

# Still Exceptions or actually Trendsetters in Germany?

A More Effective Executive Through Targeted  
Personal Development with an Executive  
Advisor

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## **Executive Advisory – Only for Exotics?**

Decision-makers working with an Executive Advisor or executive coach are still often considered exotics in Germany – much more so than internationally. We (a former CEO and an experienced executive coach) want to contribute to changing this and share our perspective on the question of why decision-makers benefit from working with an Executive Advisor.

## **Curious? Interested? Feeling Overwhelmed, or Perhaps Even Desperate?**

That's exactly when you should invest a few minutes of your time and read the next pages. Specifically, when you as an executive (ExCom member or managing director, divisional executive, business unit head, or in a comparable function) bear profit and/or cost responsibility and wish to remain sustainably successful in this role.

\* We use the masculine form in the text solely for reasons of readability and we want all people to feel addressed.

# CONTENT

- 3     **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**
- 4     **NOT AT ALL EXOTIC**  
Do's and Don'ts of Executive Advisory
- 5     **WHAT IS RARELY DISCUSSED HONESTLY AND OPENLY**  
An Executive's Personal Situation After a Significant Change or Expansion of their Role
- 7     **ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL – OR RATHER TAILOR-MADE?**  
Why Traditional "Qualifications" Often Don't Help, but a Personal Executive Advisory Relationship Does
- 8     **A TRUE "FRIEND & HELPER"**  
The Role of the Executive Advisor and the Benefits for the Executive
- 9     **INSTEAD OF THEORY: HOW ANDREAS COULD BE SUPPORTED WHEN IT MATTERED MOST ...**  
A Fictional Story to Reflect on

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

## Becoming a More Effective Executive with the Help of an Executive Advisor

### **Straight to the point, because that's what it's all about:**

Executives face daily challenges that go far beyond technical expertise. Working with an Executive Advisor offers individual, tailored support to gain clarity, promote self-reflection, and sustainably increase one's own effectiveness.

### **No one-size-fits-all solution from the "toolbox for better management" – what is the actual goal of working with an Executive Advisor?**

A goal- and solution-oriented process that helps executives to recognize both challenges and potential, define specific goals and intentionally develop ways to achieve them. Unlike consulting, Executive Advisory does not provide direct solutions, but encourages independent reflection and development and leads to the more relevant questions and answers more quickly than executive coaching.

### **Why classical training isn't enough:**

The specific challenges at the highest executive levels cannot be addressed with standardised programs. They require individual reflection on the respective situation and strategy development, and that is what working with an Executive Advisor offers.

### **Help is within easy reach – the advantages of working with an Executive Advisor:**

- promoting self-reflection: recognizing one's own behavioural patterns and managing them intentionally to increase effectiveness.
- clarity of objectives and implementation steps: defining strategic realignment and specific options for action.

- support within complex stakeholder-environments: finding a safe way of dealing with divergent interests and power structures.
- supporting transformational processes: ensuring that own activities to deal with challenges are adapted to new requirements.
- confidentiality and objective perspectives: the Executive Advisor acts as a sparring partner without vested interest.

### **From expert to expert:**

An experienced Executive Advisor understands the diverse dynamics within top management and supports executives in positioning themselves effectively in their role. What about unconscious patterns? One's own public image? Blind spots? Relevant questions are being addressed competently and without much ado, and effective answers are created together.

### **What's in it for the executive?**

Working with an Executive Advisor is a strategic decision for sustainable success. It allows executives to gain clarity about their own leadership role, overcome challenges in a structured way and increase their own effectiveness in the long term.

# NOT AT ALL EXOTIC

## Do's and Don'ts of Executive Advisory

Working with an Executive Advisor is a goal- and solution-oriented process in which an Executive Advisor supports the executive in gaining clarity on personal matters or specific issues, identifying both challenges and opportunities, defining specific objectives, and developing intentional ways to achieve those goals.

