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But here she was, outlining a project she thought I should consider, despite my resistance to coaching. One thing about Ilene—she knew how to pique my interest.

“Last year we promoted Steve from our Houston region where he successfully turned around our personal lines business,” she began. “Now he’s in our home office here in Dallas, leading the middle market line of business, and he’s struggling.”

Ilene told me that despite receiving a 360-degree leadership assessment, tough feedback from his boss and others, and a formal performance development plan, Steve hadn’t changed at all. This information made me curious to find out more.

In a nutshell, Steve got high marks as a results-focused leader, a great cheerleader and hard worker. Yet he was also considered superficial, relying on corporate-clichés rather than substance. He depended too much on Sheila, his HQ sales manager, who was insensitive to what really went on in the field. This led him to drive initiatives without considering their impact on his managers. And while his division was reaching its goals, it was next to last in growth compared to groups in other parts of the country.

The situation contradicted two of my objections to executive coaching: First, Steve had already received a raft of feedback, and, second, his decline in performance was not being allowed to fester until it was too late.

As we continued talking, I got hooked, though I admit this interest was only partly about figuring out why someone with a good track record all of sudden “didn’t get it.” The truth was, I had become somewhat restless with my more systemic organization change work, and

doing something different felt like a good idea.

“By the way,” she concluded, “Steve is an ex-pro football player. He’s about 6’ 5” and around 300 pounds. I hear he can be intimidating.” Before I could respond, she said she’d arrange a meeting with Steve’s boss Carmen, and quickly got off the line.

A week later I was sitting in an office near the top of a glass skyscraper overlooking downtown Dallas. Carmen flashed a quick smile and just as quickly got to the point. “Steve was successful in Houston. He was promoted by Hal, whom he has known for years. Then Hal left and I’ve been his boss for the past six months.”

Carmen echoed Ilene’s comments about Steve’s strengths and weaknesses but added emphatically, “My biggest concern is that he doesn’t look at the business strategically and he hasn’t learned to utilize his managers in the field. And it’s not going to happen if he keeps listening to Sheila, who seems to be running the whole show.”

I wondered what Carmen would do if Steve weren’t interested in being coached. She didn’t look happy about this, but agreed that if Steve went into the process kicking and screaming it wouldn’t matter anyway. I encouraged her to have him meet me with no strings attached to see if we could develop some chemistry. I left the meeting empathizing with Steve: No matter what Carmen said, this “voluntary” coaching was obviously going to be mandatory.

As I prepared to coach Steve, I wondered why he hadn’t responded to the feedback

he received. Of course, he could claim people didn't understand him, or that being in a new role required more of a learning curve. And, he *was* making his numbers.

But I suspected that Steve's resistance might be related to a need to preserve his self-image as a strong, capable person. When the pressure is on, as it often is in a new, visible executive role, it is not uncommon to rely on the strengths that got us there, rather than learn what new skills are needed. Perhaps Steve was now over-relying on his charm, which may have helped him before, but wasn't helping him much now.

Finding Common Ground

Regardless, I also needed to prepare for another hallmark of successful executives—their abiding belief that they already know what they need to know. Executives are usually experts in their business, and it's hard to argue with successful track records. I thought I'd better position coaching as a way to make a good thing better rather than needing to fix something that was "broken," which it wasn't.

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Steve *was* imposing in his double-breasted suit. He had a shiny, bald head, booming voice, and wide smile. Even in his oversized, wood-paneled office festooned with football memorabilia, he seemed to fill the entire space. Compared to my slight frame,

he was a giant. I momentarily wondered what a skinny kid from Brooklyn was doing trying to coach a handsome ex-pro football player who could eat him for breakfast and still be hungry. I tried not to wince when he shook my hand.

After the preliminaries I said, "Listen, I don't know about you but this is quite awkward for me, like some weird blind date. You didn't ask for a coach, and frankly, individual coaching isn't what I do most of the time. I focus more on organization change, and I'm no shrink."

I didn't appear to fulfill Steve's expectations of what an executive coach was "supposed to say." I asked him why he thought Carmen wanted him to receive coaching. Without much eye contact, he said that he must be considered a "diamond in the rough," that they wanted to smooth out. I asked if he agreed with this assessment. "Everybody can use some coaching," he began. "Even Michael Jordan, arguably the best basketball player ever, was always looking to learn and be coached."

His comments sounded rehearsed, though he spoke with enthusiasm. I asked him if he felt blind-sided by Carmen's "suggestion" of an executive coach. He admitted that he was pretty put off. "I really didn't expect this," he said. "I thought I was doing fine. My numbers are good now and I did well in Houston. That's why they promoted me. I need time to get my team in place, and I need time to learn this line of business. But I believe in life-long learning so I guess it's a good thing." I noticed his use of "life-long learning," and other clichés such as "second place is no place," and remembered what Ilene called his corporate clichés.

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I compared his situation to a top-rated quarterback. At a certain point, I said, “Defenses read what he is going to do and he has to make some adjustments. The best quarterbacks adapt to new circumstances but don’t lose what got them into the league.”

