Shakespeare's Witches
Drama-based Executive Coaching

PDW Proposal No. **13110**

Primary sponsor: MED
Other sponsor: MC

Abstract

For nearly two decades we have been trying to find appropriate ways to support the executive decision taker and spent most of both our academic research and our consultancy on this issue. We developed a conceptual framework and some practices for coaching and a software tool for knowledge engineering. We have accumulated substantial experience in supporting the executives and we understand them better today.

With this workshop we invite the audience to explore the conflict situations the executives face. First we introduce a conceptual framework that explains how we see the corporations, the shareholders and the chaos of the organization. By chaos we mean the reality of the organization beyond that tiny deterministic part. In chaos an infinitesimal change on the input may result in a completely different output. We see two kinds of executives: the action hero that lives in the deterministic world and the drama hero, whose domain is the chaos. We use dramas to depict conflict situations and thoughts of the greatest business thinkers to interpret them. The dramas over-emphasize the characters thus make the conflict situation more obvious. These are not our real business situations, so we will feel no, but they are also not some hypothetical case studies, they are sufficiently near to our experience so that we can relate to it. Most importantly, the essence of the dramas is the catharsis, in which the executives realize: *"this happened to me"* or *"this could have happened to me"* or *"this can happen to me tomorrow"*.

Presenters: The 3 people running this workshop are long-time collaborators. They are all academics working in business education and they also have considerable experience in advising/coaching top executives. Two of them started a post-MBA course for executives and executive coaches where they teach using the drama-approach which is introduced in this workshop.

Audience: This PDW is aimed at executives, executive coaches and academic professionals researching and/or educating these two groups.

Preparation: The participants of the workshop are expected to do some reading and/or video watching prior to the workshop. It is expected that they are familiar with Shakespeare's Macbeth (if you have read/seen it long time ago, please, watch it again), with Mintzberg's critiques of the MBA education (video available at http://mitworld.mit.edu/video/302), with Chapter 6: *"Twin Citizenship"* and Chapter 7: *"Subsidiarity"* from Handy's "The Empty Raincoat" and with Chapter 6: *"Directing Evolution"* from "The Evolving Self" by Csikszentmihalyi.

Proposed timeframe: 2 hours

Introduction

The three of us have spent many years in working *with*, *for*, and *on* executive decision takers in various ways. We have worked as executive coaches, we have been doing research and publishing academic papers and books about executive decision takers and how to support them, we have acted as knowledge engineers and developed the knowledge-based expert system Doctus, we are academics, and all of us are involved in teaching in one way or another at higher education institutions.

In this PDW we will introduce our new approach to executive education. The 'traditional' management education focuses on giving tools/methods to the learners and training them how to use these. The problems will start when the executive realizes that the tools – as anything else – have domains of validity, beyond which the unknown chaos starts. Many attendees of executive courses never ask the question of validity and will apply the learned tools to everything. They mistake the chaos for determinism and usually cause great damage. Those who realize that the conflicts in the chaos cannot be handled with the tools made for determinism will face dilemmas which are inaccessible for the analytic thinking. They will be left with nothing but their intuition. Such executives and their coaches are who we want to help with this PDW.

We tried to categorize the conflict situations we have seen during our work with executives and soon realized that the dramas, from Sophocles through Shakespeare to Mrožek, are engaging with similar conflict situations. Therefore we decided to use dramas as means for getting the executives think about the conflict situations they face. Any executive have experience with a few such conflict situations and recognize them at once. The others they have not come across yet but some other executives are nodding that these are the ones they faced – thus the trust is built. They may face any of the conflicts tomorrow.

Conceptual Framework

As Mintzberg et al. (2002: 69-70) explained, corporations originally existed to serve society. They used to be both economic and social entities balancing a variety of priorities. In the last couple of decades, however, they became simply economic machines trying to maximize the shareholders' income (inappropriately called shareholder value). These corporations we call the *lean and mean* companies. We do not intend to paint a picture in which all corporations are evil but we want to acknowledge that they are polarized. The organizations that are the opposite of the lean and mean corporations can be characterized by *communityship* (Mintzberg, 2006, 2009) based on the engagement (Mintzberg et al., 2002) of the members of the community.

Ownership in today's organizations may no longer be the appropriate concept. In publicly owned businesses the shareholders became *gamblers* or, as Handy (1995: 149-152) called them punters, placing bets on the corporations they hope to would win. It would be interesting to examine the addiction of the shareholders, but in this workshop we are only interested in the executives and their coaches. The shareholders are for this purpose only interesting as they are setting the scene by setting the expectations for the executives.

