



Do You Know Who is Actually Delivering Results?

INTRODUCTION

The ability to accurately identify who is delivering results is a vital executive skill. One must be able to discern who actually gets things done from those who are quick to take credit. Accurate allocation of credit has major implications for decisions about employment, promotion and termination and, ultimately, the very achievement of results.

Some executives regularly are hood-winked regarding results and are taken in by show ponies. The allocation of credit is difficult because an executive is bombarded with attempts to gain credit by those who don't deserve it. If one added up all of the purported credit for a result the number would far exceed 100 percent.

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Most people do not intentionally exaggerate their contributions; they sincerely believe what they purport. The executive has to go beyond what is said and attempt to accurately read the situation. The executive also needs to understand how personality characteristics can be revealing in determining who deserves credit.

How can executives increase their skills in this regard? There is no magic formula or silver bullet. It really is an art form. The evidence is never obvious or clear cut. The data are highly ambiguous and the executive has to go with the preponderance of evidence. With a little effort, executives can improve their skills in finding out who is delivering.



Conversely, those who actually deliver results are often so busy working they don't have time to bother the boss with frequent self-enhancing discussions.

Typically, those who regularly give credit are the ones who likely had more to do with the result than those who repeatedly take credit.

DATA TO INFORM ALLOCATION OF CREDIT

What types of information should an executive collect to ensure that credit is appropriately allocated? Executives need to collect certain kinds of data, look for patterns across time, examine personality characteristics, use the opinion of others, as well as reflect on their own gut feelings. When all the imperfect data are collected and considered, allocations of credit can be more accurate.

PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS

Executives must determine what was central and what was peripheral to results, then overlay the facts about who was responsible for which activities. Typically, one or two central factors outweigh many peripheral factors. Once this is known, executives can then discriminate between individuals who worked on the central issue and those who effectively handled the peripheral factors. Too often individuals who contribute peripherally strive to take excessive credit.

One executive was trying to discern the degree to which the Vice President of Sales and the Vice President of Engineering had contributed to a sale. Confusing the issue, the VP of Sales was quite self-enhancing and overt in describing the many steps he had taken to secure a commitment. On the other hand, the Vice President of Engineering was a quiet and unassuming executive. The visiting customer had spent 90 percent of his time with the Engineering VP and his staff. While the activities of the VP of Sales were important, they paled in comparison to the Engineering impact. The executive was able to determine, based on analysis of the process, what truly was central to the sale and what was important but peripheral to it.

People who seek undeserved credit may take excessive amounts of an executive's time extolling the virtues of their contributions. Conversely, those who actually deliver results are often so busy working they don't have time to bother the boss with frequent self-enhancing discussions. What an individual discusses with the boss can be informative about that individual's contributions.

It also can be enlightening to reflect on who offers original thinking rather than just parroting what the executive has said. Executives must be on guard against such fawning and should give more credit to people who constructively disagree and advance thinking.

PATTERNS ACROSS TIME

As an executive looks back across multiple results, it can become apparent that the same people are there each time. Their contributions across multiple circumstances are clear. Some individuals are always present when good things happen and their fingerprints are all over the results. Patterns across time and circumstances can be highly informative in discovering who bears prime responsibility for the results.

Who created the plan and who was involved when success was still uncertain? Answering this question often provides a sharp contrast between these individuals and the ones who are adept at reading an impending success and who involve themselves only after the hard work has been done.

Who repeatedly takes credit and who repeatedly gives credit? Typically, those who regularly give credit are the ones who likely had more to do with the result than those who repeatedly take credit.

PERSONALITY VARIABLES

Excessive self-interest can be a clue that an individual seeks more credit than is deserved. Who talks more about money, benefits, title and advancement than about results? Who puts others down as a means of self-enhancement and who pulls others up? Who does the heavy lifting and who does the easy stuff? Who is around when the going gets tough? Who blames others and who takes personal responsibility?

