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*Supporting the Alignment of  
Women Executives  
with their Stated Values*

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# Supporting the Alignment of Women Executives with Their Stated Values

Sheila Maher

*Women executives are aligning their work and home lives with their values in substantial numbers. Interviews with women executives found that they fell into four categories based on their level of alignment: Traditional, Aspirational, Transitional, or Aligned. Alignment coaching can support executives in each of these groups in articulating their personal and professional values, achieving greater balance and alignment with values, developing skills to lead and manage from their values, and leading more successful and deliberate lives.*

Women executives, a powerful force for many years in the non-profit world, are now also beginning to have an impact in profit-making organizations. As their numbers and influence grow, women executives are more able to align their lives with their personal and professional values. Executive coaches can help these executives through each phase of this process.

This *alignment coaching* enables clients to clarify their values, beliefs and attitudes and mold their professional and personal lives to fit them. Writing in the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, Lazar and Bergquist (2003) assert that this type of coaching can address several important issues.

Alignment coaching addresses issues of value and meaning in multiple contexts. It can clarify one's personal values and how those contribute to our perspective on the world. It can help one discern what is important...Alignment coaching can open the conversation about how one's personal values match or mismatch those of an organization in which we work and the personal and organizational impact of that match. (Lazar & Bergquist, p. 3)

Coaches ask a variety of questions to help clients align their professional lives with their values:

- Are you allocating your time according to your values?
- Does the culture of your organization communicate your values?
- Do the nature, creativity and variety of your work express your greatest interests?
- Are interpersonal relationships in your organization healthy?

- Are you working with integrity?
- Are you building the professional respect and reputation that you seek?

Work-life balance is an often-cited indicator of alignment, especially for women executives. Defined as the degree to which time spent at home and work is consistent with one's values, work-life balance is critically important to a meaningful life. Recognizing this fact, organizations have introduced a variety of flexible working arrangements to improve the work-life balance of their staff. However, taking advantage of these arrangements can present its own problems, especially at the executive level. Writing in *Newsweek* Daniel Conley (2009) described a class of executives he calls the "Elsewhere Class." He writes:

in a blended world of work and leisure, home and office [the Elsewhere Class] is a new breed of American professionals ...constantly dogged by a feeling that he or she should be 'elsewhere' -- back at the office, at a party full of potential clients, home with the kids or at a social function with the spouse.

Many executives need better time and energy management and/or more balance in their lives but are often reluctant to ask for it. Some feel a manageable calendar is either not achievable or may not be an appropriate goal. Yet, the effective management of an organization requires executives skilled in time and energy management. As a result many organizations invest in coaching for their executives and executive coaches can help their clients through the alignment process. Once they begin to work with a coach, executives are often relieved to find that balance and alignment are both appropriate and achievable goals.

In a *McKinsey Quarterly* article entitled "Centered Leadership: How Talented Women Thrive," Barsh, Cranston and Craske (2008) developed a model of centered leadership that included both alignment and energy management:

- *meaning*, putting strengths to work toward an inspiring purpose based on values;
- *managing energy*, knowing where energy comes from, where it goes, and how to direct and conserve it;
- *positive framing*, adopting a more constructive way to view the world;
- *connecting*, identifying who can help you grow, building stronger relationships; and
- *engaging*, or finding your voice, becoming self reliant and confident by accepting opportunities and collaborating with others.

Over the more than ten years that I have been coaching executives, I have come to realize that alignment coaching is critical to the success, happiness and well-being of my clients and it is also what I find most meaningful as a coach. With this clarity, I decided to focus the next decade of my coaching on clients who wanted to do the work on values and alignment. To accomplish that goal, I needed to understand the range of executives' perspectives on creating alignment with their values. I started by looking back over the approximately 150 executives whom I have coached in the past ten years and noticed that those who had done this alignment work had been predominantly (though not exclusively) women. I decided to interview women executives to get a sense of the challenges and values that drive executives toward alignment, the strategies they use to achieve it, and the roadblocks that stand in the way.

