

# Senior Executive Development Challenge # 1

## The Avoidance of the Vulnerability Necessary to Learn

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### The Dilemma of Admitting That You Don't Know

As of March 2016, Gary Rodkin is beginning his transition out of the role of CEO of ConAgra after almost ten years in the role. Besides all of the portfolio, structural, and management incumbent changes he made, one of the less obvious changes he introduced was the visible implementation of a leadership competency model that included the proposed guiding value of "be vulnerable." Rodkin left PepsiCo in 2005 perceiving he had too many likely internal CEO successors in front of him to ever be considered for the CEO job. Years ago, an executive described the competitive culture of PepsiCo to me (accurately or inaccurately) as "bleeding, swimming in a pool of sharks." Now that's vulnerability!

As an outside executive coach to waves of participants to the ConAgra Leadership Excellence Series, a multisession program supplemented by individual coaching, I was struck by my perception of the stark differences between the metaphor of the devouring sharks and the expressed desire for "vulnerability."

From my coaching sessions, it became apparent that the operating culture that Gary had inherited as CEO included expectations that resulted in a lot of CYA behavior. An executive was supposed to know "everything" and admitting that you "did not know" was an invitation for humiliation and loss of credibility. I don't claim to be an expert in ConAgra's culture around 2007, but similar cultural expectations in other companies have resulted in managers and executives not fully disclosing what they did not know and where they had significant concerns about the assumptions underlying key business decisions. In these other companies, it was more important to present a facade of mastery than to disclose uncertainty fully, warts and all. The resulting decisions or actions often missed the intended goals and a "blaming" witch hunt often followed. Being able to admit that one "didn't know" but was taking intentional actions to learn and reduce

The ConAgra  
Leadership Behaviors:

Be courageous  
Be vulnerable  
Be authentic

Part of ConAgra's  
Leadership Model  
Circa 2007

uncertainty was a shift in the cultural tectonic plates that would not happen overnight. But how else do you learn when you can't first admit what you don't know?

## The Assumption that the Organization Needs to Learn but the C-Suite's Learning is Complete

In internal leadership programs that are intended to introduce sweeping changes in leadership performance in the upper echelons of the executive ranks often incorporate C-suite executives as presenters or "faculty." Rarely do they sit in the learning sessions as "students" in need of learning.

If the extended top executive team does acknowledge that they need help individually or as a "team," this is often addressed through low visibility interventions or coaching. Learning needs to occur in safe environments where participants can admit what they do not know and experiment and make mistakes as they master new skills and knowledge. These interventions do not need to be open for public display. But how do the top executive's communicate the cultural imperative that everyone in the organization, including those at the top of the house, needs to continue to learn and be a lifelong learner?

## The Typical Learning Bias of the Inner Circle

Recent advances in the discipline of Organization Network Analysis has challenged some of our assumptions about the appropriate approaches to improving top executive team performance. Mapping the informal networks of information flow, influence, trust, and "energizing" contacts among top team members and flowing in and out of the top executive groups suggests that the interactions of top executives should be more accurately considered as overlapping networks and sub-networks of contacts that enable or inhibit the quality of the decisions made and whether the work gets done. Informal networks, both within the executive team and between executives and stakeholders outside of the team can bias how decisions are made.<sup>1</sup>



“Diversity is good. Pass it down.”

Combined with academic research on the characteristics of the top executive "inner circle" of trusted advisors, these findings suggest that top executives tend to consult with trusted advisors who share many similar characteristics with themselves. They trust

<sup>1</sup> Cross, Rob, Robert J. Thomas, and David A. Light. "How" who you know" affects what you decide." MIT Sloan management review 50, no. 2 (2009): 35-42.

people who think like they do. They are more alike than diverse in how they view and evaluate the business. As a result, they run the danger of an inner circle learning bias that limits their development of a more complete systemic view of the business, its strengths, and its vulnerabilities. Common mistakes include: a short term focus on quarterly performance at the risk of mortgaging longer term viability; an internal focus comparing past with current performance while ignoring external competitive threats and performance; or a focus on tangible metrics while ignoring the impact of actions on the softer measures of actual operating culture or lack of employee commitment or "following." There is some research that suggests that dissimilar top management teams are better able to process more complex information, better at considering multiple alternatives simultaneously, better at unorthodox and creative thinking, better at testing underlying assumptions, and better at arriving at commitment and consensus once a decision is reached.<sup>2</sup>

## What do you think?

- What is the current operating culture in your organization at the senior executive level about vulnerability and openness to senior executive learning?
- What have senior executives done to create expectations about whether it is acceptable to admit vulnerability and an ongoing intention to learn?
- Is there is learning bias in the senior executive ranks where the business is viewed through certain preferred lenses and certain information is valued more than others?
- What are the blind spots among the ways the senior executive team learns? What don't they see that is apparent to many other stakeholders?
- How receptive are the senior executives to feedback?

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<sup>2</sup> Mooney, Ann C., and Allen C. Amason. "2 In search of the CEO's inner circle and how it is formed." *The handbook of research on top management teams* (2011): 41.