

## New York Times Best-selling Author and Business Coach Talks about the Behaviors Holding C-level Executives Back



When Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), one of the world's leading manufacturers of chemicals,

fertilizers, plastics, and metals, wanted to polish its executives' leadership skills, Flip Flippen, the country's top business coach, went to Saudi Arabia and spoke to about 500 of SABIC's executives. **More on Best Practices**  
His company, the Flippen Group, has helped top professionals at organizations, ranging from ITT to NASCAR, to break free of behaviors that can hinder their performance.

- [Different Levels, Different Expectations](#)
- [Social Networks: A Whole Different Reality Under the Radar](#)

Trained as a psychotherapist, Flippen has put his constraint-busting strategy into a book called *The Flip Side: Break Free of the Behaviors that Hold You Back*. This book has made the both the *New York Times*' and *USA Today*'s list of best sellers. Flippen's own company has received several awards for being one of the best places to work in Texas.

Recently, Enterpriseleadership.org sat down with Flippen to find out how even successful C-level executives, including CIOs, can unlearn behaviors that have hampered their careers or can keep them from moving further up the corporate ladder. Here's what he had to say:

**EL: Can you give examples of personal constraints that become organizational constraints?**

**FF:** We see often in corporate America a character we call "the bulldozer." This person constantly runs over others, and thus becomes difficult to deal with. The bulldozer doesn't collaborate very well. If a bulldozer calls a meeting, it's to ramrod his or her agenda only by wasting everyone's time. This behavior handicaps everyone, and kills the creativity. Being a bulldozer doesn't hurt the individual who has that personal constraint as much as it does the people around them.

We worked with one corporate executive who said that being a bulldozer had already worked for him. I replied, "Then why do you want to change?" He said that his company's executive turnover rate had steadily increased, and that people were leaving for better jobs. He realized that he wasn't growing executives, but causing top talent to find more hospitable pastures.

**EL: What's the first thing you tell people about personal constraints?**

**FF:** We assure people that we all have them, and that they play themselves out in every area of our lives. Many personal constraints often become professional constraints.

**EL: How does one's personality factor into personal constraints?**

**FF:** We all come with fixed personalities. Our group is more interested in behavioral constraints than an individual's personality. We look at how an individual's behaviors affect them, positively and negatively. For example, we worked with one executive whose behavioral constraints turned him into a "volcano." He constantly blows up when things don't go his way. Unlike the bulldozer, the volcano might empower people and delegate well. If he's hell bent on pushing his agenda, through, he will probably blow up when things don't go his way.

We worked with an executive of a \$350 million company who had a habit of throwing platters of food at the wall. This executive used to take pleasure in telling everyone in his staff that they'd better either perform or leave. I asked him flat out, "If you think you're such an effective leader, why do you have to act like a child having a temper tantrum in order to get your staff's attention?"

**EL: If a lot of successful people have some life-long behavioral constraints, how have they managed to be professionally successful?**

**FF:** The constraint that helped them to get ahead might now be the constraint that will hold them back from going any further. The volcano I spoke about wanted to get a position at the corporate headquarters of his global company. The company president asked me to help him become a better leader, but like a lot of people, the volcano denied that he had a behavioral constant. I asked him to pick up his cell phone and call his wife. He replied that he was separated. I then asked him to call one of his children. He said he didn't know how to reach them. Then, he lost his composure and remarked, "I made \$3 million last year, and I've destroyed relationships with the people I care the most about." I'm glad to report that he is now a group president and works out of the corporate office.

**EL: These days many executives aren't staying in one position for any more than three or four years. Why is that?**

**FF:** Today, we have systems constraints and personal constraints. Many companies, such as private equity firms, expect instant results: we aren't patient anymore. Look at what we're doing to General Petraeus in Iraq: We tell him he has six months to get the war in shape. That's not realistic.

Pressures like this don't work and will never work. They cause people to act out in ways that aren't good for the people around them. It takes considerable courage to go for a top-level position and to tell people something they didn't expect to hear, such as, "It's going to take five years to turn this thing around. If your expectations are different from that, then I'm not the person for the job." In contrast, a lot of people say all the right things to get the job. They think they can wave a wand and make it all work. It usually doesn't.

