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The goal of coaching is the goal of good management:

To make the most of an organisation's valuable resources.

The Executive as Coach

by James Waldrop and Timothy Butler

How do you deal with the talented manager whose perfectionism paralyses his or her direct reports? Or the high performing expert who disdains teamwork under any circumstances? What about the sensitive manager who avoids confrontation of any kind? Do you ignore the problems? Get rid of the managers? Or do you coach them? Coaching requires understanding someone's problem behaviour in context, deciding whether the problem can be remedied, and encouraging the person to adapt. Coaching - helping to change the behaviours that threaten to derail a valued manager - is often the best way to help that manager succeed. So why are some executives reluctant to coach? Coaching can take a lot of time, the process is a bit of a mystery; and the results are not guaranteed. On a deeper level, executives may fear overstepping personal boundaries, assuming too much responsibility, or playing the role of psychiatrist. Let us be clear : Good coaching is simply good management. It requires many of the same skills that are critical to effective management, such as keen powers of observation, sensible judgement, and an ability to take appropriate action. Similarly, the goal of coaching is the goal of good management : to make the most of an organisation's valuable resources. It sounds simple, yet many executives don't know where to begin.

In helping executives become better coaches, we have learned a few lessons that we would like to pass along. An effective coach knows what questions to ask when evaluating a situation, assessing problem behaviours, and calibrating his or her own coaching abilities. An effective coach also draws on a wide variety of techniques to help a manager change problem behaviours.

To identify what's really going on, it is critical to observe the dynamics between the manager in question and those around him. The focus, of course, is on the manager's behaviour, but behaviour never takes place in a vacuum. An important part of what you assess is the impact that problem behaviours have on the other members of the organisation. A systematic way to understand a problem behaviour in its context is to ask the same questions a journalist would ask when gathering information for a story : Who, what, when, where, how, and (if possible) why?

Consider, for example, the analytically brilliant but overbearing manager. Look for opportunities to see her in action, and pay attention to how she behaves under various circumstances. Whom does she attempt to dominate? Whom does she seem to respect? Is her behaviour apparently influenced by the gender, status, or ethnic background of those around her? Does she have difficulties with one specific person? What exactly does she do that is overbearing? When does she act out that behaviour?

Always? During times of stress? When asked to perform outside her area of expertise? Does her behaviour depend on where she is? Is she more or less overbearing outside her familiar territory? How does the behaviour affect those around her and her ability to get her work done? Can you begin to understand why she behaves in an overbearing manner?

It is often very difficult to uncover the underlying reasons for a problem behaviour. If the behaviour is new, it may help to consider what else in the manager's life could be affecting her. Is she getting divorced? Suffering an illness? Struggling with a financial setback? Adjusting to married life? Finding out what's going on in the individual's personal life may provide you with key insights into the problem behaviour. Of course, establishing a rapport is not always easy to do and is generally possible only after you have entered into a coaching relationship with the manager.

Keeping track of effective behaviours as well as ineffective ones will help you develop a full picture of the person in question. Sometimes executives tend to focus only on the bad and overlook the good. The goal of coaching, however, is to help someone be more effective, not to build a case for the prosecution. Depending on the frequency of the problem behaviour, the period of observation may go on for three months or longer, although it is sometimes possible to reach a conclusion sooner. Our rule of thumb is that one event makes one event, two events make two events, and three events make a pattern. How long the period of observation lasts must depend on your own judgement that enough information has been gathered.

To evaluate the effect of the problem behaviour on the rest of the organisation, it helps to answer some simple questions : How many of the problems that you have dealt with in the past three months centred on this person's behaviour? When the organisation tolerates negative behaviour, what does it signal to other employees? What would life be like without the individual in the organisation? What is life like when the manager is out on vacation?

