

**Management**

# Shape Up to Ship Up

## Boot Camps for Executives on the Fast Track

By JONATHAN D. GLATER

PHILADELPHIA — Tom Healy had just been promoted to lead a new division of the **Best Buy Company**, the nation's largest electronics retailer, from his old job as regional vice president in Kansas City, Mo. Obviously, Best Buy had high regard for Mr. Healy's management expertise — so it sent him to Philadelphia to learn why he was a weak manager.

Weak in some areas, that is. The catalog of basic management skills is long — it includes motivating people, delegating authority, crunching numbers and smoothing over office conflicts — and no boss can do everything right. But as people on the fast track approach the top, failing to figure out what they are doing wrong can endanger their careers.

Mr. Healy said he knew he was doing some things wrong, but he was not quite sure what they were. So Best Buy paid \$25,000 to send him to a weeklong training program here run by a consulting company, RHR International, so he could find out.

RHR specializes in jogging up-and-coming managers, including No. 2's in line to be No. 1's, to acknowledge their flaws and take action to correct them. It is just one of a growing number of coaching services that are helping corporate America grapple with its latest crisis, a severe shortage of management talent. Firms like the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, N.C., and Personnel Decisions International in Minneapolis say demand for their services has increased rapidly over the last year. Business schools, meanwhile, are offering more courses on sharpening personal management skills.

RHR says it offers a special twist: each client meets with one of its coaches, who



Michael Branscom for the New York Times

Executives, above, experience the "Fireside Chat" at RHR International's weeklong management training retreat in Philadelphia.

are all psychologists, in his or her workplace both before and after attending an RHR retreat. At courses in a suburban Philadelphia conference center, the participants do not rule over subordinates; rather, they joust with fellow executives and listen to experts who analyze their behavior. The programs include a substantial dose of business strategy, too.

A lot of people who enroll are senior managers in line for jobs as chief operating officers or even chief executives, and they are well aware of the pitfalls of promotion to the upper ranks. The unceremonious departures within the last year of two high-profile executives — Michael C.

Hawley from the **Gillette Company** in the wake of disappointing earnings, and M. Douglas Ivester, whose management style was criticized in the industry and by analysts for contributing to problems at the **Coca-Cola Company** — were harsh reminders of the vulnerability of even the most senior executives.

It is difficult to determine how many senior executives came up through the ranks, but it is probably as high as 70 percent, according to Peter Crist, vice chairman of Korn/Ferry International, an executive search firm. Many of them say that

*Continued inside*



Sal Dimarco Jr. for The New York Times

John Zillmer, center, took RHR's training course last fall. With him are two Aramark co-workers, Ann Marie Gulian and James W. Summers.

ticipatory and more collaborative and it appears, at least, that that is perceived as weak leadership," he said.

Now, he has become more assertive, he said. At a meeting to designate a successor to a retiring officer, for example, he made sure the talk did not drift off from the core topic of candidates' leadership skills.

In another exercise that had something of Boy Scout camp feel, participants were asked to imagine being threatened by a brush fire and to list, in order of importance, 12 items that could help them survive. First, they drew up their own lists. Then they were divided into two groups and asked to prepare a team list. That is when the fireworks began.

"We just had at it," Mr. Healy recalled. Several people in his group tried to dominate the process, but because nobody had any power over anybody else, nobody was able to take control, and the discussions

the jump to making more strategic decisions, perhaps about markets to enter or companies to acquire, is not easy.

"The focus when you're managing a division is much more tactical," said John Zillmer, who participated in RHR's program last year when he was president of the Aramark Corporation's international operations. He is now president of the Philadelphia-based company's food and support services worldwide and a member of the executive committee.

In a recent session at RHR, Mr. Healy of Best Buy took part in a series of exercises aimed at helping participants confront negative traits common in their ranks, like arrogance and the drive to dominate people. In one, the executives were paired up, and one member of each pair asked the other executives what they thought of his partner.