### The "DO's": working with an Executive Advisor...

1. ... **promotes self-reflection and self-awareness**: recognizing one's own behavioural patterns and thought structures and dealing with them intentionally.
2. ... **creates clarity about the current situation and the resulting tasks, goals and their implementation**: designing suitable activities and implementing them in defined steps.
3. ... **is goal- and solution-oriented**: focused on developing "actionable" solutions and approaches that are based on the executive's goals and are to be achieved within a defined timeframe. This includes identifying potential obstacles – both self-imposed and those caused by third parties.
4. ... **gets to the important questions quicker**: and identifies better answers with great precision.
5. ... **is conducted in a dialogue**: based on an appreciative, trust-based dialogue between the Executive Advisor and the executive as peers.
6. ... **supports personal responsibility and independence**: aims to enable and encourage the executive to take personal responsibility and self-manage more effectively.
7. ... **is completely confidential**: partnership-based, exclusively aligned with the executive's interests and completely confidential.

### The DON'TS: working with an Executive Advisor is NOT...

1. ... **therapy**: does not treat mental illnesses or deep-seated emotional problems. Does not work with clinical conditions, but with goals and potentials.
2. ... **training**: no transmission of specific skills or technical knowledge. The executive is the expert of their own life and situation and is supported in using their own resources and solutions.
3. ... **a substitute**: no "deputy" assumption of tasks of the executive as a superior.

### And what's in-between?

Working with an Executive Advisor is usually NOT, but sometimes can be ...

4. ... **consulting**: does not provide the executive with advice or ready-made solution proposals, specific expert knowledge or answers to specific problems; it supports the executive's own solution-finding process. This can also happen when an Executive Advisor offers various examples of what has occurred in other companies or with other executives in comparable positions. This creates (ideally several, at least three different) scenarios that help the executive to reflect on these against the background of their own situation and develop their own solutions.
5. ... **mentoring**: typically, there is no exclusive transfer of experiences or advice, but rather the development of one's own approaches and solutions. There can be a "grey area" where the exemplary sharing of experiences may contribute to developing meaningful options.

### In summary:

The focus is on promoting self-reflection, recognizing one's own resources, developing solutions, identifying obstacles (especially mental barriers) and dealing with them, and overcoming (personal or professional) challenges. Even though consulting-like situations may arise: An Executive Advisor does not provide ready-made answers or solutions but rather helps the executive find their answers and own their chosen solutions.

# WHAT IS RARELY TALKED ABOUT HONESTLY AND OPENLY

## An Executive's Personal Situation After a Significant Change or Expansion of Their Role

**The next career or development step – business as usual. Or is it?**

In our experience, there are two essential areas that play a central role in evaluating an executive's personal situation after taking on a new role or significantly expanding their current responsibilities:

1. **Responsibilities and environment:**  
the changes/challenges that arise solely from the (new) role/position and its environment. These are independent of the individual executive's personality but must ultimately be addressed and met by the executive.
2. **Critical self-assessment:**  
the individual characteristics and traits, as well as the existing natural and acquired behavioural patterns of the executive.

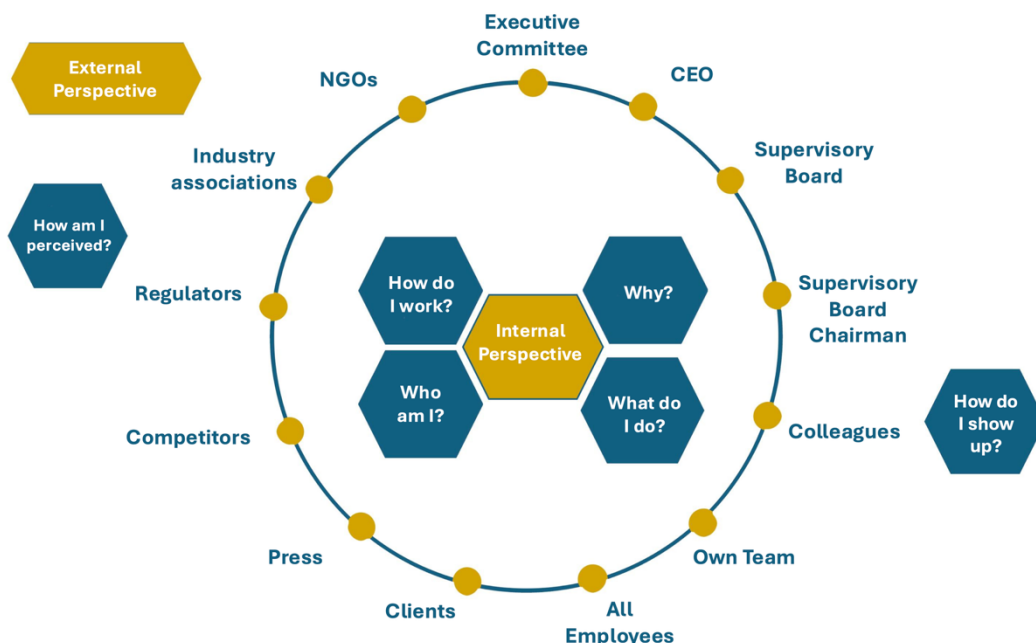
Both areas are pivotal in determining how well one gets "out of the starting blocks" and silences the voices (those of others as well as those in one's own head) that exist everywhere ("he/she can't do it," "he/she only got the job because..." etc.) – and can mutually reinforce or neutralize each other in certain situations.

