

Coaching Culturally Diverse Executives

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Summary

The purpose of this presentation based article is to provide information on how a wide array of coaching activities and skills are implemented with culturally diverse managers in a multicultural organization. The presentation is divided into the following three sections: The first section examines the rationale and organizational positioning of the coaching program in a multicultural organization; the second section focuses on the coaching counseling skills needed to effectively implement a coaching program in a multicultural setting; and the third section includes an overview of managerial issues faced by three managers who have participated in the coaching program.

Introduction

The International Monetary Fund is one of the world's most culturally diverse organizations with a staff of approximately 2,200, originating from 122 member countries. The staff is comprised mainly of economists (1,000) but also has professionals in other fields of expertise including statisticians, public finance and taxation, research scholars, linguists, accountants, lawyers, writers, MBAs, and human resources specialists, including psychologists. The International Monetary Fund's management development strategy consists of the following elements: management development competencies, a management development assessment center, management training curriculum, a supervisory staff feedback exercise, and a coaching program.

Program Rationale and Description

In 1993 the Fund's management team endorsed a coaching program for the staff newly assigned to division chief positions, their first supervisory experience. Economist staff move from highly technical individual contributor roles, with no supervisory experience, to their first supervisory experience managing subordinates who have high-risk country economic policy responsibility. This first supervisory experience significantly changes the division chiefs' responsibilities and scope of work. The purpose of the coaching program is to make available an external consultant to assist new division chiefs in developing their managerial skills on the job. The terms of reference, or scope of work, for the external consultants is attached (Attachment 1).

A growing number of organizations have started coaching programs, some of which have recently received attention in training and management journals (Filipczak, 1998). Programs vary as to duration and level of participants, but they generally support the notion that managers benefit from personalized feedback on their own styles and from assistance on handling on-the-job situations. While some programs are targeted at *problem managers*, the Fund's program strongly emphasizes the importance of coaching as a valuable service for *all* managers, especially those who are new to their job. The coaching program can help make this transition easier by preparing division chiefs for the organizational challenges they may encounter.

The Fund's program is also designed as a voluntary one, because the assumption was made that coaching is more effective if the recipient is ready and willing to use coaching productively. The voluntary and flexible nature of the program also suits the manager's schedule, which includes heavy worldwide travel. The program's emphasis is on individual coaching, and the manager works directly with the external consultant who provides confidential practical advice on issues. In addition, the division chiefs are invited to meet as a group with other new division chiefs to discuss organizational challenges and to build a better peer network.

An evaluation of the first year of the program was conducted. In summary, the program was well received by the participants who found the flexible, personalized format particularly helpful in allowing them to address day-to-day issues with specific approaches or solutions to management problems. The participants also commented on the high quality and effectiveness of the consultants, including their ability to listen well, clarify the nature of issues, and make practical suggestions for handling different situations. A list of managers' objectives and reasons for joining the program is attached (Attachment 2). The most common managerial objectives cited were time management skills, preparation for the annual performance review, assessment of management style, and effective delegation.

Based on the favorable experience of the initial target group of new division chiefs, the coaching program was, on demand, expanded to include the Fund's most senior managers: the deputy managing directors, department directors, and their deputy directors. To date 100 managers have participated in the coaching program, which is now an established program in the Fund.

Coaching—What It Is, What It Is Not

The recent and far-reaching changes in the workplace environment have created a need for interventions with managers which focus on: (a) the people skills necessary to manage the diverse work place population and (b) the administrative skills necessary to meet increasing demands with limited resources. One intervention, which can be delivered in both a timely and a personalized manner, is executive coaching. First, it is important to define what coaching is and what it is not. Coaching is primarily a one-on-one, preferably voluntary arrangement where a trained professional assists a manager in making the behavioral changes he or she feels are necessary to improve his or her functioning as a manager of people. It is

not psychotherapy; it is not technical training; and it is not a panacea for a generally poor performing manager.