### **THE INTERVIEW**

At the end of 2008 I conducted 62 twenty- to thirty-minute telephone interviews with women executives. I explored their current challenges and the strategies they were using to address them. I asked them to identify what was most important to them in their personal and professional lives. Then I asked them if they were able “to spend enough time with the people and activities they valued” as one measure of alignment with their stated values. Finally, I asked, “What would living deliberately – fully engaged with what matters to you most – look like in your life? What would change?”

### **FINDINGS**

#### **Age**

The women executives I interviewed ranged in age from their 30s to over 50. Since the interviewees were executives, it is not surprising that none of them was in the 20-29 year old age group. The age distribution was:

- 22.6% in the 30-39 age group,
- 38.7% between 40-49, and
- 38.7% over 50.

#### **Challenges**

The challenges identified by the three age groups were remarkably similar. Executives in each of the age groups were concerned about the impact of the current economic downturn on their organization, time management, and staff development. As is often the case with executives, most of these women had been trained in a technical discipline and had been promoted into management with little specific training for their new leadership responsibilities. Several talked about how lonely it was “at the top” and indicated that they had sought out colleagues and mentors to support them in their new position.

## Values

When asked what was most important to their professional lives, younger women in the 30 to 39 year old group cited performance and recognition factors as paramount. Women in the two older groups consistently cited these factors:

- respect, compassion and understanding
- reputation
- making a difference
- meaningful work – good working relationships
- trust and honesty.

Not surprisingly, when asked about the most important factor in their lives as a whole, the youngest age group often cited children as a primary focus while the older groups tended to define what was important in broader terms or included children and family among other values:

- balance, rich home life, being a full person
- children, marriage, grandkids, productive and responsible
- fulfilling family relationships; growing young people.

## Alignment

Four categories of alignment to values emerged from the interviews:

- Traditional
- Aspirational
- Transitional
- Aligned.

**Traditional.** About 13% of the executives I interviewed fell into the Traditional category and they were the oldest among the four groups. Traditionals valued their careers above all else; their self-esteem came almost exclusively from work. Some traditionals were self-proclaimed workaholics while others had accepted the time demands of their job as the price they must pay for the work they do. Traditionals were not conflicted about the imbalance between home and work, at least not at this point in their careers. Thus, they were “aligned” with their primary value – work – but they were not centered or balanced.

- “I don’t mind working 10-12 hour days and wish that my staff were like that too.”
- “I am a workaholic. And I am lucky to have a family arrangement that allows me to do this.”
- “My job is my highest priority. I can travel guilt-free (and extremely intensively) since my husband is retired and can come with me and my kids are grown.”

The Traditionals experienced no conflict between work and home life. All of them indicated that they had enough time or almost enough time to spend with the people or activities that they valued, though they confessed they had little time outside of work:

- 25% reported that they had the amount of time that they wanted to spend with the people and activities that they value.
- 75% reported they had almost the amount of time they wanted.

**Aspirational.** Slightly less than 20% of the interviewees were Aspirational and they were slightly younger than the Traditional group. Aspirational indicated that they wanted a better balance between their work and the people and activities they value. For the Aspirational group, time management and work-life balance issues dominated their concerns. Though they wanted to have more time for the people and activities they valued outside of work, they had not taken any steps to address time management or balance issues. They often were unaware of the control that they could have had over their time.

Unlike the Traditionals, however, Aspirational were not wholly satisfied with the situation and reported that they did not have enough time for the people and activities they valued:

- 0% had the amount they wanted;
- 16.7% had almost the amount they wanted;
- 16.7% had an OK but not sufficient amount;
- 33.3% had too little;
- 33.3% had much too little time.

Several Aspirational indicated that they felt powerless to affect a change because the culture of their organization did not support time management and balance issues. For example, in some organizational cultures executives felt an obligation to attend meetings because they were asked to attend, even when their presence was not necessary. As a result their normal workday calendars were packed with meetings requiring them to take work home to keep up.

