Evidence-based Executive Coaching: A Case Study

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Prepared for publication, October 2010
Evidence-based coaching uses the combination of best-available scientific knowledge and professional experiences to create interventions geared towards personal development, or performance enhancement. The following executive coaching case study addresses the critical aspects relevant to successful executive coaching. Elements such as building a solid coaching relationship, cognitive and behavioral coaching models and techniques, goal setting, progress assessment, and project termination will be discussed within the context of APA’s ethical principles and code of conduct.
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Evidence-based Executive Coaching: A Case Study

The following case study was derived from an actual and ongoing coaching assignment recently accepted by the writer, taking place in the realm of organizational coaching. The writer has been contracted to work with two executives of a small IT company on the East Coast. Both individuals – for this case study referred to as Bill and Ben – have been friends for a long time, are equally educated Caucasian males in their middle adulthood, and possess over 30 years of combined industry experience. Since its inception in 1995, the company has been growing slowly, but steadily. The current economic climate, however, has not only halted this growth, but actually caused overall sales to decline by 20%.

While both executives realize the need for a change in business model, the willingness to pursue such change varies considerably among them. Bill as an unattached single has no difficulty adjusting his lifestyle to the reduced disposable income, thus is more than willing to accept it as long as he can continue doing what he always did and enjoyed. Ben, on the other hand, struggles to provide an in his mind acceptable quality of life for himself, his wife, and three little children. After numerous discussions between Bill and Ben on alternative strategies, product mix, and other business related issues, interpersonal tensions have grown to a level that threatens to tear apart both the personal and professional relationship between them. Bill knows and respects Ben’s concerns, but shuts down whenever an approach to change is being proposed. Such cognitive dissonance in attitudes makes it very uncomfortable for Bill to be around his long-time business partner. Ben values Bill’s friendship, but has lost patience and reached a point where any interaction with Bill ends in destructive confrontation. If this situation can not be rectified, it will plausibly lead to the demise of the company.
As the success of the organization is so intrinsically intertwined with the personal relationship of the two executives, the coaching plan focuses on the writer’s efforts to create buy-in to the development of an implementation plan for change, and coach both Bill and Ben along their way towards constructive conflict resolution and co-leadership.

**Coaching Relationship and Coaching Models**

The first steps in a coaching process lay the foundation for its likely success. In their coaching practice Eaton and Johnson (2001) have found three main elements critical to achieving a productive coaching relationship; these being autonomy of the client, shared responsibility, and the fostering of new skills. Since coaching is a process aimed at helping individuals grow professionally or personally towards a higher degree of self-actualization the quality of the coaching relationship depends on the coachee being encouraged and enabled to develop new skills and related performance standards (p. 22).

*Developing the Coaching Relationship*

Building a productive coaching relationship also depends on conditional parameters. Bill and Ben should feel comfortable, safe, and respected as persons from the moment the coaching project begins. Safety in this case relates to their perception of confidentiality and willingness to trust the writer. Eaton and Johnson (2001) also point to infrastructural criteria such as choosing an appropriate time and location – for example, a private office or meeting room with a window onsite or offsite the company to lend for a more relaxed, less guarded conversation – or allowing sufficient time and possible overtime (p. 25). In addition, an agreed upon routine in terms of
structure, timing, and frequency of sessions will be set up to further reduce guardedness and uncomfortable ambiguity.

Before beginning the coaching sessions a psychometric profile of Bill and Ben will be established. In the writer’s experience with executive coaching particular behavioral and personality traits can determine the quality of the relationship to be formed. Therefore drawing on psychometric information obtained through the administration of the abbreviated NEO PI-R and DiSC inventories improves the understanding of specific facets of Bill and Ben that might contribute to the motivational friction points related to any change management intervention. In addition, an evaluation of their profiles allows the writer to customize his communication style, task orientation, goal setting, and other relevant aspects of the coaching project.