Coaching does not generally address the systemic problems of an organization but rather focuses on the more immediate, tangible goals of an individual manager. Therefore, coaching is ideally suited for work with a culturally diverse population because it can be so readily tailored to the individual cultural parameters of a particular manager. In addition, coaching is pragmatic and focuses on what works rather than on any preconceived management theory that may or may not fit into any given culture's comfort level.

Coaching Skills Needed for a Diverse Population

In the context of a diverse employment force, perhaps the most important tools of a coach are his or her ability to listen and learn, to empathize, and then to synthesize and collaborate in order to problem solve. These skills are particularly important in working with culturally diverse managers where listening becomes the mechanism by which the coach learns about the cultural press of that manager. For instance: What is the manager's notion of leadership? How comfortable is he or she with confrontation? Is assertiveness both up and down the line considered appropriate? Can the manager allow him or herself to be self-promoting, that is, to blow his or her own horn? How friendly and personal should the manager be with subordinates? What value is placed on autonomy and independence versus teamwork and cooperation?

In addition to the cultural aspects of these and other questions, there are also gender and individual stylistic issues, which contribute to any one person's instinctive and diverse managerial style. Keeping in mind that the coach cannot and will not change personality, it is crucial from the beginning to have agreed upon goals for the coaching relationship. And as in any effective goal-setting exercise, the goals should be desirable, achievable, and measurable. Too many goals, goals based on *shoulds* or goals with no observable payoff, will be quickly abandoned or resentfully or resistantly approached in a half-hearted manner. The goal setting should be collaborative and sensitive to the individual manager's needs and should fit a cultural definition that works for that manager. This is not to say that cultural, gender, and individual personality biases cannot be challenged, but the coach must first see the manager's world through the particular prism created by the intersection of culture, gender, and individual personality. Because of the individual, confidential, and ideally voluntary nature of the coaching relationship, managers are much more likely to reveal, with the support and gentle prodding of the coach, what they feel ready to change. The relationship between the coach and the manager then becomes of particular importance. In the context of this relationship, both parties must respect their individual cultural, gender, and personality differences while making an effort to plan for behavioral changes, which contribute to effective managerial practice.

Discussion by Diverse Panel of Managers

The panel consisted of three managers all of whom have been coached by a United States national, trained as a psychologist in U.S. universities. The three panelists, two men and one woman, represented three different cultural backgrounds (Indian, Iranian, and Argentinean) and three different managerial levels at the International Monetary Fund. They shared the key lessons learned from their coaching experience and specifically addressed how coaching contributed to their development as managers. In addition, they discussed cultural or gender differences which had an impact on their coaching and whether the concept of a coach or consultant is viewed as positive, negative, or neutral in their cultures. Particular attention was given to whether coaching influenced their coaching of others and to the suggestions they had for improving the effectiveness of a coaching program. In addition, the interrelationship of the coach's culture and that of the manager was discussed in terms of how that directly impacted the coaching relationship.

Conclusion

Conclusions regarding the effectiveness of a coaching program for cross-cultural executives will be summarized based on the coach's and the executive's perspectives and their discussion.

Coaching Successfully in a Global Environment

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Summary

Because coaches work in environments with multiple cultural differences they must adopt a variety of ways of interacting with clients. To be effective, they must be able to create an appropriate context for learning, listen deeply, use intuition, and shift assumptions if necessary. Added to this Herculean task, they must suspend judgment and, as a starting point, meet the client on the clients' home ground. In addition to these necessary characteristics of an effective coach, they must learn about the culture or country in which they work, particularly how different people communicate and solve problems. Finally, by increasing awareness of the assumptions they work from, coaches will recognize their frame and can make choices to break it.

Introduction

As more corporations and businesses develop more global markets, coaches have increased opportunities for dealing with diverse people and human culture. The global landscape presents us with multiple challenges. As an organizational development practitioner with a focus on coaching, I have had assignments in Russia, Singapore, England, Egypt, and Aruba. I have also consulted to populations in businesses and corporations in the United States that have a wide range of human differences: age, gender, ethnic background, and temperament.

