

Working with Tough-minded Executives: A Coach's Lessons Learned

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Summary

This paper describes the lessons learned as a coach by the author, a dominant feeling type on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, in working with tough-minded executives who are primarily thinking types and are often skeptical about the benefits of executive coaching. Included in the lessons learned are some typical mistakes beginning coaches make as well as ways that the coach can get hooked into roles that make him or her less effective. Explicit do's and don'ts for working effectively with tough-minded executives are included. General principles for both thinking about a client's issues as well as for working with clients are presented. The paper concludes with some suggestions for developing one's self as a coach.

Introduction

During the past thirteen years, I have served as a coach to a number of lawyers, economists, accountants, and scientists whose jobs have required them to manage the work of others. Clearly, my sample of managers is *not* representative of the general population of managers. Many, if not most, of my clients have been what I deem tough-minded, namely, somewhat skeptical of the usefulness of coaching, focused on practical business results, and interested in the field of management only to the degree that it leads to these practical results. As a dominant feeling type on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, I have been both challenging and immensely satisfying working with these tough-minded executives.

Some of this work has been part of a formal coaching program designed to support the management development of professionals (including those whom the organization would identify as high potential). Other parts of this work have been as part of a larger organizational development intervention in the organization, for example, with the leader as preparation for his or her leading the organization in a strategic planning process. Still other aspects of this work have been as targeted interventions with key professionals who were highly valued for technical contributions but who were having difficulty in managing others.

The paper distills my key lessons learned through this work. It is divided into four parts: (a) typical mistakes of beginning coaches, including some hooks to avoid, (b) some Do's and don'ts for working with tough-minded managers, (c) some general principles to guide both thinking about the coachee and principles to guide the work of the coaching engagement, and, finally, (d) some advice to coaches for developing themselves as coaches.

Beginner's Mistakes and Hooks to Avoid

A number of beginner's mistakes and hooks to avoid will be discussed in the conference presentation. For the sake of this paper, however, three of the most noteworthy of each will be mentioned.

Beginner's Mistakes

Showing enthusiasm too early. Learning any new set of skills requires practice. Sometimes we can benefit from those who have gone before and learn from the mistakes they have made. One of the mistakes I made early on was to show too much enthusiasm, largely through head nods, smiles, and mm-hms when tough-minded executives said the socially-acceptable, good human resource practice they thought I wanted to hear. By not asking them to articulate their own good reasons for "Why change," I allowed them to put me in the position of having to defend effective human resource practice. This allowed them to repeat already well-rehearsed arguments for not changing. I believe what happened is that I took on one pole of a polarized internal conflict which allowed them to argue for the other pole. This did not serve them or me.

Taking debate personally. A second mistake I made was to take client's debate, argument, and resistance as somehow personally related to me. I have come to realize that for many tough-minded managers, debate and argument is how they process and take in new information. Unless they have the opportunity to debate and argue, they haven't sufficiently chewed on the idea to digest it. I have been astounded often to find, in my next session with a manager, that the very suggestions the client had argued vigorously would not work, had been fully implemented. As a dominant feeling type on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, I have learned to think of the debate as the tough-minded managers' way of connecting with me. I also do not take personally whether they follow my advice. Whether they take my advice typically has little to do with my competence or the quality of the ideas I have suggested. Each of us changes at our own pace and must be allowed the freedom to do so.

Sharing opinions too early. A beginner's third mistake, which I confess I still make at times, is to share my view, opinions, and/or judgments before the executive is convinced that I fully understand the uniqueness of his or her situation. Often my intuition does serve me well, or, indeed at this stage of my practice, I have seen similar situations repeatedly before. However, if I venture forth too early with my view, without having fully listened to the nuance of the executive's situation, I risk being discounted because I have not gotten one important part of it right. One probably cannot listen too much in the earliest stages of a new relationship. The more information I have the more I can tailor my questions and suggestions to the unique situation of the person I am coaching.