It may be helpful to draw on the observations of other people you trust to round out your own understanding. Obviously, this information gathering must be conducted with great sensitivity. For example, you should not ask leading questions of the manager's peers or subordinates. Suppose, for example, that you are concerned that one of your managers controls information too tightly and finds delegation next to impossible. What kind of conversation could you have with his direct reports that would leave them confident in his leadership? Highlighting his problem behaviour in any way risks undermining his effectiveness. If he finds out that you are talking about his problem behaviours with his peers and subordinates, he will almost certainly feel betrayed. Then your chances of establishing a healthy coaching relationship with him will be slim. Of course employees who come to you with comments or complaints should be given an ear regardless of their status in the organisation, or they will justifiably feel ignored.

As a general rule, confine your discussions about the manager to your own peers. They may have useful observations and advice. In one company we worked with, for instance, the general counsel had a very good sense of what was going on in the organisation and often served as the senior executive's sounding board and confidant.

Once you have evaluated the situation, you must determine how bad the behaviour is. “We are what we repeatedly do,” wrote Aristotle more than 2,300 years ago. “Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” Most commonly, observed behaviours are habits in some form. The question you have to answer is, How entrenched is the habit? Stubbornly ingrained or something that can easily be changed? Truly expressive of the manager’s character or a reflex without profound significance? Part of her substance or part of her style?

The answers to those questions have important implications. Consider the newly promoted vice president who is perceived as arrogant. Through his bluster, he may unwittingly be expressing a fear of failing in his new position. A good coach can help him identify his fears as normal and encourage him to behave more modestly. Alternatively, the manager may be deliberately acting arrogantly in the mistaken belief that arrogance is respected. A coach can help him dispose of that myth. The third possibility is that the manager is, in fact, incorrigible. A wise executive will recognise that the manager’s behaviour is not likely to change, because he is simply expressing his true character.

Three tests reveal whether or not a problem behaviour is based in character. First, the behaviour is part of a pattern seen in different contexts. For example, a person with low self-esteem may mask it by buying an expensive car, getting herself invited to the “right” parties, or sending her children to the “right” schools. She likely evaluates other people professionally and socially on the basis of status and generally avoids taking risks that might jeopardise her own standing.

Second, the problem behaviour is generally observable over a long period. Has one manager always cheated on her income taxes or did she cheat just once when she was desperately short of cash? Has another always dodged responsibility or is he simply overwhelmed right now and temporarily unable to cope?

Third, character flaws tend to express themselves in a complex array of behaviours rather than in a single one. Changing one or two of these behaviours will not make much of a difference because too many other negative behaviours will likely remain. Imagine trying to coach the socially awkward technological wizard to prepare her for a senior sales-management position. You may succeed in some superficial ways - for instance, by training her to stand farther away from others at cocktail parties or to dress a bit better - but you cannot hope to change the myriad other behaviours that express her core being and mark her as a techno-nerd. The manager will never be able to engage in small talk when she really wants to talk bits and bytes. And she will never suffer fools gladly simply to make a sale. Even if you could identify and work on the many behaviours that express the very core of her character, such efforts would demand constant attention. She would revert to old habits unless she relentlessly monitored them, just as a car straightens out of a turn without a steady hand on the wheel. A manager can sometimes change character-driven behaviours, but only with constant effort and limited success. Such behaviours are a lot like crabgrass : deeply rooted and difficult to weed out.

A simple conceptual framework can help you classify the type of the behavioural problem you are facing. (See the chart “Assessing Behaviour : The Likelihood of Change.”) The framework allows you to map the manager’s behaviour along two key dimensions : how frequently it occurs and how deeply rooted it is. The key questions that the framework then helps answer are as follows :

Can the problem behaviour be changed? In cases at the extreme right of the continuum, consider the behaviour to be unchangeable. The question then becomes, Can we live with that behaviour? The decision whether or not to keep a manager depends on how profound the negative effect is. Does the behaviour occur too frequently to be ignored? Does the behaviour occur infrequently but with such impact that the person cannot succeed in the organisation? A character trait such as dishonesty need express itself only rarely to derail a manager permanently. Do the negatives of a set of behaviours clearly outweigh the positives of the individual's contributions to the organisation? If the negative aspects are too great, the answer may be to suggest that the person move to a place where the character trait is not a liability but a potential asset. For example, the verbally aggressive manager on the genteel corporate staff might be encouraged to join a new venture that would welcome his energy and shrug off his edge.

