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Lessons from a Decade of Coaching Public Leaders: Coaching Works!

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Lessons from a Decade of Coaching Public Leaders: Coaching Works!

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The author shares her experiences and insights from over a decade of coaching government leaders. Working with senior managers, directors, and political appointees, she has identified eight lessons that have held true working with public leaders. This article profiles several public servants, their barriers and the breakthroughs that enabled them to become more powerful and effective leaders. Examples include individuals as well as management teams, as well as long-term leadership development cohort programs. The author makes a strong case for the effectiveness of executive coaching for productive leadership development, particularly in the civil servant organization.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

I was driving home from yet another successful off-site. The 30-person division of a Federal agency had fully embraced the two and a half days of team building and strategic planning. People had opened themselves to one another and to creative possibilities for improving their work product and their working relationships with an authenticity and energy that had been palpable. The event had ended on a high note with clear action plans for things to be addressed, changed or improved, identifying the responsible persons with due dates. “This time,” I thought, “there will be some real change.”

Follow-up about a week later assured me that things were on track and moving in a positive direction. Three months later, however, NOTHING had happened.

This experience, and many others like it, left me scratching my head. Laboring for many years as an organization development and change management consultant, I had carefully conducted this contract, doing all the “right things.” I had gathered data, met with key people, designed an engaging and productive agenda, and facilitated an enthusiastic and receptive group of people to their own conclusions, decisions and action steps. What was missing?

In the weeks that followed, I had several conversations with colleagues to explore this question. I recognized that to create

change that would last, something had to “shift” and that the key to sustaining the change was the leader. Someone told me about a colleague friend who was doing something called “executive coaching.” After that first hour-long talk with him, I decided to become an executive coach.

That year was 1995 and something important was happening. In the Federal government, it was the height of the “TQM” movement – numerous activities including training, team formation, and organization development efforts were being undertaken to help agencies become quality management organizations. The need for change was widely recognized. The National Performance Review (NPR) effort was being led by then Vice President Al Gore. New presidential mandates by President Clinton (e.g., the Executive Order for “Setting Customer Service Standards”) and legislation (such as the Government Performance and Results Act, GPRA) were being enacted.

But so many of these efforts were falling short. This, in coaching, is what we call the “breakdown.” In reflecting over my decades of practice within the Federal sector, I realized that all of the “flavors of the month” had something very good to offer – be it management by objectives (MBO) or zero-based budgeting (ZBB) or Quality Circles. Part of the government ethos is “We differ from private companies (which, of course, is true) and management ideas that work for them don’t work in government” (which is not necessarily true). One by one, all new management initiatives had been declared a failure, or passé, or outmoded, and the agencies had abandoned their efforts only to move on to the next new initiative. But it was the same people, laboring in the same systems, and most importantly, using the same way of thinking, that were implementing each new management initiative. Somehow, the very thinking had to change.

WHAT BRINGS AN EXECUTIVE OR A LEADER TO A COACH?

Enter executive coaching. Coaching differs from consulting in that we don’t assist people in figuring out and implementing Plan B if Plan A didn’t work. Rather, we explore and challenge the level of awareness, kind of thinking, and belief system in place that produce Plan A or Plan B in the first place. Only when a “shift” occurs in that person’s thinking (or even an organization’s “thinking”) can new behaviors and solutions be generated. And for this shift to occur, one has to realize that what they’ve been doing is not working.

Lesson Learned #1: It’s Not What You Know – It’s What You Don’t Know

Simply put, executive coaching helps us to address situations for which our background has not prepared us. I find that leaders request coaching for primarily one of two reasons: either they

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are feeling “stuck” or have reached a barrier that all their best efforts have not succeeded in moving them through; or they want “more” – to provide better customer service, improve their products & services, build their team, or become a more effective and powerful leader – and they don’t know how to do it.

My coach likes to say that coaching is not simply a profession that has grown to help people get better results (there are other disciplines like consulting and counseling that share that aim); coaching is a response to a deeper, more profound need for learning.

