Sixteen Sources of Leverage in Executive Coaching*

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Summary

The purpose of executive coaching is to move the executive—toward increased effectiveness. To accomplish that, the coach needs to be potent. This paper identifies several sources of leverage that may not be widely used in the coaching profession.

Introduction

To achieve the objective of increasing an executive's effectiveness, the coach needs adequate leverage with the executive to get him or her to move. No one source of leverage does it all. It is a combination of things that gives coaches the potency they need.

I have come to these conclusions on the basis of fifteen years of intensive consulting to executives—as well as consistent efforts to study and conceptualize their work and their development. What follows is an annotated list of levers.

Sources of Leverage

1. *Don't call it feedback.* Some of us who use 360-degree feedback refer to their work as just that, but that term is misleading. Obviously, the survey is not the purpose. Development is.

2. *Time and place.* Executives are extremely busy; their schedules are packed, and they tend to view development activities like coaching as not having the same importance as the other demands placed on them. As a result executives may offer very limited time for coaching, or coaches themselves, internal coaches especially, may make the assumption that they can ask only for very limited time—brief sessions, a small number of sessions, or infrequent sessions. The irony is that if we allot too little time to get the work done, we set ourselves up to be ineffective and reinforce the attitude in the executive population that activities like this are not high-value added. The principle here: do everything you can to participate in setting the terms of the relationship. Know the difference between being respectful and being deferential. This principle applies to where the work takes place. Generally, it is better to get executives off-site—or at least out of their offices—to do this kind of reflection.

3. *Data.* While coaches can be effective without data, they can use data as a reliable way of establishing the need for change—as well as establishing the need for assistance in making the change. Data informs executives of problems they were not aware of, and it can overcome their resistance to admitting the existence of a problem.

What kind of data? First, a sufficient quantity for the major messages to come through loud and clear. Second, a variety in the types of data—multiple sources (superiors, peers, subordinates) and multiple methods (for example, self-report personality profiles as well as input from coworkers). When the same message comes from different sources, it cross-validates those messages. An important point: coworker ratings and coworker verbal descriptions are more powerful and instructive taken together than one or the other.

What does the quantity of data and the variety of data do? It gives *credibility* to the data and to the consultant. If the data is valid, then the activity is valid.

4. *Condensing the data.* Management trainers and executive coaches tend to jump directly from feedback to goal setting and action planning. But in doing so they pass up the power that comes from carefully analyzing the data, boiling it down further, even if the amount of data is relatively limited—to give executives a clear and compelling picture of their leadership. The first step in this inductive process is to come up with categories or buckets to contain the data—one set of categories for the strengths and another set for the weaknesses. These categories grow out of the individual's own data; they are tailor made. The second step is to further order the strengths by identifying, with the executive, the core strength or capability and to do the same with the categories of weaknesses. The task is to identify the organizing principle for the strengths and for the weaknesses. In finding the underlying pattern among the numerous data points, the coach together with the executive discovers the simplicity on the other side of complexity. There is power in a simple but profound formulation of the data.

In our practice the discussion of the condensed version usually takes place in a separate session—call it feedback, part 2.

5. *Setting a direction for development.* Most coaches know how to help feedback recipients set goals for change and come up with an action plan. This is useful but tactical. Before coaches get down to the level of specific behaviors, it helps to think strategically about the executive's development. On the basis of the core strengths and core weaknesses what, broadly speaking, is the direction in which he or she would like to move? What's the big thought?

6. *Polarities as an integrative tool.* The big thought about an executive's development can grow entirely out of the data and can be completely unique to him or her—or it can be informed by the professional literature. For the data analysis to be thoroughly inductive does not preclude the use of theory, as long as we coaches don't force-fit theory onto the data.

I have found dualities or polarities to be extremely useful ways to define an executive's leadership and development. A polarity is an opposition where the two opposing elements may seem contradictory but in fact they are complementary. Examples are specialist versus generalist, mastery versus intimacy, autonomy versus inclusion, and stability versus change.