The traditional role model for leadership is the ***action hero***. The action hero has no doubts, always 'knows', as (s)he was *told*, good from evil, right from wrong, desirable from undesirable. And (s)he delivers the performance to achieve these. And then gets her/his reward. For instance, the youngest son rides over seven seas and seven mountains, fights the dragon, saves the king's daughter and, as a reward, he gets the princess and half of the kingdom. The CEO increases the (short term) profitability of the corporation, delivers high profit to the shareholders, and gets an incredible remuneration package. (Cf Mintzberg, 2007) The action hero CEO does not think about whether it is right to fire a few thousand people, does not hesitate whether it is good or evil to build a factory which is efficient but has detrimentally pollutes the environment, has no doubts whether it is desirable to finish off a competitor, etc. The shareholders told her/him what is good, right and desirable: the high shareholder gain. The action hero is the CEO of the lean and mean corporation.

Many executives are action heroes, but many are not. We watched executives struggling with doubts as they could not know the outcomes of their actions in the chaotic world of business. Their world is not deterministic, they cannot control everything, and often they do not even know how to distinguish good from evil in a particular situation. Gradually we realized that they are ***drama heroes***. Our view comes near to the heroic vs. engaging management introduced by Mintzberg et al. (2002) but our emphasis is different. We put under scrutiny how the executive sees and handles the conflicts in her/his world of business. This is why we contrast the drama hero with the action hero. The essence of the drama hero is that (s)he fights for something no one else fights for, doubts herself/himself and can never find out whether it was for a good cause or not. This kind of CEO has a chance to comprehend their chaotic organizations and can try and learn to swim in such turbulent waters. This happens in organizations characterized by communityship, so the members of the community can learn to swim together in those turbulent waters. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993)

Drama-based Teaching

We start from Mintzberg's (Mintzberg, 2004, 2005; Mintzberg & Lampel, 2001) understanding of the management education, according to which MBAs are producing business analysts and not managers, let alone executives.

"Looking more closely at the CEOs who failed, we noticed that they tended to do so in similar ways: They ran their businesses according to a formula, regardless of the people involved or the dynamics of the industry in question." (Mintzberg & Lampel, 2001)

"These programs give students the confidence to make decisions but not the competence to deal with the messy reality in which decisions are executed. Students learn to analyze situations and propose 'implementation'. Unfortunately you cannot replicate true managing in the classroom. The case study is a case in point: Students with little or no management experience are presented with 20 pages on a company they do not know and told to pronounce on its strategy the next day." (Mintzberg & Lampel, 2001)

We distinguish three approaches to executive education (Figure 1). The *Action Hero* schools are the traditional MBAs as described by Mintzberg. The *Celebrity* schools are usually trainings typically labeled as team building or communication. The *Drama Hero* schools focus on the executives' conflicts.
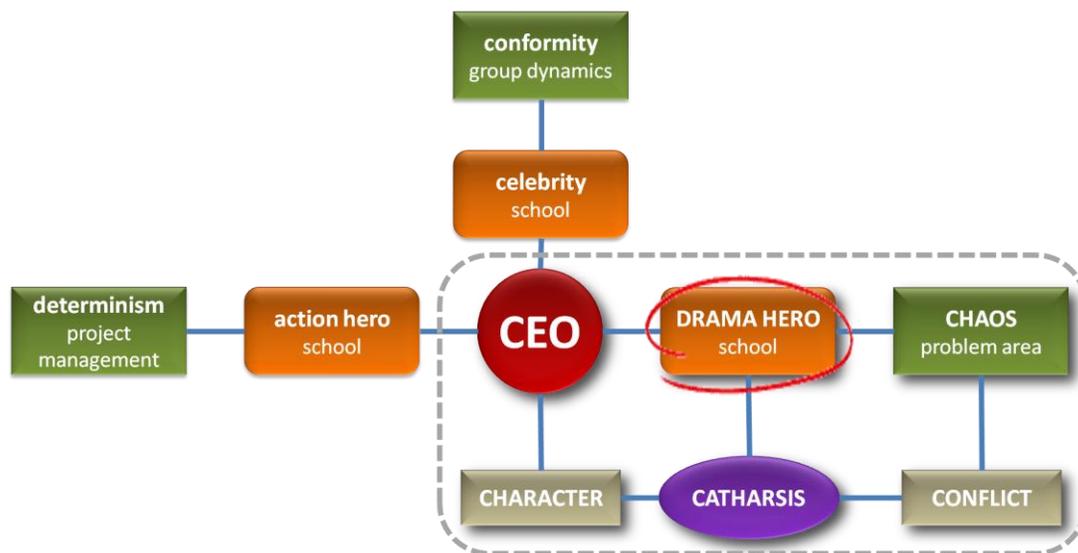

Figure 1: Drama-hero school

Why have we found the dramas particularly useful in depicting conflict situations? First, the dramas over-emphasize the characters thus make the conflict situation more obvious. Second, the dramas are not our real business situations, so we will not have the anxiety accompanying it, but they are also not some hypothetical case studies we have nothing to do with. Dramas are not specific to any business discipline but they are sufficiently near for any executive's experience so that (s)he can relate to it. Finally, and most importantly, the essence of the dramas is the catharsis, in which the executives realize: *"this happened to me"* or *"this could have happened to me"* or *"this can happen to me tomorrow"*.