I have been fiercely challenged by the cultural differences and by the questions that arose as a result of the differences. What assumptions do Americans bring to the table not shared by other cultures? What practices and behaviors do I want to release or change and what practices do I want to adopt as I coach people in global communities? What is the difference between being an effective coach in the United States and being an effective coach in another country? These questions inspire continuous learning.

I define a coach as follows: A coach helps people access what they know. A coach helps people strengthen consciousness and assists them in managing their state of being. A coach both supports and challenges the client during the defined relationship. This definition comes from my belief that clients have the internal resources to solve their own issues. Helping access those resources, however, often is the work of the coach.

In preparation for this workshop, and in addition to drawing on my own experiences, I selected and interviewed twelve consultants, both men and women, whose work is at least 95% international consulting. Six people work with corporations; one is a CEO in a multinational corporation. Five people work in nonprofits or with government projects in

developing countries. I asked the consultants the same questions and have chosen, for the purposes of this paper, to focus on part of our discussion: What makes a coach successful in a global community? Their responses were practical, experience based, and anecdotal. They were also surprisingly similar.

Coaching Strategies

On a national scale, we Americans have the assumption that we can achieve and that with our *can do* attitude and hard work we can change situations; in other cultures resources are more limited, attitudes more fatalistic. Americans prefer directness and face situations head on; other cultures favor indirection and a gentle, more diplomatic approach rather than what some cultures consider our American brashness. Recognizing these and other multiple variables, coaches succeed when they have different styles in their repertoire. If a client prefers directness, that approach drives coaching interactions. If the client culture dictates indirection, the coach is well served to consider that cultural norm.

Effective coaches in culturally diverse organizations in the United States have confronted and worked through the multiple implications of diversity. If one has coached with culturally diverse groups in the United States, this work is solid preparation for coaching in a country not one's own. In that setting, coaching strategies need to be even more intentional.

In reviewing what makes a coach successful in different cultures, twelve coaches agreed on the following six strategies as critical.

Learn About the Host Country

1. Read.
2. Interview people who have lived in that country and assemble do's and don'ts, particularly about communicating successfully.
3. Be able to answer the following questions concerning the culture or country where you will be working.
 - Do you know the names, titles, and responsibilities of the people you will be meeting? Can these people make decisions about your project? If not, who can?
 - Is there a state religion? How does this affect people? How does this religion differ from your own religious belief?
 - Who are the stakeholders and interest groups? How do they express their concerns?
 - What is the relationship between the United States and this country? Are Americans liked? Disliked? For what reasons?
 - Notice the effective ways people influence and persuade. How will these approaches affect the way you work with clients?

4. Find a cultural guide. Once you are in the client system, select a person to use as a cultural resource. Resource persons are valuable—they give information, offer suggestions, explain why things are happening, and point out pitfalls.
5. Finally, dress appropriately. If in doubt initially, dress up rather than down. Then follow the lead of the client.

Strive for Self-awareness

Become aware of your preferred style when you work with clients. Outlining what you typically do is a useful exercise. For example, do you usually create an agenda before the meeting, create one with clients, or wait for the client to self-generate? The more we are conscious of our actions and the assumption base that drives them the more present we can be to ourselves and to the client. The more we know about our behaviors the more conscious choices we have about when and how to interact with clients.

Observe from Multiple Perspectives

Besides providing critical information, seeing from more than one viewpoint keeps coaches from being locked into one perspective. Single vision limits options and blocks growth. Being able to see deeply into another culture and learn from the experience requires flexibility, a core characteristic for coaches. Seeing other perspectives can be a transforming experience; it allows coaches to expand horizons, question assumptions, and try new strategies. In the short term seeing with different lens gives coaches additional tools for their toolbox; in the long term they also gain self-confidence.

