C3Advantage Leader Insights

Executive Leader Function:

Three disciplines to elevate impact and create freedom

Executive leadership requires a well-functioning trio of executive presence, emotional intelligence, and accurate assessment. This article will examine how they fit together to elevate your impact to your organization while simultaneously create thinking, breathing and yes, living space for you as the leader.

I recently presented at an executive leadership conference to a room full of C-Levels, and found they all had one thing in common. Their primary concern was expanding their impact while recognizing their limited capacity. You may wonder "Is that possible?" The answer is an emphatic "Yes." In fact, this Executive Leadership Function model with a three-fold approach may actually make it possible for you to spend more time outside of the office while also ensuring your company flourishes.

For example, a client was spending most of his time managing situations. He was managing his employees, his business, and himself. He couldn't get out from underneath the weight and details of this management approach to running his company. As we worked together on these three component of executive function, he shifted from a management approach to a leader approach. He began to see himself as who he really was - a leader.

1. Command of Self - Executive Presence

When you walk into a room, what happens? When you say something, how do others respond? Leaders want a strong executive presence; however, this can extend beyond how we portray ourselves into how we command ourselves. The discipline of developing an executive presence with a command of oneself can be worth the investment. A willingness to hone oneself is what sets great leaders apart from the rest.

I know a leader who is a "great guy," but whenever he stepped into a leadership role, he became hyper-strong and somewhat belligerent. He thought he was displaying a commanding presence, although to the contrary, his words and presence caused people to groan and shut down.

Things like facial expression, tone, body language, and stance have cause and effect that we can't afford to ignore. For example, if a leader portrays anger because they have lost control of a situation, it communicates instability to the organization. However, if modulated anger is expressed with purpose, this intentional approach can propel productivity and sobriety in thought and rapid response for a team.

How do you craft that kind of presence? John Beeson, author of Deconstructing Executive Presence says:

"Find your voice as an executive: that is, identify your assets and leverage them to the hilt. In an increasingly diverse world, executive presence will look very different from one executive to another. However, the constant is building the confidence of others that you can step up as a leader when times get tough."

How do you handle unpleasant surprises? Does emotion work for or against your organization? When someone on your team brings a fire to your attention, it's best to avoid pouring on the gasoline that adds fuel to the fire and multiplies stress. Command of the yourself benefits everyone.

What is your presence growing in your organization?

2. Awareness of Others - Emotional Intelligence

Think back to the last time one of your team members brought something to your attention. How did they present the problem to you? Did they lead the conversation with solution, truth, emotions, analytics, etc.?

A leader goes beyond understanding the information presented and becomes aware of why that information is being presented. People communicate a lot about themselves in the way they present concerns, information, questions, and feedback. As leaders, we must be disciplined to understand why this issue is important to them. Consider, "What's going on for them? Why are they bringing this to me and therefore what do they need from me?"

Even if emotional intelligence is not innately understood, it can be learned. It's a matter of intentionally and consistently shifting focus:

"Building one's emotional intelligence cannot - will not - happen without sincere desire and concerted effort. A brief seminar won't help; nor can one buy a how-to manual. It is much harder to learn to empathize - to internalize empathy as a natural response to people - than it is to become adept at regression analysis. But it can be done." (Daniel Goleman, "What Makes a Leader?")

As a leader, one of your responsibilities is to work through the barriers that stall progress. It is to not only know your team, but to also help them know themselves so they can grow in their capacity for handling crisis.

When is the last time you coached your team through a problem? To be clear: delegating responsibility and dumping responsibility are not the same thing. Leaders don't just push their team into the deep end. They also teach them how to navigate daunting depths on their own, one step at a time.

What does your team's emotion-meter say about your leadership?

3. Clarity in Crisis - Accurate Assessment

By the time something reaches the desk of a leader, it is a crisis for someone. Understanding that most anything on your desk is a crisis, but not necessarily your crisis is the key. How are you leading instead of managing the way you triage crises?

Jesse Sostrin, Director of the Leadership Coaching Center of Excellence, offers some helpful case studies in a recent article:

"Diagnose your urgency trap- don't let yourself get stuck in knee-jerk reactions to everything that comes to your attention. Leave delegated tasks delegated. Bring focus to the right priorities - don't spend time on what you want to do at the sacrifice of what you need to do. Avoid extreme tilts and avoid rash decisions. The pendulum will never stop swinging, and your stance will never move from reaction to response as long as you don't give yourself margin to change."

When something goes up in flames, your primary job is not to treat the flames; it's to find the source of the fires. Every moment spent on the distractions is a moment you could have spent solving the root issue at hand.

However, clarity in crisis doesn't mean that everything needs to be cooled off and watered down. Sometimes, clarity means knowing when to embrace the heat and yield it to something productive. Rick Wagoner, previous CEO of General Motors, learned this lesson the hard way. His failure to have command of self and make difficult, often counter-cultural decisions amidst difficult times in an organization led to its epic downfall:

"At GM, if you went along, you got along. Wagoner never pushed back hard enough against that culture of the status quo... Until very recently, General Motors acted (at least in public) as if everything would be okay. Responding to crisis demands agility. In many ways, Rick Wagoner was too easy going to be GM's chairman." (John Baldoni, "How GM's Rick Wagoner Failed to Lead in a Crisis")

Regardless of how hot the crisis gets, how do you cultivate clarity in your assessment and response?

Any one of these principles sharpened alone will help, but will not necessarily pull a leader out of management mode. When the interconnected power of the three components are harnessed, that is when leadership can truly pull an organization forward:

When Executive Presence and Emotional Intelligence are combined, we have strength in relationship. If I can command a room, but not myself, I have no integrity to my message. And vice versa, if I have inner discipline but lose it in front of my audience, I have proven that I can lead myself but not the masses.

When Emotional Intelligence and Accurate Assessment are combined, we have strength in execution. When you are aware of others, you win influence. When you have clarity in crisis, you win control. But when you have both influence and control, there is nothing that can stop you or your organization from breaking through to what used to look out of reach.

When Executive Presence and Accurate Assessment are combined, we have strength in decision. Have you ever seen a leader with charisma but not wisdom? Or a leader that is a genius but lacks social skills?

My client mentioned at the beginning of this article learned that challenging and rewarding lesson. He explored his executive function from these three areas. As a result of making a shift in the way he thought about and behaved in his seat, there was a major shift in his organization. The company is stronger, more profitable, and he is less involved yet very engaged. From this well-honed and yes, hard fought position, he is now able to launch aggressively into his next set of professional goals, business imperatives as well as personal endeavors. Impact!

About Cheryl Scanlan

Cheryl Scanlan, MCC, CMCC, BCC is president of C3Advantage. She has worked with CEO's that are in Fortune 100 through next generation small business owners. Having also run a multi-million dollar firm in New York, Cheryl knows the importance of business goals and the impact of teams. Cheryl's thought partnering method helps leaders see clearly what is fuzzy, articulate what is currently unintelligible, and generate coherent and executable strategy.