

Excellent coaching requires an understanding of both the individual client and the organizational context in which the coaching is conducted. Failure to assess and manage organizational as well as individual dynamics can lead to disappointing results, as this experienced consultant cautions.

First, Do No Harm

by Ted C. Bililies

Managing the Politics of Coaching



Coaching and the Dyad

For the first decade of my own coaching practice, I believed that there were essentially three dimensions to the craft of coaching that made it effective in helping accelerate the learning and development of leaders and managers, and that essentially all professional and ethical considerations were restricted to these three dimensions:

- * The Coach's Skill
- * The Client's Motivation
- * The Quality of the Relationship

Within this model of coaching, the quality and depth of the coach's training, the ability to constructively manage the growing emotional attachment/dependence between client and coach, and her deftness in understanding the ways that all people use to manage anxiety and maintain their self esteem in performance and evaluation situations, are all key factors in determining a coach's ultimate effectiveness.

Culture, Politics, and "Coaching-in-Context"

As my coaching practice has evolved, and after having served in both internal (large corporate) as well as external (consulting) coaching roles, I have realized that there is another level of skills and awareness required for successful coaching, namely the degree to which the coach recognizes, understands, and manages the political and systemic forces in which she works. When viewed in a systemic context, the coaching relationship is no longer a simple two-person arrangement. Now, the coaching relationship takes on new meanings, and is subject to influences outside of the dyad's control (and sometimes their awareness).

As a clinical psychologist, human resources professional, organizational consultant and executive coach coming up on 20 years experience in working with veteran and emerging leaders, I find myself thinking more and more about how coaches navigate highly competitive business environments that are often ethically challenging, culturally loaded and politically charged.

Helping a person become a better manager and leader through understanding himself and others is often the major focus of a coach's work. Working at an intimate distance, often "behind the scenes," keeping secrets and holding confidences, is heady stuff. Buoyed by this feeling of importance and even power, some coaches may not notice how they are being used and even manipulated by highly specific and entrenched systemic forces and political agendas, in which group norms, hierarchies, and personalities can negatively influence and distort the value they are attempting to bring to their clients.

By employing terms like politics, system, context and culture, I mean to draw attention to how coaching is understood by all its stakeholders and participants, how various constituencies can use the coaching to further their particular agenda, how labeling and scapegoating can become all-too-common occurrences, and how the coach can face real challenges in managing these conflicting forces while trying to do good work with their client.

Peter Panned

Peter was a bright, energetic, and creative manager and finance professional with lots of ideas, an Ivy League education, and solid work experiences under his belt. Not quite in mid-career, he was glad to be in a large and successful Fortune 500 company in a vice president role, and believed he was on a fast track in the company due to his passion for raising the standards and practices of finance.

A quick study, Peter kept up with best practices, tried lots of new ideas, and was never satisfied with the status quo. His manager, Kevin, a senior vice president, had been at the organization many years and had carefully cultivated relationships with the most senior line executives through what was widely acknowledged (but rarely mentioned) as rather obsequious and even servile behavior. Kevin really didn't know very much about the technical aspects of finance, but he was a master at telling people what they wanted to hear and at doing them favors. Kevin reported directly to the new CFO, Sal, a veteran corporate warrior who was easily threatened and didn't like those who disagreed with his views and opinions. A very authoritarian, even "military" leader, Sal loved to hear himself talk. He knew everything about everything, and was known to "kiss up and kick down" in this fast-paced, highly political, yet highly successful financial services organization.

Peter went about his work with drive and enthusiasm, meeting with senior line leaders, understanding their business challenges from the perspective of finance, and designing and developing tools and processes that they, his clients (as he saw them), could use to help them run their businesses more effectively and efficiently. Peter also had a few direct reports whom he tried to support and mentor. Unlike the dominant culture of the organization that encouraged managers to pass off their subordinates' work as their own, Peter always spoke highly of the individual achievements of his direct reports to Kevin and to Sal. He looked for opportunities to showcase their talents, resisted close monitoring of their activities, and gave them as much responsibil-

ity and freedom as possible.

