

# How One Organization Recaptured 100 Hours per Week of Valuable Senior Executive Time: A Case Study

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*Fostered, developed, and formalized over the past three decades, the components of Total Rewards have continued to increase in both number and substance. Beyond flexible workplace, career opportunities, well-being, and of course, compensation, further evolutions include work-life balance, customized recognition, meaningful work, overhauled performance review methods, and commitments regarding culture, diversity, shared values, transparency, and corporate social responsibility. Intended to earn employee engagement, motivation, and loyalty, employer adoption of these essential advancements is robust. Undermining the sustainability of each of these advancements, however, is a strategic imperative that is often neglected: the individualized, longitudinal, earnest engagement of senior executives in the development of staff.*

*The following case study documents the benefit-rich process of constructive disruption that recaptured over 100 hours per week of valuable senior executive time, redeploying it toward the deliberate, focused development of staff.*

## CASE STUDY

The organization described in this case study was and is remarkably successful. Its business metrics were breaking past records, neither salaries nor bonuses were frozen, and no layoffs were planned. While the industry in which this organization operated was hemorrhaging badly, revenues in this firm were healthy, and its board was delighted with the outcomes achieved. Nothing was discernably awry, so what motivated the chief executive officer (CEO) to seek outside management consulting?

What indeed! One could quite persuasively argue that the CEO was ill-advised to allocate funds and executive time when the potential benefits were nothing more than a “gut feeling.”

Knowing a bit more about the CEO will help answer the question. In particular, five characteristics about the qualities of his leadership are germane:

- *First*, in his own words, he was driven, demanding, and hard to please. He routinely set expectations at seemingly impossible levels that made his executives uncomfortable, yet this consistently catalyzed extraordinary results.
- *Second*, with an uncanny knack for recognizing talent, he repeatedly placed in positions of authority

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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.

- *Third*, he interviewed and hired for more than competence 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 wanted to hire people who were hungry to surpass themselves.
- *Fourth*, he was willing to prune out of his organization those who did not lead well—even if they were delivering the business outcomes required of their positions. He understood the importance of preventing the crippling, corrosive impacts of retaining toxicity and negativity.
- *Finally*, he was not long at rest, even when current and desired states were in alignment. Instead, he persistently mused and encouraged others to muse about how much better the organization, a

department, a function, any outcome could be “*if only . . .*” 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, exhorting that all should adhere to the centuries-old advice of Latin Saint Jerome of Stridon: “Good, better, best, never let it rest, until your good is better and your better is best.”

Few of his direct reports shared these five characteristics. Within that context, it is perhaps easier to understand why the CEO chose to deliberately disrupt the already impressive organizational performance. In addition to excavating additional opportunities for improvement, he was increasingly certain that the quality of work submitted to his executives by their subordinates was far short of that which was ultimately submitted to him. He was convinced that his executives were spending considerable time engaged in revising the work of their subordinates. Since he knew that taking further action without sufficient data would be unwise, he engaged a management consultant to determine the extent and quality of executive engagement allo-

cated to staff development. Outlined below is the three-step process that revealed 100 hours *per week* of senior executive time was being allocated to doing the work of subordinates.

### Step One

In private meetings, each executive was asked a series of questions, among which were:

- Reflecting on your average work week, what specific functions consume most of your time?
- Among your direct reports, what unnecessary demands do they make on your time?
- What functions do you choose not to delegate because you really enjoy doing them?
- Which functions do you perform that do not require your level of intellect or experience?

The purpose of these questions was to identify what activities/interactions were diverting their focus away from executive-level work. Shown below are the six common themes that emerged from their collective responses, along with the corresponding negative impacts:

1. Accepting incomplete

work from staff whose existing competencies were sufficient to submit completed work the first time. High performers can see that mediocre work is accepted and will not stay in such cultures.

2. Retaining functions when the provision of explicit instructions or templates would equip staff to perform them. This constitutes a breach of the implied contract between employer and employee and is inconsistent with allegedly shared values.
3. Failing to progressively develop, within competent staff, the level of acumen prerequisite to taking on more substantive work. Professional development is dwarfed. Career trajectory is slowed/flattened, blunting motivation.
4. Following up with staff to learn the status of previously assigned tasks. Misrepresenting responsibilities and obscuring expectations which creates confusion.
5. Attending/leading meetings where their attendance/leadership would not likely add value. Implies a lack of trust and withholds op-

portunities for staff to learn how to lead teams.

6. Choosing to be involved in enjoyable work that does not require their level of intellect. *Suggests that staff development via executive engagement is subordinated to executive preference.*

### Step Two

Executives were then asked (again privately) to estimate the number of hours they were currently devoting *per week to each* of the functions identified in Step One. Answers were documented and tabulated outside of the executive's view. The total number of hours per week devoted to the functions identified in Step One were then revealed to each executive. The results appear below.

● Executive One:	25	hours
● Executive Two:	8	hours
● Executive Three:	13	hours
● Executive Four:	17	hours
● Executive Five:	10	hours
● Executive Six:	7	hours
● Executive Seven:	4	hours
● Executive Eight:	9	hours
	Total: 93 hours	

The CEO himself endured the same invasive questioning, revealing that he too had the opportunity to meaningfully redeploy seven hours of his time.

