

Why and How to Assess Your Team in Times of High Risk

By Douglas Reiter

Is your management team up to the herculean task of navigating through the current recession, identifying opportunities, and assuring your company will survive? If not, then maybe it's time to perform a reassessment of your top team members.

Here are the top three reasons CEOs refrain from evaluating their executives, even though it's a good idea:

- They believe changing players in the midst of a severe economic downswing is riskier than leaving an ineffectual manager in place. Contrary to this opinion, there are many positive outcomes of disposing of underperformers and bringing in the right kind of new leadership, particularly in a downturn.
- They think changing the old guard mid-stream may demoralize the rest of the company's workforce. On the contrary, employees are often re-energized and motivated by new leadership and, especially, new energy from the top.
- They lack the necessary knowledge, skills, or will to perform an equitable and unbiased assessment. Fortunately, the skills and knowledge necessary to perform an effective review and develop an action plan can be easily obtained

from experts in the executive assessment and recruitment fields.

Here are nine steps to take to initiate and complete an assessment of your executive team:

1. Be brutally honest and complete the task

When times are good, much gets overlooked; it's human nature. The first step, therefore, in assessing your team during a downturn is a personal commitment to both intellectual honesty and to following up with the appropriate actions. You must be brutally honest with yourself, and ultimately your team, to make the tough but right decisions. And then you need to muster the will to carry them out.

2. Use an independent party to facilitate the process

The nature of this assessment process is sensitive and can pull at the fabric of your organization. Your HR or OD Director may be able to act as a facilitator, if they are perceived as honest brokers. If, however, you feel these players lack the right kind of attitude and objectivity, then you must hire an outside consultant who has demonstrated expertise in executive selection and assessment. It has been proven in many studies that an outside facilitator provides a more comprehensive overview and



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will be perceived to present a more honest and unbiased report than your in-house team.

3. Conduct a survey and "where-we-are" assessment

Ask your managers to itemize on one sheet of paper the following information. (As Winston Churchill once said, "Please be good enough to put your conclusions and recommendations on one sheet

of paper in the very beginning of your report, so I can even consider reading it”.)

- The best and worst decisions the company has made in the last 24 months
- The best and worst decisions they personally have made in the last 24 months
- The key strengths and weaknesses of the company
- Their own individual key strengths and weaknesses
- Three ideas to improve company performance
- Three ideas to improve their own performance

4. Ask team members to update their resumes

Have your team members update their resumes. This process will allow them to articulate their successes and failures in brief written form. This exercise will also expose their writing skills and provide a similar platform for discussion with all of the officers when you meet with them.

5. Get to know your staff on a more personal level

It's never too late for a CEO, owner or founder to ask questions about their staff's childhood and early education. After all, the better one knows others, the better decisions you can make about them. So, ask them:

- Where did you grow up?
- What did your father/mother do for a living?
- How many siblings do you have?
- In what activities were you involved in grade school, high school, college?
- Describe your high school experience?
- How did you decide to go to college? How did you choose your major?

- How long did it take you to finish college?
- Who paid for your college education?

While these questions may seem insignificant and out of line, they are valuable in uncovering a plethora of information about who the person really is and what drives him or her. It helps you paint a picture beyond the usual data regarding experience and education.

6. Consider psychological and aptitude testing services

It's important to complete your internal assessment process with testing instruments. Some tests that I've used successfully include Hogan Assessment Systems, CPI and Watson Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisals. Using a trained certified professional to administer and interpret the tests allows you to understand what the assessment tests mean, and how to properly use them in the evaluation process.

Once you complete these five steps, you will have the following information from each of your key executives:

- An updated current resume.
- Their own view of the strengths and weaknesses of the organization and themselves.
- Ideas for improvement.
- Survey data from peers, subordinates and superiors regarding their management style, strengths and weaknesses.
- Interview results which include personal data.

Everything is now in context. It's a level playing field. You now have the same body of information on each executive. It's time to make some decisions.

7. Draw preliminary conclusions

One can learn a lot about individuals just by observing their reactions to

these types of exercises. Some of your team members may resent this intrusion while others will be threatened or distrustful. These reactions are definitely red flags. Don't fight the fallout. If someone resists the process and draws a line in the sand, you have learned something about this individual.

8. Allow for individual improvement

Certain character traits uncovered in these assessments can be improved and mitigated while others will never change. Before you act, have an expert take a look at these assessment results and provide detailed analysis about which negative characteristics in your executives can be overcome.

Most individuals know when they are failing in their current assignments. Remember, failure does not mean the individual lacks talent altogether; he or she just may be in the wrong job at the wrong time. To paraphrase Peter Drucker, the late management guru; "Don't make a trumpet player play the flute, she won't like it, and she isn't good at it anyway."

9. Don't hesitate to act

No one enjoys firing a colleague or peer. But failure to act, once you have the objective assessment, is a dereliction of duty. Having the wrong person in any position is a very expensive luxury.

As a consultant for 32 years I have helped countless companies perform assessments of existing and potential executives. The sum is greater than its parts. In other words, a company's survival is more important to its shareholders, employees, customers and communities than any one person's longevity.

It behooves CEOs and company owners, therefore, to conduct executive team assessments during this economic downturn – and to do so with compassion, fairness, clarity and reason. Once they have the information, they must move forward, take action and build the best team in their industries for the future.