Good coaching does build on existing skills, but it does not simply extend those existing skills to obtain new results. Rather, it explores new territory for the client, beyond existing capabilities, habits and practices. Coaching then is equal to learning; before we begin, we may have an idea of where we’d like to end up, but we don’t know how to get there by ourselves. If we did, we wouldn’t engage a coach. So an effective coaching client must be able to declare “I don’t know.” When this happens, supported by the presence of wonder and curiosity, coaching and learning can begin.

Lesson Learned #2: Courage is the Fundamental Ingredient

It takes a great deal of courage for a seasoned leader to declare that she doesn’t know exactly what to do or how to do it. Isn’t that what she is there for? Don’t they pay her to know the answers? If leadership takes only the role of managing others in applying technical expertise, we might make a case for the answer to these questions being “yes”. Yet even technical expertise is increasingly challenging. Leaders must stay current, given our rapidly changing technological world. However, to be effective, leaders in today’s world must develop a whole new set of skills – as well as eyes with which to see an emerging world vastly different from the one into which they were born. Dr. Ronald Heifetz identifies this new skill set as essential for the “adaptive leader” (rather than the technical manager). In his book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz (1998) claims that adaptive leaders must be able to declare breakdowns, build coalitions of people to address and explore heretofore unknown problems, and step into the void of not knowing so that new learning can be revealed. There is no roadmap: the path is made as the journey is taken. It takes courage to learn something new.

Learning, however, is not wholly valuable unless the new knowledge, skills or abilities can be used and applied. Herein lies the greatest challenge, the place where courage is most needed – that is, to change behavior. Breaking habits, reacting not from automatic ingrained behaviors, but rather responding out of

For a leader to move from an automatic behavior of supplying all the answers in team meetings, to a stance of listening to others can be an extraordinary shift. There is good news however – it doesn’t have to take a long time!

choice based on a desired result is a very complex physiological and psychological process. It requires practice over time so that the brain literally develops new neural pathways and the body new muscle patterns to achieve long-lasting change. The new action must be both observable and executable, and be done over time to change behavior. We all have our triggers, as well as our *modus operandi* (“MOs”), that we have been using and reacting to for a lifetime. Committing to change and making conscious choices to consistently behave in a new, desired way requires a great deal of courage, as well as awareness and intention. We all know how difficult it is to change even a simple habit – try brushing your teeth with the opposite hand some time – not to mention our more complex automatic behaviors that we use unconsciously every day. For a leader to move from an automatic behavior of supplying all the answers in team meetings, to a stance of listening to others can be an extraordinary shift. There is good news however – it doesn’t have to take a long time!

Lesson Learned #3: Sometimes We Have to Change the Story

In order to achieve the rather remarkable results that coaching offers, we often look at the conclusion, interpretation, or “story” that we carry to explain things. Our behaviors and additional conclusions follow, based on the interpretations we hold (often unconsciously as “true”) of a particular event, situation or person. For instance, if I see someone as “always late” (even if they are on time nine times out of ten), I will only notice the one time he’s late, and then use that little piece of evidence to confirm my opinion. “See, he’s always late!” We human beings are constantly doing this – it saves us from having to figure out how to be or act in each moment or situation in which we find ourselves. It’s like we produce a short-cut to save time. For example, every time I go to visit my parents I automatically engage my “good child” story and act accordingly, omitting anything that reveals my vices (like swearing), or struggles, or allusions to anything they might assess as inappropriate. I know my part, they know theirs, and everyone has a good time. But what if I want a more authentic relationship with my parents?

One of my executive coaching clients was a woman who had come to a new division of a Federal agency. Susan had been told by the panel of senior executives who had hired her that she was being given “the bad group” and to expect personnel issues and underperformance. Unfortunately, she “bought” that story as true and proceeded accordingly. Can you imagine the way in which she managed and attempted to lead the division? Within six months her organization was riddled with distrust and performance had fallen to a level lower than when she had taken the position. Susan hired a coach and after some challenging analysis and some soul-searching, she recognized that she had treated

her new employees in a distrustful, unpleasant way, and with lowered expectations. Demonstrating great courage (admitting “I was wrong” can be even harder for leaders than saying “I don’t know”), she assembled her employees and came clean. She admitted she had bought an assessment that wasn’t grounded and that she had made a terrible mistake and done them a great disservice. She asked for their forgiveness and an opportunity to win back their trust. I tell this story when I want to illustrate courage.