If the behaviour can be changed, is the person willing to try to change it? Behavioural change is possible only when it is voluntary, and willingness to change even a superficial behaviour at the far left of our chart depends on the individual. Some people will go to great lengths to change any behaviour that inhibits their effectiveness. Other people consider any suggestion to change an assault on their entire being. The best predictor of future flexibility is flexibility in the past. Has the person previously been open to feedback and willing to change and grow? If so, you can expect him to do the same in the current situation.

Even if the individual's history suggests an unwillingness to change behaviours that are in fact changeable, you should assume that change is possible. One of management's most important jobs is to motivate, and inspiring a flawed but valuable player to accomplish something as difficult as significant behavioural change constitutes one mark of a fine executive. You are, in effect, resurrecting a valuable human resource that your organisation might otherwise lose. It's worth a try.

Becoming an effective coach requires introspection. Ironically, coaching someone else may require behavioural changes on your own part as great as the change you expect of the person you are coaching. Successful coaching behaviours run counter to many traditionally successful executive behaviours - behaviours that you will still need to use in other business contexts but may need to suspend for coaching. In effect, you need to figure out which of your own reflexes may get in the way as you begin to coach.

What are the typical behaviours of a successful senior executive? Not every executive has emerged from the same mould, of course, but top-level executives as a class tend to be very competitive and quick to think, judge, act and speak. Concerned with the complex needs of the business, they are pressed for time and can afford to tolerate few excuses from their subordinates. Given the pressures on them from their boards and from Wall Street, most executives focus their attention on the business in the near term and don't have a great deal of time to spend on building warm and fuzzy relationships with their subordinates. Because of the meeting and travel schedules most executives keep today, it is hard for them to develop and maintain relationships.

Compare that profile with the characteristics of an effective coach. The coach must adopt the approach of teacher, not competitor, of helpful colleague, not judge. The coach observes first to understand, and only after understanding is he able to criticise.

The intent of any criticism is to help the person improve. The coach reflects before acting and encourages the individual he is coaching to do the same. Although the ultimate goal of coaching is to improve business performance, the focus is less on the immediate task and more on the long term. In addition to pointing out problems, a wise coach knows when to give positive strokes to provide support and structures a collaborative relationship through regular meetings.

If you had to, could you do all that tomorrow? Could you stand some of your most prized behaviours on their head? Think of what that would mean. The coaching relationship would receive as high a priority as any other important business challenge. Would you be willing to set aside other business obligations temporarily? Coach and manager need to meet regularly and frequently. Could you meet for at least an hour every other week? Are you willing to put these meetings on your calendar and guard that time?

Coaching requires confronting some unpleasant truths about a key member of your team. Are you able to deal with an imperfection in one of your managers? Can you suspend judgement long enough to figure out how to help? Perhaps the problem behaviour annoys you as much as it bothers everyone else. Will you be able to put that feeling of irritation aside to be a helpful coach? For example, we know of one hard-driving, analytical, supremely organised executive faced with coaching a brilliant, creative, very disorganised manager who did excellent work, but could not meet a deadline. The executive's struggle with himself was as great as his struggle with the subordinate. He had to face and overcome his fundamental distaste for the other's style even before he could consider coaching. The executive ultimately succeeded as a coach because he was very clear about the standards that he wanted met and did not compromise them. The behavioural objective he set for the manager was clear and unambiguous : be brilliant and creative, but change the perfectionist behaviours that get in the way of meeting deadlines.

