

Becoming a Next Level Executive

How we helped a CEO stop managing and start leading.

Opportunity

Take me to your ... Manager?

It is a common story in large organizations. A high-performer spends the bulk of their career navigating various leadership roles of the structure. They learn the ins and outs of the company – how to manage a team and how to coach and guide other managers. Eventually, they land the senior-most position, and by any objective standard, they are fully qualified for the job. However, as skilled as they are at managing, nothing and no one has prepared them to lead at the highest level.

Such was the situation that the CHRO of a multi-billion dollar aerospace and defense development company brought EDC in to address. The organization's newly-appointed CEO was a lifer. They had excelled at

general management and execution, but now they were being tasked with casting vision for the entire organization.

Prior to stepping into this new role, they had worked as a business unit leader, managing their own P&L. Now they had 12 direct reports – a mix of business unit leaders and department heads.

The CHRO explained that while the team was functioning, it was not fully performing. The problem was that the CEO was acting like a “super business unit leader,” not the organizational leader they needed. Instead of one shared vision, there were 13.

Approach

Our Plan of Attack

What are we assessing? Enter EDC. Regardless of the type of engagement, several guiding principles shape how our team designs the right-fit to the challenge.

Context is everything: This was not a do-or-die situation we were entering. The company was healthy, but there was room to grow, and that growth had to start with the Executive Leadership Team. The CEO had the support of the whole team, but the team was not getting the support they needed.

Leader sets the tone: If the senior-most leader micromanages, so will their direct reports. As a whole, the organization was looking down, instead of forward.

Teams aren't built in a day: The engagement we agreed upon was 18 months. One session was not going to embed the practices and patterns of a higher-performing senior team.

With those principles in mind, EDC opted for a two-pronged solution – five workshops that the entire team would take part in and one-on-one coaching with the CEO.

CEO Coaching

Having spent years as a Business Unit Leader, the CEO knew how to manage a company day-to-day. They were good at it too. It was that experience that had led the board to promote from within instead of hiring from outside the organization.

Like many first-time senior leaders though, this executive was still in manager mode. Instead of setting a course for the entire organization, they were hopping in the trenches with their direct reports. Now, yes, that was the CEO's prerogative, but it was not their best and highest use. The CHRO knew that while this behavior

was not really hurting anything at the time, over the long run, it would impact the health of the entire organization.

For the next 18 months, EDC had one goal for the CEO – helping them redefine their job description. After several sessions, they began to better understand their new role. They were no longer the one executing. Instead, they were empowering others to do so.

Leadership Team Workshops

Workshop No. 1: Defining the Goal

The goal of the first workshop was to identify shared objectives. Where did the Business Unit Leaders align and where did they not? And how did every leader see their responsibility in relation to the overall organization? We also developed a positioning statement for the organization to help guide the individual efforts of every leader.

“We believe that our customers will value our emphasis on affordability, open-architecture solutions, and long-term service after the sale. We will not be the biggest, but we will be the most agile.”

Workshop No. 2: Evaluating the Team

EDC is always paying attention to team dynamics, but in this second workshop, it was our sole focus. Overall, the team was fairly functional. They were all high-performers, and they liked each other. However, the historical approach was to manage each business unit separately, failing to leverage the portfolio to present the enterprise as a strong partner for defense technologies.

Workshop No. 3: Breaking Down the Silos

After two workshops focused on alignment, it was time to put the progress into practice. For the third workshop, EDC asked the team to evaluate the 35 leaders who reported up to the ELT with an emphasis on mission-critical roles. Instead of only considering the contribution these managers were making to the business unit or department, the CEO and ELT vetted their ability based on the future needs of the organization.

Workshop No. 4: Planning for the Unknown

The organization’s new core narrative was built around being an “agile” company, but could this team of 13 put that into practice? In this workshop, EDC challenged the team to consider the “what ifs.” The goal of this exercise was not to plan for every possible future scenario. Instead, EDC helped the ELT build flexibility into the overall corporate strategy and to develop skills of detecting and responding to weak-signals in the ecosystem.

Workshop No. 5: Putting It All Together

After 18 months of working side-by-side with their team, we sat down to review the progress. A lot had changed over that year and a half, including some of the people in the room. But because the team now had a shared vision, the organization could now weather the departure of any one individual.

Outcome

Unite and Conquer

So, how did we do? 18 months of hard work yielded results. The team was largely unchanged, but the way they interacted was anything but. The ELT understood how their individual contributions were impacting the success of the larger organization, and the CEO had stepped back, allowing everyone to step up.

Shortly after EDC’s engagement ended though, the CEO left the company for a senior position at the Pentagon. Had that happened a year and a half earlier, the loss might have derailed the company. With the team now unified around a shared vision, they were able to successfully weather the transition, celebrating the outgoing CEO’s success and welcoming in a new leader.

CONTACT US:

704.248.0863

info@executivedevelopmentconsulting.com

edc-llc.com