This leader created a new “story” that breathed life into the division. She intentionally met with each member individually and in teams to build relationship, connection and, ultimately, trust. They clarified roles, learned and gave each other feedback. Six months later Susan’s division was performing at its highest-ever level, and one of her employees said to me, “She’s great to work with.” This is the power of a story – it can hold us in its grip, or it can give new life to new possibilities.

There are numerous “stories” in the Federal government that hold great sway. One is “Change is slow.” Another is “We are so different.” “We can’t get rid of poor performers.” And one very unfortunate reputation or saying that exists in the American culture is “good enough for government,” implying a level of mediocrity that is tolerated, even expected, in public agencies. I believe that coaching is helping to change these stories in the Federal government. I have seen several courageous leaders in the public sector change their story and the story of their organizations, and create high-powered productive and creative places in which to work.

Lesson Learned #4: Learning and Change can be Extraordinarily Fast

One of the very real benefits to an individual client and the organization is that coaching typically produces real change and powerful results very quickly. In fact, often changing a “story” facilitates this speed. Coaching is tailored specifically toward the client’s concerns, and can “laser” in on the heart of the matter very quickly.

My “fastest ever” coaching engagement contained only two sessions over a two-month period. John was a political appointee at a prestigious Federal agency, on the fast-track to a promising political career. He started every day around 6:00 am with breakfasts around town with various Washington politicians, arrived at work by eight to put a full day in, and ended his evenings with dinners at charity events and other organizations, arriving home exhausted and falling into bed around midnight. When I met him he was 20 pounds overweight, was having trouble staying alert in the afternoons, and was behind with ordinary life tasks

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like paying bills and picking up the house. His wife, needless to say, was none too happy with the choices he was making.

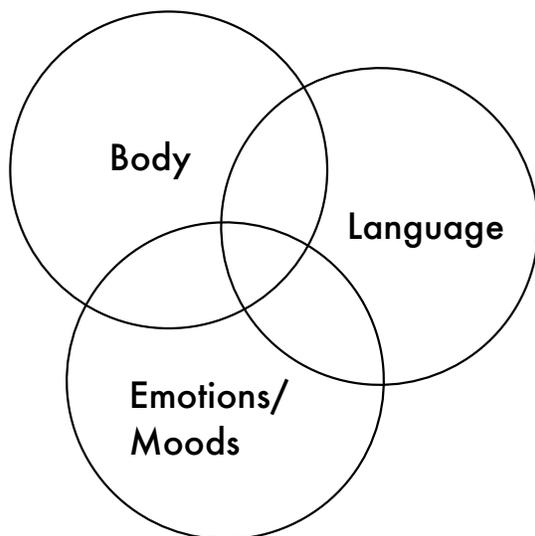
The laser coaching was swift, focused and to-the-point; John was crystal clear about his goals and was open to being coached. After only two sessions and a final debriefing, he had lost ten pounds, was sleeping seven hours a night, had hired someone to help with ordinary household tasks, and was having a weekly “date night” with his wife. He was feeling energized and approaching his job with renewed interest and enjoyment, and getting more done in less time.

How is this possible?

Lesson Learned #5: Coaching Works With the Whole Person

The effectiveness of coaching is particularly high with the “ontological coaching” I practice. *Ontology* is the study of being, or that which makes us human. Ontological coaching deals with the whole person as a system and the system in which he or she lives. I work with a model of the person that includes language, body, and emotions. I have found this model to be extremely powerful in understanding, deconstructing and integrating behavior changes. This model is directly linked to leadership competencies, containing the three domains below.