The senior executives that Peter supported by and large gave him lots of positive feedback, went to him directly regarding business problems they thought he could help them with, and were visibly supportive of the initiatives he was leading.

Given this positive feedback from such influential players, Peter saw green lights stretching ahead on his career pathway. So he was surprised – to say the very least – when one day Kevin requested an unscheduled meeting. "Sal wants me to get you a coach, Peter," Kevin said with a wry, faint smile. "Her name is Karen, and she'll be here at two o'clock. You can meet her in the lobby." Stunned, Peter at first thought this was a case of mistaken identity. "What on earth for?" he stammered. "My work is very good, my clients are all happy...the CEO likes my work...I don't understand." Kevin looked out the window with a certain mock-seriousness: "Sal hears a lot of complaints about you from our peers. They don't know what you're doing and, frankly, they don't understand it. Sal wants you to learn how to get along with them better. He's really pissed at you."

Peter was speechless, panicked, and thrown off his emotional moorings. He had never been in a situation like this before. He had three jobs in his career before this one, and had a fair amount of performance feedback, but he had never heard anything like this. He fought hard to regroup. "But I tell everyone what I am working on and, more importantly, I tell you what I am doing, Kevin. Maybe people are threatened because massaging relationships and doing favors all too often passes for real work in this organization." Peter was angry now. He felt like he was being scapegoated, singled out because he was actually accomplishing something, and being made to take the blame that more properly belonged to Kevin and his jealous, old-fashioned, and parochial colleagues. "They're the ones that need coaching," he thought. "That may be so," Kevin said, with a smile now visible. "But it's what Sal wants. He's pissed at you and he wants you to work with this coach that he knows from his previous company; evidently they go back a long way. You're to meet with her this afternoon." He got up to leave his office. "Oh, and she is going to want to interview a bunch of people about you, too." He waved good-bye to his secretary and was gone.

Coach Karen

Later that day Peter met with Karen, not sure what to expect, and still angry, hurt, and confused by what felt like an unfair and, more importantly,

a punitive action. He also worried about his job security. The hour he spent with Karen didn't make him feel much better.

"Oh, I just know that you're wonderful and smart, and I can tell that you really aren't arrogant at all!" Karen exclaimed after 10 minutes of preliminaries and surface discussion. "Arrogant?!" Peter replied. "Who said I was arrogant?" "Ha! That Sal! He didn't tell you much about this, did he?" A former stage actress, Karen had a strong interpersonal presence and was a powerful communicator (Peter would learn later that she reduced nearly all leadership, team, and business matters to "communication problems").

Karen continued on a long introduction filled with assumptions about Peter that left him confused, defensive, and a little overwhelmed. When she said that she had "helped many executives just like you," that she sees "problems like yours all the time," and that "I can definitely help," Peter just couldn't believe what was happening to him. A part of him wanted to run out of the meeting and into Sal's office and demand to know what was going

the ones in which he was interested. Feedback from his direct reports was positive, though one critiqued him for being a "perfectionist" and another for being "cold." Karen dutifully reported these statements to Peter – and to Kevin and Sal through a back channel – and set about earnestly to "fix" Peter.

After the third session --- and with a few weeks to digest what had happened to him -- Peter was more than willing to look at how he had failed to build stronger ties with Sal, Kevin and their peers. He realized that he hadn't assessed the culture properly, that he may have been too enthusiastic and exclusive in serving his clients, and that he hadn't spent enough time getting to know the people and personalities within his own department. But he also knew, with equal conviction, that he had been set up by people who were threatened and challenged by the initiative, drive, and high standards that he demonstrated, and that coaching had essentially branded him as "the problem," instead of addressing the larger systemic issues related to driving change, making progress, and Sal and Kevin's political agenda.

Peter was very concerned about Coach Karen, who meant well, and who had a number of good tips and suggestions for improving his communication style, but who also appeared oblivious to -- or, worse, unconcerned about -- the collusion she had created with Sal. Though privately she would tell Peter he was nothing less than a victim, she did nothing to influence, educate or push back on the obvious scapegoating that was taking place in his department. Karen lacked the courage to confront the person who was paying her bill, and didn't want to do anything that would diminish the number of future referrals she might receive.