### **Guided self-help with a sparring partner**

This analysis and evaluation of options should be carried out with a neutral third party, who is very rarely to be found within one's own company. An Executive Advisor can be particularly helpful in this regard.

**"The role shapes the person more than the person shapes the role"**

Those who embrace this from the outset save themselves many detours and considerable energy in shaping their own (new) role.



### The first act in a new situation: looking at the (new) role and one's own environment

What a dilemma – no one actually told me this before!

As executives ascend to increasingly senior levels and roles, they face a dilemma of two opposing and often mutually reinforcing developments:

- **I am under constant observation!**  
Everything increases significantly: the (internal and external) visibility, the scope of responsibility, the complexity of issues, and for ExCom members/CEOs, also the perception of "public" duties compared to their previous role in terms of both "internal and external" representation.
- **Where do I best start?**  
The ability to directly influence work results and (daily) decisions decreases massively. What might be left is some degree of quality assurance. Leadership and communication skills are disproportionately more in demand.
- **Aren't we all striving toward the same goal?**  
There are circumstances beyond my control, such as: I have to work with a team I did not assemble; one team member was a contender for my position; another team member is closely aligned with my predecessor or supervisor and adopts an oppositional stance.

#### **Time for a change**

This means: While moving from N-3 to N-2 allows many "old methods" to continue being used, at N-1 or as an ExCom member it is absolutely essential to a) reorganize oneself and b) acquire new competencies. In this necessary change process, the Executive Advisor, with their experience and complete focus on the executive, is an important companion along the way, seeing things that the executive might not be aware of.

### The second act: critical self-assessment

My management style has served me well thus far – after all, why else would I be here?

The executive is facing an important situation or is new to their position and discovers

- **"severe weaknesses/shortcomings":** I have a "flaw" or behave in a manner that doesn't match the expectations of different stakeholders (the quick-tempered, the aggressive, vanity/strong personalities,...).  
For example: very harsh reactions with sharp words intended to intimidate or even "hurt" others; frequently mentioning past success stories.
- **self-doubt:** I don't trust myself to do it; am I good enough?  
For example: displayed confidence while simultaneously experiencing internal insecurity that must not "show", leading to e.g. distanced behaviour, or frequent postponement of decisions by requesting additional information (analysis paralysis).
- **reflection on methods/previous success formulas/new tools:**  
What used to work so far, doesn't anymore: I need new methods/competencies/tools.  
For example: delving into details because it provides security, and thereby losing sight of the big picture = micromanagement.  
This easily leads to fear/defiance/defensiveness/insecurity, and thus to compensatory behaviour or distance "from the people" to protect oneself from "discovery" ("fake it till you make it").

#### **And finally, the self-awareness that:**

- the challenge is still there, even if I don't look at it and
- it doesn't go away and
- I'm out of excuses and
- I can't do this on my own and
- I don't sleep at night and
- internally, there is no way to help me, or I don't feel comfortable asking someone from the inside as I would have to expose my dilemma

# ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL – OR RATHER TAILOR-MADE?

## Why Traditional “Qualifications” Often Don’t Help, but a Personal Executive Advisory Relationship Does

### **One executive development program at an elite university please, that always helps!**

Companies usually “provide” their executives with various development programs.

