Client-centred coaching

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What can we truly expect from executive coaching? Here is a model where the coach role-plays, but the client can be themselves.

The model

The coaching model described below grew out of work we have been doing over the past six months. We have been working on a coaching concept that grew out of a number of sources: assessment centre design and delivery, our own model of feedback, client-centred coaching and the development actions written for the competency behaviour sets that we design. This was not an intellectual idea. It evolved in the course of delivery of services to a blue-chip service company, an education quango and an international systems company. It contains several elements, and we believe the model requires a special skills set. The basic idea is simple.

- An individual client needs to be coached to realise their potential, meet some opportunity or overcome some blockage.
- We design a simulation to exercise the need. The context is that of the reality and culture of the organisation. The client's preparation for a simulation ranges from 5 to 20 minutes.
- The client handles the 15- to 30-minute simulation as themselves, with the coach in the role of an appropriate member of the organisation.
- Through the feedback model, the client explores how they behaved, what issues arose for them, and what they might do differently. Throughout we use a client-centred approach. We therefore have concrete examples of behaviour recognised and owned by the client.
- The client is further coached to identify personal learning needs and personal blocks to behaviour and to the required learning.
- Needs that can be addressed in the session are met (this may be single-loop or double-loop learning). A development plan is drawn up with activities from the development actions, or activities are agreed or designed for the client.
- The further development actions may be self-development or may involve traditional coaching from subject-matter experts or Neuro Linguistic Programming-type interventions from the coach.

Evolution

We designed and ran an assessment centre for development in the IS department of a rapidly changing service organisation. The output was a development plan for each of the attendees. We were asked to provide a coach to help each attendee with their plan. The coach met some deep-seated concerns held by the attendees and some personal problems – many of which were endemic in the organisational culture.

Key learning points

- A coaching model using reality role-play.
- The design of the reality role-play.
- The feedback and coaching action introducing single-loop and double-loop learning.

However, we are not passive. We will create options for the client to explore, providing input and advice only when it is needed, not just wanted by the client. We will not become problem-solvers for the client, but we will become problem-solvers with the client. This may require confrontation of the issues that are not being addressed.

Bringing about change

For us there are two areas of change. The first is *single-loop learning* and the second is double-loop learning.

For our purposes, single-loop learning is the recognition of the need of a different operational strategy that will work within the same goal structures, beliefs, values, conceptual frameworks and rule boundaries. It is a simple feedback loop, where modification of the behaviours used in the application follows consideration of the outcome and reflection on the behaviours that we used to achieve the outcome. In this model, the broader environment is taken for granted.

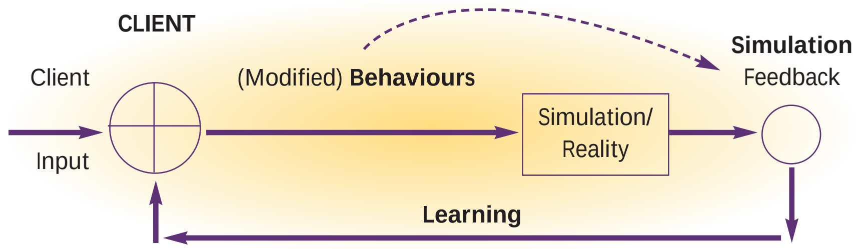

Fig. 1: Single-loop learning

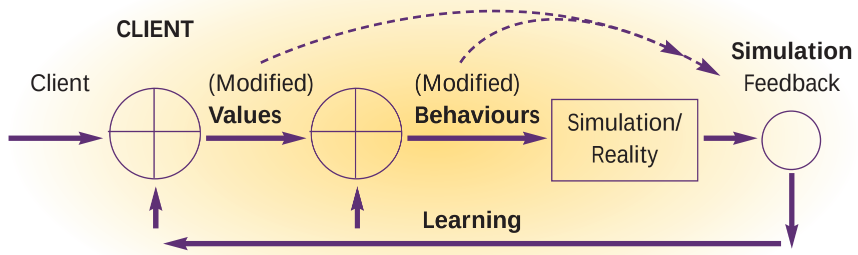

Fig. 2: Double-loop learning

A higher order of learning is when we question the whole activity as part of a larger cycle, in which the reflection is about the activity and the assumptions implicit in it. This is referred to as double-loop learning. It is more creative, and may lead to changes in the beliefs, values, strategies, rules or consequences related to the performance. Double-loop learning involves critical reflection and an ability to stretch or change self-imposed boundaries.

When faced with the client, we ask ourselves the question 'What are we dealing with here?' Is it a matter of learning some interactive behaviours and process, or are we dealing with some beliefs or decisions made about self? In the former case, we may adopt a process of in-role coaching, and in the latter we may use some other techniques, such as NLP, to support double-loop learning.

In the case of single-loop learning, we provide the client with development actions written for the competency behaviour sets. They describe interactive behaviours and processes to fulfil the learning need, such as delegation, assertiveness, influence and rapport. These are often related to classical techniques and ideas such as Belbin's Team Roles. They may be used as self-development tools, or with a coach.

Conclusion

What we have described is a method to get quickly to the real learning needs of a client, from the behaviour observed by other members of the organisation or from the client's own wants. The process clarifies the needs and motivates the client to take action owning the learning. It also enables deeper coaching, driven by the client because they own the need.

Reference

1 Barry Johnson, 'Behavioural Analysis in Training', *Train the Trainer*, Issue 23, Fenman Limited, 2005.

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The client is able to exercise ability and insight within a framework

Faced with this situation, the coach decided to get the clients to describe individually circumstances that they had difficulty in handling. She then role-played the situation with the client as themselves. This clarified much for the clients, and enabled the coach to identify each client's specific issues and address them. This loosely structured approach worked, primarily owing to the role-playing ability and interpersonal skills of the coach.