Mid-way through the coaching, having received an attractive job offer from another company, Peter bitterly resigned and left the company.

What Went Wrong?

Peter's coach, Karen, allowed herself to be used by a group of veteran staff members to strike out and disable a new and energetic "change agent" who had recently joined their organization. He challenged their comfortable status quo, threatened to reveal their limitations and lack of knowledge, and to surpass them in the perpetual contest for limited rewards and recognition within the corporate arena. In some variant of sibling rivalry, Peter unwittingly was competing with others for Sal's attention, and, for his part, not managing that dynamic at all well. With good intentions but unaware – or unconcerned – about the larger political environment, Karen

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on. 'Yesterday I thought I might be promoted,' he thought, 'and today I am worried about losing my job and being seen as a jerk by my peers.' Peter was not naïve when it came to organizations. He knew that turf battles, "friendly fire," and professional jealousies put talented and capable individuals at risk, and he had suspected for some time that he may become a target for upsetting the organizational apple cart. He was just realizing, however, to what extent he had been targeted.

A Poor Result

Over the next several weeks, Peter's new coach interviewed many people who offered a range of views on Peter, with the majority of the sentiments being positive. Certainly development areas did present themselves, for example, a few of his colleagues thought Peter could do a better job of being seen by others as focused on a variety of activities, not just

effectively colluded with the veterans – through Sal and Kevin – in scapegoating Peter. Peter had been labeled as “the problem,” much the same way that a teenager, acting out the dysfunction of his family system, is often identified as “the patient.” Rationalizing the labeling by citing Peter’s inevitable “development needs,” Karen was more than happy to carry out the agenda of the troubled system.

Managing the Politics of Coaching

Following are my recommendations for successfully managing the system factors which (in addition to the dyadic ones above) will impact the outcome of every coaching program:

There is no substitute for a dutiful and careful analysis of salient organizational, political, and cultural factors.

During the initial assessment, coaches must familiarize themselves thoroughly with the political and cultural elements of the organization, inquiring about past coaching efforts, formulating their own cultural analysis of what the dominant values, norms, and behaviors of the organizational culture are, and step back and view the referral as part of this larger system. The coach must -- very deliberately -- strategize their work simultaneously from both the systemic AND dyadic perspectives, and balance the inevitably competing priorities and agendas with skill, tact and ethics.

Coaches must thoroughly investigate and understand the real reasons for coaching.

Insist on meeting in person with the professional who is making the referral. Ask about how individuals who are assigned a coach are viewed by the others in the organization. If it appears there is a substantial risk of the individual being scapegoated or stigmatized, offer other ways to effect change in the situation, e.g., coaching the manager instead of the individual in question, suggest training programs or executive education programs off-site, facilitate several “off the record” meetings with the manager and the individual to make performance and behavioral expectations crystal clear, etc. Discuss mentoring as an option.

Specific and measurable objectives must be set and agreed upon initially in the coaching process.

Subjective milestones, e.g., “be less arrogant,” are unacceptable and must be minimized. There is no substitute for a detailed coaching plan, complete with objectives, milestones, tools and resources required, and an end date. Wherever possible, the coach must help the manager develop the appropriate skills along with the individual, and there should be measures and milestones set for the manager as well. The question, ‘When will we know that

it’s time to end?’ needs to be asked - and answered - before the coaching begins.

At the very minimum, the coach needs to remind all parties that behavior is contextual.

However convenient it might be to reduce a complex situation down to a seemingly more simple and manageable one, a coach needs to advocate for as truthful and clear an understanding of the situation as possible.

Coaches bear a professional and ethical responsibility for educating the stakeholders of coaching of its potential risks as well as its benefits.

Informed consent is a more appropriate concept in coaching than confidentiality. Stakeholders must understand what they are getting themselves into. Coaches should be prepared to walk away from the referral (and from the revenue!) if they see that they are participating in a process that could be damaging to the client.

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