

THE EXECUTIVE MANIFESTO

Why Business is Bad, Executives are Sick and People Hate Coming to Work

(And what we can do about it.)

So why the Manifesto?

As a confidential CEO Advisor for nearly twenty years, and a former senior executive of NYSE Banks, I've seen patterns and repeated mistakes that are eroding our nation's corporate competitiveness, destroying families and making executives feel both miserable and trapped.

I'm writing this Manifesto to ignite a conversation, to get executives talking about making real change to their style of leadership and the way they run their business and life. By highlighting the well-known hypocrisy and misguided priorities of corporate America, I hope to provoke executives to change their behavior and adjust their approach to leadership.

Here's what's wrong...

1. Wasting time in meetings.

Wasting time in so many unproductive, rudderless meetings without an agenda, without a true leader, without active engagement, without firm commitments, without next steps and timelines, without any follow-up or review of prior commitments. Taken as a whole, ineffective meetings are a multi-billion-dollar flush of America's corporate resources.

2. Putting work above all else in life.

Those misguided executives who lose their families (and often their health) due to neglect because they consistently put work ahead of their children and spouse. I hear all kinds of excuses about "quality time" but that's nonsense. Your kids and spouse want to see more of you, and when you are home, they want your full attention. Don't kid yourself that you can make it up with more toys, a better neighborhood, a bigger ring or a newer car. It won't make any difference in the long run. Strike a balance and go home to see your family.

3. Too many long, boring emails.

Email. Hundreds of unnecessarily-long emails where everyone is cc:'d for CYA purposes. Then when you are not aware of some new project or the status of some event, the manager says, "I sent you the email!" Yeah, you may be right, but one thing I know for sure is that I didn't read it because all of your emails are so long and boring. Stop sending me so many emails for CYA and only send me the important ones. And keep them much more crisp and succinct if you want me, or anyone else, to read them.

4. CEOs with weak backbones.

CEOs who let their executive teams drift into dysfunction and outright war over turf and limited resources. The alignment of the executive team is 100% the responsibility of the CEO and you can't pass that buck.

5. Managers who avoid tough decisions.

Weak managers who are so fearful of HR or the Legal department that they lack the guts to make a decision without consulting half of the executive floor. Tangentially, I'm very disappointed with executives who don't take the time to clearly define the authorities, decision rights and boundaries for their direct reports, leaving them to waste time while they struggle to figure things out.

6. Unclear direction and poor follow-up.

Managers who give ambiguous direction and who don't follow-up to ensure that their teams understand what's expected of them. Predictably, projects or initiatives fall behind or fail outright due to poor initial direction, lack of feedback and inadequate accountability.

7. Too much "collaboration" and not enough action.

All this talk about "collaboration" when managers also tell us that they have to meet even higher expectations with fewer resources. Your people can't help everyone else and collaborate when they don't even have enough time and resources to do their everyday jobs. Now you want them to reach across the aisle and do all these special projects for everyone else in the name of teamwork and collaboration? You can't put 10 pounds of apples into a 5-pound bag unless you grind them up into applesauce. Similarly, you can't consistently get more and more from your people without grinding them up, destroying morale and getting an inferior work product.

8. Overly complicated & ornate PowerPoint decks.

The incredible amount of time that is wasted trying to create pretty charts, fancy graphs and colorful images for massive PowerPoint decks. If you can't get your point across in about 5 to 10 simple slides, then your proposal or your message is too complicated. You need to find a way to strip the complexity from your presentations so that your plans can be readily understood and executed by people who are already over-burdened, double booked and way behind plan.

9. Corporate double standards & sexism.

We have a double standard with women and men. Men who set high expectations and say what they mean are labeled "tough and effective" yet women who model those same attributes are given offensive labels. That's just BS and we can't stand for that anymore!

10. Reluctance to promptly address failures and setbacks.

Executives who lack the courage to promptly tell subordinates when they are not meeting expectations. No one likes having a difficult conversation, but beating around the bush only delays the inevitable, and worsens the situation. Then there are the executives who say that they are holding someone “accountable” yet when targets, budgets, timelines or goals are missed, there are no consequences! There can be no true accountability without consequences for failure.

11. Rampant politics and infighting.

Turf wars, fighting over scarce resources, and executives engaging in subterfuge to undermine their peers in some kind of a Machiavellian power grab.