Whose language is filled with the latest corporate buzzwords and concepts that sound good but have little depth or meaning? Conversely, whose vocabulary is filled with substantive and meaningful concepts that lead to business success? The excessive use of the pronoun “I” may also be a counter-indicator to actual contribution. Retice and modesty often correlate more highly with results than talkativeness and loudness.

The executive must distinguish between appearances and substance. Some people are especially good looking, well dressed and verbally proficient. It is common to assume that they excel at everything. Astute executives go beyond the surface when collecting information germane to credit allocation.

These personality variables are clues that suggest further observation may be needed to arrive at definitive conclusions. Executives should work to collect more data when they observe these personality variables.

OPINIONS OF OTHERS

How other people react to individuals can be informative in trying to ascertain who is delivering results. People clearly admire and respect those who actually deliver results, and they treat individuals seeking excessive credit quite differently. Employees know who contributes and who merely talks about contributing. The opinion of others can be important data.

An executive should take note of which individuals are listened to and which are ignored when they speak. Similarly, an executive can observe who is regularly sought out for their input and advice. Who do customers seek out? Which individuals get invited to be on task forces?

These patterns that emerge from the collective opinions of others can be revealing in regard to who is delivering results.

GUT FEELINGS

Sometimes executives are reluctant to rely on their gut feelings, even though those feelings may be rooted in sound data. The information generally is fuzzy and may point to areas where more analysis and data gathering are needed. Nonetheless, gut feelings can be an important piece of information in the process of figuring who delivers results.

In one instance, the Vice President of Manufacturing had a bothersome, uneasy feeling about the Vice President of Human Resources, who frequently came to him with lists of problems she had resolved. The Manufacturing VP had a nagging suspicion that the HR executive was creating problems in order to solve them. In his judgment, the plant was running well and not exhibiting any of these problems. So he began periodically accompanying the HR Vice President and observed a pattern of asking questions that actually created problems. He concluded that the HR executive was quite skilled at solving every problem she created. This is an example of an executive having a gut feeling and following through to collect other information in order to come to a solid conclusion about the veracity of the feeling. He confirmed that the HR executive actually was interfering with results.



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EXECUTIVE RESPONSIBILITIES

An executive must do far more than identify those who are delivering results. He or she must take steps to manage both the contributors and the non-contributors. Unless the allocation of credit is accurate, subordinates will lose respect for the executive.

Executives should examine their own behaviors to determine if they have unintentionally contributed to the rise of the empty suits in their organizations. Perhaps they have spent too much time listening to self-aggrandizing individuals who have not contributed and not enough time with those who actually have delivered results.

How and with whom an executive spends time sends a powerful message about what is important to the organization. Those who are driving results need to be recognized and encouraged. This may be more difficult than expected because oftentimes these individuals prefer to keep a low profile and are uncomfortable with attention. Spending time with them, showcasing their work and giving them additional responsibilities are some ways to achieve this. Spending excessive time with those who are charming, verbally proficient and overt in their credit-taking, even though they had little to do with the positive outcomes, inadvertently sends the wrong message. By devoting more time to those who deliver results, the executive sends a clear message about what is valued.

Accurate credit allocation can also be enhanced by working with individuals who are excessively modest and allow themselves and their organizations to be underestimated. These individuals may need coaching about how to give their work a higher profile so that the rest of the organization can learn how they contribute to results.

Individuals who look good and say the right things but don't really deliver results may be rehabilitated. Such people can be given the benefit of the doubt. These behaviors may have been encouraged by past bosses or simply tolerated and not addressed. Sometimes they just need an executive to push them into more substantive activities. Executives need to teach these individuals about the thought processes and activities required to deliver results and then monitor the amount of resulting behavioral change.

CONCLUSIONS

The ability to distinguish between those who actually deliver results and those who mostly talk about results is a critical executive skill. Overall, a pattern of attention to show ponies rather than plow horses can have a detrimental effect on an organization. On the other hand an organization that recognizes those who truly deliver results will attain its goals more quickly, build its bench and retain the best talent.

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