Making Executive Coaching Work:
The Importance of Emotional Intelligence

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DOES COACHING REALLY WORK?

Coaching models and practitioners seem to be increasing exponentially these days. There are even organizations and training institutes devoted specifically to this particular intervention— each with different models, approaches and even ethical/professional guidelines. It seems "everyone" is now doing "coaching" for a variety of clients and presenting problems. Many of the larger human resources consulting and outplacement companies now provide and "specialize" in coaching services.

Countless coaching books and articles are being published on the topic despite little or no systematic research or evaluation behind them. A very recent thorough literature search on coaching reveals little or no published studies demonstrating the effectiveness of any coaching model or process (Kampa-Kokesch, S & Anderson, 2001). In fairness, a few case studies have been published in academic journals boasting of successful results. Furthermore, meta-analytic evidence of over 600 studies suggests that feedback interventions, a cornerstone of all coaching models, can actually cause a decrease in performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

Some evidence that coaching does pay off, comes from a recent survey of 100 Executives by Manchester Inc., of Jacksonville, Florida. From the survey of respondents who received coaching, it was estimated that coaching resulted in an average return of 5.7 times the initial investment. Furthermore, coaching contributed to a perception of increased productivity for 53 percent of respondents and improved quality of work for 48 percent of the respondents. When asked in the survey, which work group relationships improved as a result of coaching, the results indicated that 77 percent reported improvement with direct reports, 71 percent reported improvement with immediate supervisors and 63 percent reported improvement with peers. Of those receiving coaching, 61% reported a significant increase in their level overall level of work and job satisfaction.

In our experience coaching does in fact make a difference. We have evidence that coaching results in significant changes in behavior and skills as viewed by supervisors, direct reports and team members when comparing changes in pre and post coaching administration of multi-rater feedback instruments. Especially noticeable are improvements in skills in the areas of communications, sensitivity, listening, and overall business relatedness. In fact in a one-year follow-up study in a large communications conglomerate (Nowack, 2005) we have found that significant behavior change was observed by supervisors of those being coached utilizing a comprehensive coaching intervention using individual assessment (multi-rater feedback, personality and career), developmental planning and follow-up meetings.

Overall, the question still remains, "Does coaching really work?" While, we have only preliminary evidence that it does, we do know some of the necessary conditions and factors required to ensure learning and lasting behavior change. Three important factors for successful behavior change include *awareness, motivation* and *emotional intelligence*. Each are necessary, but not sufficient, to ensure a successful coaching intervention with any client. This article explores each of these factors and how to maximize their impact in coaching interventions.

AWARENESS

Managers and executives have good reasons for leading, communicating and behaving the way that they do. Most are pretty resistant to change by the time an executive coach comes on the scene. If it isn't hard enough to overcome the stability of personality traits over one's life span (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness) coaches must try to get executives to adopt new behaviors and styles that are at best, awkward and uncomfortable. People only change for a good reason—*awareness* is a key and critical condition rEluired to leverage any behavior change effort. Without *awareness*, behavior change is random—maybe it will meet the needs of others and maybe it won't. Executives have to know what it is about his/her behavior that is experienced to be irritating, annoying or frustrating before he/she will consider doing something about it.

Good coaches realize that one of their roles is to function as a "mirror" reflecting as accurately and specifically as possible how others experience, perceive and react to his/her client. Helping executives "see the world" more accurately is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to ensure behavior change. To this end, most coaches utilize some form of assessment or survey feedback process (e.g., multi-rater feedback, interviews with key stakeholders, direct reports, team members, peers, supervisors and customers, focus groups, etc.) to collect information about the executive and then figure out the best way to deliver to his/her client to increase *awareness*. Too often, executives are still "puzzled" about what they need to focus on at a behavioral level even after feedback is presented to them. To maximize the *awareness* factor required for behavior change:

- **Provide Specific and Behavioral Feedback**. If you can't be specific and behavioral with your feedback, it's just dumb luck that Executives will figure out what to do more, less or differently to be effective on the job. Just letting executives know they are an "INFJ" or score high on "agreeableness" on a five-factor personality inventory rarely is enough to increase awareness and self-insight (even with a thorough discussion of the meaning of these scores on popular coaching assessment tools on the part of the coach). Remember, one small behavior change that is successful can make the difference between success on the job and "executive derailment."