Though Aspirational were not as a group articulate about their professional values, three women mentioned “meaningful work” and “trust and honesty” as important for their professional lives. Several mentioned a strong spiritual life and living with intention as goals of a meaningful life.

**Transitional.** On the other hand, Transitionals intensely felt the need for time management, stress reduction and a more balanced life *and* they actively worked to achieve these goals. The largest of the four groups, the Transitionals were spread relatively evenly over the three age groups. Some Transitionals had children and were

striving to balance their children's needs with the demands of their work; some were mid-career, and some were later in their careers. One executive said, "The balance shifts over time... it's dynamic." She had taken less demanding jobs with less travel when her children were young. When they were older, she had accepted an executive position and at the time of the interview she was trying to accommodate her work and the very different needs of teenagers. All the executives in this group were challenged by the demands outside of work: "too many balls in the air," "never any down time," and the need to set boundaries. All were taking steps to bring more balance into their lives.

The Transitionals were much more articulate than the previous two groups about the things they valued in their professional and personal lives. In their professional lives, Transitionals almost unanimously indicated that "meaningful work," "something that changes the world," was important to them. Additionally, many also indicated that working from their "values and integrity" and "being respected" were critical to their professional lives.

Though no one in this group felt they had the amount of time they wanted, Transitionals were more content than the Aspirationals with the amount of time they had with people and activities they valued:

- 20% felt they had almost the amount of time they wanted
- 50% felt they had an OK but not sufficient amount of time
- 30% felt they had too little time with the people and things they value.

This group was articulate about what alignment would look like, even though they had not yet achieved it:

- Using skills fully and for a higher purpose. Feeling that there is enough time to do both. Doing everything I am doing but doing it better as if there was no time limit;
- Being better able to resist being pulled by others and be able to craft my focus and direction;
- Doing what I am doing now but doing it with more time to take stock;
- Doing more of the things I value and worry less;
- Calmness throughout work and life {balance} and an ability to deeply explore.

They showed evidence of the strains of the “Elsewhere Class,” not being able to be fully in the present where they were because their attention was diverted by concerns about where they were not. They wanted

- not to have the shadow of the next task constantly looming over me and to be able to focus on the present, and
- to be more fully present whatever I am doing.

**Aligned.** *Almost a third* of the executives I interviewed (32.3%) had actively and successfully aligned their lives with their values. They had created positions where they could control their time, reducing the stress at the office, and creating the balance necessary for alignment and meaningful lives. In their professional lives, Aligned executives apportioned their time to focus on both their professional and personal values. Professionally, Aligned executives in both the profit and non-profit sectors worked from their values indicating that they were making a difference by improving the performance of their organization and/or promoting social change.

One hundred percent (100%) of the Aligneds reported that they had an acceptable amount of time to spend with the people or activities they valued:

- 40% had the amount of time they wanted
- 20% had almost the amount of time
- 40% had an OK but not sufficient amount
- None of the aligned group said that they had too little, much too little, or none.

Notably, even these executives, who had gone to great lengths to align their lives with their values, did not necessarily feel that they had *enough* time to address all of their values. They had allocated their time according to their values but 40% of them still felt that the amount of time they had was OK but not sufficient.

Aligned executives had taken a variety of paths to achieve alignment. Many had changed their jobs either within their organization or by moving to a different employer, in some cases taking a lower paying or lower prestige position. Two Aligned executives had started their own organizations. In each case, however, they had specifically negotiated terms that would allow them to spend more time outside of work with the people and activities they valued. One interviewee had worked with a coach to achieve alignment.

For many of the women in the Aligned group, living a deliberate and meaningful life went beyond aligning work and life demands with values. For them living deliberately meant living more consciously:

- being more present with whatever I am doing;
- a mutually supporting family and work-life; policies and attitudes go beyond merely tolerating the other; and
- calmness throughout work and life; ability to deeply explore meaning; control of time.