Drama-based Coaching

Who is the coach? To use an example from sport, the coach is the guy running up and down at the sides of a baseball field trying everything to make his team win without ever hitting the ball. How long does (s)he coach the same team? For a few years at the maximum. The coach teaches the players all (s)he is supposed to or can, then moves on. The team hires another coach and the coach is hired by another team. With Handy (2002) we believe that the coach has nothing but her/his reputation; so if the coaching has been successful, the reputation increases, if unsuccessful, it decreases. That is how it is and how it should be. Beware of consultants who offer non-interfering-coaching, who promise not to give advices – they surely will not give you any advices, at least, no useful ones. They are coaches with empty bags.

The coach may occasionally come back to the same executive, but then (s)he will have something else to offer. The coach is constantly learning. We depict the idea of this process on Figure 2. The *alchemists* (Handy, 1999) are people who create something from nothing. In the field of leadership, they are people like Bill Gates, Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, etc. They create the nova. The *gurus* validate the nova and by doing so they create concepts. They are the gatekeepers who let the new ideas into the field. The *coaches* make sense of the gurus' concepts; they put the concepts into the context of the corporation thus creating conceptions. The coaches whisper their conceptions into the ear of the *executive*. The executive occasionally does what the coach says, most of the time (s)he does not. But the decision of the executive will certainly be different than if the coach did not whisper in her/his ear. The coach helps the executive creating the picture about the conflict situation.

Figure 2: Rough sketch of the coaching process

The validation-conflict

When we got the idea to develop an executive educational program focusing on the conflicts the executives face, we tried to categorize the conflicts. We have distinguished four phases of strategic thinking and we have found three or four dilemmas in each phase. For organizational reasons we decided to have three dilemmas in each phase. We emphasize this as there are, of course, other ways to categorize the conflict situations. By examining the catharsis of the dramas, the participants will realize that there is no single right way or best way of dealing with the conflicts. What the executive can find is a way (s)he is able to see then and there based on the picture (s)he depicted influenced by the whispering of the coach.

The four phases of strategic thinking are the following: changing the change, validating the conception, pitching the conception, and changing the identity. The four phases are part of any strategic thinking even though this does not mean that the executive will change paradigm every time. But (s)he faces the dilemma every time whether to change the paradigm or not.

In this workshop we will play with the second phase, the validation. Within the validation phase we have the following three dilemmas: interpretation vs. fact, dream vs. opportunity, whisper vs. dictate. We will depict each dilemma using a drama and then interpret these using the thoughts of business gurus. One drama, Macbeth, provides an overarching theme to set the scene:

"All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter! ... Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none: So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!"

Sponsors

This primary focus of this workshop is on the *education of executives and executive coaches* using the drama approach. It introduces a novel approach that we developed for teaching executives and their coaches who are not satisfied with the 'traditional' MBA courses. Therefore this PDW is of primary interest to the MED division. The drama(tic) situations one of which we are introducing in this PDW describe conflicts in the real, chaotic world of business which the executives face, if they are lucky, accompanied by a coach. The executives may learn, apart from an insight into what kind of conflicts they are facing, what they can expect from a capable executive coach and the coaches can learn *what the executive need support with*. Thus this PDW is also of interest to the MC division.

Workshop format

The PDW starts with a presentation about the conceptual framework we adopted when developed the drama-based teaching of executives and executive coaches. The second presentation provides a brief explanation of the themes using which we have covered the most important conflict situations of the executives and how these themes are structured.

The main part of the workshop starts by one of the presenters outlining a drama situation which describes a typical conflict of the chaotic world of business. The conflict is *introduced* through the drama situation and then *interpreted* using the thoughts of the greatest business thinkers. This interpretation stage is individually done by the participants of the workshop using the workbook provided by the organizers. The final phase of the workshop is a *plenary discussion* of the interpretations of the conflict situation.

Statement

"I have received signed statements from all intended participants agreeing to participate for the entire workshop, AND that these participants are not in violation of the Rule of Three + Three."

Viktor Dörfler
submitter

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