



## ARE YOU A COMPLETE EXECUTIVE?

SUSTAINED LEADERSHIP INVOLVES BALANCING MENTAL,  
EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

By IMD Professor Michael Wade – April 2014

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How do you define a top-performing executive? A person who can make tough decisions with incomplete information? A leader who can inspire others to superior performance? Or perhaps someone who is able to clearly articulate a long-term vision? A top-performing executive is probably all these things, and more.

Regardless of your definition, however, to make a real difference, an executive must be able to maintain performance at the highest level over a sustained period of time. In today's 24/7 world, this is not an easy feat.

Indeed, executive burnout is an all-too-frequent news story these days, often under dramatic headlines such as “collapse” or “stress leave”. Over the past few years, tragic cases of executive suicides have also rocked the business world.

Being a top executive nowadays is more than a full-time job. It requires total dedication and commitment in the relentless pursuit of organizational performance. The information gap between the time an event occurs and when a company is required to act on it has almost completely disappeared. Today's top executive lives in an always-on world, with constant demands for his or her attention.

While the situation may be worsening, it is not new. We have been talking for years about the importance of work/life balance. Yet, this term suggests an unrealistic split between ‘work’ and ‘life’. For executives, work is an integral part of life – there is no separation. It is unrealistic to assume that an executive can have a healthy ‘life’ to make up for stressful and unhealthy ‘work’. The key for executives is to optimize and reinforce their performance in both work and non-work pursuits. We refer to this objective as becoming a ‘complete executive’.

A complete executive is someone who maintains a balance of physical health (i.e. a healthy diet and regular exercise), emotional health (i.e. enriching experiences with family and friends, as well as active hobbies), and mental health (i.e. managing stress and maintaining motivation), both inside and outside of work. There is strong evidence to support the benefits of maintaining such a balance. Research by Tony Schwartz and Catherine McCarthy from The Energy Project showed that employees who went through an energy management program reported substantially improved customer relationships, productivity, and personal satisfaction. These findings are in line with evidence from other firms, including Ernst & Young, Sony, and Deutsche Bank, showing that executives in good mental, physical and emotional shape performed better and made superior decisions.

The complete executive balance is not easy to achieve. In fact, many companies conspire against it. There is a common attitude that these ‘softer’ aspects of life are an executive's own personal responsibility and should be pursued outside of company time. Exercise should be done before or after work, and active hobbies or long holidays are seen as acts of disloyalty. Business schools are guilty of having the same skewed focus toward leadership, with a strong focus on the intellectual side of business life—on strategy, organizational structures, and helping teams reach concrete objectives. Programs that specifically address executives' mental, physical and emotional health are seen as soft and fluffy by comparison.

### **Make the change**

Legendary Procter & Gamble CEO A.G. Lafley often talks about the importance of exercise and reflection for executives, and the most effective managers know that leadership encompasses more than “just” running a business. It also involves maximizing your motivation and mental strength, or becoming “a super-user of your brain” in the words of neuropsychologist Helle Bundgaard. Furthermore, it requires taking care of your physical health, or “reminding you of the fact that you have a body,” as sports psychologist Steven MacGregor puts it. These experts and others show executives tips and tricks to extract the most benefit from diet and exercise during the rigors of a busy day at the office or on the road.

Business leadership also involves boosting your emotional health by finding happiness and meaningfulness in the work you do. Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, the highly respected CEO of LEGO, points out that executives and companies can stay fresh and effective by treating work as a kind of “serious play” involving learning, creative problem-solving, and fun.

Without doubt, hitting targets and handling commercial pressure are central to an executive's role, and will remain so. But there's a growing recognition that companies and business schools have been focusing too much on squeezing the life out of executives, sometimes quite literally. Replacing top executives is expensive and disruptive. It is in the best interest of smart companies to keep their executives fit and clear-headed for a sustained period of time. Hopefully this recognition marks the first step toward developing a new generation of complete executives.

*Michael Wade is a professor of innovation and strategic information management at IMD. He co-directs Orchestrating Winning Performance , IMD's flagship program for individuals and teams. The Lausanne edition of this year's event will take place from June 15-20 and includes daily activities focused on physical, mental, and emotional health for the complete executive.*

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