

Beyond 'Fix or Fire': 5 Steps to Manage the Maverick Executive

How should a CEO deal with a high performing executive who is nonetheless something of a rogue within the organization? Here are 5 steps to take control of such situations.



By Steve Axelrod, Ph.D.

Charles was a very smart, creative, and rather eccentric senior executive who had begun to run afoul of several members of the organization's executive committee. He was inconsistent in responding to their requests, was at times outright rude, and seemed to view the organization only through the filter of his own department's needs. Yet, he had built an effective group, developed important new products, and had won public acclaim for the organization. Skip, his boss and CEO, was in conflict about what to do. On one hand, his senior staff, whom he had worked with for years, seemed dead set against Charles, sometimes personally so. They did not believe he could work with them on the executive committee; and when he was particularly uncooperative or rude, they agitated for his dismissal. On the other hand, Charles had proved invaluable to the enterprise, which had grown far beyond what it had been in the "old days" when the other members of the EC were junior department heads. Should Skip promote Charles to the EC? How should he address Charles' behavior and the implacable opposition to him from the old-timers on the EC?

This scenario (a composite of several cases observed over the past 15 years) is well known to most CEOs and senior executives. Jack Welch, in his 2000 annual report for General Electric, recognized that of the four types of managers, the "Type 4" manager who doesn't share the values but delivers the numbers "is the toughest call of all." Welch was insistent that managers like Charles have to be removed, and argued persuasively that doing so was foundational to building a great culture. But is it really all that clear? Stay with me while I raise questions about this conventional wisdom, and walk you through a more nuanced consideration of the issues involved in managing these maverick executives.

Whether we like it or not the creativity and innovation needed for organizational success often flow from "talented and difficult" executives (TaD). These men and women combine characteristics like temperamental, obsessive, tyrannical, and self-centered with vision and creativity. (The late Steve Jobs may be the most well-known and extreme example.) This group includes very talented business leaders who might be shy and socially awkward, or prone to emotional outbursts and inappropriate behavior. Widely viewed as misfits, their signature characteristic is difficulty working with other people, especially their peers. They are typically "narcissistic" in the general sense of the term, exhibiting difficulty empathizing with others and seeing things from another's perspective.

One alternative to Welch's "fire" is talent management's "fix" approach to the TaD executive. But these policies, procedures, and programs are usually geared to the average personality type. They usually don't work with the "talented and difficult" since in these cases personality dynamics act as barriers to absorbing corporate norms and values. And TaD executives, who have made it into the senior ranks by contributing mightily to the firm's success, are often dismissive of soft-skills training designed for more junior executives.

We need to move beyond traditional "fix or fire" approaches to develop more individualized methods to harness the originality of the TaD executive. This starts with you, the TaD executive's manager. Like Skip, the CEO I described above, you know that these situations defy easy

answers, and you spend considerable time and energy “under the radar” on the individualized management of these executives. Your approach to the TaD’s is the critical factor in whether they are retained or let go. You are the real “thought leader” in these cases, but let me offer some advice.

As you struggle with the complex issues involved in deciding whether to keep or terminate the TaD executive, you should first assess whether you are being driven by irrational fears. On one hand you may worry that if you terminate the TaD executive the business will tank. Deep down, do you feel that your own success rides on this individual’s accomplishments and that you could be vulnerable if you let him or her go? Can you objectively evaluate the real impact of dismissing the TaD executive on the business and on your own future?

Conversely, you may be afraid to fully commit to retaining the TaD executive. You may fear going against the common wisdom that pervades your organization. Organizational culture is powerful, but not always right! In my example, the culture of the organization had been shaped by the EC’s old-timers and was in some ways hidebound, narrow-minded, and frustrating. Skip, the CEO, was a thoughtful and measured leader who intuitively sensed the groupthink of his senior executive team. But he preferred to avoid conflict, and his reluctance to rock the boat meant that he missed important opportunities to shape the organizational culture and grow as a leader.

On a deeper level, Skip’s avoidance of difficult conversations with the members of his EC grew out of his own anger and frustration with them. Sometimes the TaD’s bad behavior is symptomatic of problems in the behavior and performance of the senior executive team. The courage to address these issues can relieve some of the pressure and dysfunction in the executive team and shift the focus away from the TaD executive exclusively.

Clarifying your own thinking about the TaD executive and the entire leadership team (including yourself) is an ongoing process. Situations change, but if you commit to really engaging and trying to retain the TaD executive, consider the following:

- **The relationship of mutual trust and respect between you and the TaD executive is the most important talent management resource the organization has.** Never lose sight of this fact. Work to build and sustain this relationship and don’t be too put off if your star performer becomes irritable or defensive. He or she may need to test the relationship and you may need to challenge them to develop more trust.
- **Show consistent interest in understanding the TaD executive’s point of view on an issue or controversy.** These are people whose stock in trade is to feel misunderstood! Unbeknownst to them, they also lack a capacity to see things from others’ points of view. Look beyond self-justification by remembering how sensitive TaD executives can be to negative feedback or criticism. But don’t be too hesitant to disagree or give feedback – doing so can build credibility and trust.
- **Assess the TaD executive’s level of organizational loyalty.** While these executives typically appear to be out for themselves, probe for a foundational sense of commitment to the organization. An executive who primarily sees himself or herself as a “gun for hire” and who demonstrates repeated indifference or hostility to the organizational mission may be in the wrong job. But one who has a commitment to the organizational mission should be helped to connect more strongly to the enterprise. Use the organizational resources at your disposal – a senior mentor in another line of business, a leadership position on an enterprise-wide committee or task force, etc.

- **Respond effectively to resistance from the TaD executive's peers as a necessary part of this process.** TaD executives send signals of aloofness, disregard, and contempt. Consequently, controversy often swirls around them. Peers may be polarized and take "all or nothing" stances, challenging you to explain why you are not demanding conformity to organizational norms (usually code for demoting or firing their TaD peer). This is expectable and requires patience, and yes, reassurance to your other executives.
- **You are not forcing the TaD executive to change; you are encouraging him or her to grow.** This may seem like a semantic issue, but it is important. You are trying to help the TaD executive improve as a leader. Your goal is not to take something away but to add something to their leadership toolkit. Which, by the way, will stand them in good stead whatever job they're in.

After struggling with his maverick executive and the reactions of his leadership team, Skip finally promoted Charles to the EC, not because Charles set an admirable example but because his contribution was essential and he needed to be part of the senior executive discussion. This decision relieved some of Charles' insecurity and may have also bought time for Charles to address issues in other spheres of his life. Charles became relatively less difficult and was able to contribute to the organization longer than most had expected.

Managing the TaD executive is not for the faint-hearted. However, the effort is worth it for both extrinsic and intrinsic reasons. If you can retain the TaD executive and better align him or her with the organizational mission, if only for a period of time, you will have contributed greatly to the organization's aims and productivity. And you will have grown in your ability to lead a diverse, high performing team, taking your talent management skills to the next level.

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