



THE RIGHT STUFF

Improving executive resilience

Across the country, public sector leaders are challenged with the daunting task of managing change and transition while delivering business results with fewer resources and increased scrutiny of their performance. They need to rely increasingly on resilience in order to strive for excellence and recover from adversity.



WHILE MUCH HAS BEEN DONE to modernize HR policies and practices in recent years to support our public sector leaders, including significant investments in management basics and competencies, there remain significant gaps in how we develop leadership resilience. Based on data gleaned from 360-assessments of more than 1,200 public sector executives, there are at least three aspects of resilience that need attention: deference to authority, managing uncertainty, and balancing action and influence.

Deference to authority

Public sector executives need to be dedicated, trustworthy and loyal within the

context of serving the public good and operate responsibly within the authorities delegated from Parliament through ministers. However, there is empirical evidence to suggest that a growing number of today's executives are showing signs of extreme deference to authority manifested somewhat by blind acceptance of assigned tasks, established procedures, rules and regulations within their organizations. Organizational theorists would characterize such environments as "command and control" and "need to know" where the core power base is held by an upper echelon of leaders.

In such environments, especially in the current climate of seeking budget reduc-

tions and improved efficiencies, it may be more advantageous for executives to "go with the flow" rather than to challenge basic assumptions, values and ways of doing things. The danger of this type of "group think" in its extreme form can prevent both current and future executives from speaking "truth to power," and from providing bold, professional advice when and to whom it is needed.

What's worse, compliance is encouraged ahead of creativity and innovation, speed and efficiency are rewarded more than comprehensive treatment of issues and, ultimately, the quality of decisions and actions may compromise the public good.

A second, related, issue is the emerg-

ing submissiveness of our executive cadre. While professionalism and respect are core values that need to be upheld, being overly polite and not speaking up is problematic. Research shows that in some cases, executives prefer not to make waves or rock the boat in situations involving people they know they will be interacting with again in the future. Others appear to put a good deal of trust in the goodness of others and do not want to come across as breaching that trust.

In other cases, executives seem ready to suppress individual desires and self-sacrifice if necessary or “do whatever it takes” to achieve organizational goals. And, there are signs that a growing number of executives are micro-managing their work environment, re-doing the work of employees, and protecting less able members rather than dealing with the management issues head-on.

The consequence of such behaviours may mean that executives do not “take their space” by demonstrating assertiveness in the right instances, e.g., to stand up against domination or one-track thinking, to prevent dependency and unrealistic trustfulness, to unify team members in key situations, etc. Many such executives fail to seek clarification or to question basic assumptions due to fear or embarrassment, and the resulting submissive behaviour sends mixed signals at best and leads to poor results at worst.

Managing uncertainty

In today’s ever-changing, fast-paced, environment public sector executives are being asked to manage ambiguity and change at every level of the organization. They need to understand the context, the structure, the strategy, the people and the process of change in order to make the right decisions at the right time and for the right reasons. They need to do this regularly to achieve authenticity and trust.

Evidence suggests that many executives are finding it difficult to break away from their own, and others’, vested interests associated with maintaining the status quo. The result is often seen as an attachment to established, or “correct,” ways of doing things that some characterize as con-



servatism or rigidity in behaviour.

Other executives appear to have difficulty managing the fine line between competing, but necessary, tensions or conflicts such as: being tough-minded yet empathetic; pushing the change yet waiting for it to take effect; building a sense of urgency while trying to maintain calmness; being strong as an individual while trusting others; being optimistic yet realistic; etc. Conflict of a cognitive nature – over basic goals, norms, procedures, expectations – is not only normal but it is healthy. Today’s executives need to know how to manage conflict and to leverage it to their advantage.

Invariably, successful change requires effort that, sooner or later, tends to disturb the equilibrium of a group. It requires changes in role, changes in attachments one has to particular people, things or processes. The strength to manage ambiguity comes from within and appears to others in various ways, e.g., clarity, calmness, vision, direction, empathy, etc. These skills can be acquired through the right measure of learning and experience.

The balancing act

Very few executives have the ability to manage equally what can be described as the spheres of action and the spheres of influence.

Public sector executives toggle their time between focusing on doing a good job (and under increasing metrics of scrutiny), navigating through an ever-changing organizational context, and being good “people” managers. It can be argued that all three are important, especially these days where efficiency and effectiveness are assumed and how one does the job is as important as the job one does.

The second and equally formidable challenge facing executives is the ability to successfully manage their spheres of influence which can be thought of in a 360-degree manner: upwards (bosses, senior management, DM community, ministers), across (colleagues and peer networks both inside and outside the organization), and downwards (direct reports, indirect reports, contractors, etc.) Some executives appear to put more energy into managing upwards at the expense of their staff and peer relationships while others seem to thrive in liaison functions or task force roles that are away from direct line management.

Ultimately, public sector leaders today need to balance all of these spheres without losing site of the main goal of serving the public good.

Call to action

One way to remedy these deficiencies is by using an integrated talent management approach that links together core building blocks of development and retention, namely performance management, leadership development and succession planning. In other words, performance feedback that is honest, accurate and consistent helps identify the behavioural gaps. Those gaps need to be addressed through formal and informal learning and development activities tied closely to on-the-job performance.

Finally, a career pathway linked to longer-term succession planning helps round out executive experience, know-how and abilities. Neither building block, alone, is sufficient to improve executive development and leadership resilience. 