

Episode #9 – November/December 2008
Transcript of Interview with Steve Axelrod, PhD

Ballard: With us today is Dr. Steve Axelrod, a psychologist who specializes in coaching top executives to build more effective relationships and better motivate and energize their people. As an executive coach, he has worked with leaders from a range of companies representing the middle market, all the way to the Fortune 50. Dr. Axelrod holds a PhD from New York University and has more than 25 years worth of assessment and counseling experience and is recognized as an expert on the powerful influence of a leader's psychological dynamics on the organization's performance. Thanks for taking a few minutes to talk with us.

Axelrod: Glad to be here.

Ballard: Today we're going to be talking about executives behaving badly. I'm interested in hearing a little bit about what kinds of bad behaviors are some of the executives engaging in. Can you give us some examples?

Axelrod: Sure. The executives I work with, the bad behavior tends to fall into two broad categories. One, and this is the most frequent category that I work with, are the angry hostile behavior. The second category is more suggestive, sexually inappropriate behavior. Both categories obviously are inappropriate behavior in the workplace. Typically, what we're seeing is a higher-level executive taking a highly critical abusive, demeaning, even threatening attitude toward a more junior person. So, someone who is under stress him or herself and lays into a junior person, threatening them with being fired if they don't get a report to somebody's desk by ten o'clock the next morning, say. Or yelling and screaming at a junior person who is not moving fast enough to get a critical hire accomplished.

Ballard: That's easy to see how that kind of behavior would have a negative effect on other employees, but does this also put the organization at risk in other ways?

Axelrod: Absolutely. It puts the organization at risk in some of these cases, especially when they become patterns and are frequently repeated and are severe enough, they put the organization at legal risk. There's a threat of some kind of lawsuit being brought and that's in addition obviously to the fear and the demoralization that takes place under these so-called reigns of terror.

Ballard: Which I imagine can tie into things like absenteeism, turnover and other kinds of behavior where people are withdrawing from the workplace.

Axelrod: In fact, and I'm glad you bring up the retention issue, it becomes a hiring issue. In fact, I worked in one situation where the executive had such a reputation for highly

critical, demeaning, abusive behavior that people won't be hired into her group and these are people industry-wide who know that this person has a reputation.

Ballard: So, the word certainly gets around.

Axelrod: The word is out on the street and there's difficulty attracting and retaining talent.

Ballard: That really has long-term implications, then.

Axelrod: Yes.

Ballard: These executives, are there certain personality types or certain types of people who are more likely to engage in this kind of behavior? Or does it have more to do with the circumstances in which this destructive behavior is more likely to occur?

Axelrod: The approach that I take, David, puts equal weight on those things, so that I'm looking at personality type, I'm looking at stressors in the executive's personal life, I'm looking at organizational stressors, I'm looking at an absence of managerial skills -- all those factors that can lead to this kind of behavior. Getting back to the personality type, the thing that's important here and interesting is that there tends to be a personality type prone to this kind of behavior, especially when we're looking at the angry, hostile, abusive behavior. And these are people who tend to be demanding, perfectionistic, and high achieving. So, it's some of the very characteristics that make them valuable to the organization set them up for this spillover behavior that's incredibly destructive.

Ballard: So it's a case where the strength can actually be the downfall.

Axelrod: Absolutely. Good way of putting it.

Ballard: In these kinds of situations where an organization has an executive or executives who are engaging in these bad behaviors, how do they make the determination whether to simply terminate that employee versus engage them in a coaching intervention?

Axelrod: A lot of the behaviors I'm dealing with are in a grey area. That is, there are some behaviors that are so egregious that termination is really the way that the organization has to go and that's what the legal counsel in house advises. So, in some cases there's no recourse. But in other cases that don't rise to that level where there's a pattern perhaps, but not no one incident that would lead to termination per se, that's when the organization may decide if this is a person who's contributed at a high level, perhaps over a long period of time, to implement a corrective coaching program.

Ballard: Now you talk about corrective coaching, can you describe a little bit about what that is and how that's different from simply providing training to the executive?

Axelrod: Right, training for the executive oftentimes actually the corrective coaching is a follow on intervention from an initial training intervention. A training intervention tends to be a scripted kind of intervention that is pre-packaged. It's to teach skills in a very short period of time by essentially conveying to the executive what's right and what's wrong and what they should do. That is the kind of thing that is applied off the shelf to a number of people. Corrective coaching is individualized. It's based on the individual profile and the circumstances of that particular executive. As such, it's longer term, more intensive, more psychological in its orientation and I believe, and believe strongly, that there's more leverage for real, permanent change.

Ballard: When you start to implement this type of program, start to do a corrective coaching intervention, what's the typical response from these executives?

Axelrod: Most executives are aware that this is a requirement. This starts out as something that is mandated and most executives who work in an organization are used to following direction and if they're told that they have to do it, they tend to at least superficially be cooperative but that's only superficial.

Ballard: How do you get real engagement then, instead of strict compliance?

Axelrod: Yes. That's what we're talking about and that's what makes this intervention potentially powerful, the opportunity to get real engagement. The real engagement comes, hopefully, from a few sources. One is the fact that the person who's doing the corrective coaching should have real credibility as somebody who knows the world and the mind of the executive and can work effectively with executives. It's incredible to me what the assumptions are on the part of the executive when they think they're going to have a corrective coaching program. They kind of assume that the coach doesn't know, understand their world; is going to be punitive toward them and highly critical; and is going to be involved in a wrist slapping exercise. And what I find is by thinking of the executive as a human being, not a monster, and my job as a psychologist is to understand as fully as I can the motives behind the behavior and to fully appreciate the stressors involved, that that can do a lot to get the executive on board and engaged with the program. At that point, I can turn this hopefully into an opportunity for growth and I challenge the executive that way.