**EL: What challenges do women in C-level positions face?**

**FF:** Based on the statistical behavioral research we've done on C-level executives, we've seen female executives who psychologically take on masculine characteristics in order to compete with their male counterparts. As a group, women tend to be better listeners, better team builders, and more compassionate than their male counterparts. For example, women will embrace each other in a social setting, but not in the workplace, to convey warmth for a job well done.

We work with a lot of women who see themselves compromised in how they interact in the corporate world. They think they can move through the organization by hiring and firing by will.

My company has a female CEO, and I'd like to see more women running large companies for many reasons. They are better at multitasking, at forming alliances and relationships, and at devising strategies. Men rely more on strength and power; women, more on relationships and collegiality.

**EL: Some companies are using formal metrics, such as the Balanced Scorecard, to evaluate employee performance. Is that fair?**

**FF:** It's a measure. It's not a question whether it's fair or not; it's a question whether it's an accurate measure. We use very sophisticated metrics in all of our work, especially in identifying constraints.

We do a lot of work to help people boil down what they do into a one-page strategic plan, which lists their priorities and goals for specific time periods.

**EL: Have you come up with your own metric test?**

**FF:** We use the Flippen profile, which is a Level C evaluation instrument. There are only three of those in the psychological world. It's a behavioral tool we use to identify personal constraints and to help people build plans to break through those constraints.

**EL: Your company received a "Best Place to Work in Texas" award from the Texas Business Council and Texas Monthly magazine. What are you doing to earn this distinction?**

**FF:** My primary responsibility is to my staff, which is my first-line customer. My job is to see that they engage in meaningful work and get rewarded appropriately with words, gestures, and financial compensation. When they go home at night, I want their kids to be proud of them.

**EL: What's been your experience working with IT professionals?**

**FF:** The IT executives we've worked with tend to be what we call "ostriches." Although they're very bright, they like to avoid conflict and oftentimes they have low self confidence. Rather than speak up about what they know, they assume more of a backstage position.

IT today needs to be front and center always. When you have low self-confidence as a constraint, the entire organization suffers from it. Your constraint actually affects the entire organization.

We also see a lot of IT people who like to move at high speed. Of course, that poses a problem because not every IT implementation has something to do with business performance or outcome. That's why some corporations have chosen to put a business executive at the helm of IT rather than a tried-and-true IT career professional. The business professional provides a broader global view of how IT fits into the corporate structure. It's one thing to know IT; it's another thing to be able to turn IT into a value-added service.

**EL: What does it take for someone to change their behavioral constraints?**

**FF:** We've had some people who just didn't get it and some who got it, but couldn't do it. That's why I focus on behavioral change. There are some things that are easy to change, and some things that are more difficult. I can change the way you think about all kinds of things, but it's going to take some time. I need to first find out what you currently think, why you think it, how you started thinking it, how that worked and didn't work for you, and how to conceptualize so that your thinking will work for you. It is a long, drawn out process.

For example, if you exhibit what we call the "marshmallow" behavioral constant, then you want to say "yes" to everyone in order to prove your competence. You haven't learned how to draw boundaries or to say "no." Once you've have acknowledged this constraint, you can begin to learn effective techniques for dealing with it. I'd suggest that you end each meeting by talking about the three W's -- who, what, and when. You need to find out who is doing what, and by when. You need to have them declare who is accountable. When someone sticks his or her head in your door and asks for a minute of your time, you might say something like, "I'd be glad to give you a minute, but I can't do it now. Let's schedule something for later in the week so we can have time to focus on it."

**EL: Can you give me an example of an executive who dramatically changed a behavioral constraint?**

**FF:** Let me tell you about Steve Gaffney, who was president of the U.S. Systems Division of ITT. He wasn't a good listener, but he apologized to his team for not having been a good listener. It was a powerful, defining moment. He told them, "The next time I cut one of you off in a presentation, I expect you to tell me. I promise you there will be no repercussions." His team did just that, and he spent a week apologizing. He doesn't use that behavior today.

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**Elizabeth M. Ferrarini** is a technology and business free-lance writer from Boston, Massachusetts. Reach her at [elizabethferrarini@yahoo.com](mailto:elizabethferrarini@yahoo.com).

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