

EXPERT OPINION

Reclaiming 100 senior executive work hours per week

Posing a series of questions revealed that some unnecessary functions were sapping time and energy that could be devoted to more value-added work

By Francie Dalton

Let's assume there's not an ounce of fat left in your association. You've redlined, streamlined and realigned, all the while continuing to deliver indisputably high value for your members. Even if you've somehow managed to convince everyone in your organization that the hemorrhaging is over, malaise has permeated your senior team, bringing a sense of insurmountable workload and a presumption that the straitened state will continue for a long time to come.

One way to rejuvenate battered spirits and restore discretionary energy is to rally your team around a common goal—one that can showcase the commitment and drive of everyone involved.

Here's a story of an executive team who did exactly that. Using a three-step process, the group revealed and redeployed more than 100 hours of senior executive time toward value-added work.

Step One: Executives were confidentially asked three questions: 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 was to identify what functions they perform well, but should not be performing. Six themes emerged:

1. Accepting incomplete work from staff competent enough to complete it
2. Retaining functions when explicit instructions or templates would equip staff to perform them
3. Not progressively developing in competent staff the acumen to do more substantive work
4. Following up with staff to learn status of previously assigned tasks
5. Attending/leading meetings where executive's attendance/leadership did not add value
6. Choosing to be involved in enjoyable work that didn't require the executive's intellectual capacity

Step Two: Executives were then asked to estimate the number of hours devoted to the

functions identified in Step One.

Results per week:

Exec #1: 25 hours	Exec #5: 10 hours
Exec #2: 8 hours	Exec #6: 7 hours
Exec #3: 13 hours	Exec #7: 4 hours
Exec #4: 17 hours	Exec #8: 16 hours

Predictably, the totals took their breath away. Yet when pressed to explain time spent on these functions, each had seemingly coherent rationalizations. Perhaps because they had taken on the functions bit by bit, they became conditioned to doing them and never realized they had the option not to perform them. Indeed, those who were struggling under the heaviest workloads slammed brain first into the realization that they were largely complicit in becoming overwhelmed.

These results aren't unusual. Twenty years in business consulting tells me these hours exist in many organizations. But until the catalytic questions in the above steps are asked, many functions performed by executives masquerade very effectively as being legitimate work.

Worth noting: the probing nature of the questions can sometimes cut close to the bone, so this process isn't appropriate as a group exercise. Neither is the perfunctory inclusion of this process on the agenda of an executive team meeting. Indeed, you may prefer to use a dispassionate third party who can constructively confront executives and elicit the needed information.

Step Three: Securing commitment from these executives to redeploy time commensurate with their capabilities required only that they understand the opportunity cost of not doing so. One final question accomplished this: What outcomes could you achieve if no longer bogged down by Step One functions?

Motivated by the opportunities revealed from answering this question, the development of specific action plans for change was quick work. Executives were eager to brief their CEOs on their individual plans. Measurable performance expectations were developed for the achievement of the newly targeted outcomes. Thematic among the action plans were the following:

1. Require that subordinates complete all assignments thoroughly and on deadline.

2. Stop overlooking poor performance. Confront it and impose consequences.
3. Segment complex processes and delegate segments.
4. Learn to develop and articulate explicit, measurable, performance expectations.
5. Require staff to engage executives only after exhausting all logical next steps.
6. Require a quality of support from staff equaling that provided to the CEO.
7. Equip staff to handle the flow of work resulting from this exercise.

The same underperforming assets as described above, along with the attendant opportunity costs, may very well exist in your organization. And in the current business climate, CEOs can't afford not to tackle this exercise. What could your organization do with an additional 100 hours of executive time? ■

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