The personality traits most interesting to observe in this project consist of Bill and Ben’s openness to experience, extroversion, and conscientiousness. In order to accept coaching for change, Bill who prefers a reactionary, transaction-oriented, quasi sustaining the status quo style, has to admit that there are components of his make-up that hinder the continued economic prosperity of the company. Ben, on the other hand, will be coached to nurture his traits of conscientiousness and emotional stability to become a catalyst in his business partner’s transformational process. As such, aligning personality traits with the process of building a coaching relationship allows for subsequent sessions to take on an interpersonal interaction style with which Bill and Ben will be most familiar and most comfortable.

In addition to psychometric information, the writer will attempt to learn more about the professional and personal self of both Bill and Ben in order to develop a better contextual understanding of likely behavioral or cognitive obstacles. Techniques such as “meet the
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candidate”, which asks coachees to describe themselves from three different vantage points (i.e. a supervisor, a co-worker, and a subordinate reporting directly to the coachee) could be used to gain insights into Bill and Ben’s self-awareness, and self confidence, and may offer initial inclinations into their personal and professional make-up.

Such solid coaching relationship Bill, Ben, and the writer are establishing will lay the foundation for the team’s accountability in terms of implementation of agreed-upon action steps within a sincere, caring context (Stober & Grant, 2006).

_Cognitive Coaching_

Cognitive coaching approaches follow the premise that an individual’s behavior is rooted in thought-processes, attitudes, and perceptions. Using insights developed in cognitive psychology, the writer will focus on the understanding of Bill and Ben’s mental processes triggering resistance, avoidance, and other undesired behaviors. Sternberg (2009) argues that such processes are the result of mental maps and schemata which produce information the mind uses to form a baseline for deductive or inductive reasoning. As Bill and Ben are both executives, thus directly responsible to internal and external stakeholders (i.e. employees, immediate family, community, etc.) for the overall performance of their company, their mental processes are subject to potentially distorting internal and external influences (i.e. stress, anxiety, sleep depravation, etc.), which could lead to sub-optimal reasoning, ill-decision making, and maladaptive behavior such as Ben’s lack of patience, or the interpersonal, destructive conflict between the two leaders.

The writer will therefore engage in cognitive coaching individually with Bill and Ben in order to place greater emphasis on planning, reflecting, and problem solving. In Ben’s case, the
writer will focus on reshaping the cyclical cause-and-effect linkage between his thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Using the technique of rationale-emotive therapy (RET), the writer will discuss Ben’s potentially distorted perception of his partner’s incapability to change by focusing Ben on his negative perception (“he will never change”), the quality of the information from which it is constructed (“Bill never expressed such standpoints. Are you, Ben, jumping to conclusions that have not been validated?”), and, finally, the resulting quality of the inferred, behavioral decision (“Is the interpersonal conflict constructive to the change you are trying to accomplish? Is your behavior creating buy-in in Bill? If not, what would be a more constructive approach?”)

In Bill’s case, the writer will engage in the technique of motivational interviewing (Butler, Rollnick, & Scott, 1996) to reduce the evident cognitive resistance to change, which appears to be rooted in distorted information processing. When investigating cognitive resistance, Blankenship and Wegener (2008) found that new information is processed based on its alignment with existing personal values. If new information is contradictory to personal or professional value perceptions, it is likely to trigger guarded or defensive attitudes causing the information to be disregarded or partially ignored. In addition, Bill’s past experiences have created exaggeration of commitment (Sternberg, 2009), thus relying too much on past successes and decisions based on an obsolete set of information when justifying a decision.

Motivational interviewing focuses on Bill himself examining the positive and negative aspects and consequences of the proposed change to enable him to subsequently make a well-informed decision. While this technique not only shifts accountability to Bill, it also allows for the alignment of the motivation to change with the evident level of readiness for change. In other
words, motivational interviewing does not operate in extremes (all-or-nothing) but focuses on achieving some acceptable level of change. By letting Bill evaluate and determine the different criteria involved in the business model change, the journey towards an improved future state can begin. Furthermore, Bill can set his own goals which he deems achievable and desirable; thus his perception of autonomy and self-efficacy will remain uncompromised, which could cause the initially erected barriers to gradually dissolve.

