



The EA Career

CREATING A NEW DIALOGUE

The Executive/Executive Assistant Business Partnership

VANISHING WORKPLACE VALUES: TRUST. COMMITMENT. RESPECT.

Facilitating a healthy perspective on the Executive/Executive Assistant Business Partnership requires some fundamental techniques, principles and strategies.

The Trust-Dependent Team:

When sophisticated executives realize that they need to replicate themselves, harness their worst tendencies and find someone to support them who has a vested interest in their business and its success, they turn to a key member of their team, their Executive Assistant/Business Partner, who brings the indispensable skills of solid judgment, increased flexibility and responsiveness.

The logic of the Trust-Dependent Executive/Executive Assistant team is that this is a relationship that calls for back-and-forth communication (only one person talking is not a conversation) and mutual adjustment. This trust-dependent relationship relies on working collaboratively to make decisions with logical clarity, and to get work done. This special team conquers the unknown with joint problem-solving, and with the Executive Assistant doing his/her best work when it matters most.

In his book, *The Power of Professionalism*, Bill Wiersma defines trust as “the emotional glue that supports one’s priorities, protects one’s self-interests, and ensures respect for one’s values.” This means that executives elevate the role of their Executive Assistant to the level of business partnership by recognizing and acknowledging strategic competence, by delegating higher levels of responsibility, and by letting others in their company know that this is a trusted and efficient colleague, whose job it is to efficiently expedite and manage to the needs of the moment.

Interpersonal trust is based on three Hs that are pivotal to effectiveness and productivity: Honor (sense of loyalty); Humility (acknowledge the person who helps you to achieve your objectives); and Humanity (focus on relational well-being).

Superb results occur and higher levels of productivity are achieved when there is a climate of psychological safety where people can express an opinion, speak up and disagree while remaining aware of professional boundaries. Stable teams can be powerful tools in achieving success. One point still remains a vexing problem: individuals are *next... ▶*

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The Duncan Leadership Institute offers Business Education for the Executive Assistant. Our curriculum models executive education programs that concentrate on professional development needs of executives. Please visit www.duncangroupinc.com.

The Duncan Group Inc., 420 Lexington Avenue, Suite 300, New York, NY 10170 (212) 297-6141

not tools, nor are they expendable commodities; there is a distinction here.

Assistants frequently refer to high-maintenance executives as a disruptive influence. There is a bright-line-distinction that separates the actions of executives expressing frustration about a situation, and driving a personal attack on the person who focuses exclusively on helping them every day. The same is true for executives' families who likewise exercise such an abuse of power. In working environments where "service" is confused with "servant," the consequences of such behavior can be far-reaching for two reasons: First, because demeaning and disrespectful behavior is contradictory to the natural meaning of Good. Second, because the primary purpose of the role, which is to provide structure, innovation and strategic support, is significantly diminished and undermined where explicit dehumanizing behavior is imposed.

For a successful, collegial relationship to develop, mutual expectations must be established through open communication, emphasizing purpose and shared values. A solid relationship is not based on a stand-off perspective. I am reminded of the telegram from a theatrical producer to playwright George Bernard Shaw: "Send manuscript. If good, will send check." Shaw replied: "Send check. If good, will send manuscript." It is wise to set mutual expectations from the start.

Experienced Assistants know that they cannot jump into someone's life and change it, nor can they change the way that someone behaves. Yet, one can change the way that one responds. These situations require that one hear (understand the message), rather than listen (absorb the message).

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"Miss Dugan, will you send someone in here who can distinguish right from wrong?"

The Commitment-Dependent Team

Companies are entrusted with a central mission: to ensure that equity conditions exist, provide opportunities for educational advancement, recognize that the Executive/Executive Assistant is a collaborative business partnership, and match compensation to contribution by validating job-related characteristics. People want to be paid fairly for the work they do. If they are over-performers, they should be paid accordingly.

Executives' behavior is fundamental in determining the level of interpersonal trust and respect they receive from those they manage. They are relied upon to uphold the fairness principle and inspire commitment by sharing information, and not by abusing the vulnerability of others.

Employees who are optimistic, highly conscientious, entrepreneurial thinkers, eager to learn and apply new skills, are vital workplace contributors. Success is dependent on the organization's ability to inspire employees to do more than is expected.

The Respect-Dependent Team

What are the implications for the future? Executives are entrusted with a crucial mission: to provide educational opportunities to allow for growth and development, and to ensure a financial safety-net for assistants who help them to achieve and retain success. Effective executives who model this behavior, and who are respectful of those who help them in their lives, will inspire the right performance standards and enthusiasm to achieve higher levels of productivity.

Assistants are entrusted with a crucial mission: to learn, apply new knowledge, focus on simplicity and adapt to changing circumstances. They know how to create alliances and they accept the principle of self-reliance by accepting the notion of ongoing personal improvement. They know how to step aside from personal attacks.

The road ahead requires professional courage, strategic competence and intellectual integration. Michael Porter, Professor at the Harvard Business School suggests that we must improve the quality of our workforce; thus, the workplace. In my line of work, I am accountable for creating the Executive and Assistant match, while ensuring that the basic principles of trust, commitment and respect are evident. As someone who has successfully supported executives for many years as an Executive Assistant, and for the success of the companies I now serve, it is a responsibility that can be neither negotiated nor compromised.

Recommended Reading:

Changing Yourself and Your Reputation, Talula Cartwright, (CCL Press, 2009)

Developing Your Conflict Competence, Craig E. Runde, Tim A. Flanagan, (CCL Press, 2010)