Others felt they were already living deliberate lives:

- I do live deliberately; surround myself with people who make my life better and find time to enjoy the trees.
- Everyday committed to fully experience my priorities; being authentic and taking time to take a bath.
- I'm doing it.

One woman in the Aligned group actually went beyond merely being “aligned”. She changed her whole life in pursuit of a specific vision, becoming a transformational leader. In an article in *Changing Minds*, transformational leadership is described (p. 1) as starting “with the development of a vision, a view of the future that will excite and convert potential followers... [Transformational leaders] put passion and energy into everything. They want you to succeed.” Once this executive had achieved alignment and had time to reflect on her highest values, she recognized that she wanted to start a school that would draw on a synergy between business and education, bringing the best elements of business to the school and the best elements of education to the business community. Since she had organized her life to have time outside of work, she had the time to generate interest and funding for her idea. When I talked with her she had left her job and was beginning to put together the pieces of this dream.

## DISCUSSION

It was impressive that almost *one third* of the women reported that they were living a life aligned with their values. Not surprisingly, these women were in the older age groups; none of the 30-39 year old executive women had satisfactorily aligned their careers and lives.

Responses from these interviews affirm what I have observed in my coaching practice. Many women executives in their late 40s and 50s experience a shift in what is important to them. As executives, they have achieved success in the business world and though business is still important to them, they feel the need to honor a more personal set of values. Some authors have said that “women lose the fire in their bellies” for business as they age. But, this is not exactly true. Women still are enormously interested and effective at work as they age, but for many their non-work values have a stronger pull in the later stages of their careers. Moreover, because they have achieved success, many older executives can afford to work less hard and are open to flexible or part-time working arrangements. Though about

half my clients have been men, I have not noticed a comparable change in their values. Most of my male clients maintain a high level of motivation for their careers well into and beyond their 50s. In fact, many get more interested later in their careers when their skills and prestige are at the highest.

Not surprisingly time management was an issue across groups. Even among the Aligneds, who had apportioned their time according to their values, 40% of the women interviewed indicated that their allocation of time was “OK but not sufficient” to fully address their values. Certainly talented people with a range of interests may always feel that there isn’t enough time. However, this finding also signals that even the Aligned group has work to do on focusing and centering themselves and managing their time and energy.

It was interesting that that most of the Aligned group (60%) was between 40 and 49 years old. Two factors may influence this finding. First, while many members of the oldest age group (50+) had resigned themselves to the demands of their job, the 40-49 year olds felt that they could and should be able to create balance in their lives. Second, the 40 to 49 year olds were predominantly junior executives, which might have made it easier for them to balance the demands of work with other priorities. It will be interesting to observe the extent to which these executives are able to maintain alignment as they enter the ranks of senior management.

Many of the women executives, particularly in the older groups, said that “respect” or “reputation” was very important in their careers. Executive reputations are built on hundreds of interactions with staff, colleagues, collaborators, and competitors every day. Each of these interactions reveals the executive’s value system and principles, whether or not the executive is aware of this influence at the time. However, like most executives, the interviewees had not articulated the principles that they wanted to manage by or specifically developed the skills for values-based leadership and management. Values-based leadership is an important element of alignment and, therefore, of alignment coaching. Even the women in the Aligned group can benefit from this coaching in order to fully integrate their values with day-to-day business actions.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHING**

Our culture provides little support for the reflection and centering necessary to a balanced and aligned life. Alignment coaching can provide assistance to executives at each step of the process:

- Improving management of time and energy renewal
- Consciously articulating values and aligning with what is important
- Exploring alternative work structures or positions
- Leading and managing from values

- Developing the skills for values-based leadership
- Supporting transformational leadership.