Internal programs for lower management levels, transitioning into programs that are run jointly with partners such as business schools for the level directly below the ExCom. These often include a small coaching element, especially if the programs are associated with business schools. They provide a “teaser” of what coaching could be but are only a secondary aspect in the program design.

The in-depth examination of the executive’s specific situations is not intended and usually not even possible due to the program’s structure. Program-integrated coaching is primarily about consolidating the contents of the program and how to successfully apply them in practice. The coach from these programs is no longer involved at that point!

### **Unfortunately, the solution doesn’t fit the problem**

At the top management level and in executive/management boards, the tasks become so specific that they can no longer be covered by programs from even the best business schools. These don’t provide the space for honest reflection on the specific, individually crucial questions. Or, another popular scenario: The reflection doesn’t take place because my internal competitor is sitting in the room, listening in and will take advantage of this later. So why should I, as a participant, openly discuss the issues that really concern me?

Executive impact is about successfully navigating a very complex stakeholder environment characterized by divergent interests and different personalities. No business school covers this in a typical

program in the bespoke depth that’s really needed.

This kind of deep conversation might happen among executives who are friends, such as in relationships that can develop from university or consultancy alumni organizations or participation in very intensive programs like the Baden-Baden Executive Dialogues. But “maybe” isn’t good enough for most executives, especially given the scale of the challenge.

Let’s be honest: Would you let a friend who isn’t a dentist pull your tooth because they’ve had a tooth pulled before?

This is where good Executive Advisory work comes in: tailored to the executive’s situation, understanding their environment, quickly getting to the crucial questions and dynamics, involving the essential stakeholders, competent, quality-assured, and focused on measurable results for the executive.

### **A tailor-made solution is not an expensive special order**

Executives often have more influence than they think on whether they have access to an Executive Advisor. The HR department (Learning & Development, Leadership or Executive Development) typically has a navigating and organizing role, but rarely the requisite budget authority. Usually, the direct supervisor controls the budget, while ExCom members have responsibility over their own budgets (possibly in consultation with the supervisory board). So, if an executive wants to hire an Executive Advisor, they can make the benefits clear to their superior (“I will become a more effective, more satisfied executive and will make you, us, the company more successful”). A superior is well advised and usually willing to provide the necessary budget, as an executive advisory relationship has a much more specific and direct effect than “general management programs”.



# A TRUE "FRIEND & HELPER":

## The Role of the Executive Advisor and the Benefits for the Executive

### A conversation based on real-life executive experience

An Executive Advisor is thoroughly familiar with the daily environment of executives, knows the prevailing dynamics and how to assess them. Most often, it is essential that the Executive Advisor was previously an executive themselves. Situational experience is often more important than industry experience. One of the best feedbacks an Executive Advisor can receive is: "They understand me/us."

### Quite a special partner and confidant

Working with an appropriately qualified Executive Advisor means to...

- ... talk about everything on one's mind with the Executive Advisor and
- this can't happen internally, as every stakeholder has a unique interest, which may differ from the executive's and
- this can't happen within the private environment, because partners and friends are emotionally attached to the executive and often can only inadequately assess the work environment and
- the Executive Advisor is only interested in the executive's success, acting as an "advocate" for the executive's potential

Why is this so important and such a great advantage for the executive? Without appropriate support, they have to work through all of this on their own, which will not be as deep and thorough as is possible with Executive Advisor support.

### Many roads lead to Rome – and also to success

This is how the Executive Advisor can help...

- creating "time to think" in order to set aside what is urgent for a moment and focus on one's own important issues
- identifying "blind spots" and comparing internal and external perceptions (e.g. dealing with hierarchy, with the opposite sex, with public appearance)

- learning to navigate the reality that "power breeds isolation": At executive levels, relationships are typically driven by interests rather than genuine friendships, with objectives pursued through shifting strategic alliances
- calibrating one's position within the team and identifying the core objectives and motivations of fellow team members
- properly categorizing stakeholders and understanding how their expectations are affected by one's actions
- aligning one's personal environment, particularly family relationships, with the professional role

### A navigator at the captain's side

What qualities does the Executive Advisor require in this role?