Coaches who define their purpose as saving a valuable resource for the long-term benefit of the organisation are more successful than coaches who get caught up in the immediacy of the coaching relationship. This long-term view keeps them out of personality conflicts and reminds them that coaching is a legitimate business responsibility. To maintain this kind of positive attitude, it helps to remember two other things. First, sometimes even the strongest performers need assistance to grow into a new position. Coaching is as much about ensuring success as it is about staving off failure. Second, most people want to be effective, especially the goal oriented individuals who are key to your organisation. The message to send is not, Nobody likes you. It is instead, You're less effective than you could be.

Setting up the first meeting in which you introduce the idea of coaching requires great care. You should schedule it as you would any other business meeting, broaching the subject of the meeting gently : "Let's get together and talk about the Chan deal. There were some problems with it that we've seen before, and I'd like to talk to you about them." Remember that confronting the manager in immediate reaction to a specific incident is a mistake because the atmosphere will still be too fraught with tension.

You may want to create a rough script for the meeting. What do you want to say? In what order? When would it make sense to pause to let a point sink in? When should you wait to allow for a reaction? It may be helpful to practice out loud, as if you were

preparing for any other important business presentation. Speaking in the first person makes it clear that both of you are dealing with perceptions, not objective reality: “Here’s how I observe you” “Here is what I’m seeing” “If I were in that person’s shoes, I might think” Be truthful, calm and supportive.

The manager must emerge from the first conversation with her ego intact. She needs to feel that she is appreciated but has room to grow. Sandwiching negative feedback between two genuinely positive messages softens the blow. At the close of the conversation, you need to be able to say, “I don’t want you to leave this meeting without going back to my opening comments. You are very important to us, and we would not be having this conversation if I did not value you and your contribution very highly. There is a real problem here, and I want to work on it with you so that you have a rewarding future in our organisation.”

Despite your best efforts, many managers confronted with their behaviours for the first time will resist the feedback and deny the behaviours. If that happens, remain calm and say, “You need to understand how other people experience working with you.” The message to send at the outset is that you are accurately relating what you and others experience in their relationship with the individual. If the manager continues to resist, let go. In the words of the fly fisherman, sometimes you have to let the fish run. A day or two of reflection can greatly increase the manager’s receptivity to coaching advice. Once you broach the subject, however, you must follow through with it. Nothing will be gained by avoiding the issue.

You will need to find a useful balance between carrot and stick. The deciding factor is the sensitivity to the individual. If he is fragile, use more carrot: “You are so valuable that we really want you to succeed. I understand that it’s not easy to shift into a new job. I certainly needed help when I was promoted to this level. Let’s get together every once in a while and talk about how things are going. I know that you’ll do a great job.” Of course, if you are too positive, the manager may not grasp the serious need to change; however, if you overemphasise the negative, you can scare a valuable player into jumping ship. The situation may seem too desperate.

If the person in question is very bull-headed (or simply dense), you may be forced to use more stick.

Sometimes a manager confronted with his problem behaviour simply shrugs and lets you know that he frankly doesn’t care. You might try this answer : “I don’t care if you think you have a problem or not. I’m your boss, and I think you have a problem, so you have a problem. Work on this behaviour and make it go away, or you are out of here.” In general, it makes sense to err on the side of the carrot because you cannot erase wounds once they have been inflicted. But it is just as big a mistake to avoid confronting someone who does not realise his effect on other people.

Finally, separate the coaching experience from the formal performance-review process. Of course, they are related - the behavioural issue may be the root cause of a performance issue - but you should present the coaching experience as a developmental opportunity for the benefit of both manager and organisation.

Practising a number of coaching techniques can help you be more effective in your new role. Both coach and manager need to agree on the ultimate goal, be it reducing the number of sarcastic outbursts, repairing relationships across organisational boundaries, allowing subordinates to speak freely - the potential list is endless. It is likely that you will be working on more than one line of development in a single individual. Unfortunately, few people in need of coaching exhibit only one troublesome behaviour at a time.

Any plan of action for remedying problems must be behaviourally specific, but lasting change also requires the manager to reflect on her own actions and to learn from them. When developing a plan of action with a manager, do not devise a to-do list with boxes to check off. Instead, create together a thoughtful programme that encourages learning. We have found some relatively simple techniques to be helpful in the coaching meetings themselves.