Figure 1. The BEL Model



*Originally developed by The Newfield Network.
See Brothers (2005, p. 130).*

Studying *language*, and how to better and more powerfully communicate, is a critical skill for an effective leader. The ability

Learning to identify one's emotions and use them to advantage to create desirable outcomes helps to build trust and relationships. . . . Mastering the creation of a mood in a team, conducive to the task at hand, is one of the leadership competencies that can be learned.

to create and articulate a compelling narrative (or “story”) is what inspires followers (see for example, Bergquist & Mura, 2005; Hall, 2000; Kotter, 1996; Pearce, 2003; Sieler, 2003). Creating conversations that clarify direction, direct actions and create commitments are essential to the successful performance of all work. And having difficult conversations that yield desirable results is one of the most important abilities for an effective leader.

Building a *physical presence*, the “body of a leader,” that inspires trust and confidence is highly desirable for leaders (see for example, Cashman, 1998; Heller & Surrenda, 1994; Leonard, 1991). Learning how to hold or position one’s body or posture to effectively communicate the message, requires both awareness building and skills development. Recognizing when to shift direction is equally important.

Emotional intelligence (EI), as researched by Daniel Goleman and others (see for example, Bar-On, 1997; Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Goleman, 1995; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000; Sieler, 2007), is claimed to be the key for what makes a truly effective leader. Learning to identify one’s emotions and use them to advantage to create desirable outcomes helps to build trust and relationships. Understanding that an emotion infuses all conversations - and learning how to generate and create the right emotion to achieve the objective - is critical to creating desired results. Mastering the creation of a mood in a team, conducive to the task at hand, is one of the leadership competencies that can be learned.

These three domains – language, body and emotions - work together in an inextricable way to produce the leadership capability that a particular person has at a particular point in his or her life. By teaching new awareness and skills in each of these domains, leaders move quickly through barriers or breakdowns and effectively take bold and powerful leadership actions.

Karl was hoping for his last promotion. Nearing retirement, he had mastered his technical field, and was looking for an end-of-career opportunity to use his vast expertise so that he might make a contribution and mentor younger people coming up in the field. In his government agency he was seen as competent and steady by the senior executive, but not as a leader of an entire organization. Our coaching focused on landing this job. Karl knew he was competent and capable. What he lacked was that elusive “leadership presence.” We worked in all three domains--building the body of a powerful leader and speaking his competence and expertise with passion and commitment. We practiced going through mock interviews, fielding unusual questions, walking

into the room and taking his seat – everything that might possibly happen in the actual interview. Karl nailed it, and landed the job. We have continued to work together over a three year period, building his capacity to have powerful conversations to make things happen: transforming his organization, developing individuals, building teams, increasing business in his sector, and visibly growing results for the customers and citizens.

One of my most memorable coaching clients was Calvin. He was an assistant deputy secretary of a Federal agency. Calvin was very intelligent and known as an expert in his field. He came to me (with only a four month window) because people were complaining about him. He had a reputation for jumping down people's throats, including his own boss! The people around him were finding ways to avoid or end-run him. Using the BEL model, we unraveled a strong automatic behavior that he had developed in childhood. Growing up with a physical disability had taught him to either fight (when teased, taunted or picked on) or run away. That automatic response (fight or flight) had carried right into adulthood, only now the behavior was showing up in the office instead of on the playground. He frequently heard other peoples' comments as attacks, and would either defend himself and fight back (hence the reputation for jumping down throats), or decide that people were not worth the trouble and walk away.

Calvin learned to identify the first sign that this habit had been triggered, a tightening in the belly. It was followed by clenched fists, the sensation of heat moving up through his chest, neck and head, and a desire to move. Next came thoughts like "They're attacking me and my ideas. They're wrong." and strong emotions like anger, distrust, dislike and fear. He would then either walk away or speak. You can imagine the words that followed: fight and defend language. Calvin was able to understand and recognize this "coherence" between his body, language and emotions. First he noticed it *after* it had happened, then he learned to notice it *as* it was happening, and finally he was able to notice the very first sign *before* the episode played out, and consciously choose a new path, a different action. He also learned to consider several different interpretations of peoples' comments, without adopting the first one that occurred to him. This too provided him with choices for possible responses. Within the first month of our work he was changing his behavior. The proof for me was one day when I was in a meeting with another client in the same agency, who did not know I was working with Calvin, said, "I don't know what's come over him, but Calvin has become so much easier to work with." That made my day.