12. Poor calendar management.

Too many executives turn over their calendars to their assistants without direction as to prioritization of appointments or access. Is it any wonder that so many executives are running from meeting to meeting without a break or time for preparation? Leave time between your meetings and if you have someone scheduling your appointments, give them specific rules of engagement regarding how you want your calendar managed. I know you have a very big job title, but not every meeting is critical and most meetings probably don't require your attendance. Typical filtering questions should be: "Is this my decision to make, my problem to resolve, is this critical for me to know, or should someone else be handling this?"

13. Selfish executives looking out for themselves.

Executives who flagrantly put their personal financial and political ambitions ahead of the best interests of their company. Stop complaining about your salary and stock options. The real question is whether or not your team is producing. Let your politics be about your results. Your ability to consistently meet your plans and develop your people is what's most important.

14. Poor career management.

Executives who work hard, do a good job, but never reach their full potential because they are not strategic about their own personal development and growth. They expect someone else to look out for their career and in the process, they get overlooked because they didn't keep up and grow professionally. While it's important to put business interests first, one should not overlook the importance of managing their own career.

15. Lack of consistency and focus.

Flavor-of-the-month, touchy-feely initiatives that add no value, that fail to inspire and that only leave people more cynical about next month's silly focus.

16. Failure to take notes and follow-up.

Executives who don't take notes (and by the way, the same goes for waiters who try and memorize my order). Give people the courtesy of your attention and take notes. I've never met a senior executive who could consistently keep track of so many moving parts without taking notes and constantly referring to them for follow-up and reminders.

17. Protecting poor performers.

Managers making excuses for their subordinates who are perennial losers that can't do their jobs, can't meet their numbers, can't show up on time, can't deliver and can't execute. Show some leadership and promptly tell people where they stand in very clear, unambiguous terms.

18. Managers who put friendship over performance.

Managers who try to be everyone's friend. Instead, be a leader. You are there to lead people and get better results for the company. I am sick of managers whose actions are indistinguishable from those of a party planner or social coordinator.

19. Lack of executive integrity.

Executives who round the corners, blur the line between a business expense and a personal expense or who look the other way when they see a legal or ethical transgression. There must be zero tolerance in matters of integrity and corporate character. And if you are rounding the corners, your people are too.

20. Using community events for personal gain.

Executives who use community activities and social events to build their personal brand, rather than doing business back at the shop. You must find a fair balance. It's the rare executive indeed, that can ever point to an ROI on their community involvement, golf tournaments or charity balls. If it's a charitable endeavor, that's great, but don't try and pass it off as "business development." You're not kidding anyone.

21. Chasing too many strategic objectives.

Executive Management creating dozens of "strategic priorities" and hundred plus page strategic plans that no one can understand, no one can execute on, no one is buying into and no one is following up or keeping track of progress. This has got to stop.

22. Matrixed reporting lines without a single boss.

All these so-called "matrixed" organizations where we are burdening employees with multiple managers who must compete for a share of the employee's time each week. We put these employees in the horrible position to have to choose which manager to really work for. These matrixed approaches may look great on paper and they may appear to solve a short-term budget problem, but they rarely produce great quality work. You can't get someone's greatest thinking and work product when they are only permitted to give

you a portion of their time. Key insight: Matrixed organizations are rife with backroom deals where managers provide special access, favors or other benefits to entice matrixed-subordinates to focus more time on their particular project.

23. Whiners, complainers and pointless debaters.

Perennial whiners, complainers and those who love to argue, who sap the energy out of others and destroy productivity. This also applies to those who hijack meetings with their own agenda, or who will debate every point just for sport.

24. Corporate favoritism and bias.

Managers who hire or treat team members differently based on their age, gender, ethnicity or alma mater. Hire the best people you can afford, regardless of the class.

25. Passing the buck and blaming "corporate."

Executives who won't speak up in meetings, but who have plenty of time to hold court and complain to their subordinates about new policies and decisions that they don't support. This has got to stop! If given the opportunity to engage in the discussion, do so and speak your mind, vigorously if needed, but state your case and make your point. If the decision doesn't go your way, you still need to support it and never, ever burden your subordinates by telling them how you disagree with "corporate." Take responsibility and never pass the buck or commiserate with other executives in after-meeting huddles. This wasteful, weak practice is far too prevalent. Don't do it and don't allow others to do it.

26. Bullies and jerks.

Corporate bullies and yellers who are allowed to intimidate with impunity because they are considered good producers. Why don't we have the courage to face-down these bullies and either get them some help or get them out of the company? There is no room in business for this level of fear and intimidation and leaders should never tolerate this from any of their managers or team members.

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