- **Utilize Multi-Rater Feedback**. Comparing self-perceptions to those of others is a critical first step to increasing awareness and understanding. Defining the specific competencies and behaviors to focus on is critical for future change. For example, use of the **Emotional Intelligence View 360 (EIV360**; www.consultingtoolsusa.com) can be an especially powerful tool to illuminate social competence, interpersonal relations, communication and self-management behaviors of critical importance for employees at all levels of the organization because of its theoretical base and emphasis of key emotional intelligence factors. Of course, "best practices" should be followed when using any multi-rater feedback process to ensure a successful intervention (Nowack, 2005).

- **Encourage Reflection**. Ask executives to summarize how he/she is being experienced or perceived by others as a result of your coaching intervention. You

can't be sure of an executive's *awareness* unless you verify that he/she really understands what others are tying to communicate and request from him/her. By "testing" for *awareness* you can be sure that at least the executive truly understands what others experience and perceive about his/her style that is productive and challenging.

- **Utilize Self-Monitoring**. Ask the executive to keep a <u>journal or log</u> of times during the day or week that he/she is aware of acting or behaving in a particular way that others find either productive or challenging. Such self-monitoring will, in its self, become a useful intervention to increase self-awareness required for behavior change efforts. While some executives might be resistant to keeping a journal or log, evidence is strong in health psychology that such self-monitoring techniques are a key to successfully changing and maintaining long-term behaviors such as smoking cessation or improved eating/nutritional habits.

- **Utilize Follow-Up Messages**. There is something about people that we all need someone to "remind" us about what is important and not just urgent. Many of our clients have rows of binders filled with feedback and assessments from previous training programs, but still have not altered their behavior. What they say is missing is someone to keep them "accountable." Executive coaching can be a very effective way to keep clients focused on what they need to change. Frequent follow-up telephone calls or email messages that "remind" an executive to focus on a developmental task is invaluable in enhancing *awareness* of what need to be changed.

MOTIVATION

"You can lead a horse to water but you can't make them drink" is an old wise saying. Without *awareness* you're lucky to get the horse to the water. Once they are there, it's anyone guess whether they truly want to drink. The same can be same of coaching interventions—without motivation to want to change, it just won't happen.

We have all worked with executives who truly were proud of his/her "directive style" or were very aware of their tendency to be "over controlling" but totally comfortable with this leadership style. Executives who are *aware* but not motivated, confident or ready to change behavior are certain to be viewed by others as rigid, resistant, stubborn or defiant. Finding a way to "motivate" others is behind every great coach. Unfortunately, some of us stumble upon it while working with executive clients and other times we never can do much to move a client away from behaviors that are truly ineffective, hurtful, harmful, or dysfunctional.

Another aspect of motivation that is critical is the power of vision. Whenever an executive can articulate his/her vision of himself or herself as an effective leader, their motivation increases. In fact, one of the ways to inspire executives is to simple ask them to articulate the picture of themselves 1 to 3 years from the present. When that executive becomes excited you have something to fall back on when the motivational level wanes. For once a person can mentally conceive achieving their goals they will be inspired to achieve.

Drawing from health psychology, we also know that people change habits when they are "ready" to change. For example, almost all smokers know that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is clearly deleterious to their long-term health. So, what motivates smokers to quit? Simply, the best predictor of smoking cessation (or any health habit) is the willingness to want to quit. That's right—you have to be ready to change, to change!

Insert Figure 1 About Here

According to the one of the latest and most popular health change models, individuals experiencing health problems can be categorized into discrete categories (stages) on the basis of their responses to a short series of questions about current and past efforts to change behavior and intentions to change in the future. Six stages have been described: Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance and Relapse. Future behavior change is thought to be directly predictable from these stages, and the stages are

also thought to provide important information relevant to tailoring coaching intervention approaches. To maximize "readiness" and *motivation* for those doing executive coaching the following suggestions are offered:

- **Provide Feedback In a Manner that Minimizes Defensiveness**. Motivation to change can be enhanced when executives are given feedback in a manner that minimizes defensiveness and denial. Executives are most likely to change when they believe feedback is constructive and accurate and when they are helped to identify specific steps they can take to grow and develop. Understanding that feedback on leadership and social competence is closely linked to an executive's identity and self-esteem can help remind coaches to strategize how best to deliver feedback. Another way to minimize defensiveness is to clearly say how the feedback will assist the executive in reaching his or her professional goals. This way, you tap into an executive's need for achievement and success.

