Where the Work of Executive Coaching Lies

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In my executive coaching practice, I have an unusual approach to billing. I don't get paid if my clients don't get better. "Better" is not defined by me or by my clients; it is defined (one year later) by the preselected coworkers who surround my clients. In other words, I don't get paid when my clients believe that they have achieved a positive change in their leadership behavior—I get paid when their coworkers perceive that my clients have achieved this positive change.

I am frequently asked, "Do the leaders you coach really change their behavior, or are they merely perceived as changing by their coworkers?" The answer to this question is very simple—and very surprising: It is much more difficult to change coworkers' perceptions than it is to change leaders' behavior.

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> **Sage counsel is not enough; look to the contribution your clients' coworkers can make.**

Evolution of a Coaching Process

Early in my career as an executive educator, I suffered from a misperception that is still rampant in the world of training and development: "If they understand, they will perform." I believed that if leaders understood how to achieve positive change, they would immediately go out and implement it. Upon reflection, this belief was incredibly naïve. For example, almost everyone *understands* that in order to get in shape they should exercise regularly and avoid overeating. As the unfortunate statistics on obesity indicate, they just don't *do* it.

After about 12 years in the world of leadership training, I came up with a novel idea. I began to actually measure if the participants who attended my classes became more effective leaders, not as judged by self-perception but as judged by their coworkers. This idea eventually led to a major study involving over 86,000 respondents in eight major corporations. In our research, all of the participants had received leadership feedback from coworkers and subordinates. They were asked to select key behaviors for change, discuss these behaviors with coworkers, and then follow up with coworkers to get ongoing suggestions for improvement. The results were very clear and very compelling: leaders who engaged in frequent follow-up with coworkers were seen as becoming much more effective; leaders who did no follow-up improved no more than random chance would predict.

As a teacher, it was a little sobering for me to realize that the major variable in determining the impact of leadership development was not the *teacher* (or the coach); it was the *leader* who was participating in the process. This realization led to a major change in my coaching practice. I quit worrying so much about my ability to give sage advice and began to focus on my client's motivation to work on self-development. I began to realize that my coaching clients could learn much more from their coworkers than they could learn from me! My effectiveness as a coach increased dramatically when I realized that my clients' commitment and dedication to improvement was far more important than my own wisdom.

As the years progressed, I began to notice another variable that was impacting my clients' success. On a few occasions, I worked with clients who were very motivated. They were making sincere, good-faith efforts to improve. Yet, almost no matter what they did, they were not being given any credit for change by their coworkers. They were not being given a fair chance. Their coworkers had put them in a stereotyped box from which they could not escape. I began to become more aware of this stereotyping

when I heard comments from coworkers such as, "she will never be able to listen" or "that's just the way he is."

This understanding has led to another change in the evolution of my coaching practice. Today, most of my time as a coach is not spent interacting with my clients, it is mostly spent interacting with the coworkers of my clients.

In my current practice, early in every coaching assignment, I have an hour-long discussion with each coworker. I describe who I am, how I work, and my "pay only for results" philosophy. I let them know that my success or failure will be determined by them, not by my coaching client. I assure them that anything that they tell me will be confidential. I then ask them to describe what my client is doing well, what needs to be changed, and what advice that would give in order to make sure that this change occurs. Finally, I ask four key questions to each coworker:

Can you let go of the past? Whatever real or imagined "sins" my clients have committed in the past cannot be changed. By continually bringing up the past, coworkers can demoralize leaders and make them feel that others' perceptions can never change. I always encourage coworkers to give my clients positive suggestions about a future that *can* change, as opposed to painful commentary about a past that *cannot* change

Can you swear to tell the truth? I have no desire to work with a coaching client for a year, have the client get a very positive report from coworkers, and then have them say behind the client's back, "He didn't really get better, we just said that." I am not so naïve that I believe that everyone who swears to tell the truth will do so. On the other hand, I do know that people who swear to tell the truth are much more likely to do so.

Can you be positive and supportive in helping my client improve—not cynical, critical, or judgmental? If the people around us laugh at us or make sarcastic comments when we try to improve, we tend to give up. If they are positive, upbeat, and encouraging, we tend to stick with the plan and keep on trying. By being supportive of my clients' efforts toward self-improvement, their coworkers can greatly improve the likelihood of achieving positive, long-term change.

Can you pick something to improve yourself and discuss your own "area for improvement" with my client? From my years of experience, two-way dialogue about personal improvement almost always works better than a one-way monologue. As part of my coaching process, my clients regularly ask coworkers for ideas about how they can improve in effectively demonstrating selected behaviors in the future. Jon Katzenbach and I have named this process feed*forward*.[1] Coworkers are then taught to pick key be-

haviors for improvement by my clients (who are often their managers) and to ask how they, too, can improve. In this way, everyone is trying to help each other get better—as opposed to everyone just judging one person. Not only does this process help my clients improve, but it also helps their organizations improve. In one positive case study, the process spread, and over one hundred leaders were rated as becoming more effective.

