



Why You Should Stop Treating Executive Development the Same as Leadership Development

By Michael Brainard

[Brainard Strategy](#)

Originally published in [Forbes](#)

Why do many organizations encounter challenges

when seeking to develop their executive leaders? After all, executives are skilled, hardworking and accomplished individuals who possess many years of experience in their field and in leading others.

These challenges arise because executive development is much more complex and nuanced than traditional leadership development. What works for most leaders throughout organizations may not work for leaders at the executive level.

While there are many reasons why developing executive leaders requires a unique approach, I have found three primary challenges that must be addressed to achieve maximum engagement when seeking to develop executives. To address these challenges, it is crucial for effective executive development initiatives to incorporate the following innovative features.

1. Expert Bias

Often, extensive experience and success at the senior level contribute to what I refer to as the "I know" mentality, or expert bias. Our brains possess countless cognitive biases which influence our thinking as we navigate day-to-day experiences. As executive leaders develop greater expertise and become more tenured in their industries and roles, they become less inclined to be self-developing and self-critical and more inclined to acquire expert bias.

Along with success comes self-deception, and executive leaders must gain awareness around the unconscious bias impact of "self." It is critical for executive development initiatives to drive self-awareness, self-critique and self-development. To foster introspection and identify learning gaps, programs must include a combination of assessments to provide clarity on strengths and areas for development. Executive leaders can then leverage the assessment data to engage their workforce in a deliberate and intentional manner.

2. Fear of Being Outed as Not 'All-Knowing'

Executive leaders do not want to be perceived as vulnerable or in need of development. Many executive leaders focus on what they have done and what they know, assuming that because they have gotten this far, further development is not worth the cost of being recognized as not “all-knowing.”

Stretch assignments allow leaders to engage in experiential learning as they work with their peers to develop strategic initiatives tied to actionable business goals. This allows executive leaders to work together, readily apply what they have learned and think critically to drive tangible change in their ecosystems. Collectively, this ensures development at the individual, cohort and organizational level.

3. 'Not Having the Time'

Executive leaders have demanding and strenuous schedules. Therefore, development solutions must be delivered "just-in-time," and executives must be placed in logical and compelling groupings to garner interest and maintain engagement.

Executive development cannot only be about leadership effectiveness. Social learning and leveraging intact peer cohorts allows leaders to experience just-in-time learning, while working with experts and colleagues to stretch strategic thinking acumen, change mastery and other disciplines around problem-solving and decision-making. Programs should also be supplemented with custom coaching support to drive key takeaways and promote further development and self-discovery.

Current development initiatives have been slow to recognize the differences between executive and leadership development, which has had a significant impact on organizational culture and performance. For the greatest impact, the above elements must be aligned with business challenges and delivered just-in-time with easy-to-consume learning packets placed strategically throughout a performance period.

Through more comprehensive and rigorous executive development approaches, executive leaders must be challenged to confront learning gaps, foster executive networks, be self-reflective and be self-developing. Effective execution of these practical features increases organizational performance and culture, which has a measurable and sustainable impact on leaders and businesses.

Michael Brainard possesses a Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and brings over 20 years of experience as a management consultant, senior executive, executive coach, entrepreneur, and researcher. As CEO and Founder of Brainard Strategy, a management consulting firm specializing in leadership, organizational, and strategy development, Michael has worked with Fortune 500 executives across industries, blending a strategic, behavioral, and experiential learning approach.