7. A major polarity applying to executive leadership: forceful leadership versus enabling leadership. So far my colleagues and I have identified two major polarities applying to executive leadership. One is forceful leadership versus enabling leadership.

To be a forceful leader is to tap into one's own intellect and energy, whereas to be an enabling leader is to tap into other people's intellect and energy. Executives typically prefer, and are better at, one approach than the other. Executives tend to lean one way or the other—they tend to be lopsided. The majority of executives err on the side of being too forceful (intimidating, overly aggressive, too tight a rein, and so forth). Their improvement program is to ease up on forcefulness and to bring up the enabling side (listen better, be more open to influence, delegate more, and so forth).

In the extreme case, executives are so identified with one of these approaches that they have little or no use for the other approach. They polarize the polarity. In such cases, the coach's job is to help them depolarize.

8. A second major polarity that applies to executive leadership: strategic versus operational leadership. Strategic leadership is broad and conceptual—concerned with the big picture. Also, it is oriented to the long term—the long-run adaptation, even reinvention, of the organization. Operational leadership is concerned with the short term, with having the organization meet its objectives in the next month, next quarter, or next year. It is practical, down-to-earth, detail oriented, execution oriented.

Coaches should be on the alert for executives who are better developed strategically than operationally or vice versa. Again, this macropolarity is a useful way of integrating various bits and pieces about an executive.

9. In addition to managerial behavior, motivation is a target of coaching. If executives are to change their behavior and to sustain that change, they also need to examine and adjust what drives the behavior. This view runs counter to the prevailing ethic in management development, which holds that it is the executive's behavior that is the proper focus of improvement efforts. An advantage of sticking to behavior is that it spares coaches and executives alike the discomfort of getting into potentially sensitive personal areas. One could argue that this is an appropriate limit to set in brief coaching assignments or for coaches lacking the background to get into the psychological aspects. The difficulty is that limiting the work in this way is likely to limit the good that comes from the work.

By motivation I mean the needs, desires, and fears that operate in executives that lead them to act the way they do, effectively or ineffectively. Examples are the need to succeed, the fear of failure, the desire to help other people, the concern with rejection, a passion for doing the right thing, and guilt about not doing enough.

To the extent that the needs of executives distort their behavior, it is the coach's responsibility to help individuals to discover this for themselves, often an important step

towards growth. The work of executive coaching is both behavior modification and personal development.

10. *Strengths and weaknesses are two sides of the same coin, united by motivation.* In reality, the combination of the core strength and core weakness is a single set of effects, which are either functional or dysfunctional depending on the situation and the way they manifest themselves. And producing these interrelated positive and negative effects is the individual's basic drive. For example, a strong sense of responsibility can give rise to strong, fully-engaged leadership or to overcontrol and to intolerance of anyone who does not exhibit the same level of responsibility.

Consultants greatly clarify the definition of the client's development and the client's work if they are able to reduce the welter of information about the individual to this kind of simplified form. The ultimate objective of condensing the data is to help the client arrive at an essential understanding.

11. *The work of executive coaching is not just developing new skills; it is overcoming a prejudicial attitude against those skills.* If performance problems represent a lack of versatility, a restriction in a manager's ability to move across a range of behavior from one pole to the other, then what accounts for the restricted range? Most likely it is a lack of skill—also likely a bad attitude about that skill. An overly forceful executive proclaimed, I don't trust *feel-good*. The work of development is as much attitudinal as skill oriented. Executives must learn to value behaviors if they are to learn to exhibit them. The gate to increased versatility is reducing the aversion, mild or otherwise. This is another way of saying that the goal of coaching is to move executives in an inner sense as well as in an outer sense.

12. *The purpose of coaching is not only to stimulate the development of the executive; it is also to clarify the individual's role.* It is easy to think about coaching, as I have for some time, as a focus on the individual. It is useful, however, to put the individual in the context of his or her job. What are the requirements of the incumbent in that job? And how well does the individual match up against those requirements? For executives who are reasonably well placed in their jobs, the executive's fit with most of the requirements will be adequate to good as will his or her recognition of those requirements. But there is usually, in my experience, an aspect of the job that the individual doesn't see clearly and is therefore at risk of failing to do well if at all.