_Behavioral Coaching_

After the main parameters defining the coaching relationship have been established, and any cognitive barriers are identified, the writer will utilize an evidence-based behavioral coaching model such as the development pipeline or other process-oriented models (e.g. GROW, GOAL, etc.). Behavior-based models stem from cognitive-behavioral principles first used in psychotherapy (Stober & Grant, 2006). Their main idea is to identify and analyze a particular behavior (or a specific stimulus triggering a particular behavior) currently exhibited by the client, and then develop different cognitive, emotional, and behavioral response mechanisms to it.

To begin the writer will jointly work with Bill and Ben to develop complete awareness of what change means to both the organization, and their professional roles within the company (i.e. professional and performance expectations, goal setting, motivating employees, leading by example, etc.). General discrepancies between current and future states are typically identified at this stage, which then need to be classified by their importance relative to the requirements of the new position. Subsequently, a priority list will be established focusing areas for improvement (i.e. coaching goals) aimed to enhance Bill and Ben’s current knowledge, skills, and abilities.
(KSA). Based on such findings, the coaching team can now jointly assess the potential gap between existing and necessary KSAs, which are then individually addressed through scenario analysis, improved time management skills, or other practical exercises.

**Coaching Process**

As a good coach the writer needs to ensure that both Bill and Ben know precisely what specific results are being sought. Many coaching sessions are based on little more than an exploration of what is to be achieved, and how, when where, with whom, and why it is to be accomplished (Eaton & Johnson, 2001). Biswas-Diener, and Dean (2007) underscore this point stating that coaches often tend to rush into the development process only to find the quickest path towards goal achievement. Yet, the achievement and reflection of each milestone or sub-goal leading up to the overall strategic objective might be even more important for Bill and Ben’s sustainable cognitive and behavioral development.

*Setting Coaching Goals and Timelines*

Goal setting is at the heart of professional, evidence-based coaching. It provides a structure for the coaching sessions, and a clear focus for expectations, motivations, desired outcomes, and time frame. Goals per se seem to carry motivational components behooving a client to either pursue or avoid them. As such, the identification, definition, and measurement of such goals become critical to evaluating the progress Bill and Ben make towards positive change. According to Aguinis (2007) there are specific inherent characteristics necessary for goals to be motivational. Such characteristics include being specific, quantifiable, meaningful to the client,
attainable, free of conflict with other goals, and developmental in that reaching a lower hierarchy objective provides the scaffolding to an accomplishment of higher hierarchy. Within this context, performance management and coaching literature frequently refers to the SMART goal setting technique (Aguinis, 2007; Biswas-Diener & Dean, 2007; Johnson & Eaton, 2001; Stober & Grant, 2006). SMART essentially aims to frame the goal(s) within the strictly confined, specific parameters of (S)pecificity, (M)easurement, (A)ttainability, (R)elevance, and (T)iming in order to improve focus and positive motivational effects.

Bill and Ben are obviously struggling with different motivations to change their business model. It is apparent that Bill is quite reluctant to step outside of his comfort zone. In fact, despite Bill respecting Ben’s concerns for both the livelihood of the company and the quality of life of his family, he tends to shut down whenever an approach to change is being proposed. However, the shown respect towards his friend can form the motivational basis for carefully starting the process of change. The writer will therefore begin with Bill and try to reemphasize the problem area (i.e. lack of sales due to a continuation of outdated business practices and unprofitable product and service solutions). In conjunction with Bill, the writer will then define a manageable goal using the SMART framework. Due to the significant resistance, it might be best to determine the long-term strategic goal, and then assist Bill in formulating a sum of attainable sub-goals, that ultimately lead to reaching the strategic goal. In order to highlight the urgency of the change management program, the writer will build performance stretches into these sub-goals. This instills in Bill a sense of manageable challenge, thus increases goal ownership and drive as well as increased intrinsic motivation to move on to the subsequent subgoal (Locke & Latham, 2002). For example, such sub-goal could constitute in a goal statement such as “Over
the next four weeks I will direct two hours of my daily activities towards new application
development or other identified growth areas”. This allows Bill to ease into a new routine, yet
contribute positively to the process of change.

