



Trouble with the New One

The Purpose of Executive Coaching [Part I]

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How do people get into more senior positions? Usually by changing jobs and applying for higher positions, or by being promoted internally.

What is the basis for these promotions? Promotions are usually based on previous job performance. However, the factors that will make the candidate successful in the new job might be quite different from the success factors of the previous position – and this fact is often overlooked.

Ideally, the management responsible for the promotion should recognize this possible discrepancy before actually promoting the candidate and should put a development plan in place (the June Leadership Newsletter will deal with this aspect).

Aside from the difference in job suitability, expectations of the management and the candidate may not be properly aligned. This can lead to a great risk of disappointments on either side.

I developed the “Start-Up Right!” Program when I got an emergency call from one of my clients, an international logistics company with regional headquarters in Hong Kong. Their Asia-Pacific HR director expressed his concern about their new finance director, John (*not his real name*), a 43-year-old MBA graduate and specialist in corporate finance. My client employed John 3 months earlier and the HR director felt that if nothing changed, he might need to fire John within the 6-month probation period.

I found out that the following issues developed:

- John could not win the acceptance and respect of the new team.
- John found a corporate culture in place, one that was considerably different from the culture he was used to.
- John was an expatriate sent from the European headquarters and had difficulties understanding the different mentality of the locals.
- John applied an authoritative style different from the participative style used by his predecessor.

Of course, because the organization invested a great deal in transferring this highly qualified manager, they did not want to see him fail because it would incur further cost and would send a negative message to the executives in the European headquarters who also considered an international transfer.

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As the situation was already quite serious, we decided to establish an emergency plan, which consisted of:

- A suitability assessment (Harrison Position Comparison Report)
- An environment assessment (interview of some direct reports, colleagues and superiors)
- A set of 13 coaching sessions (3 double coaching sessions in the first month, 3 single coaching sessions in the second month and 2 coaching sessions each in the third and fourth month)

1. Suitability Assessment

The Harrison Position Comparison Report (Upper Management) revealed that John was quite suitable for this position, but had a couple of traits that needed to be developed for him to be successful. He scored rather low on Collaboration (3.2 on a scale of 0 to 10) and Diplomatic (2.8). He had particularly high scores on Optimistic (9.2), Pressure Tolerance (9.6) and Manages Stress Well (8.9). His score on self-acceptance seemed OK at 7.2.

So we decided to have a closer look at John's willingness to collaborate and his readiness to develop a more diplomatic communication style.

2. Environment Assessment

We carried out a mini 360-degree assessment with two employees of John's choice, his direct superior, the managing director of the Asian headquarters and two colleagues, also selected by John. According to their answers, John was perceived as a highly intelligent and competent person. However, they didn't find him sensitive enough to local culture and didn't like the way he communicated. They found him, as someone put it, "too strong in his use of words."

3. Coaching Sessions

I noticed that John was a bit skeptical towards the coaching process. He was never coached before and achieved his current career position with little help from others.

To make John feel comfortable with the process, I first acknowledged him for his achievements in Europe and congratulated him for having gotten the promotion. When we looked at the assessments, I directed him to focus on his strong points, knowing that pointing out the low scores first would make him defensive. Even though John tried to talk about the low scores immediately, I stopped him from doing so and asked him to explain how his strong traits helped him achieve the past successes in his career.

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Then we looked at his current situation and I asked him how his strengths currently support him now. From there he started to see how these strengths served him much more in the past than they do today. He eventually realized that the success factors of his current position differ from those of his past situation.

John finally opened up and was willing to discover the skills and traits he would need to develop to become successful in his current position. The assessment results are helpful as pointers, but must be interpreted in the specific context.

John agreed to work with me in developing:

- A more adequate communication style with his team members and colleagues
- A more respectful and appreciative view of the competencies of his team members
- A participative leadership style that helps him share the responsibility and fosters engagement among the team members

Before coaching John through these issues, we agreed that we would ask those who participated in the 360-degree assessment to support John in this development project by giving him honest, well-meant and respectful feedback whenever they deemed appropriate. We enlisted them as co-coaches to help John make this transition as fast as possible.

In my praxis, I found that the involvement of environment is key to successful development because executives don't operate in a vacuum. Even if the executive is ready to change and actually does change his attitude and behavior, the environment can discourage him by not accepting the new behavior, like by cynically dismissing it, etc.

After 2 months of intense coaching, we collected progress feedback from the participants and noticed a considerable improvement in John's evaluation. The greatest leap was perceived in his communication style and the way people felt valued. They found that his leadership style could further improve by giving even more autonomy to the team members.

As a result, the managing director and HR director decided to keep John on board and complete the coaching program over the next 2 months to further stabilize the situation.

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This was a risky assignment and honestly, I prefer not to be involved in these emergency situations, as there is a high risk of failure. I suggest to my clients that they organize a regular "Start-Up Right!" Program for every person being promoted to a higher position. Not only will this minimize the risk of such problematic escalations, but the employer also immediately benefits from higher productivity, smoother integration and avoidance of major disappointments due to misaligned expectations. It's money very well invested.

In Part II, we will talk about the preparation of an executive to a more senior position.

Purpose Statement: The basic purpose of executive coaching is to help the coachee further improve his performance and make better decisions to maximize his success and, subsequently, the success of his organization.