Hooks to Avoid

Delivering the performance improvement message. In situations of corrective coaching, I often will be asked to both communicate the problem to the coachee and, then, work on

its solution with him or her. This hooks me into a managerial role, namely, communicating the performance problem, as well as a consulting role, namely, working collaboratively on the solution. To avoid this, I will usually help the manager shape the message she or he is going to deliver to the coachee, then suggest a three-way meeting of the manager, the coachee, and myself to begin the coaching process. In that meeting, I seek to have the manager clarify:

(a) the issues to be addressed by the coaching, (b) how progress will be checked, (c) our timetable, and (d) any limitations to the work.

Offering advice on the margin or outside one's competence. A second hook to avoid is to make decisions or suggest actions which are really the sole prerogative of the managers. Often once you have established credibility with a coachee, she or he may begin to ask your view on issues and situations for which you have limited or no competence. It requires considerable self-awareness and personal self-restraint to not venture your views. One noted management consultant, Michael Doyle (Doyle & Strauss, 1984), has said that the major *shadow* issue for facilitators and coaches is to wish to have the power and authority of the managers with whom we work. This is a hook to avoid because it potentially hooks our own needs for power and authority. These may be known to us or *in shadow*. Nevertheless, it hooks you into offering suggestions or ideas in areas where you cannot deliver results given your role as coach, as well as your more limited knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Confusing what is yours and what is theirs. Finally, the last hook I will mention is, in actuality, a series of hooks to avoid. The coach must know himself or herself, especially those life-long personal issues that are likely to be present as you interact with smart, capable people with power. Often these issues have roots in our earliest relationships with our family of origin and first teachers. It is important to know whether your typical reaction to authority is to challenge it, comply with it, or avoid it. It is also important to know the psychological reasons that draw you to this work. Is it about getting results in the world? Having influence? Being close? Or some other motivation? How do you react to power dynamics like being kept waiting? Being put in a chair lower than the executives? What do you do when stressed or under pressure? Knowing your reactions to these type of things can aid you in knowing what is typical/familiar for you and what might be more attributable to your relationship with this particular client. In some ways, knowing yourself is about calibrating yourself as an instrument of change. Through self-exploration and discovery, you can calibrate which aspects of your response are yours and which aspects may be providing you with information about the client. The hook you avoid through this self-knowledge is misattributing issues that are yours to the client.

Do's and Don'ts for Working With Tough-minded Executives

Do's

1. Explore *their* rationale for change.
2. Ask questions, explore how their self-interest, in their own terms, is served by making the changes. What's in it for them?

3. Expect debate/argument regarding your ideas. Often, there is a *test* in the first five minutes. If they see that you do not melt when challenged, the testing diminishes or goes away. If you are a feeling type, it might help to think of this as their way of connecting with you.
4. Lead with curiosity to things which are surprising, seem wrong, or which you don't understand.
5. Play devil's advocate when a client seems to be articulating a politically-correct reason for dealing with the human, *soft* side.
6. Take care of yourself in your interactions with tough-minded executives, both financially and emotionally.
7. Propose new approaches as a menu from which the client can choose with pros and cons to each.
8. Frame new approaches as empirical hypotheses to be tested. In this way, you become a co-investigator with your client focused on finding out what leads to the results they desire.
9. Tie the need for *soft* skills to hard outcomes (better task performance).
10. Ask for their *thoughts and reactions*, rather than how they *feel* about things.
11. Ask explicitly for positive feedback. They will most likely provide the critique/negative feedback, but make sure you ask for what they think went well, or was helpful. Often it seems like stating the obvious to them and may, therefore, seem unnecessary to them.
12. Articulate the principles and rationale for trying new approaches whenever possible. Make them up, if necessary.
13. Hold the vision of their *best self*, while recognizing their limitations.
14. In delivering tough messages, words confront, but the voice supports (Block, 1988).

Don'ts

1. Side with the positive reasons for dealing with the "soft" side too quickly.
2. Take their reactions, resistance personally.
3. Take argument with your ideas as an indication that they are rejecting the ideas. It may well be just the opposite.
4. Lead with your judgments or your view until you have listened sufficiently to their view/understanding.
5. Assume you will have difficulty with someone because others do.
6. Assume you will not have difficulty with someone because others do or don't.
7. Take on their emotional reactivity. A non-anxious presence can have amazing calming effects.
8. Use personal examples, especially self-deprecating ones, too early in the relationship.
9. Look to clients for satisfying your emotional needs. Find other sources instead.
10. Assume that a client's inability to follow your recommendations suggests anything about the merits of your advice.
11. Assume that what you find difficult or easy will be difficult or easy for your client.
12. Assume how they treat others is how they want to be treated.
13. Abandon diplomacy simply because they are *tough-minded* or assume that thinking types cannot get their feelings hurt.

