

Are Your Top Leaders Top?

By Charlie Lang, Managing Partner of Progress-U Asia



When I met John, British, the Regional COO Asia of a Europe based bank, for the first time, he appeared to be a very polite, smart and approachable executive. I was briefed by the VP HR that his team collectively hated him and that unless John significantly changes and improves this situation, he couldn't be tolerated anymore in this bank.

Sandy, Chinese national, the Head of Legal & Compliance for Greater China of a US based chemical company approached her boss, Tim, the CEO of Greater China to discuss "what's next" for her career. Sandy had successfully reformed the compliance system and also improved the processes to handle legal affairs, both leading to reduced exposure to risks and actual cost savings especially on the legal side.

It is interesting that there seems to be a widespread assumption in Asia that people who reached the C-Suite of their organization don't need development anymore.

This is a grave mistake and its hidden cost is immense. There is no doubt that the higher up anyone works in an organization, the higher their impact on top and bottom line (which is why people at the top get paid top dollars).

Why develop the C-Suite?

What could be typical reasons for development at C-Suite Level?

- They are new in the role/company and the faster they work on an optimal level, the sooner the company gets the return on this 'investment' (worst case: failure of the new CXO with massive cost for the organization)
- They are relatively successful but display damaging behaviors (cf case of John above) ultimately leading to disengagement or exit of important talent with all associated cost
- They do well but might have potential to do even better, bring the organization to a higher level through inspiring and transformational leadership
- They lack unbiased feedback (especially CEOs) and would greatly benefit from a competent sparring partner
- They see potential in getting the top management team work as a top team
- They face a challenging new situation that they don't have experience with (e.g. merger, downsizing, PR crisis, etc)
- They have reached the top position within the company/function and wonder what's next (often resulting in leaving the company after some time representing a great loss for the organization)

This list is by no means exhaustive but might give you sufficient reasons to consider development for your top management people.

Current practices and their pitfalls

What are the current practices for developing the C-Suite?

- **Executive Development Programs by Business Schools** - Comment: these courses tend to be quite expensive (especially if overseas travel is required) and more importantly quite time consuming; they typically offer a significant amount of new knowledge out of which typically only a smaller percentage is really useful for the participants because such programs necessarily need to be to some degree generic; a side benefit is networking with other senior executives
- **Team Building programs for top management teams** - Comment: while they might enhance the 'feel-good' factor, they rarely achieve lasting positive changes and typically don't address deeper issues the team might suffer from
- **Executive Coaching** - Comment: In the best case, it can be highly impactful and lead to significant positive changes with a high impact on the top/bottom line. In the worst case the CXO not only wastes precious time but is misguided by a self-declared 'expert coach' leading to a significant negative return

What works?

We started working on developing CXOs in 2005 (3 years after Progress-U's foundation) and here is what we found working:

- **Executive Coaching:** Progress-U works with about 70 carefully selected coaches in 15 cities across Asia and we consider only about 1/4 of them 'fit' for coaching on CXOS level despite all 70 being qualified coaches with significant corporate background. We found that coaching on C-Level requires a certain 'breed' of coach to achieve optimal impact.
- **Team Coaching:** unlike team building, team coaching explores on a deeper level team issues around positivity and productivity of the top management team through the use of adequate team assessments and innovative team coaching tools. It requires very competent and courageous team coaches to maximize the impact on the team development. Often, team coaching is blended with facilitation (eg around corporate strategy, etc)
- **Professional Coach Certification for CXO:** to our positive surprise, we see an increasing number of C-Level executives recognizing the power of coaching and want to reach a coach qualification themselves to coach professionally top talents in their organization. (For the first time, Progress-U offers now a dedicated coach certification program exclusively for C-Level executives, [click here for more info](#))
- **CEO Retreat:** for CEOs to take out 2-3 days of their busy diaries for their own development, it'll be better worth it. Rather than running an off-the-shelf program, we designed our CEO Retreat to be intimate in size (6-8 participants) and highly personalized with 1:1 interviews before the retreat and 1:1/group coaching sessions after the retreat. Participants work out how their Organization will need to transform and discover how they need to transform as a CEO as a result. To ensure optimal

impact, participants will be supported through the follow-up individual/group coaching and a membership in the exclusive 'Progressive C-Club'

What happened to John and Sandy?

Luckily, John was open to change as he realized that this was the only way to remain in this bank. However, it required significant courage to admit the damage his previous style created and strong resolve to consistently jump over the shadows of the past. After a few months of individual coaching, John recognized the need to conduct a team coaching day which removed some of the doubts of his team members (I had a 1:1 interview with each of them before the team coaching session) whether John's change will be temporary or lasting. What made me most confident that it would be sustainable was the fact that John actually enjoyed his new way of working more than the old one.

Concerning Sandy, after working on optimizing the approach to her current role, we brainstormed new possibilities within the company including leaving the legal function (her comfort zone) and to look at more generalist roles where she could transfer some of her strengths. We generated Job Success Analyses (Harrison Assessments) for these roles to identify the possible fit and potential gaps including development needs to be ready when the opportunity presents itself.

What is your experience with developing your top executives? We'd be happy to hear from you.

Let's keep progressing!

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