Needless to say, the totals took their breath away. Yet when pressed to explain having devoted so many hours to performing functions that should be performed by their subordinates, they stated that doing so was necessary since subordinates were not reliably producing "ready for prime time" deliverables.

Failing to require decision-ready work from their subordinates perpetuated staff incompetence and cannibalized the unique value-added potential of each executive. Indeed, executives who were struggling mightily under the heaviest workloads acknowledged the inescapable fact that they were largely complicit in creating an overwhelming workload for themselves and delivering undercapacity results.

All who are employed receive rental payments in the form of salary in exchange for behavior and results that align with or exceed the job description. Perhaps for the first time, these executives recognized that they were receiving executive-level pay while performing the duties of subordinates and that this be-

havior had vast radial impacts on retention, innovation, and the health of the enterprise.

### Step Three

Securing commitment from these executives to redeploy their time commensurate with their positions and capabilities required three final questions. Again, these questions were posed in private conversation.

1. *Can you identify a major outcome you are fully capable of delivering to the firm—one that you'd be ecstatic to tackle since it would produce a watershed of benefits for the organization?*

Their responses were immediate and detailed. No urging was needed. They had already thought about and were fluent with the initiatives they knew to be of compelling value. In fact, each of them genuinely wanted to redirect their attention toward such initiatives but had been operating under the faulty perception that they alone could adequately perform the Step One functions.

2. *How long would it take to achieve it?*

Again, answers were documented and revealed to each executive.

3. *How does that amount of time compare to the total amount of time you are currently allocating to the functions identified in Step One?*

Without exception, the total time spent on Step One functions was substantially higher than the time required to achieve the watershed outcome.

### Next Steps

This three-step process allowed the executives to consider afresh the various initiatives they had unintentionally placed on the back burner. Once reacquainted with the richly substantive challenges they could be pursuing “if only . . .,” getting their cooperation in developing specific steps that would free up the requisite time was easy; they were eager to do so. Most prevalent among the next steps were the following:

- Stop fixing incomplete staff work; reject it. Elicit a higher standard of work.
- Stop initiating follow up on staff assignments; stipulate the required cadence for updates/deliverables.
- Stop overlooking mediocre performance; constructively confront it; impose accountability.

- Stop withholding complex problems from staff. Delegate the hard stuff so staff learn how to choreograph the processes of capitalizing on opportunities and neutralizing vulnerabilities.
- Reconfigure workflow as needed to align required functions with staff strengths.
- Learn to develop, define, and articulate explicit, measurable performance expectations.
- Require staff to engage their executive only after independently considering possible next steps, bringing forward their recommendations and associated rationale.
- Require a quality of support from staff equaling that which an executive provides to the CEO.
- Equip staff to handle the flow of work resulting from these steps and provide training as needed. Express confidence in their capabilities.

### CONCLUSION

The details of this case are not unusual. The same underperforming assets, along with the attendant opportunity costs may very well exist in your own

organization. However, based on an ongoing business consulting career spanning over 34 years, it is clear that the until the questions in the above processes are asked and answered, many functions performed by executives can masquerade quite effectively, if unintentionally, as legitimate executive-level work.

Results like those depicted in this case study 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 challenge talented senior executives. At least initially, the process is usually uncomfortable, primarily because attendant to the application of scrutiny is the expectation of change.

But comfort cannot be the yardstick by which we measure success—whether personally or organizationally. Comfort simply is not how we as professionals get to the top of our game and it is 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. In the current business climate, modeling the subordination of comfort to the temporary pain of meaningful substantive change is essential.

CEOs cannot afford to avoid posing the question: “How much better could X be if . . .?” with X being, for example, retention stats, culture, innovations, the level of business acumen among staff, and the like. Whatever the respon-

ses that emerge, how much more easily and quickly might needed adjustments be achieved with 100 additional hours of executive time per week?

In conclusion, permit me to challenge the readership of *the Journal of Compensation and Benefits* to recreate and complete the below grid. The more merciless you are with yourself in completing it, the greater value it will be to you. Useful in revealing opportunities to recapture and redeploy *your* time toward the deliberate, focused development of staff, consider taking stock of your current attrition level as of this reading, and again six months hence. No doubt you will be able to discern an increase in the impact of YOU.

**Recapturing and Redeploying Executive Time**

<p><b>What I Do Well and Should Be Doing</b></p>	<p><b>What I Do Well and Should Not Be Doing</b></p>
<p><i>Where most of your time should be spent</i></p> <p>Populate this quadrant with as many functions as possible that depict what you are able to do better than anyone else.</p>	<p><i>Spending time here cannibalizes the time you have available to function in the upper left quadrant</i></p> <p>What do you choose not to delegate because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● You enjoy doing it.</li> <li>● Confusion always ensues if you do not.</li> <li>● Incoming deliverables are not adequate.</li> <li>● You have always done it.</li> </ul> <p>What work are you delivering that is actually the responsibility of another individual or department?</p>

## How One Organization Recaptured 100 Hours per Week

What I Do Poorly and Should Be Doing Well	What I Do Poorly and Should Not Be Doing
<i>Action required</i>	<i>Stop doing these</i>
Any content in this quadrant should spur you to get the needed experience/education to do well.	Any content in this quadrant should cease to be among your functions.

### REFERENCES

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