### **Improving management of time and energy**

The process of moving toward balance and alignment begins with managing time and energy. Executives in all groups clearly identified managing time and maintaining focus as major challenges in their lives. Coaches know that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to work with clients who don't have the time or mental space to do the work. Traditionals and many Aspirationals, particularly older clients, may need to be persuaded that time management, balance, and alignment are professionally appropriate and achievable, as well as personally and physically beneficial. Coaches can help clients *define and focus on critical strategic actions* at work by *eliminating or delegating* many low-level activities. Similarly, reducing over-programming outside of work frees time and increases the possibility of balance. Coaches thus help clients become less busy and more centered, enabling them to improve balance and move toward alignment.

Many of the executive women I interviewed admitted to having *trouble saying "no"* to requests for their time or assistance. Often the coach can help build this skill with a client by giving her the language to decline non-strategic or unnecessary demands on her time. Several Aspirationals indicated that the culture of their organizations did not support them in *setting boundaries* on their time. They felt, for example, that it would not be acceptable for them to respectfully refuse an invitation to a meeting or working group that was not directly related to their responsibilities. Coaches can help change *the culture of an organization* by making senior management more aware of the costs of these cultural inefficiencies.

Several executives felt that the demands of their workloads relative to their staff size were so great that it was impossible for them to succeed or achieve any form of balance or alignment. Coaches can help these executives, who are often close to burning out, *assess their current workload* and the possibility of reducing it. Unbearable workloads can often result from a personal or cultural inability to say no. Some executive women keep accepting assignments even when they do not have adequate staff, trying to do more with less, rather than turning down the request or *negotiating for additional help*. In *Women Don't Ask*, Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever (2003) argue that women negotiate far less often than men and point out the impact of "not asking" on women's careers and lives. They assert, "With women's lives becoming increasingly complex, and the structures of business changing, the ability to negotiate is no longer a luxury but a necessity" (Jacket cover).

**Improve energy and focus.** With the exception of those in Aligned group, many of the executives whom I interviewed were running on adrenaline from one activity to another. Few took the

time to manage their energy. Even when they took a vacation, they often brought a laptop or Blackberry and didn't fully relax and break their adrenaline cycle. Many indicated that they didn't like to take time off because of the amount of work that would face them when they returned.

Research is clear that stress is unhealthy, often unproductive and can even affect reproduction (Sapolsky, 1994). Managing energy becomes much more important as we age when our bodies are less resilient to stress. Many women stated that the ability to be fully present at work and at home is critical to a meaningful life. As part of managing their energy, many coaches are helping clients find *a daily renewal practice* that fits their lifestyle and provides relief from the constant stress of work and home. Finding a time and place to fully relax even for ten minutes by going for a walk or sitting quietly is essential for the stressed executive. Renewal practices, if followed daily, will improve focus and rehabilitate the "Elsewhere Class" so they can fully experience, function in, and enjoy the present.

### **Consciously articulating values and aligning with what is important**

*Understanding one's personal and professional values* is the foundation for creating alignment and living a deliberate and meaningful life. Not surprisingly, older women were generally more capable than younger women of articulating their values. Even executives who had achieved a level of alignment could benefit from a greater exploration of their values. Many coaches include values exploration as part of a package of assessments for all clients. This work helps clients see the degree to which their lives are in alignment with their values and motivates them to do something about misalignment.

Beyond looking at allocation of time to valued activities, clients also *assess whether their values are in accord with those of their current employer*. Several of my clients had been miserable while doing a job very much suited to their skills. The problem was that their values were out of sync with the culture of their organization. Many people in that situation misinterpret their dissatisfaction and begin looking for a different type of career path rather than a more compatible organization. Once they realize the mismatch with the culture of their organization, coaches can help clients attempt to change the culture or move to an organization where there is a better fit.

