

# The changing state of leadership development

Today's array of conferences and group seminars dedicated to leadership skills – in many ways a response to a lack of experienced development practitioners – means that long-term, one-to-one coaching, in which a trainer guides an executive towards his or her personal performance targets, is increasingly rare. Kevin Lane Turner, president of **Turner Leadership Strategies (TLS)** outlines why such tailored training provides better results – and value – for companies and their heads.



**K**evin Lane Turner is president of Turner Leadership Strategies (TLS), an executive development and coaching firm. Based in Dallas, Texas, US, TLS advises and coaches leaders and executives of companies from start-ups to Fortune 500 organisations.

## As an executive coach, how would you describe your profession?

**Kevin Lane Turner:** We develop executive talent for large, medium and small businesses. Today we find ourselves in a similar position to that faced by Marvin Bower – the father of management consulting and head of McKinsey & Company – in the 1930s. The ‘profession’ of executive development is in great need of qualified coach-practitioners. There are a lot of people out there who identify themselves as executive ‘coaches’ or ‘trainers’. However, it’s difficult for companies to find skilled development professionals who have the ability to lead an executive through a sustainable change from point A to B in their behavioural habits. This requires skill, experience, logical thinking and intuition on the part of the coach in order to produce the sustainable results demanded for executive performance within today’s global economy.

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## Is there a particular method of leadership development that works better than others?

Yes – executive development is at a crossroads; today’s system of leadership training and coaching is broken. Because of a shortage in skilled practitioners, motivational events and seminars are being used as surrogate vehicles for individual executive training and development. Consequently, companies large and small are misappropriating critical resources (money, time, and people) to the tune of over \$70 billion a year in the US and \$130 billion worldwide. When it comes to achieving the results and sustainable changes to human performance required

within today’s growing companies, motivational events and seminars have proven themselves to be ineffective and inefficient. Consequently, we set executives up for failure by not providing them with the proper leadership training they need. Then, when the executive does not measure up, we blame them and not ourselves or the training vehicle we sent them to.

Let’s consider: what other investments in temporary results do great companies make? The answer is ‘not many’. So why do we, as business leaders, continue to agree to such enormous expenditures on the temporary results of motivational events and seminars, when our most important commodities – our people and their performance – are at stake?

In order for leadership training and development to yield sustainable change, the following factors must be secured.

- It must be carried out over a series of coached learning engagements or sessions (versus a one-hour, one-day, or one-weekend event).
- There must be sufficient time between sessions for the executive to practise and absorb information.
- The training materials must be well prepared and tailored to the specific needs of the individual.
- A network of trusted individuals (his or her team, peers, manager, coach) must support and reinforce developmental progress; affirmation is a key component of improvement.

## From executives in Fortune 500 companies to small businesses and start-ups, how do you adapt your coaching and development approach?

It’s a matter of the coach’s experience and exposure to each of these scenarios. The effective coach-practitioner must have personal familiarity in the arenas their clientele comes from. While there are basic dynamics that are cross-functional (such as communication skills, leadership skills, delegation skills), there are other dynamics that are unique to each executive’s situation and background. With a Fortune 500 executive, it might be the intricacies of corporate strategy or cultural awareness. With a start-up or small business the more pressing dynamics might be nuances of investor involvement or direct-customer acquisition.

What helps our customers is our company’s experience and exposure to both ends of this large-to-small business continuum, allowing us to, first, better understand and, second, better serve the needs and solutions that best fit our customers.

### When you see an executive losing focus, how do you get them back on track?

First, we find out what motivates them, on several levels of their personality. Then, we couple this with behaviour modification ‘tools’ that are tailored to the individual. When or if we have to, we rely on these as leverage to help the executive stay on track until they’ve experienced the changes they need. The executive is the one who reaps the full benefit when he or she stays focused.

### When you go into a turnaround situation, how do you decide what direction to take?

When it comes to working with our customers and turning a situation around for the better, we do not and cannot set our direction. Our job is to help them find their direction; what best fits them, within the parameters of their corporate culture, their structure and any monetary concerns, and assist them with developing a course of action that will get them where they need to be. To do this, the coach-practitioner must walk a client through the process of removing the issues and obstacles hindering success and then reclaiming the true direction and course of action. The answer to a successful outcome for each organisation, team or individual typically lies within them. It is the job of an experienced, objective, external coach to help them transition from where they are to where they need to be.

### How do you advise or coach executives to make effective decisions and abandon faulty decision-making?

One of the first skills we help develop is the ability to exert personal emotional self-control. When we function from our ‘logic mind’ rather than our ‘emotional mind’, we make much better choices. Most executives are unaware of how much or to what extent their emotions affect their thinking and decision-making. When I first began advising and coaching business leaders, I was surprised to discover the extent to which many of them were influenced by their emotions, though few would ever admit it. This is because most are not even aware of how much influence their emotions have on their reasoning skills.

What people don’t understand is that the more emotionally led or controlled they are, the more vulnerable and susceptible they are to:

- being misled by faulty reasoning (from themselves and/or by others)
- being taken advantage of or manipulated
- making ill-fated business and/or personnel decisions.

### Failure often supplements success. How have you overcome setbacks, and what advice do you give leaders to do so?

Most people fail because they either quit or run out of resources. When I started my first company, KC-MAC (an aircraft maintenance company), I spoke with potential customers at Kansas City Municipal Airport, introducing myself and discussing their needs. Dozens told me that they needed our service and they’d use us then and there if we were already open for business.

Months later, our grand opening came and went, and there was no business to be found. Everyone I had spoken with earlier acted as if they’d never met me. That was a mind-numbing experience.

With my start-up business overhead and a family to feed, pressure became the ‘mother of invention’, and I set out to dig up customers. After a year, it was not only going, but growing rapidly, and a few years later we were able to sell it for a considerable gain. But it never would have happened if not for all that I learned from those initial rejections. It is important to face your fears and setbacks head-on. They will not go away until you address them.

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### What do you look for when you are considering taking on an organisation and its leaders as a client/customer?

We consider several things:

- **Compatibility:** will we work well together? We endeavour to figure this out during the initial interview phase. It’s a business partnership, so, it is essential for us to be aligned in key areas.
- **Character and ethics:** if we do not share common ground here, then it is a ‘pass’ from us.
- **The challenge:** is the project doable and challenging? If so, it’s a ‘go’ for us and for the potential customer as well.

### Has anyone in particular influenced your career?

I met and formed a friendship with Norman Brinker, 12 years ago. Norman was the founder in the US of restaurants like Steak & Ale and Chili’s. In North America, Norman is considered the “father of casual dining.” Often, after spending individual time with Norman, I’d walk away from our meetings thinking, “If only I could’ve met him when I was 20 years younger.” I realised from my relationship with Norman that most successful executives have at least one good mentor. That is the impact good mentors have on their mentees. I try and serve a similar role for those who come through our services. ■

#### Further information

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