pose the question: "How much better could we be if...?" Whatever the responses that emanate, how much more easily and quickly might implementation be achieved with 100 additional hours of executive time per week? **CM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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