Lesson Learned #6: Conversation is Powerful

All work in organizations flows from conversations. The quality

and effectiveness of the products or services is directly related to the quality and effectiveness of the conversations. Sometimes conversations are powerful, sometimes weak, sometimes difficult, and sometimes non-existent. At other times the conversation itself may be effective, but it is the wrong conversation to begin with.

In the government, it takes some powerful and effective, and sometimes new, conversations to break through the story of “We’ve always done it that way.” A large part of my coaching with public clients is to build their capacity to create effective actions through the conversations they are holding with their employees, their customers, and their supervisor. We also spend time building authenticity – matching your public conversations to your internal, private thoughts. This builds credibility and trust.

Michaela was a rising star in her local government agency. Only in her late twenties, she had taken a new job as an executive in charge of public educational facilities. She had come from a successful stint in the South, where the previous organization’s culture had operated very much like a family. She was accustomed to close working relationships, receiving abundant recognition and affirmation. She was being cared for by her co-workers. Then she moved to Washington, D.C.

The pace of her new job was very different: fast, hectic, technically-oriented, and challenging. The relationships in her office were mostly focused on the work, not on the people. She soon felt disoriented and unappreciated. Life didn’t fit her view and expectation about how it should look. By the end of her first year, she was uncertain of her role, unclear about her value to the organization, and generally demoralized. Her work product was suffering. She considered resigning, and moving back to the south. She was “recommended” for coaching. To her credit, she seized the opportunity to get some help and fully embraced our coaching relationship.

We quickly assessed that her knowledge, background and technical expertise stood her in good stead for challenges of the new position. The primary barrier, it turned out, was the relationship with her supervisor. She reported to the number two person in the organization, who happened to be a middle-aged female, about the same age as my client’s mother (hmmm, see the possibility for a “set-up” here to fall into some very old and unproductive patterns?). In the absence of positive feedback and regular interaction, Michaela had drawn the conclusion that her supervisor disapproved of her, was dissatisfied with her work, and what’s more, didn’t like her. She began to avoid her supervisor, putting more and more distance between them. In one of our

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sessions Michaela started complaining that her supervisor rarely initiated a one-on-one conversation with her, seemed cold, and never gave her any affirmation (please note the “story” at work here and how our assessments serve to support that story, once crafted). It suddenly occurred to me, “What would happen if *you* initiated a conversation, and gave *her* some affirmation?” My client looked shocked, slowly saying, “That’s not my job.” After a brief discussion of how we create “rules” to support our stories, she decided to break her own rule and provide her supervisor with precisely the thing that she, herself, was missing from her supervisor.

We planned the conversation around an event that had just occurred, a staff meeting her supervisor had held to clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations. Michaela informally dropped by her boss’s office and said, “That meeting you held was really useful – it helped me understand what you need from me, and how the other people on the team relate to the things I’m doing. Thank you!” The supervisor “melted,” expressing her gratitude, and sharing that she had worked hard over an entire weekend on the agenda, and had not heard anything about it from anyone. The ice was broken, and the two of them began to talk. A new relationship was soon forged that ultimately became quite close and more importantly, extremely productive.

Michaela’s confidence returned, her creativity was sparked, her leadership capacity grew and production increased. In the months that followed, I drove through that jurisdiction and watched as schools and libraries were remodeled, expanded, or built from the ground up. Those projects, I knew, were being directed from Michaela ... the results, in part, of a new conversation that changed a story.

This is but one example of numerous instances where a simple conversation (that was not happening, and finally was identified, planned and implemented) transformed a relationship, leading to remarkable results in no time at all.

