

# Why Do Successful Executives Behave Like Thugs?

Hervé Da Costa

Most executives will not admit that their behaviors could be perceived as subversive; they may sincerely not realize that they are. The question is: who does notice? How about colleagues, other departments, employees at the bottom of the decision chain or suppliers? What are people complaining about in company hallways? This article discusses the key reasons for those behaviors and how to begin to address them to elicit real positive change — *Everybody Wins*.

Most dedicated executives eventually reach a level of success where they become important actors in the future performance of the company. These people have a proven track record and lengthy experience delivering results. Yet, at a certain point, their style of leadership and their behavior become the talk of the hallways, a target for criticism around the coffee machine. They do not realize that every single one of their mistakes now has a bigger impact. They demonstrate how top management fails to model what it preaches: they don't "walk the talk." The discussion by people at lower levels revolves around, "If they don't do it, why should I take the values and guidelines they talk about seriously? I will just do my job and look out for myself. That's it!" Innovation and productivity suffer.

The fact is that most companies do not prepare their executives sufficiently for the next level. The focus is mostly on the elements of the strategic plan and maintaining profits. Very little is planned to train key employees in order to sustain their success. Suddenly, a new CEO comes on board or a radical strategic shift is needed and the bad behaviors become true obstacles. Yesterday's Heroes become Today's Thugs overnight. Do you know one of these unfortunate persons?

To analyze how this happens, let us consider the following three modes of leadership:

**Survival leadership** is focused on survival strategies:

- My department and I do whatever it takes to win
- I impose my know-how to insure myself as the leader. I do not let go of my perspective and ensure that it greatly influences the final decision
- I protect the loyal ones only
- I annihilate the ones who threaten my position
- For many: "Greed is good."

**Intellectual leadership** is focused on imposing principles and theories to achieve success:

- I impose my principles, as they have worked in the past. I am the role model

- I create alliances for the time being to preserve an image of coherence and to achieve my goals
- I am powerful at discrediting my opponents
- I practice *The Art of War*
- I achieve independence
- I implement my agendas to win
- For many: "Plotting is a necessary evil."

**Collective leadership** focuses on using the power of collective intelligence to achieve greater results:

- We focus on making sure that all are involved productively and feel part of the whole
- We explain and share key information
- We confront non-collaborative behaviors
- We operate in an interdependent ecosystem where all parts influence our ability to succeed
- A team is often a better means to achieving our collective goals
- For many: "Win-win is possible".

A pyramid can represent survival and intellectual leadership. A circle can represent collective leadership. Pyramids are easy and natural. Circles are no longer easy and natural; they were when we evolved as ancient tribes.

The three modes of leadership are useful and should be acknowledged as such. One needs to excel at being a survivor and at creating intellectual strategies before tackling the collective leadership style.

Most executives learn to navigate all three modes of leadership, depending on the situation, environment, or the inspiration of the moment. This is generally done as a reaction and not as a conscious decision, a deliberate choice, or a planned action. This is where failure originates: the executive does not operate proactively and has received no training to identify what mode is appropriate. Worst, most of his/her successes have taken place when operating alone. The collective mode cannot be mastered by chance without focused training. Therefore, the experience with collective dynamics is minimal.

Major problems happen when the activities of the company become complex, global, and multicultural; suddenly, the environment can also become very demanding. The new era requires consensus, careful planning, including opinions of many before finalizing the decision, going through mistakes before finding the right solution, learning from all, collaborating with people with whom you have no authority, etc. This is when the successful executives discover their area of incompetency. This is a hard spot to encounter. The former way of winning is looked upon as destructive, unproductive, and the old tactics are perceived as subversive.

### *How do subversive behaviors show up?*

The wrong mindset leads to a behavior coming from the wrong mode of leadership. For instance, in a meeting to respond to a crisis, an executive may decide to be the only person talking instead of inquiring, asking questions to his/her staff. A CEO may announce an exciting vision and its strategic (intellectual) plan when the troops are focusing on surviving the previous failed strategy or lack thereof. The HR department may announce new corporate values, including being inclusive, without soliciting input from any other department. An executive may become skillful at criticizing a failing department instead of confronting the problems jointly and offering unbiased help, and so on.

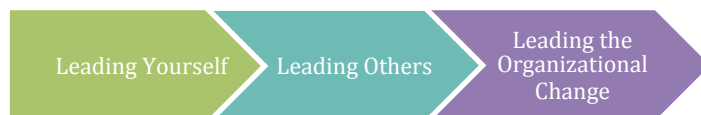
Here are some of symptoms that may help detect an executive who is not in the right mindset. You may hear:

- I know it all — look at my track record
- I can do it alone, as always
- They don't get it. I must keep demanding
- I don't have time to do things correctly
- I do not fully understand why we are doing this, but I am following directives
- It is the fault of this and that and this, again
- I cannot trust anyone; those guys are Thugs!

### *How do we create collective leadership?*

Successful executives have a very hard time acknowledging failure, but they will stretch to win a new challenge. Once they understand the options that are available, in particular, how to diagnose a bad situation and how to better intervene, they become more open to evaluating bad decisions or interactions: debriefing with peers and learning must become part of their personal success strategies.

The next step is to train executives to learn to work as a collective entity. It is easy to say, but as seen empirically by the author, hard to achieve. This is where patience, persistence, total commitment is needed. The survival



and intellectual modes of leadership have created deeply ingrained habits, fears, and convictions. The learning process must privilege learning and avoid the typical emphasis on blame. “We made some errors and we will learn from them,” is a much better approach than “Let us point out whose fault it is so it does not happen again.”

### *How do we get started?*

A strong understanding of integrity, self-responsibility, proactivity, and mutual responsibility is required. Someone must take on the vision that it is time to change the mode of leadership and begin to act in an exemplary way. This person must practice it before inviting others to join in. Who could be the first to start the change? It may be the CEO, the HR director, an influential mentor or an executive who can manage up. This is the seminal leader and it could be the reader of this article.

The development of learning-agile executives can have three pivotal and interrelated aspects: mastering personal conduct, mastering group dynamics, and mastering organizational change. The path to success requires humility and learning from mistakes together. A proven way to develop new behaviors is to practice consistently and intently for a long time. Therefore, a well-crafted development program will involve all three areas with an increasing level of expectations and practice.

A coach can begin by focusing on the art of communicating effectively and respectfully. Then focus on developing mutual accountability. To stop non productive behaviors, executives must learn to be accountable to what they are complaining about and explore in what ways they are at the center of creating the bad situations. To go beyond, an executive coach will support the focus on the development of the executive's integrity, self-responsibility, managerial courage and sense of ethics. Finally, the work environment may contribute in a negative way so executives will also need to create a culture shift from technocracy to inclusivity. Innovation and productivity win. Everybody wins.

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