Ballard: So, if this approach gives equal weight to the individual characteristics of the executive as well as organizational factors, during the assessment process, what all do you need to understand and how do you go about collecting data about all of those things?

Axelrod: What makes this different from an off-site, privately conducted therapy engagement, one thing that makes it different, is that I'm working with organizational stakeholders to assess the organizational culture and organizational stressors. I'm looking to get a window into that from the executive him or herself but also to have my eyes and ears, through other folks, stakeholders, usually the individual's manager and oftentimes a senior HR executive, who will give me an opportunity to learn about the culture and

understand the stressors. And there are situations for example when I'm trying to understand all the different stressors impacting somebody. One recent example that came up is that an individual involved had a new manager and he came from the outside, was not part of the culture of the firm and was a very demanding, difficult manager and that added more stress to this individual who already showed a propensity to aggressive behavior. So, it's understanding those kinds of changes in the organization itself and in the organizational culture that are critical part of the assessment and as I said, I looked to both the executive and the stakeholders to get a fix on that.

Ballard: Can you walk us through what an intervention like this might look like?

Axelrod: As I've said, the initial stages have a lot to do with engaging the executive, drawing out their expectations, trying to get them on board with the idea of this as a growth opportunity as well as a behavior change program, getting the stakeholders as part of the team. That's the initial introductory stage. Then we move into working with the executive on self-assessment, on understanding really doing a very detailed in many ways a straight behavioral analysis of what these incidents consist of and identifying what the triggers are. All this in the context of an assessment of the individual's management and leadership style, as well as any personal stressors that they're encountering in their lives. All that funnels into a detailed coaching plan for anticipating stressful circumstances and how best to deal with them and here we have different ideas of, it depends on the individual involved, for some individuals it might be a more cognitive approach to how they think about and frame up the potential trigger situation. For others, they may need to bring relaxation into play; for others they may need to reach out to somebody to talk them through or to get a different perspective on a situation. What we do in terms of role playing, rehearsing situations, again working on clarifying what the stressors are is going to be individualized based on the case involved.

Ballard: So once you have the plan in place, then you conduct the actual coaching sessions?

Axelrod: Yes, although I think that the assessment is such a critical part of the coaching and has such a beneficial effect, really going through and paying a lot of attention to the executive's career history and development, really identifying what the triggers are as well in the context of their management and leadership style has a very beneficial effect right off the bat. But the implementation of the coaching plan is that latter phase of the intervention. If we're talking about an intervention that's say six months we've got three or four months of implementing the coaching plan. And I just wanted to add, when we do that we're circling back to the stakeholders to get their perspective on how the executive is doing, what kind of behavior they're displaying and what stressors they might be encountering in the organization. At the end of the engagement, we hopefully have somebody who's learned a lot, has grown a lot, has eliminated certain behaviors that were inappropriate; however what I've come to realize over time, and this is just common sense, is that a lot of good, constructive change can happen in that time, but there can be backsliding. And so then what

becomes critical is after the end of the engagement what provision do we make for follow up and for support internally or externally. That's a critical part of this that I've become more attuned to as I've done it.

Ballard: In the current economic environment, we're in a recession, many organizations are having to tighten their belts, executives are under a tremendous amount of pressure in the workplace, what effect do you think these factors have on the intensity, frequency, prevalence of these bad behaviors? Are you seeing any changes?

Axelrod: It's only been at this point several months that we've been under the worst of circumstances. I'm starting to see what I would call pre-bad behavior and that's widespread, so when the going gets rough the losses pile up, the layoffs start, and people have to take responsibility for less than stellar results in their business unit. They're not only under stress, but the normal human tendency is to start blaming and pointing fingers and that's what I've seen quite a bit of. I think that sets people up and might be one of the stressors that's going to lead to some more of this behavior.

Ballard: There are a lot of people out there who put themselves out as coaches and consultants, but if an organization is really having a problem with this type of issue, how do they go about finding someone who is truly qualified to do this kind of work?

Axelrod: I think there are a lot of really skilled people working in organizations who have a wide variety of backgrounds, but to be perfectly frank with you, when it comes to these kinds of cases, I find that people are looking for psychologists. That's been my experience and that's been where I've been able to add value. And that's where I feel that senior management, senior HR executives, are savvy because they know these are often complicated psychologically individuals and they're looking for somebody who adds that piece. Now that being said, I'm talking about a specific kind of, these are corrective coaching assignments. In the broad range of coaching assignments, there are lots of great people out there, psychologists and non-psychologists, who have worked in organizations. But I'm working and have worked in organizations where there are even internal coaches who are former HR executives who do a really good job, but when it comes to this kind of assignment, the senior people in the legal and HR world will look for somebody who's psychologically trained.

Ballard: Well, these are certainly high-stakes situations and it's good to hear that there are actually some things that can be done under those difficult circumstances and working with people who can make or break organizations and the employees who work with them. So, I want to thank you for being with us today and for sharing your expertise in this area.

Axelrod: It was my pleasure.