- **Match Feedback to Executive's Self-Insight**. Some individuals have an accurate appraisal of his/her strengths and development areas (In-agreement raters). Others lack all insight about how he/she is perceived by other. Tailor your feedback to increase motivation by matching your client's self-insight to your approach to delivering strengths and development opportunities. For example, individuals who are particularly self-critical, perfectionist and/or lacking in confidence will frequently see themselves as less competent than others (Underestimators). Such individuals will typically focus only on "negative" comments and feedback and ignore most anything complimentary or "positive" in nature (Nowack, 1997). As a coach, you need to provide and emphasize a "balanced scorecard" for these clients to ensure that development plans also leverage his/her strengths for continued and future success.

- **Assess the Readiness Level**. Identify and determine how "ready" your client is willing to initiate new behavior change (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992). During the contracting phase, clearly define the purpose of the coaching intervention, including behavioral goals, of your client. Identify why the Executive is willing to work on specific areas of strength or development. Most of us doing coaching have had clients that we perceived as "just going along for the ride" and not truly motivated to do anything except

finish the "coaching intervention to get Human Resources or his/her own boss off their back." Executives in a "Precontemplation stage" (no intention to modify style or behavior) or those in a "Preparation stage" (a stated intention to modify specific behaviors that are illuminated during a coaching process) are not likely and very likely, respectively, to attempt some behavior change. If an executive is unwilling, not ready or lacking in confidence to attempt to change his/her behavior, the goals of your coaching contract should be redefined and your contracting stage revisited before moving ahead.

- **Categorize the Stage of Readiness**. Identify which "stage" of readiness your executive is in with respect to behavior change and tailor your coaching intervention to maximize *motivation* of your client. For example, for those in an Action Stage (currently making attempts to modify his/her style or specific behavior) will require "just in time feedback" from his/her boss and others to shape the desired behavior. As a coach, increase your follow-up via email, voicemail and/or one-to-one appointments as this point to maintain *motivation* for the behavior change effort. Similarly, for those in a Relapse Stage (tried the new behavior and quickly reverted back to the old style or approach) you need to quickly diagnose the reason(s) for the relapse and build in ways to avoid turning "lapses" into total "relapses" with a minimization of the original coaching goal. There are also times when saying to an executive that he or she does appear to be engaged in the process and maybe the timing is not good. Speaking the "truth" will many times help the individual identify what stage of readiness they are truly at. This will save tremendous time, effort, and money on going forward, if the individual is simply "not ready".

- **Facilitate Barrier Busting**. Identify barriers that are perceived to prevent the executive from successfully initiating and maintaining new behaviors within the organization. For each barrier, ask the executive to develop a plan to overcome these perceived or real obstacles that might interfere with sustaining new behaviors (e.g., my boss doesn't support or value a participative leadership style or my staff is really not competent for me to allow them handle that project on their own).

- **Conduct a Behavioral Force-Field Analysis**. Brainstorm the payoff and advantages of initiating and maintaining new behaviors for the executive with regards to his/her job, career or future development. Clarify the payoff and outcome of how these new

behaviors will be perceived and experienced by others with whom he/she works and what it can result in. In essence, what is driving the executive to change and what are the drivers not to change. Once these two drivers are identified, the coach can help the executive build upon the reasons for change and reduce the reasons not to change. What is accomplished after this is the person actually feels the "pull to change".

- **Provide a Change Model**. Introduce one or more of the popular individual, team or organizational change models in the human resources, OD or mental health professions to the executive to help them better understand the typical stages, emotional reactions and feelings that accompany individual, team and organizational change. These models may be useful to increase motivation to change at various stages of success or failure for executives.

- **Tell Stories**. Good coaches are able to "connect" with others in a manner that motivates and inspires behavior change. One simple approach that continually works is to tell stories. Using stories of others, without violating confidentiality, has been valuable. Helping executives related to the successes and failures of others like them can be both instructive and inspirational. Story telling is an important skill for anyone serving executives as a coach to learn and develop.