### **Leading and managing from values**

A critical component of alignment is leading and managing from individual and organizational values, thus integrating values into day-to-day management behavior. It is very hard for executive clients to develop a true management intuition if they have no sense of the values that they want to convey. Therefore, clients must define *the values-based principles* they want to guide them. I work with my clients to identify about five key management principles they wish to govern their behavior. These principles, which can

be developed with or shared with staff, provide a framework for the executive in making consistent and conscious decisions. Many times clients need to *learn new skills and a new vocabulary in order to effectively apply their management principles.*

### **Developing the skills for values-based leadership**

Putting values-based principles into practice in the business world requires a range of leadership skills. I work with clients on four types of leadership intelligence that help them incorporate their values into day-to-day business situations.

- **Behavioral intelligence**, which means taking the high-return, strategic leadership actions, and requires visioning, communicating, collaborating, and being dependable, accountable and resilient. Time management is part of this intelligence.
- **Emotional intelligence**, which deals with managing emotional states in relationship with others and requires self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills.
- **Spiritual Intelligence**, which brings higher and ethical considerations into leadership, and requires passion/purpose and meaning; connectedness; centeredness, compassion; reflection; integrity and ethics. Win/win negotiation is covered in this intelligence.
- **Physical Intelligence**, which means conveying a sense of presence and calmness, and managing energy through positive energy rituals, reaction rituals, and self-renewal.

Depending on the client's strengths and weaknesses, we may work in one, several, or all of these areas developing a deeply rooted management intuition based on their values.

### **Exploring alternative work structures or positions**

It usually took the Aligned executives considerable effort to achieve alignment, often requiring them to reconfigure their responsibilities or move to a new position or organization. Flexible schedules and off-site working arrangements have allowed many executives to achieve far greater work-life balance and alignment than would have been possible in the past. Coaches can encourage executives to *explore the range of opportunities* available to them in their own organization and to consider reconfiguring their current position or to changing jobs, if necessary in order to achieve greater alignment. Clients need to recognize, however, that in this recession some organizations may frown on their taking advantage of alternative working arrangements, which may affect their careers. On the other hand, some companies are actively encouraging flexible schedules to cut costs and reduce layoffs. Some creative employers are offering new benefits (including child care) as a way of retaining well-trained

staff (Shellenbarger, 2009). In each case, coaches can work with executives to *evaluate the impact of these options* on their careers.

### **Supporting transformational leadership**

A small number of executives have such a clear vision of a future possibility that the ultimate expression of their values is to make that vision a reality. These “transformational leaders” must do the work to become aligned and then go beyond alignment to actively transforming or creating an organization according to their vision. Coaches can help them to first become aligned and then to effect the transformation, developing the vision alone or with others; selling the vision to convince others to support it; determining how to implement the vision, and ensuring continual forward motion in spite of the inevitable setbacks as they lead the charge until the vision is a reality.

Coaches can also support transformational leaders by ensuring that their vision is truly feasible and grounded in financial and organizational realities.

One of the traps of Transformational Leadership is that passion and confidence can easily be mistaken for truth and reality. Whilst [*sic*] it is true that great things have been achieved through enthusiastic leadership, it is also true that many passionate people have led the charge right over the cliff and into a bottomless chasm. (Changing Minds, 2009)

### **SUMMARY**

Women executives are making great strides in aligning their personal and professional lives with their values. Coaches can provide valuable support to executives in each of the alignment groups as they seek to articulate their values, control their schedules, balance their lives, develop skills to lead and manage from their values, explore alternative work arrangements, and lead more successful, conscious and deliberate lives.

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Sheila Maher brings a Masters in Business Administration, a Masters in Psychology, two years of training as a coach, and over 20 years experience as a successful executive and management consultant to her coaching practice. In the last ten years, Sheila has successfully coached well over 100 executives in a variety of public organizations, including the World Bank; non-profit organizations, including International Center for Research on Women, and Georgetown and George Washington Universities; and private sector organizations, including American Express, Paine Webber, and Blue Cross. Sheila has also served on the Board of Directors for several organizations including *IJCO The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*<sup>TM</sup>, and IPAS, an international organization directed to women's reproductive health.

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