

## The coaching executive

*New leadership style leads to lower turnover and higher engagement*

BY SHANNON KLIE

Teaching executives how to lead a team of employees is one of the hottest trends in executive development, according to industry experts.

"It's about getting people away from doing to leading," says Michael DeVenney, president of Halifax-based Bluteau DeVenney and Company, an executive and team coaching service. "There are a lot of really competent executives who have no idea how to deal with people whatsoever."

At the Queen's University Executive Development Centre, almost half of the leadership program is focused on learning how to coach and mentor people, says the centre's executive director Tom Anger.

"It's been something that's been a definite trend over the last several years," he says.

One of the reasons it's becoming more important to executives is that organizations are under a financial crunch and people have to do more with less, says Anger.

"You have to work as a team, you have to be able to share responsibilities and, as a result, you have to also understand how people work and how they work effectively and what their core competencies are," he says. "That's where the whole leadership development for an individual comes into play."

### Understanding how others work

To be a good leader, an executive has to understand her own abilities and leadership and coaching style, says Anger.

"The next thing you have to understand is how other people work, solve problems and think," he says.

Spending extra time learning about team members makes a leader a true coach and it's what most employees are looking for from managers, says DeVenney.

When DeVenney talks with executives, they tell him they want their teams to take

more initiative, while the team members tell him they want leaders to invest more time in them. Leaders who want to get the most from teams need to involve them in the strategy and direction of the company, as well as take the time to ask them for input, says DeVenney.

"Intellectually (leaders) know they should, but there's always so many things coming at them that in reality it doesn't always happen," he says.

When leaders do take the time to coach their teams — meeting with individuals on a regular basis for coaching sessions, setting up action plans and tracking members' progress and encouraging members to take initiative — then morale and engagement go up, turnover goes down and the organization will be more successful, says Daniel Harkavy, an executive coach and author of *Becoming a Coaching Leader*.

The much heard adage that people don't leave companies, they leave managers, is true, says Harkavy, and that's where a coaching leader can make a big difference.

"If (employees) aren't feeling connected to, appreciated by or valued by their direct supervisor, they're gone," he says. "A coaching leader will be much more successful in recruiting top talent and they'll be much more successful in retention as a result of some of the soft skills they'll learn."

### Other trends

Leadership development, in all its forms, is the one executive training trend that has been around forever and shows no signs of slowing down, according to Alan Middleton, executive director of the executive education centre at York University's Schulich School of Business in Toronto.

But there are other trends that Middleton has seen emerge recently. In the past, most management training was requested by individual managers or individual departments, but now nearly half of all training is being requested by the HR department,

says Middleton.

"There's been a shift toward organizations not only wanting to plan careers more, but make sure training aligns with needed competences and also make sure that training for high potentials is used effectively not only as a learning mechanism, but as a retention mechanism as well," he says.

It's the gap analysis of the talent pipeline — which competencies are available today and which ones are needed in the future — that leads many organizations to send current and future executives for training, says Anger.

There's also been a shift in how training is delivered, says Middleton. There are more blended programs that incorporate e-learning, experiential training (including real-world simulations), facilitation and traditional classroom training.

"Training is half content and half entertainment. The more you can engage people through the process, the more likely they are to learn," says Middleton.

That's why simulations have become so popular, he says, especially when teaching leaders how to make decisions.

### Ethics training

When it comes to ethics training, reading and talking about a code of ethics is boring and doesn't actually teach anyone anything. Instead, training should focus on helping people understand an organization's ethical guidelines and then give them scenarios in which they have to make an ethical decision, says Middleton.

"You have them go through a series of simulations of decisions, and these days it's not big choice decisions," he says. "It's the small trade offs, it's the bending of the rules versus slight advantage. The analysis of Enron, classically, is that there wasn't any one big unethical decision, it was a series of things accumulated over time that led to the problems."