The power of conversation creates equally remarkable results in team settings. I had been coaching a management team in a Federal agency, when they called me with an urgent situation. Three days earlier, a crime had been committed within the agency that then received media coverage. The staff had shut down, exhibiting symptoms of stress with little or no work being produced. The rumor mill was running wild. Staff members were meeting in pairs or trios to talk about what was going on, unable to return phone calls or provide service to their customers. Congress was calling, customers were calling, investigators were on-site, interviewing employees one by one behind closed doors.

Working with the management team first, we identified the internal consistency and integrity (coherence) of the team using the BEL model. We explored how that coherence was creating disruption and low productivity. We had a conversation containing the following questions [including some sample responses]:

“What happened when you first heard this news?” [shock, dismay, kick-in-the-stomach feeling]

“What is the first thought you remember following the news?” [Oh no! How could this happen? Who did it?]

“What is the emotion you experienced?” [anger, suspicion, adrift, fear]

“Where did that leave you?” [drained, demoralized, not knowing what to do next]

“What are you experiencing now?” [trouble sleeping, headaches, appetite disturbances, difficulty focusing]

“How does that support your work?” [it doesn't]

“What mood has that created within your team?” [impotence, resignation]

“What needs to happen?” [we need to support one another, deal with the numerous inquiries and inappropriate humor, get back to work and serve our customers]

After having this conversation, the team realized that the employees must be experiencing similar things. They organized an all-hands meeting for the following day and led the employees through a similar conversation. People were allowed to share their experiences, which were validated by their leaders. The management team then declared that the next steps were to support one another and get back to work. They asked the employees to develop strategies for both of these in small groups, which were then presented to the whole group. Some of the strategies included things to say in response to the curious and the stakeholders, and ways in which to counter inappropriate humor. These strategies were then practiced or role-played with everyone. Agreements were made as to how to support one another so the agency could continue to deliver its services. By the next day they were up and running.

The power of these conversations allowed people to acknowledge and validate their experience, and then shift it in order to serve their customers.

Lesson Learned #7: Everyone Gets Better

After about my tenth coaching client or so, I noticed an unusual phenomenon. Everyone was getting better! Everyone was moving through barriers, finding courage, making bolder leadership moves, building broken relationships, producing better business results. It was amazing. My coaching skills notwithstanding, I sought out a reason for such a high level of success.

I finally decided it was the process of coaching, literally having a “champion in your corner.” The coaching relationship produces a safe space (see Willats & Bergquist, 2005) where high-pressured leaders can let their hair down. The saying “it’s lonely at the top” tends to be true in my experience. The more leadership responsibilities people take on, the smaller their peer group, and the less opportunity for sharing and connection. In management groups or classes, I find that individuals are often reluctant to ask questions because it might reveal something they don’t know. With their coach, they have the trust to say whatever they want, and produce learning from whatever their situation happens to be. This is truly a gift for them. And they seem to flourish in the coaching environment.

One of my early clients was a bright and gifted younger woman. She had been the personal assistant to a high level government official in one of the departmental agencies. Because of her expertise she suddenly found herself in charge of an entire division of approximately 100 people. She now had to manage a leadership team and a team of support staff, be responsible for the work of 100 people, and be a member of the senior leadership team. She needed help. She identified two primary areas for her professional development: 1) presentation skills of all kinds, including how to create the right tone in written communications, how to speak on her feet, how to deliver briefings, and how to plan and conduct effective hiring interviews; and 2) how to build her teams, including trust-building and partnership-building where relationships were weak.

She improved her abilities in all of these areas, and we continued to work over time to deepen her capacity for effective leadership. The other ingredients that make “everyone get better” are the client’s intention, openness to coaching, and receptivity to learning. Again, it is the person’s courage to leave their comfort zone and risk becoming a greater leader.

Lesson Learned #8: Pre-thinking and Planning Work Wonders

In the case of individual coaching relationships between a coach and a leader, planning is fairly simple and straightforward. It usually involves identifying two or three learning goals, for which tangible results are identified. These results then become the “measures” of individual success in the coaching engagement. The coaching process is generally established as a 6-12 month proposition, with a checkpoint mid-way through. While the coaching process remains confidential, the assessment of progress on the learning goals is often shared with someone else in the organization, be it a supervisor, the HR director, or manager of the coaching cadre and/or program in the agency.