The work of the coach is at two levels. At a behavioral level, the coach defines the expectations, the job specifications, in clear, practical terms. At a personal level, the coach helps the individual identify and resolve the feelings that cloud the executive's judgment on this important point. Many times the emotion is fear, a fear of being inadequate at that type of task—for example, strategic thinking. And the executive responds unconsciously to the fear by avoiding the task. Usually a one-shot intervention is not enough. This pattern of avoidance is something that the coach monitors and intervenes in over time, maintaining a creative

tension between the job requirement and the executive's willingness and ability to meet that requirement.

13. *Connections to the executive's personal life*. Quite often an executive's personal life offers parallels to the behaviors exhibited at work. For those parallels to be drawn further validates the findings at work. For example, one executive who had certain inhibitions that kept him from acting said that what clinched the insight was when he made the connection to his oldest child, a young adult, who had a similar problem. He recognized that for him to grow in this respect he had a chance of helping his child grow by setting an example. For executives to see the general significance of a pattern of behavior in their life is a kind of leverage because it enhances their motivation to change.

Crossing the line into the private lives of executives, even in a discussion, could be intrusive, but in our experience executives find it natural to talk personally as well as professionally. Every executive knows that he or she lives one life. The condition for engaging him or her in such discussions is that the consultant is equipped to do it and that the relationship is strong enough to support a broader involvement.

14. *Connections to the executive's childhood*. As foreign to management development as this may seem, it turns out to be as natural for most executives to talk about their past, including their early years, as it is to talk about their personal life. The parallels between present behavior and past experience are just as instructive. Many executives, like the rest of us, have not taken the time to look back and see those connections. The early influences are especially useful for giving executives insight into their basic motivations. The way executives were raised, the make-up of one or both parents, good or bad experiences growing up, and so on, can without delving deeply shed light on individuals' present fears and desires, which in turn are defining characteristics of their leadership.

As with personal life, the consultant need not collect data on early history prior to the active consulting. The consultant or the executive can explore life parallels when they become relevant to discussion of the individual's leadership.

15. *Getting personally involved*. The consultant-client relationship is a major source of leverage.   The prerequisite is that the executive knows that the consultant genuinely cares—not just that the consultant wants the best for the executive and is in his or her corner but also that he or she has a true feeling for the individual. This concern becomes clear to the individual not so much because the consultant professes to care but because it is demonstrated in the way he or she behaves in the relationship.

Another prerequisite is that the executive feels safe and secure in the relationship. One means to this end is for the consultant to guarantee confidentiality and to separate the coaching from performance management and selection decisions.

To earn the client's trust and confidence, the consultant must also be credible professionally—to know the world of organizations and management including the executive

suite, to be skilled in a helping relationship, and to have the strength of character to hold his or her own with high-powered executives.

Getting personally involved includes two very different roles—displaying high empathy for the individual on the one hand and confronting the individual, constructively, on the other.

Beyond the sanctity of the consulting relationship, other people can play a role in promoting the individual's development—the supervisor, human resources manager, management development specialist, and even the executive's spouse. In fact, when executives choose not to involve other people in their development, it can be a sign that they are a poor prospect for changing.

16. *Implementation*. It is not enough to help executives raise their awareness and formulate plans. It is important for the coach to stay involved as the executive applies insights—one, to offer assistance if the individual runs into snags and, two, to hold the executive accountable for following through. An ongoing involvement on a periodic basis is important leverage for change.

Conclusion

This is not an exhaustive list. But if executive coaches avail themselves of the various classes of leverage, from a concentrated dose of data to unifying concepts to role mismatches to connections outside work to a strong bond to follow through, they stand a good chance of stimulating genuine growth and sustainable change—provided the client is willing. And yet leverage can foster willingness.

If executive coaches can add a dimension to their practice, then they stand a better chance of helping their clients add a dimension to their practice of leadership.