Practice active listening. Play back to the person what you heard her say, paraphrasing in your own words so that the person knows you truly understood her - or so that you can clarify any misunderstandings if you didn't. This discipline also helps you better articulate to yourself what you are hearing and exemplifies a good behaviour for the manager to use in her own work.

Support learning through action and reflection. The coach needs to support the manager's learning process by taking time after a specific event or during the scheduled coaching meeting to ask, "What happened? What did you do? How successful do you think the action was? How did you feel before, during and after? How did other people react? Did you get any feedback? Do you need to follow-up?" One goal of the coach in the action-and-reflection cycle is to make the manager realise how his behaviours affect his ability to succeed. The best way to accomplish that is to ask him to imagine how others might be reacting to his behaviour.

Move from easy to hard. One of the best pieces of advice that we can give to an executive is to move from easy to hard, much as learning to ski on the beginner slopes gives a skier the skills and confidence to advance to intermediate runs. Do not expect the behavioural goal to be reached without some trial and error along the way. If you need to work on several behaviours, pick the one that is likeliest to change quickly and with the least amount of trauma. Then move on to successively more entrenched behaviours.

Set micro goals. A very effective technique that allows for practising a new behaviour with minimal risk is to set what we call *micro goals*. These goals approximate the ultimate goal and form the basis for reflection and discussion between coach and manager. For example, if the ultimate goal is to be a more trusted and approachable manager, successive micro goals for the manager might be to ask a staff assistant how his weekend went, to solicit other people's opinions about a decision and to follow up with them afterward, to ask more people out to lunch, and to take notes about how a particularly nettlesome relationship is progressing. If the ultimate goal is to stop overly controlling behaviour, a series of micro goals might encourage the manager to hold back her opinion in a meeting until everyone else has spoken, to delegate an important piece of work, and to practice active listening.

Use tape delay. Another helpful technique for a coach to use is what we call *tape delay*. The coach encourages the manager who gets into trouble by speaking before thinking to wait for five seconds before reacting in meetings, just as live television delays broadcast by a few seconds to allow network sensors to delete any profanity.

Practice script writing and role-playing. The coach can help the manager who has problems communicating by encouraging him to write scripts and then to play out possible scenarios.

Set up relationship-repair meetings. The coach must ask many questions of the manager to find out what is happening in a bad relationship. When the manager is ready to work on the relationship, the coach may help him script and play out a first meeting. It also may be of benefit if the coach acts as meeting facilitator.

Encourage more positive feedback. Executives and managers have an understandable tendency to focus on problems more than on successes. When coaching, don't just dwell on the negative, and encourage the manager you are coaching to avoid this error as well. Napoleon stressed how everyone responds to rewards when he said "Men don't risk their lives for their country. Men risk their lives for medals." Human nature has not changed.

The essence of coaching is to be imaginative and to look for a variety of solutions. Coaching must reflect the complexity and difficulty of genuine efforts to change behaviour. Behavioural change requires understanding one's effect on other people - a process that can be painful. Change requires endurance : it may take place over months, not weeks or days. Change requires faith : progress in the beginning may come in small increments as the manager moves from minor modifications to more noticeable differences. Change takes vigilance and self-discipline : sliding backward is almost always easier than moving forward. Change means deferring gratification : expect no applause; even after a behaviour changes for the better, few people will notice until new behavioural patterns are well established. Change is not linear : allow for the occasional slip backwards as well as the leap forward.

Successful executives often tell us that when they were in business school, they considered the quantitative "hard" subjects, such as finance and operations management, to be the most important topics they studied, they had little respect for the "soft" subjects, such as organisational behaviour and human resources management. 15 or 20 years later, however, those same executives recognise that it is their people management skills - working with and developing people - that have been the key to both to their personal success and to that of their business. Being an effective coach is one essential part of that key to success.

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