Assessing Progress

As Locke and Latham (2002) found, clearly defined, challenging goals increase task
motivation and performance. Encouraging Bill and Ben to define goals along the SMART
framework may therefore ensure the sustainability of their progress towards continuous personal
and professional development by providing measurable evidence of their progress. In order to
assess such progress – in essence, the effective installation of a new, more productive routine -, SMART goal milestone would be created and reviewed in monthly coaching sessions over the
next six months. In case of successful adaptation the sub-goal could be amended. For example,
if Bill has comfortably settled into his new routine, an even greater performance stretch could be
built into new sub-goals (e.g. allocating four instead of only two hours devoted to the
development of new applications). At the same time, both Bill and Ben would have the
opportunity to provide reflective feedback on their efforts to reduce interpersonal conflict, thus
realize how their cognitive-behavioral changes directly relate to positive, quantifiable outcomes
(i.e. increased revenues and personal income).

Ethical Considerations

Both the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) and the American
Psychological Association (APA) adopted a comprehensive ethical framework defining the roles
and responsibilities of practicing psychologists in various capacities Principles such as beneficence, competence, confidentiality and limits thereof, conflict of interest, or informed consent (APA, 2002), to name a few, have implications for the practice of I/O psychology in either employment, consultative, or coaching capacity. In alignment with Principles A and E of the APA’s (2002) ethical principles and code of conduct, the writer is to shield his clients from any potential harm, and respect Bill and Ben as autonomous persons. Displaying non-judgmental, empathetic caring will foster their capacity to decide on the best options to pursue self-actualization. Safeguarding client autonomy will require a two-way coaching style. In other words, the writer as well as Bill and Ben share the responsibility and ownership for decisions that are being made and their timely implementation. Furthermore, since both Bill and Ben embody the coachee as well as the client; and coaching sessions might be held individually or in group format, potential limits to confidentiality need to be discussed before beginning the coaching process. In order to ensure the adherence to all pertinent ethical principles, any planned intervention and its potential consequences will be discussed in detail with Bill and Ben, who reserve the right to approve, modify, or disapprove its deployment.

Project Termination and Follow Up

Coaching relationships typically do not exist forever, but are at least conceptually tied to the evident and satisfactory achievement of personal or professional goals (Stober & Grant, 2006). Referring to APA’s (2002) ethical code 10.10 the coaching relationship should best be ended when the client no longer draws tangible benefit from it, or could be harmed from a
continuation (i.e. if a continuation would foster helplessness, dependence, or other maladaptive behaviors).

As indicated before, the coaching project with Bill and Ben will span across a time frame of six months. The final coaching session will include a postmortem analysis during which the writer and his clients evaluate the outcomes against the objectives at the outset of the program. During this final session, the writer will ask Bill and Ben to describe their perceived transformation, the positive accomplishments that have resulted from the intervention, any gaps or problem areas that might still exist, and how to handle similar challenges in the future. As part of the program wrap-up, the writer will provide additional suggestions to further improve on the achieved knowledge, skills, or abilities and remains available for sporadic follow-up sessions as required by the two executives.

Conclusion

Psychological coaching aims to drive sustainable, positive change. Evidence-based coaching, in particular, combines best-practice knowledge with personal and professional experiences to respond to the client’s need in particular situations. Ethical coaches form a relationship with their clients in which the coachee remains in charge of his or her future direction and decision making. The outlined coaching plan adheres to the standards of evidence-based coaching. All interventions, coaching models, and assessment techniques have been derived from valid, empirical and psychometric research, thus provide reliable results within the context of the APA’s (2002) ethical framework.
References