14. Buy how they *frame* the issue. Seek to understand it, but, usually, how they see it may be a major part of the problem.

General Principles of Coaching

The following principles of coaching apply to all types of clients, not just tough-minded executives. They are distilled from my experience as a coach. Whenever possible, I have sought to provide appropriate attribution for the original source. These general principles are divided into two categories: (a) ways of thinking and (b) ways of working. Ways of thinking refers to principles for conceptualizing a client's issues. Ways of working refers to practical principles to guide what you do with a client.

Principles for Thinking About a Client's Issues

Overdone strengths become deficits. Often the very behavior that was key to our survival at one point in our lives, gets overdone and becomes a deficit (Atkins, 1982).

Psychic efficiency. Assume even the most destructive behaviors somehow made sense or served a useful and *good* end at one point in the person's life. Finding out how it served this person can be helpful in changing it (Ferrucci, 1982).

Fallacy of similarity. We tend to assume others are like us which may or may not be the case without more careful investigation.

Differentiated but connected is the goal. Inherent in this paradoxical phrase from Bowen's family systems thinking, is a gem regarding the importance of being clear about who we are and what we want while being psychologically in contact with those who are different from us (Friedman, 1985).

Principles to Guide Working With a Client

Hologram principle. How clients manage me provides a clue to how they manage the rest of their lives. Watching my own thoughts and feelings as I work with them can give me clues as to how others are likely reacting to them as well as what they are doing to manage the problems in their lives. This is why work on yourself, as a coach, is so critical for providing *calibration* of you, as an instrument of change (Block, 1981).

Empirical test. Seek to become a co-investigator with your client regarding his or her life. Collaboratively, develop hypotheses to be tested in real-time practice. Reflect and analyze whether the behavior leads to the results the client desires.

Move to immediacy, if stuck. If you get stuck or are going in circles, describe your own experience in the moment as neutrally as you can. This shifts the focus from task to relationship which can often lead to getting unstuck (Weisbord, 1987).

First third gets repeated. Whatever happens in the first third of a meeting or relationship, tends to get repeated throughout the rest of the meeting or relationship.

When in doubt, treat clients as adults. When in doubt, provide people with as much information as you can, so that they can choose what they want to do (Sherwood, 1987).

Special AND normal. Regard clients as special but treat their individual problems as completely normal within the class (Arron, 1993).

Tips for Developing Yourself as an Executive Coach

In this final section, I would like to offer some suggestions for developing yourself as an executive coach. My suggestions fall into two categories: (a) working on yourself, and (b) developing your competencies as a coach.

Work on Yourself

1. Explore your own inner terrain. Calibrate yourself as an instrument through therapy, twelve-step programs, personal growth workshops, t-groups, and family of origin work.
2. Establish close friendships with people who are different from you. Seek to learn from each other.
3. Take calculated risks in whatever aspects of your life you are playing it most safe (physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional).
4. Develop a spiritual practice (meditate, yoga, chi gong, tai chi, chant) and practice it with discipline.
5. Practice being differentiated but connected in all your relationships. Start wherever you can.

Develop Competency

6. Get a coach yourself.
7. Begin a personalized reading program in the area you most want to develop. Ask professionals you respect what the best thing they've read in the area is.
8. Think through how you would coach someone if you had the chance. Commit the steps, as specifically as possible, to paper.
9. Volunteer to coach an executive pro-bono in an organization you care about, then hire a shadow consultant to supervise your work.
10. Know your limits and when to refer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I have tried to offer you the lessons I have learned as a dominant feeling type in my thirteen years as an executive coach with tough-minded executives. My goal in offering them is to be helpful to others working with similar managers. The thoughts above reflect my current thinking on the topic which, of course, is constantly evolving. I

welcome your thoughts and reactions to these ideas as we all work to improve the work we do with executives.

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