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When I asked him to describe his strengths and his “soft spots,” Steve was pretty aware of what he was good at, but only dimly aware how his leadership might be turning people off. Rather, he thought people might be intimidated by his size.

Near the end of the meeting, he asked me about next steps. I said, “It’s up to you, but if you are interested, it’s similar to me being a football coach. I’ll gather feedback, observe you in action, provide some ‘new moves,’ and help you get your whole team to get better results through your leadership.”

We were developing chemistry. I think my earthy language, objectivity, and empathy for his situation helped him through some of his initial resistance. Perhaps he just felt good about getting stuff off his chest; he talked about his discomfort with Carmen, noting this as one thing he really wanted to work on.

I liked Steve and enjoyed our interaction, which got me thinking less about Steve’s resistance to being coached, and more about my own resistance to being a coach. While I certainly had strong, friendly relations with clients, most of my work permitted me to

stay somewhat detached and then to move on to the next project. I momentarily wondered whether it was this detachment that was driving my restlessness. But I brushed these thoughts aside as I mobilized for the project.

One day while I was engaged in the feedback gathering meetings that Steve had arranged, I needed to speak with Steve and called him. My eyes bugged out of my head as I listened to his voice recording asking people to leave a message. I had never heard such a long, “disk-jockey voiced” message. I knew this was a key moment in our relationship: I felt obliged to tell him that the message was not professional-sounding or appropriate.

When I told him I had some feedback for him, he laughed. “So soon?” he asked. Only half-joking, I told him that I wanted to provide some value in the “first quarter of the game.” He got quiet when I discussed his voice mail recording, and told me he was going to listen to it again and decide what to do.

At our meeting a week later I framed the feedback report around how strengths overdone can be perceived as weaknesses. I wanted him to see that he wasn’t bad or broken, and that changes were more about modulation than wholesale shifts.

He reflected on his “corporate-speak” and thought it wouldn’t be too hard to change (admitting sheepishly that he had changed his voice mail recording in response to my feedback). He rationalized Sheila’s influence since he needed someone to teach him the ropes; he just hadn’t seen how her reputation tarnished his credibility. He had been thinking of moving Sheila into a more

marketing-oriented position but wondered how he could accomplish this transfer without hurting her. I appreciated this loyalty.

Mostly, Steve was stung by the feedback that he wasn't seen as sensitive toward his field sales managers. "Don't they realize all I do for them?" he lamented. "No," I said. "They only see that you keep endorsing more and more initiatives regardless of their value, and they only hear the message, 'Yes, I feel your pain, now just do it.'" Steve vacillated between accusing his managers of being whining babies and recognizing that he hadn't managed the pipeline of projects well.

When Steve discussed his relationship with Carmen, I could see that they hadn't adequately discussed how they were going to work together. He blamed her for the number of initiatives driven into the field. "Carmen doesn't realize the havoc she creates when she calls me with something," he complained.

What's Behind the Mask?

As he struggled with the feedback, Steve's smooth persona fell away and he became quiet. Noticing, I stopped talking about the feedback report and described this shift from his usual demeanor. It was interesting that when I described my personal reaction he remained thoughtful rather than resorting to cliché or offhand joke.

He described the pressure and expectations he had felt as a young man with a talent for football. An injury forced his retirement his second year in the league. He was still recovering, not from the knee injury itself, but from the disappointment. He believed this created within him an extraordinary fear

of failure, which sometimes kept him from seeing what was right in front of him as he kept trying to "score more touchdowns." He saw it in his relationship with his boss, whom he was afraid to disappoint, and in how relentlessly he pushed his people.

Afterwards, I reflected that Steve's "ice started to melt" *only* after I moved away from the feedback report and described my own personal reactions. I started to see coaching in a new light, wondering if the power of coaching was in providing more of one's own true self to help an individual develop, rather than through some "by-the-book" feedback process. Without knowing it at the time, I would soon be able to test this hypothesis.

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We met Carmen in her office. Steve shared with her what he learned from the coaching process. When he admitted that Sheila might be seen as running the division, Carmen asked what he wanted to do about it. Steve said, "I'm ready to take the training wheels off." Steve also acknowledged that he might not be providing Carmen what she wanted, and she described her expectations in reporting: "I don't need you to read me the numbers. I need you to discuss trends and what you intend to do about them," she said.

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Afterwards Steve asked what I thought of the meeting. I told him he did great and that he and Carmen seemed to reach a higher level of understanding. "The one surprise for me," I said, knowing I was dampening his enthusiasm, "was why you didn't bring up the point of her driving all those distractions into your division, but only discussed how you can meet *her* expectations."

Steve was crestfallen. He admitted thinking about the subject but something held him back. When pressed to get to the heart of it, he said, "She's my boss! I can't tell her what to do and what not to do. If I can't do what she asks she'll find someone else who can." I said that if he insisted that this assumption was correct he would never find his own voice with her, and never be seen as a credible advocate by his field managers.