But how does one plan for coaching as part of a long, formal program for leader development or succession planning? This is a much more complex process. Having been a part of long-term development programs in several agencies (including an individual or group coaching component), I have observed that the effectiveness of individual coaching engagements varies widely. Why are the results from program-related coaching different from one-on-one coaching engagements? This is not necessarily a simple question with a simple answer. There seem to be several factors that are involved.

Factors may include the following:

- *Purpose of the program* – is it strictly for developing leadership capacity, or is it targeted to fill specific leadership positions?
- *Support* – is it primarily an HRD-sponsored training option, or is it a senior leader-supported initiative?
- *Expectations* – what results, including behaviors and outcomes, is the program designed to produce?
- *Accountability* – how will results be measured and assessed?
- *Program components* – what are they (for example, training, action learning teams, research, mentoring, etc.) and how will they dovetail with coaching?
- *Selection* – how will participants be selected (for example, through application, screening, recommendation, etc.)?

Of all the above, I have found that “selection” is key to a successful program outcome. Leadership development programs are often designed by the HRD professionals within the agency, frequently with assistance from external vendors. They are often cutting-edge, latest-technology kind of programs. Government agencies, on the other hand, are some of the most traditional organizations in our country. Some are more than a hundred years old, with long-standing histories of hierarchical traditional management systems. Even the most recent cabinet-level addition, Department of Homeland Security, carries that legacy, having been formed with various pieces of existing agencies, continuing the Federal bureaucratic, stable, but slow-to-change culture. Sometimes these programs do not match up with the culture, or with the expectations of the program participants. Selection procedures must be established to maximize the opportunity for participants to succeed, learn and grow. Awareness and acceptance that one has learning edges, and being open to being coached is crucial. One participant stated, “I’m not here to learn a thing – I’m already successful at what I do; I’m just here to check the boxes so I can get my next promotion.” Another said, “Just tell me where my gap is, and what I need to do to fix it.” Another refused coaching altogether; another would not participate in the team project. These people were ultimately assessed not to be “coachable”. None of these individuals was assessed as successfully having learned and/or expanded their

leadership capacity as a result of their respective programs. A structured training program may have been a better option for these individuals.

The other factors are also very important, especially the “support” element. I coached in one program that requested long-term, involved action learning projects of their participants. These plans were to include problem identification, research, analysis, developing a solution and making a presentation to management. The expectation had been created that the projects would be utilized by the entire agency; however, no follow-through or authorization to implement the solutions was forthcoming from management. Aside from the individual learning that occurred, participants felt resentful that all their hard work ultimately resulted in nothing happening or changing. Clear agreements about expectations, support and accountability, as well as promises to the participants, need to be developed before implementing leadership development programs containing coaching services. The coaching must be aligned with and supportive of the other program elements, creating a unified leadership development experience.

Throughout this article I have illustrated four kinds of coaching found in government organizations:

- One-on-one coaching with executives
- Management team coaching
- Partnership building
- Leadership development in a cohort program

Group coaching, where individuals meet regularly in a learning group setting and receive coaching in public, is another form of organizational coaching. This form requires a high degree of trust and a high standard of confidentiality. I have seen this practice less often in government agencies, although there are some (for example, NASA) that use this approach.

CONCLUSIONS

Coaching works! It is an effective tool for developing leadership, and creating sustainable change. I believe that executive coaching has provided support and hope during the last decade for leaders in the Federal government who want to do something different, but are stymied by a system that changes very slowly. Coaching can facilitate real breakthroughs where leaders can make rapid and sustainable changes in their spheres of influence. I have seen remarkable transformations, in a very short amount of time, by the leaders with whom I have had the privilege to work. I look forward to another decade of coaching within the government. Coaching is taking off, people understand the value, and I am proud to coach leaders who are developing new capacities to face increasingly complex challenges, thereby co-authoring our future.

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