- **Make it Personal**. Integrate the behavior change efforts with the executive's own career and professional goals. Too often coaches are faced with trying to integrate competing goals of the organization with those of his/her client (e.g., we have had several clients tell us flat out that "this is how my boss would like be to act but it just doesn't work for me"). Trying to focus on enhancing managerial competencies and leadership skills with those who prefer to be in independent contributor roles rarely is successful either. Executives will be *motivated* to change behaviors that seem to facilitate both effectiveness and satisfaction on the job—for them. In other words, tie your executive coaching goals closely to your client's career and professional growth plans.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE (EI)

Not all *aware* and truly *motivated* executives are successful at changing their leadership style or even specific behaviors that clearly contribute to future "derailment." In order for behavior

<u>change</u> to be sustained, executives must know what to change and be committed to sustain it over time. The key to successful long-term behavior change is the consistent application of a complex set of skills over an extended period of time.

Why are some executives successful and others not? A look at the literature on multiple intelligence provides an intriguing answer to this age-old question of "can you teach old dogs new tricks?" If interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness and ability are truly "unique types of multiple intelligence" we can better understand the elasticity of executive behavior. Perhaps Emotional Intelligence (EI; involves a combination of both interpersonal and intrapersonal awareness/ability) explains how some truly motivated and aware executive's are unable to modify core personality traits or master specific interpersonal skills even with tremendous motivation, practice and feedback. No doubt everyone can improve and get better to some extent with maximum effort and targeted feedback. However, it seems that not all of us can "stretch" behaviorally as far as others who are blessed to possess an initially higher level of EI (Goleman, 1998).

Ok, it might not be politically correct to suggest that some of us lack innate "potential" or "ability" to acquire and sustain new skills and behaviors. Nor is this a reason to easily explain a poorly designed and delivered coaching intervention. However, it is a reason to realistically appraise just what is possible for an executive to truly earn, acquire and master with respect to complex leadership, communication, interpersonal, task/project management and problem-solving skills. There are a number of ways to enhance and foster EI. Much has been written about this topic and an excellent resource is the Emotional Intelligence Consortium (http://www.eiconsortium.com/).   Some strategies and techniques to enhance and develop one's EI include:

- **Maximize Individual Choice/Self-Directed Change**. Executives are much more likely to grow and develop in areas *they* decide which competencies to focus on and set his/her own goals. To stretch executives, it is particularly important to maximize choice, whether it is behavioral goals to focus on or the type of learning to engage in (e.g., experiential). In this way, the coach can maximize learning by matching the executive's needs, preferences and preferred learning style. It is important to remind the executive that his/her level of change is truly a choice. Our experience is that successful

individuals do see themselves as creating their own destiny with an internal locus of control and optimistic explanatory style of successes. Therefore, the more the executive can take responsibility for making choices the better. Many times, part of an executive coaching program is to provide learning on decision-making. For many executives being taught how to make personal decisions is as critical as making business decisions.

- **Structure Goals into Manageable Steps**. When an executive achieves success on specific developmental goals it leads to the setting of new, more challenging goals. It is important to "stretch" executives by structuring goals into small, attainable and manageable steps. Learning and developing competence is maximized when goals are challenging but attainable. Although challenging goals are more motivating than easy ones, if they aren't attainable and manageable it won't be possible to ensure steady progress. One of the most common complaints about Leadership Development programs is the focus usually on "tactics" and large complex action steps. Our experience is the more practical and small the action step the more helpful the experience is. We recommend that Developmental Plans consist of very concrete and practical steps. We refer this to the "video camera criteria" which translates to what a person with a video camera would actually see an executive doing if he/she was being recording while engaged in a new behavior. This provides an easy metaphor and criteria to discuss the implementation of new behavior.

- **Maximize the Use of Experiential Techniques**. Reading books, listening to tapes and attending Executive seminars may be useful, but current research suggests that EI can be facilitate much more rapidly and deeply by using more active, group and experiential approaches such as work sample simulations, case studies and on-the-job activities (e.g., special projects, stretch assignments, etc.).   A recent review of development plans of executives participating in a company-wide multi-rater feedback program revealed that the majority of individual goals were largely non-experiential and "activity", versus, "results" based (e.g., attend a particular executive development seminar or do another multi-rater feedback evaluation in 10 months versus employ a "time keeping role" and action item log in future staff meetings to improve efficiency and reduce meeting time). To enhance EI, a greater emphasis must be placed on maximizing

opportunities to practice new behaviors—in learning situations and back on the job to ensure that learning is sustained and evaluated over time.

