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### **Getting Naked: In Search of Executive Vulnerability**

Speaking metaphorically, many executives show up to tropical team meetings dressed for arctic temperatures. Too much self-protection in a business climate of increasing heat. Uncomfortable for them? Probably. Ineffective for the leadership issues they must manage together? Most certainly.

Ok, so the answer isn't literal nudity, but it is a dressing down of sorts. Let's begin with some context setting:

Companies today are facing enormous challenges. The prospect of executive failure, employee dislocation, and public derision is omnipresent. The marketplace is complex and ever-changing. Competition for survival, let alone supremacy, is fierce. The war on terror is changing the way we vie in the world. Smart, responsible leadership has never been more necessary at the helm of businesses and governments.

So, when leaders from a single organization come together as an executive team to set a course and oversee its implementation, the meetings should be filled with rigorous and honest debates among the company's senior brain trust. Participants should look forward to these meetings, knowing that they will leave with greater insight, clarity, alignment, and peer support to excel, individually and collectively.

Does this describe a typical executive meeting?

As my 13 year-old would say... NOT!

In my work as an executive coach, I attend these meetings routinely. Here's what I sadly observe:

- Individuals jockeying for position and appearances.
- People who won't comfortably and openly challenge the ideas of upper management.
- People backing away from real points of disagreement (especially when the scheduled 'end' of the meeting approaches and individuals can get back to their 'real' work).
- Monotonous tactical progress reviews rather than disordered strategic debates that have to happen for sustainable focus and alignment to cascade throughout the organization
- Denial of how truly hard it is, on all levels, to drive real change in organizations, to succeed in today's marketplace, to deal with massive workloads, and all of this while staying healthy and happy

Success in today's business environment is contingent upon jumping over hurdles better, faster, and cheaper than the competition. There will be hurdles from both inside the organization (e.g., trying to please multiple masters in a matrixed environment) and outside the work context (e.g., a family emergency). Further, there will be very complex hurdles to confront in today's global marketplace (e.g., SARS outbreak in Asia; war in the Middle East). These challenges will make leading effectively in today's environment difficult. Count on it.

So if forthright discussions are conducted in dyads and off line, leaders aren't making tough decisions from the same information base, at a just-in-time pace.

This is not ideal for today's times.

Consider an analogous scenario: A teenager has been looking forward to a party for weeks, but the day of the party he gets ill. His mother forbids him to go to the party as long as he has a fever. So, in a 'rabid pursuit of short term self-interest' (I can say this: I have a teenager at home), the teenager sucks on an ice cube when his mom leaves to get the thermometer. She returns, takes his temperature, and 'learns' (from her 'scientific' data gathering) that he is fever-less. And off he goes to the party.

Wrong decision. But because the mom was duped into thinking all was 'fine; a short-term self-interest agenda won.

After 20 years of leadership coaching, here is what I see: At the top of many companies, the tough truth telling, what I call real-time 'vulnerability' is not just infrequent, it's taboo. While executives might be well schooled in telling what they think is the hard truth about YOU, they are in less of a rush to share the truth about their concerns, equivocation, uncertainty, doubts, imbalance. The appearance of personal and organizational control is, for many, perceived requirements for executive success and security.

Let me ask: How often in executive meetings do you hear:

- I don't know
- I am having a really tough time and I need your help
- This makes no sense to me
- What are we going to stop doing to accommodate these new expectations
- I haven't had fun at work in a long time
- I think we're going about this all wrong
- This issue is still unresolved for me
- I don't have an answer and I'm not even sure how to articulate the question
- We say all the right things and we try harder but our results are no better
- I feel stuck

To be fair, there are times that things get SO bad that there are special 911 (e.g., emergency) agendas put forth to address a crisis. Then, there is some conversation regarding the ‘softer’ issues (e.g., time management; work/life balance; uncertainty about the organization’s direction), and maybe a Band-Aid type solution is added (e.g., a team building session or a stress expert brought in for a lunch time lecture). Time passes, things go back to ‘normal’ and leadership vulnerability returns to being undiscussable.

I know this because, on many occasions, I have been hired to do the team building, the talk on stress, as well as the follow up private conversations with the team leader and/or concerned members (separately is often the client preference versus in the team meeting) when the first two approaches fail to change the executive culture. Why is this a problem?

Because we can only be confident of team efforts when *we trust each other to tell the truth in real time*. And this is as true at the top of the organization as it is anywhere else.

But don’t just take my word for it.

Peter Senge, a widely regarded organizational consultant, shared a story at an American Society for Training and Development Conference. I never forgot it because it revealed such uncommon wisdom. Senge was hired by Ford Motor Company to elevate the contribution of one key company team. He sat in a few of the team meetings and recommended only one adjustment to how they worked. He recommended that, for the next six months, each team member voice a question or concern as soon as it occurred to them. To make sure that no one seemed smarter or more loyal than the next, they were encouraged not to think about it first, but just to ask the question or voice the concern as it popped into their heads. Just speak and the team will sort through the relevance of the information as it is shared.

In six months, all of the team’s measures of performance improved significantly

We have another illustration of the power of sharing vulnerability. In my view, Rudy Gulliani’s legacy after September 11, 2001 had nothing to do with what he knew for sure but what he felt for sure and how he choose to respond . . . .He had unanswerable questions and horrific heartache as did others, but he showed up wherever he could, to tell the truth about his pain, to bond with others in unparalleled vulnerability, and lead others into a very different future.

## **Recommended Actions**

It is time to re-examine what constitutes a great executive meeting. My bias is that executive meetings will produce better information, decision, and relational outcomes in if they were designed explicitly to ‘unsafeguard’ thoughts, feelings, questions that relate to how leadership decisions and execution should improve for the organizational good. In other words, let’s transform the negative connotation of ‘vulnerability’ (a sense that we are open to attack or damage) into a positive. Let’s now see vulnerability as **openness** ---

as an invitation to discuss freely the truth about what the leaders think/feel/see/do. And, to share these issues in real time ---- “this is what I’m thinking/feeling/seeing/doing right now ---- so they can be collectively managed (if not resolved) today, while we’re together.

Here is a sample topic agenda for a senior team meeting:

- TASK 1: Refocus the team on the few (e.g., 3 or less) strategic focus areas that were selected to define success over the next 12 months
- TASK 2: Invite candid self-assessments of progress and disappointments related to the aforementioned strategic targets
- TASK 3: Have unfiltered discussions around needed adjustments that involve all team members (e.g., who needs to do what differently; what needs to be stopped or delayed so that collective success in key areas can be assured)
- TASK 4: Make requests for input, feedback, aid and other forms of collegial support
- TASK 5: Renew team focus and joy (yes, joy) around the shared commitment to do great work for the organization and its members

## **In Summary**

Like the rest of humanity, executives don’t get a choice on whether or not they are vulnerable. They only get a choice on whether they are open with each other, i.e. whether they opt to reveal their questions, concerns, struggles in ways that are constructive for them as individuals, for their families, and for the organizations that need their leadership. Excessively protecting our image, pride and self-interests will not take our organizations where we want to go; they will not create more fulfilling experiences at work; and they will not make our work more fun. But working hard and sharing the truth with each other will.

And perhaps we should insist on nothing less when we meet.