Carmen described Steve's progress when I talked with her a few weeks later. They had gone on a field trip together and she observed that he was trying to lead differently. I smiled when she added, "He even challenged me on the number of times I ask his group to do things. I had no idea I was creating such chaos. I want them focused on the business, not on extraneous stuff."

The following week Steve, his nine managers, and I met for a day in a windowless room at a local conference center. The agenda included Steve describing the feedback he received, how to re-structure the role of the sales manager in the wake of Sheila's transfer (for which there was much rejoicing), and a strategic topic of their choice. I thought this format would give me a chance to watch Steve being the type of leader to which he aspired.

The morning was outstanding. Steve received kudos for discussing the feedback. Several managers remarked that he just as easily could have been speaking about them, too. He described what he would work on to become a more effective leader and his hurt reaction upon learning that he was not being seen as empathetic. He didn't once resort to "corporate-speak."

I asked each person how he or she could support Steve's leadership. Commitments ranged from respecting Steve's schedule more to better planning before Steve would conduct market visits. One manager said, "I need to tell Steve about the minefields to expect out here *before* he comes out here."

Steve guided the next discussion on how to structure the role of the sales manager to add more value. He didn't impose his point of view, yet he did provide some big picture perspective when the group got too narrowly focused. I could tell he was much relieved the earlier conversation had gone so well.

Unfortunately the afternoon did not. Steve was disengaged in the selection of a strategic topic. He actually spent time surreptitiously glancing at a newspaper, which really annoyed me. When he drifted off topic, he failed to notice the non-verbal signals his team was displaying: They rolled their eyes and crossed their arms whenever he digressed. He even minimized the group's disagreement with him about a controversial issue. When I drew their attention to this disconnect, he said that he would be happy to hear their point of view, "regardless of how misinformed it is." We recovered some of the positive energy at the end of the meeting, but I knew that Steve had squandered some hard-gained credibility.

A few days later we discussed the meeting. I speculated that he had invested so much energy in the morning session that he had nothing left for the afternoon. When I gave him a few examples he agreed, berating himself for not performing “as well in the fourth quarter as I had in the first.”

He asked for ways to improve. After I gave him some facilitation and listening tips, I said, “It seems to me that your focus is still oriented toward meeting your own needs rather than the group’s. So these techniques might be useful but are less important than your understanding your own intentions.” I then asked him, “How do you want people to experience *themselves* when they are with you?” He asked me to elaborate.

“If you want people to experience *themselves* as powerful, trusted, and competent, you will express this intention naturally, without the need for technique. But if your orientation is toward being seen as the most powerful person in the room, the big boss, you will create that effect. Leadership is more a matter of intention than technique, and at the end of the day, I’m not sure what you really intend.”

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Hold Up the Mirror (to yourself)

As I heard myself speak I considered my own intentions as a coach. Had I been as willing as Steve to be authentic, to get past my coaching persona? Here I was, spouting Wisdom and Truth, rather than disclosing

my own anger about his behavior. I took a deep breath and said, “I have to tell you how disrespected I felt when you read the newspaper while I facilitated the meeting. It really bothered me.”

Steve stared at me for a few seconds without speaking. He thanked me for the feedback, said a few words, and left. I wondered if I had gone too far, and immediately became nostalgic for less personally challenging consulting projects.

A few weeks later I spoke with Carmen. She was amazed by the change in Steve. She had heard from several people that he was reaching out more, getting to core issues but not avoiding tough decisions. The field managers were impressed that Steve was leading the new sales manager, not the other way around. I walked away convinced that Steve’s breakthrough (and mine?) came not from my homily on “leadership intention,” but from my honest reaction to his behavior during the meeting.

After a few more conversations, I saw Steve in action at a large conference he was leading. While his charisma was on display, I noticed him listening more deeply to people’s concerns without feeling the need to give easy, pat answers. He let others lead topics that he would have previously controlled. Steve was respecting his people differently, and the group was reciprocating.

As I watched him, I realized that Steve wasn’t the only one who experienced a breakthrough. I had spent years helping companies change their management structures, strategies, and processes. I had forgotten the power of authentic helping relationships to transform leadership performance. I now saw this as central to

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renewing my passion for my work, whether for large organization change projects or for individual coaching.

When I followed up with Ilene, she told me she had heard great things about Steve. With a knowing smile, she asked me if I was still “anti-executive coaching.”

Chagrined, I admitted that my resistance to coaching had shifted. I acknowledged that traditional performance planning systems did not lend themselves to some sensitive performance problems, even if an executive is performing well “by the numbers.”

When I said that maybe it’s not so bad if executives are initially pushed into coaching relationships, Ilene retorted, “Maybe it’s not so bad for consultants either.”

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Resistance to change is natural to organizations, individual clients and yes, even consultants. Part of any successful project is to navigate through this resistance and emerge with insight into new behavior choices. This is what happened to Steve, and this is what happened to me. The beautiful irony of this project was that the client couldn’t get through his resistance unless I got through mine. So when Ilene told me she

had another coaching project for me to consider, my eyes widened a little as I heard myself say, “Put me in coach—I’m ready to play.”

Suggested Reading

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