

# CASE STUDY

Leadership Effectiveness  
For a Pharmaceutical Executive



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Creating Advantage Through Talent Management

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## Leveraging A Coaching Approach to Enhance Leadership Effectiveness: A Case Description

When Sam, a 38 year old pharmaceutical executive, was promoted into a "bigger job" everyone who knew him believed he was the perfect choice for this challenging and highly visible position.

From all outward appearances Sam had the perfect skill set and temperament for the role and six months into it he was meeting all his targets. However, internally, Sam felt quite differently. During our first meeting to explore the possibility of having me as his coach, he said he just wasn't feeling "like himself." Generally he was excited about any new challenges he took on. He had always been eager to jump in and "make things happen." That wasn't happening this time and he just couldn't figure out why. He was confused and more than a bit worried that this ambivalence would start to show up in his performance.

Toward the end of our first session Sam revealed that he had "figured out what the problem was." He said he had spent his entire life pleasing others and had become pretty good at it. He attributed much of his past success to meeting others' expectations. Now, he said he wanted to know: "What do I want to do?"

The timing was perfect for Sam to work with a coach. He was used to drawing upon data to solve problems, then executing to a plan,

and that's exactly what we started to put together. I reassured him this problem was no different than many others he had successfully solved. I reassured Sam that he could use many of the business skills he already possessed, and "learn a few new ones" as well. This approach would help him bring the issues into perspective, articulate what changes he wanted to make, and then identify the goals, priorities and steps for moving forward.

Our work together really began when Sam started describing the things that mattered most to him in his life. His values were solid and idealistic. He had come from a comfortable middle class background and was blessed to have had two excellent role models who had helped him shape his leadership style. He described these role models as people who were "making a difference." Sam explained that he wanted to "make a difference as well" and somehow felt that his most recent jobs were taking him further away from this path.

These conversations helped Sam begin to realize more about "what" he wanted to do but not exactly how to get there. So I suggested that he go back to these role models and actually talk to them about "how" they got to where they did and what enabled them to reach their goals. Sam had these conversations over a few months

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time and he was amazed to find out that none of his heroes actually had a clear plan about how to get where they were; and many of them had also faced the same confusion in their lives that Sam seemed to be experiencing.

In the meantime, my role as coach was to begin learning more about Sam and how he was viewed by others in his organization. The objective was to better understand how his motives and values were shaping his behavior and how he communicated with and influenced people on his team.

Gathering information about Sam involved interviewing ten people that worked both directly and indirectly with him. I also talked with his present and past managers. Additionally, I asked Sam to fill out several diagnostic instruments and allowed me the opportunity to observe him in several of his regular meetings.

The picture that started to emerge was one of an individual that was energetic, driven and sometimes impatient to get results. The data also indicated that Sam was adept at shoring up people when they weren't performing up to expectations. His team members described their leader as someone they all liked a great deal, and who was clear about roles and expectations, but he just wasn't consistent about holding everyone accountable. They attributed this to the fact that Sam had a tough time dealing with conflict or with people when their performance fell short.

Sam talked a great deal about managing through his team, but in reality all real problems were taken off-line. Even if they were discussed, problems weren't really resolved. Sam just worked around the people who were holding the team back and asked his stronger performers to do more.

When Sam reviewed the assessment, it helped him realize that his need to please people was creating problems in his organization as well as for his own psyche. Sam could see that his avoidance of conflict was blocking him from addressing important performance issues. It was also blocking him from developing people in ways that would lead to higher performance from his entire team.

Coaching enabled Sam to look at the dissonance between his espoused leadership values and the way he was actually behaving. He saw himself as a developer of people and a strong team builder. He prided himself on being open, honest and having strong integrity in all his dealings with others. Sam realized that he wasn't living up to his own values, and not acting authentically was sapping his excitement about his new position.

Sam came to the realization that he could not make a real difference without being willing to move out of his comfort zone. Moving ahead meant he would have to delegate more and hold people accountable for solving problems, and that

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meant having some potentially difficult conversations.

To help Sam get started and ensure he didn't get overwhelmed too fast, we mapped a plan. Sam identified the specific people he needed to talk with and what he wanted to accomplish from each conversation. He identified the benefits that could result from each discussion and learned to anticipate the "push back" he might get. He also learned how to stay calm when people responded with hurt looks or upset feelings. His first few attempts felt awkward, and Sam realized that what he really was avoiding was feeling "out of control." However, he stuck to his plan and with each successive conversation he got better and more confident.

After Sam tackled a few individual issues and started to see the results of these conversations pay off, he was ready to move on to his team. Again we worked together to craft a plan that would demonstrate to Sam's team that he wanted to make some important changes regarding the way they worked together. He began by explaining the value of the feedback he had received from my interviews and the changes he wanted to make in the way his team interacted among themselves. This included how he planned to listen more effectively and how he would take time to explore, not avoid key issues that would invariably lead to some tough performance discussions. Finally, he committed that he would not shut things down or change the

topic when the temperature in the group went up. He asked people to give him real time feedback if he didn't live up to these commitments.

Again, the first few team meetings were a bit awkward but Sam didn't back off. He had learned how to recognize his anxiety for what it was; a signal that he was entering new territory rather than a sign that he was in danger. He had acquired some new tools for working his way through uncomfortable moments that were inevitable. Things began to change and within a few months, Sam and the team were reporting that they were functioning together in a much more productive manner; for the first time, they all felt that tough issues could be resolved in their meetings.

As Sam developed his ability to communicate authentically with people, his feelings about himself as well as his job began to change for the better. He realized that he was once again feeling excited about coming to work because he was looking forward to the new possibilities he was encountering each day. He found himself wondering where it was all going to take him. This brought our work back to the topic of "what did he really want to do with his life" and how did he see himself "really making a difference."

The last phase of our work focused on where Sam could make a significant impact, and whether his position would enable him or hinder him from doing this. Sam again reached out to people for their

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ideas and he took the big risk of letting his boss know that he had aspirations beyond managing his organization in the traditional way his predecessor had.

His boss was smart enough to know that Sam was a person who needed to "design his job" in a way that was meaningful and aligned with his core values. He worked with Sam to help him recognize areas in the corporation that Sam could help influence. He also helped him figure out how to use his position in the organization as a platform for giving back to the local community, an area that Sam was passionate about.

Then one day it all came together for Sam. He realized that by staying where he was he could actually have a pretty big impact on the people and community around him. He saw that his position gave him the credibility to open up

discussions with people that could result in real changes in the way his organization developed people. He saw that he could help people in his organization better adapt to change and function in more flexible ways that would lead to better business results. He also saw that his position gave him the opportunity to participate on community boards and to foster better interactions between his organization and the surrounding community.

We are still in touch, and Sam tells me that he hasn't looked back. He was recently promoted to an even bigger position and he reports that he is excited about "jumping into it" and seeing how he can make an even bigger impact than before.

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