Check Assumptions

Questioning assumptions—one's own, the client's, and any stakeholder who is key to the client's success—is a hallmark of good coaching. Having discussions that name and clarify assumptions before you start work, during the course of the assignment, and at the completion of the project is an exceedingly effective practice. To start an assignment with the working assumptions you employ in your own culture is to invite disaster for the coach, the client, and the relationship/project. The following questions suggest an intentional frame for working with clients in different cultures.

- Who is the client from your point of view? From the client's point of view?
- What assumptions do you hold about the desired outcome of the service? What assumptions does the client hold? How will you manage the differences?
- What criteria will you use to measure productivity or the success of your work? What criteria will the client use? If the criteria is different, how will you manage the differences? When will you manage them?

The most successful coaches report that they check assumptions continuously and ask for concurrence often to assure the partnership of the client and the success of the work.

In addition to managing the assumptions that you bring to your work with clients, the whole arena of cultural environment also must be deliberately managed. Westerners expect customer service and they expect it quickly; often they expect logical rationale for failures in service delivery. They also expect value, efficiency, and systems that work. Many cultures do not hold these values; coaches, trained in western thinking, must set aside their own cultural beliefs or at least hold them lightly, difficult as that may be, to connect with the client on the client's home ground.

For example, coaching in a different culture might require that you give up expecting schedules to be met as planned or that you give up any expectation of service. You may find that you will work in an environment not to your liking but one that the client is familiar with and accepts. Rather than trying to change the working environment, successful coaches say they work instead from a posture of appreciation for their clients and their situation. Appreciating frees them for effective work. They also report that only when they recognize the power of assumptions different from their own can they work with clients on the clients' own turf, with the clients' sense of timing and the clients' rhythm of work. If coaches can manage to let go of their own sense of how things should be done, altering habits, attitudes, values, and tastes, they have an opportunity for intense personal growth, a fulfilling transactional experience, and satisfying coaching.

Maintain Sharp Consulting Skills

Observing and listening. Being able to observe and to listen are powerful tools for building a coaching relationship of mutual respect, mutual trust, and freedom of expression. Clients in different cultures, much as clients in the United States, respond to coaches with a well-honed ability to listen. Until coaches can really listen they cannot assess a situation, speak with wisdom, or design practices that will make a difference. Significantly, until coaches demonstrate they can listen and observe, they do not have credibility with the client.

Assessing. Using what he or she sees and hears, a coach can assess a client situation free of judgments and prejudices. This clear reporting allows a coaching relationship to deepen and work to begin.

Designing. The coach develops practices based on clients' realities and goals that assist clients see the world in new ways and gets them where they want to go.

Asking hard questions. It is easy in a culturally challenging situation to skirt the difficult situation, to sidestep the hard question, and to postpone the unspeakable, but hard questions must be asked. The risk must be taken. The challenge for coaches is not whether the client should be confronted but when and how to confront that will promote the work moving forward. Concurrently, the coach must be mindful of the multiple layers of difference that separate the cultures of the coach and the coachee and must manage these differences so

that learning can occur. Timing and process are doubly important in a different cultural setting since so many cultural issues must be considered.

Keep a Sense of Humor

Having a sense of humor serves coaches well in different cultures, but clearly the humor must be managed to suit the group and place. Humor can defuse tense situations and make coaches approachable and sessions lighter. Being able to laugh at oneself for some culturally inappropriate act can be very freeing. Clients usually appreciate the candor and the vulnerability coaches show when they can laughingly admit mistakes.

Smiling along with making eye contact is also a critical behavior for coaches working in different cultures. Smiling signals openness, availability, and friendliness. Cultures differ, however, about when and how long to keep eye contact. To be culturally appropriate, check your specific site for local customs and communication patterns.

Conclusion

Coaching in global settings is both challenging and rewarding. It is challenging because coaching is an art form with no easy formulas, no guarantees of success. As a discipline it requires flexibility, presence, and humor. Coaching is also enormously rewarding. Faced with ongoing issues about how people develop, coaches learn about themselves, their craft, and their host county.