Cognitive Dissonance and Changing Perceptions

One of the most widely discussed theories in psychology over the past 50 years is cognitive dissonance theory.[2] The underlying premise of cognitive dissonance is very simple. We have a natural tendency to seek consistency in our cognitions—that is, the way we see the world. Cognitive dissonance has a huge impact in the process of helping leaders change the perception of coworkers. Over time, we all begin to develop stereotypical descriptions of the leaders around us (such as, "she's hyperactive" or "he's a jerk"). We have a natural tendency to look for behavior that reinforces our previously existing stereotype and to discount behavior that is inconsistent with that stereotype.

The following simple case studies may help illustrate the impact of cognitive dissonance and the importance of follow-up.

Situation A

Let's assume that client Bill receives confidential feedback that he consistently makes destructive comments about coworkers. The company is trying to build synergy and teamwork across the organization. Bill realizes that his behavior is totally out of line with what the company needs from its leaders. He mistakenly believes that solving this problem—and changing coworkers' perceptions—is simple. Bill thinks that he doesn't need to talk with his coworkers or to engage in follow-up. He thinks he needs only to stop making the destructive comments—and the problem will go away. Bill makes no negative comments about anyone for seven months. Then, like all humans, he makes a mistake. Bill says, in front of his coworkers, "Those stupid SOBs in Finance. How do we get anything done in this company? We are being run by a bunch of idiot bean counters!"

Over the years, through many interactions, a stereotype had evolved about Bill. His coworkers all saw him as overly judgmental and prone to destructive outbursts. How would many react to Bill's remark about the people in Finance? "Oh well, there he goes again. That's just the way he is!" Bill's seven months of progress could be negated by one unfortunate comment.

Situation B

Let's assume that client Bill receives the identical feedback about making destructive comments. Only now, he decides to talk with his coworkers about what he wants to change and begins a bimonthly follow-up process. At first, few will actually believe that he will improve. In fact, they might find the conversation somewhat amusing. But two months later when Bill follows up and checks in with them, coworkers begin to realize that he has changed. They begin to say things like, "I haven't heard you make any negative comments. Keep up the good work." As Bill keeps on following up, they begin to notice that he is sticking with plan and getting better. Over time, they may actually say, "Bill, I didn't believe that you would change, but you have taken this process seriously—and it is making a positive difference!"

Let's now assume that, like all humans, Bill makes a mistake. He makes a very inappropriate comment about people in finance. One of his coworkers brings this to his attention and notes that this is the first destructive comment that he has made in seven months. Bill apologizes to the team for the comment—and commits to keep on trying to improve.

In Situation A, did Bill's behavior change? Yes. Did his coworkers' perceptions change? No.

In Situation B, did Bill's behavior change? Yes. Did his coworkers' perceptions change? Yes.

Leadership is all about perception. As leaders, what matters is not what we mean to say. What matters is what our coworkers hear! Their perception forms the basis for their opinion of us and our values. *People don't believe that we have changed when we tell them. People believe we have changed when they tell us!*

Bill's company probably has a "values statement" on the wall that encourages everyone to treat coworkers with respect and to build teamwork across the organization. In Situation A, Bill is not seen as caring about— or living—the values. In Situation B, Bill (although still human) is seen as making a sincere effort to be a leader who models the company values.

A Favorite Client

One of my favorite clients, "Joe," is the CEO of a huge organization. Joe was seen as a great leader by everyone on his team. He embraced our coaching process because he wanted to "move to the next level" and get even better. Some of Joe's team members felt that he was so charismatic and powerful that he would sometimes, without meaning to, implement plans without ensuring adequate involvement from coworkers. Joe committed to do a fantastic job of encouraging involvement from his team members. He conducted regular follow-up sessions. When making decisions with his team, Joe got into the habit of asking, "Are there any other ideas that we need to consider or any other people that we need to consider?"

Not surprisingly, after a year, Joe's improvement scores were fantastic. He went from great to even better.

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Surprisingly, many of Joe's team members also experienced very positive change. In fact, two team members had the courage to tell Joe that—upon reflection—their critique of his lack of encouraging involvement was more a reflection on them that it was on him. Both realized that they had sometimes lacked the courage to stand up and express their true opinions. It had been easier for them to blame Joe and look for his problems than to look in the mirror and face their own problems.

I spent less time with Joe than anyone I have ever coached, yet he had the greatest measurable improvement in coworker feedback—in spite of the fact that he was great to start with! What did I learn? To achieve a positive, lasting change in coworkers' perceptions of a leader, don't just work with the leaders—work with their coworkers!

Leadership involves a relationship between real people. As Peter Drucker has noted, management is a practice, not an abstraction. As consultants, we have often fallen into the trap of inferring "I can make you better." We should put the responsibility where it belongs: with leaders and their teams. Our message should be, "You can make yourselves better!" ∎

Notes

1. See M. Goldsmith, "Try Feed*forward*—Instead of Feedback," *Leader to Leader* (Summer 2002).
2. L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957).

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