1. The Executive Advisor must be able to understand the executive and their behaviour within their environment and specific circumstances, without necessarily having technical knowledge of that environment. They accomplish this through their "professional gravitas": A combination of competence, experience, and personal authority, combined with a robust methodological approach that enables them to effectively challenge and support the executive.
2. The Executive Advisor must remain emotionally detached from potential conflicts with their mandate (e.g., due to personal relationships with friends, partners, or family members), or they must openly address such potential conflicts with the executive, both prior to kicking off the engagement and once specific topics are part of the conversation.
3. They must accept not being the most important person in the room and dedicate themselves and their actions exclusively to the development and success of the executive.

# INSTEAD OF THEORY: HOW ANDREAS COULD BE SUPPORTED WHEN IT MATTERED MOST ...

## A Fictional Story to Reflect on

Andreas Weber, CEO of a rapidly growing tech company, sat in his office gazing out at the city skyline. It was a morning like any other, yet internally he felt strangely depleted. Recent weeks had brought him to a point where he realized: I have made a mistake. For the first time in his career, he found himself asking: Am I truly capable of continuing to fulfil this role?

Andreas had always possessed the confidence and acumen to make difficult decisions, but now he sensed that he was reaching a threshold. He felt isolated and unsure, recognizing that his usual strategy "grin and bear it" was no longer effective. The doubts emerging within him could no longer be ignored. This isn't going away, he thought. And I can't ask anyone within the company without showing weakness. Everyone who might have been considered for such a conversation was quickly dismissed, as Andreas perceived them not as allies, but rather competitors driven by their own interests.

In the following days, this thought consumed him relentlessly. As his sense of control slipped away, the pressure to make decisions intensified. One evening, after an exhausting Executive meeting, a realisation struck him: "Power breeds isolation." The insight that everyone in his circle pursued their own interests and no one truly shared his perspective hit him hard. He needed help, but not from someone within the company.

When he heard a friend mention an Executive Advisor a few weeks later, he began to seriously consider that possibility. An Executive Advisor could be the solution, he thought. Someone who has no personal agenda and simply wants to help me gain clarity.

The first step was not easy. How would he find the right Executive Advisor? Andreas remained skeptical, particularly because he was reluctant to relinquish control. However, the prospect of

speaking with someone who was impartial continued to resonate with him.

The Executive Advisor he ultimately selected had distinguished himself through clear positioning. He understood the challenges facing executives in top-tier roles and offered precisely what Andreas sought: a space for honest reflection. The Executive Advisor had established himself as an expert who supported CEOs in aligning their internal disposition with their external impact. The Executive Advisor's message was unambiguous: It is not your technical expertise that sets you apart at this level – it is your capacity to grow as a leader and the impact that you create as a result.

During their first meeting, the Executive Advisor directly addressed the challenges facing individuals in top positions: the isolation at the top, high visibility coupled with limited influence, and minimal tolerance for error. He outlined how 95% of a CEO's work consists of leadership and showing up, while only 5% involved operational participation. This was the moment Andreas recognized that he needed to better understand not only his role, but also himself.

Over the following months, Andreas underwent an intensive process of self-reflection with his Executive Advisor. He began to understand that a lot of his decision-making – way beyond sheer logic – involved unconscious patterns he had never come to examine before. The Executive Advisor helped him identify and address these blind spots, such as his insecurity in public appearances and his approach to managing conflicts within the leadership team.

One of the key turning points was the transition from "directive leadership", which he had practiced so far, towards "relationship-based leadership." The Executive Advisor showed him that it was not merely about delegating tasks,

but also transferring authority to shape his managers into true leaders.

### Authority is granted, leadership is earned

In a matter of months, Andreas felt not only clearer and more confident in his role, but also less isolated. He understood that he did not need to know everything, but rather should be able to recognize and nurture the potential in others. The Executive Advisor had helped him

not only find the right answers, but also ask the right questions.

As for the Executive Advisor? He had successfully positioned himself by specifically addressing the needs of a CEO like Andreas: the isolation at the top, the pressure to know everything, and the necessity of bringing unconscious patterns into conscious awareness. Through his experience and empathy, he had become the trusted confidant who supported Andreas during a critical phase of his career.

# About the Authors

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## Get in Touch



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