Mr. Healy said he was told he was "perhaps too driving" in his comments — criticism that his employees would never have dared make, he said. "People don't tell you, 'You need to soften your style,'" he said.

Even if they had, he might not have listened. "Sometimes the people closest to you are the people you dismiss the fastest," said Patrick Parker, a senior executive at Zhone Technologies Inc., a telecommunications company in Oakland, Calif., who took part in the program last year with his previous employer. The participants in the program "don't love you, they don't hate you, they're not paying your rent," he said. "That will give you pure feedback."

Another executive who took part this fall, but who did not want his name used because his promotion to chief operating officer has not been announced, said that his problem was an appearance of being indecisive. "My management style is more par-



## To Do List

Here are some things that a senior executive should work on before moving up to the role of chief executive, according to Peter Crist at Korn/Ferry International, an executive search firm:

✓ Stop acting like a sycophant.

✓ Develop charisma. People like charismatic leaders.

✓ Focus on identifying market opportunities, as opposed to exploiting those pointed out by others.

✓ Balance wants of competing constituents: the board, employees, shareholders and customers.

✓ Don't just be decisive, look decisive. Image matters.

became contentious, he said.

The results were instructive. The teams scored higher than the majority of the individuals. The lesson was that teams can generally achieve more than the boss acting alone.

On the other hand, some individuals scored higher than their teams. The lesson being that even smart executives can fail to appreciate the insights of other smart executives.

Exercises like this serve to remind successful managers, who have advanced by showing themselves more capable than their rivals, that as they rise in the ranks they must rely on the people who work under them, said Robert E. Mittelstaedt Jr., vice dean for executive education at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

This lesson often becomes lost because employees are usually evaluated on the basis of individual performance rather than team performance, until they become very senior, Professor Mittelstaedt said. "Look at Wall Street," he said. "It's how many deals did you do. At some point you lose sight of the fact that you need a team to do that."

During the brush-fire survival test, an observer recorded who spoke and how often and who made the best suggestions. Mr. Healy said he was surprised to find how garrulous he had been. "Bosses just do that," he said, adding that he was determined to change his ways.

In another game intended to provoke strategic thinking, the class was divided into two groups and participants were asked to choose among options that tested their cooperative instincts. But they were never sure that their fellow players would act cooperatively; they were allowed only limited communication with one another and they were even given incentives to cheat. At the end of the game the points were totaled and they were asked who won.

"Some said they won individually, others said the team," but no one added up the total number of points scored by everyone and said the whole class won, said Michael Seitchik, who helped design RHR's program. The lesson? Chief executives need to think about more than beating the other guy — and whether anyone needs to be beaten at all.

Mr. Healy said that he found himself applying some of the lessons as soon as he returned to work. He cut the size of a 25-member team that he was supervising to a core group of six.

Members of the larger group "didn't necessarily all have a common agenda," and some did not want to participate at all, Mr. Healy said. During weekly meetings, people interrupted one another and too much time was spent on minor issues, he said. Worst of all, the mood was usually sour. "There was almost a sense that the project was doomed from the outset," he said.

The RHR program made Mr. Healy realize the reason: with so many people attending, most felt they contributed little or nothing. So he cut the size of the group and gave the members more responsibility.

At their next meeting, the atmosphere was "a lot more collaborative," he said. The team was able to set up goals for itself, and one member had voluntarily prepared an extensive time line, something that employee would never have done in the larger group, Mr. Healy said. "We actually got work done."

In their meetings with the RHR psychologists before the Philadelphia retreat, participants discuss their goals for improving their management style, and in the meetings afterward they talk about the progress they made. Mr. Parker, the Zhone executive, said one of his objectives was to become more patient. "I'm the kind of person that, if you don't understand it, I'm not going to try to explain it," he said.

Now, Mr. Parker said, he tries to tailor his explanations to the listener's background. Such solicitousness does not come easy to an engineer who describes his management style as hard charging and his attitude toward co-workers as no-nonsense.

"One of the most difficult things to do is try to effect change, change within yourself," he said. □

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