Later, we ran a selection assessment centre for an international systems company. Part of the specification was that we would give feedback to each of the candidates. We had previously done this for an education quango development centre. The process we used for this impressed the managers involved, and resulted in a request from the company to use this methodology to coach individuals.

Once we had the tools, the experience and the confidence of the company, all we needed to do was to design and test the process. This gave us a product we could use.

The steps in the process

The steps used to design and deliver the coaching can be related to the following real projects, in which managers identified the individual clients to be coached. In the two examples names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned.

The clients

Gladys was a new and dynamic resource manager in a matrix structure. She was very bright, very tough and very focused on results. She knew the business, she knew the technologies and she knew her job. She was no respecter of boundaries or sensibilities. She was a bulldozer in a well-kept garden. Results: yes, she delivered results, and also damage totally invisible to her. If she were to be just a little bit other-person centred, then she might recognise the problems. An example of the sort of thing she did was that while a peer operations manager was on holiday, she reorganised the processes in his department. No discussion, no offer of collaboration. She brooked no resistance. She just did it. You can guess what happened when he returned.

A second case was Derek, a young man who was brilliant at handling all aspects of contracts. Technically, he was ideal to head up his section. He was likable, respected, and very reluctant to be assertive or delegate responsibility.

Gaining entry

The coach met with the clients and gained acceptance as their coach. The key elements of this were building rapport and establishing credibility and, through that, building trust and confidence. The coach then explored how the clients saw the company, their own roles and their needs.

Analysis

The coach gathered specific information from the manager about the company, their perceptions of the clients, the current role and how it was likely to develop; and also information from the HR function from an independent point of view and from a cultural and business view. This formed the basis of analysis, together with the personal views of the clients.

Working with colleagues, the coach then asked some simple questions: 'What exactly are the needs in the context of the organisation and the individual?', 'How can that be replicated in some form of simulation?' These led to design decisions.

Design of simulation

Two key elements must be designed:

- A written and oral brief for the client: This must be easy to understand and take no longer than 20 minutes to assimilate. The content must restrict the client to the information given, preventing them from constructing information. It must be real for the client, but must not overburden them with information. This is a very skilled process.
- A written brief for the coach: This will cover how the simulation will be run, the information to run it, and the information the client may need to elicit. It will also include the information the coach will need to use to play the role credibly – such as information about the person they are playing, values, behaviours, personality, and what they know and what they can disclose. How they are required to behave will be guided by the expected behaviours of the client.

The simulation must feel right for the client. The facts must be correct. It must match reality.

So, what sort of things did we design? For Gladys, a situation in which she had a new boss who made some decisions that impacted on her department with no consultation while Gladys was away for a couple of days. The coach role-played the new boss. This was a reversal of the sort of thing Gladys did. It enabled her to gain insight, and the result was surprising. In Derek's case, the coach role-played a competent subordinate who was reluctant to take on a job that Derek was delegating. She used all sorts of escape ploys. This pushed Derek into handling the process of delegation and into being assertive.

Role-play

Imagine the scene. The client and the coach are in a room that contains a table and some chairs. The coach briefs the client: 'We are going to simulate a situation that you might run into. I am going to give you a brief. I want you to read the brief,' and so on. The client knows what is going to happen, and what they are going to have to handle, and understands that they are to be themselves – no role-playing.

The essentials are that the coach is a consummate role-player, able to improvise within the context of the role, emphasising the reality of the underlying problem.

Feedback

The key to identifying development need is feedback. We work on a model that defines feedback as information, rather than praise or castigation. That means that there is no such thing as positive and negative feedback; information is information.

The process we use is simple: First, we ask the question 'What did you do well?' We sometimes have to insist on that question as some clients tell us what they did wrongly.

We believe that people learn from success. After all, if we do something and we are successful, why on earth would we change what we are doing? The issue is that we tend not to review what we did to be successful in the specific detail of behaviour. What the coach can do is to break the actions down into the specific behaviours.[1]

Traditional wisdom tells us that we learn from mistakes. Well, we do. We learn we must do something else. The question is, what?

Having elicited some things done well, we explore more: 'What else did you do that was successful?', 'Tell me more about that', 'What did you see/hear?', 'How did you feel?' The client is the centre. They are talking about themselves.

There are usually some things that the client did not recognise that they used successfully. These are often in the body language area and the specifics of the oral process or language. This we can feed back directly: 'When I ...', 'What I saw/heard you do well was ...', 'Do you remember that?'

By now the client has some solid behavioural information and is feeling positive. The next question is 'What could you do differently in a similar situation?' Whatever the answer, the coach paraphrases or reflects, and then explores with 'how'. When that is bottomed out, the question is 'What else might you do?' Notice that they are not asked to 'improve'. We are exploring options. In many situations, this part of the feedback leads to an exploration of some sort of action plan.

Sometimes, the client does not have the means to explore the options for themselves. In this case, the coach may say, 'What you might do differently to improve is ...' We must add that to move to this fourth step is relatively rare. Most people, most of the time, can and do know what they can do differently and what is needed for them to improve. They might not have the behaviours – yet – but do want to acquire them. We believe the client's ability to help themselves is released by being client centred.

Client centred

What do we mean by 'client centred'? The attitude of the coach is crucial, and should primarily be one of consideration for the client. We believe that the client has the ability and insight to identify their needs and goals. We attempt to create frameworks and opportunities for the client to exercise that ability and insight.

Our role as a coach is to restate and clarify the goals, approaches and concerns that the client manifests; and to assist the client to make decisions about what they want to do to achieve goals or meet needs.