- **Provide Focused Feedback**. The professional golfer Tiger Woods is widely acknowledged as one of the great young golfers of our time. He has obviously been blessed with innate ability to be successful but maximizes his potential by continually looking for more focused feedback to grow and improve his professional game. He attributes much of his phenomenal string of successes to his own coach who constantly provides him with focused feedback on what he is doing well and what he needs to immediately correct to ensure success. Not many executives we have coached are a Tiger Woods, but all can benefit with more targeted and specific feedback during the change process. EI development is enhanced with ongoing, focused and finer (concrete) feedback by others. As coaches we need to constantly find the best way to provide focused feedback to our clients—the more successful they are, the more challenging this becomes.

- **Build Social Support**. It is well known that EI develops best in a social environment where mentors, friends, coworkers and even family members going through the same change process can help facilitate a person's confidence, hope and motivation. Creating mentor relationships, support groups, peer coaches and involving family members can make a great difference in the success or failure of individual change efforts. Social support systems can also facilitate accurate self-awareness and self-insight, which is a cornerstone of emotional intelligence. Probably the most critical skill in today's business world is networking. In fact, research indicates that executives often derail because of a lack of a large supporting network. Spending time building and maintaining relationships is absolutely a must. A saying we use in coaching is that "out of sight, out of mind, out of business." Nowhere is this truer than in business today.

- **Provide Relapse Prevention Training**. "Lapses" and "slips" are part of the inevitable journey of personal behavior change. Understanding what leads to these "lapses" and how to effectively cope with periods of personal stress will enable Executives to

continue to grow and learn over time without totally relapsing back to old entrenched behaviors and styles. Relapse prevention training can provide strategies for preparing for and dealing with minor setbacks without becoming easily discouraged and disillusioned with his/her original behavioral goal (Tziner, Haccoun, & Kadish, 1991). Developing EI is a gradual and incremental journey. Recognition of potential obstacles and strategies for overcoming them are essential for lifelong learning. One of the reasons ongoing coaching sessions are valuable is that the "reminders" keep people from relapsing or regressing to old behaviors. Our experience is that people do go back to those behaviors that have contributed to their success. Regular coaching can identify the early signs of relapse and then help prevent a relapse from occurring.

CONCLUSION

Coaching models and approaches are diverse. Executive coaching is challenging work. Individual behavior change is complicated. To maximize coaching success, you really have to have all the "cherries line up on the slot machine" to ensure that the essential conditions required for behavior change are all there. ***Awareness, Motivation*** and ***EI*** are the three conditions that are essential to initiate and sustain successful individual change efforts. Coaches who attempt to maximize all three conditions will have a much higher probability of seeing a payoff in their clients than if any one condition exists alone. Clients who are aware, ready to change and continue to develop his/her emotional intelligence almost always will "hit the jackpot" with respect to job and career success over time.

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FIGURE 1

READINESS TO CHANGE AND SAMPLE COACHING STRATEGIES

READINESS TO CHANGE STAGES		SAMPLE COACHING STRATEGIES
Precontemplation (No intention to initiate behavior change the near future)	Unfreezing	*Self-Evaluation:* Explore and discuss how individual change effort is linked to career, personal, and professional goals
Contemplation (Some intention to initiate behavior change in the near future)		*Consciousness Raising*: Brainstorming "pros" and "cons" of behavior change to increase awareness and information about the change and its benefits
Preparation (Strong intention to initiate behavior change immediately)	Changing	*Stimulus Control*: Align organizational resources and structures to support the change effort (e.g., schedule weekly meetings with one's supervisor to review progress on the development plan
Action (Initiation of behavior change for a short period of time)		*Reinforcement Management*: Align incentives and disincentives to support the change initiative; Build systems to track and monitor progress and achievement of change
Maintenance (Sustaining of behavior change for a long period of time)	Refreezing	*Helping Relationships*: Provide support, mentoring and assistance to Executives having difficulty with the behavior change; Make effective use of celebration, recognition and praise when personal change efforts are sustained
Relapse (A lapse in behavior resulting in a full-blown "relapse" back to old behaviors)		*Relapse Prevention*: Build follow-up communications and interactions by the coach to minimize lapses and prevent full-blown relapse to old behaviors; Encourage your client to talk with his/her supervisor and coworkers when they encounter difficulties of the change; Teach stress management and coping skills to handle job strain