



You Can't Coach A Vampire to Stop Biting:

27 imagined, sometimes impossible coaching conversations that reveal keys to coaching success.

Andrew Neitlich

Table of Contents

About the Author.....	4
Additional Resources	5
The Intent of this Book	6
A Note for Coaching Purists.....	7
You Can't Coach a Vampire to Stop Biting.....	8
Succession Planning for the CEO of a World-Famous Candy Company.....	11
A Superhero's Mild-Mannered Alter Ego Gets Coaching on Leadership Presence and the Coaching Contract	14
Career Coaching for a Frustrated Elf Who Desperately Wants to Be a Dentist	19
Influence Coaching for the Manager of Some Cartoon Animals Who Don't Wear Pants	24
Romeo Gets Coached About Priorities	30
Issues Developing Leaders from the Perspective of an Evil Space Ruler	34
Managing Up When Your Boss Is an Evil Space Ruler	40
Negotiation Coaching for Dorothy Gale of the Wizard of Oz	45
Coaching the Abrasive General Manager of an Imaginary Taxi Company to Improve Employee Engagement and Productivity.....	50
Conflict Management between Two Underwater Creatures, One Lovable and Outgoing and the other Grumpy.....	57
Conflict Avoidance Coaching for Two Overly Polite Cartoon Rodents	64
Bad Coaching from One of the World's Most Famous Detectives	69
Coaching on Process Improvement for the Bank Manager in <i>It's a Wonderful Life</i>	71
Coaching a Lesser Superhero to Develop a Strong Personal Brand	75
Coaching Ralph Kramden of <i>The Honeymooners</i> on Starting a Business	78
Coaching a Post-Apocalyptic Military Commander to Influence the Remaining Humans that His Newest Recruit is "The One" that Prophecy Predicts.....	81
Change Leadership at ACME in Response to Defective Products.....	85
Coaching Dr. Jekyll, Disruptive and Abrasive Scientist	89
Coaching on Thinking/Communication Flexibility for an Ultra-Fast Superhero	93
Quick Boundary Setting with a Cartoon Bunny	96
Coaching a Female Superhero to Break Through the Glass Ceiling	99

Coaching a Passionate Skunk on a More Flexible Communication Style.....	103
Group Coaching: Strategic Planning and Core Values for a Couple of Super-Villain Industrialists.....	107
A Superhero Seeks to Expand His Power Base, Maybe	111
A Humble Hobbit Has to Reframe Some Limiting Beliefs	115
Group Coaching for Executives with Magic Significant Others.....	119

About the Author

Andrew Neitlich is the Founder and Director of the Center for Executive Coaching, a leader in training and certifying coaches who want to work with leaders, business owners, managers, and up-and-coming talent. He also runs his own leadership advisory practice, with a focus on working with leaders and their teams in dynamic, growing companies. He is the author of ***The Way to Coach Executives***, ***Elegant Leadership***, and three ***Guerrilla Marketing*** books including *Guerrilla Marketing for Coaches*. Andrew received his MBA from Harvard Business School.

Andrew's email is andrewneitlich@centerforexecutivecoaching.com.

Additional Resources

The Center for Executive Coaching, at <http://centerforexecutivecoaching.com> offers resources for both aspiring and seasoned coaches.

Visit us to learn about our International Coach Federation-accredited coach training programs.

Click the “For Seasoned Coaches” link to learn about resources for seasoned coaches, which include our acclaimed Coach Master Toolkit (27 coaching methodologies addressing the top issues that leaders and managers face); the Turnkey High-Performance Coaching Academy; the Turnkey Exit and Succession Planning CEO Roundtable; and our Business Development Intensive for Coaches.

We can also customize a program for you, for instance if you want to move from your ACC to your PCC with the International Coach Federation.

Finally, see the “Articles” link on our website for ongoing articles and resources for coaches and aspiring coaches.

The Intent of this Book

This book began because I am kind of a nerd. I like superhero movies, science fiction, sitcoms, and even the occasional play by Shakespeare. So why not imagine coaching some of my favorite characters?

I wrote this book with three intentions for you:

ONE: Learn coaching in a way that is more fun than the usual coaching simulations and review of the International Coach Federation core competencies.

TWO: As you go through the imagined conversations, perhaps you will find a coaching question or two that you like, and add it to your repertoire.

THREE: Even though these coaching conversations are imagined, and parodies at that, they cover some very real issues that coaches and clients deal with every day. I hope that as you read these conversations you are not only entertained, but also have some insights about how to be a better coach.

Enjoy! Meanwhile, please let me know what you think. The beauty of a book like this is that I can edit it at anytime. If you see opportunities to make any of the conversations better, or have ideas for additional coaching sessions with fictional characters, please let me know. My email is andrewneitlich@centerforexecutivecoaching.com.

A Note for Coaching Purists

As the coaching profession matures, more and more people are aware of core coaching competencies as promoted by the International Coach Federation (ICF) and other coaching professional associations.

Some coaches are purists when it comes to these competencies. If this describes you, I ask for your indulgence as you read the imagined coaching conversations in this book.

The conversations that follow are parodies. For this reason, and for effective teaching, they are shorter and less meandering than a real coaching conversation. That way, they make key points about best practices in coaching while also, hopefully, keeping you entertained.

The coaches depicted in these vignettes sometimes get directive, sometimes don't listen, and sometimes work with repugnant characters against all ethical guidelines. In some instances, the coaching is clearly negligent. That's part of the fun and the learning.

At the same time, the clients range from the criminally insane to superheroes, crazy cartoon characters, and sitcom characters. These characters go through their imaginary life the way they were created, and without much choice or flexibility in their behaviors and thinking. Sometimes they take the coaching in directions that flesh-and-blood clients would never go.

Therefore, I ask that you have a sense of playfulness as you review these case studies. They are fake conversations with fictional characters! Use them to clarify what it means to coach your clients effectively. If we take ourselves too seriously as coaches, we risk forgetting that coaching is a fun, powerful activity that is supposed to make a difference to our clients.

You Can't Coach a Vampire to Stop Biting

This case study is inspired by a coach who kept trying to get to the senior level of leadership in a company, and was not successful.

She explained, "I know lots of middle managers at the company, and they tell me that the senior leadership team is doing all sorts of things that are demoralizing. They are abusive. They are arrogant. They don't listen. They don't seem to care. But I can't figure out how to get the senior leaders to hire me as a coach so they can change these behaviors."

Here, Dracula is used as the vampire in question. If you are from a younger generation, insert your favorite television or movie vampire as the client.

COACH: Count Dracula, the villagers beneath your castle asked me to come up here and provide some coaching.

DRACULA: Vunderful. Give it your best shot.

COACH: It's kind of dark in here. Is that okay with you? Can you focus lying down in that coffin-like box? One of the first rules of coaching is that both client and coach and be present and really focus.

DRACULA: Proceed.

COACH: Well, here's the thing. I did what's called a 360-degree verbal assessment of your communication style with the villagers. I did this on my own dime, just to get some data in the hopes that you will find it valuable.

DRACULA: And?

COACH: Well, first, let's be clear that there are some things that are positive. The villagers have the utmost respect for you. They can't believe the things you can do. Also, you can be quite charming when you want – seductive even, if I dare say.

DRACULA: But?

COACH: The thing is, there's one thing you could work on that would really help you improve your relationship with the villagers. In fact, in my assessment, this came up 100 per cent of the time, and so I am sure the data is valid. The villagers, each and every one, would like you to...stop biting them.

DRACULA: Stop biting them?

COACH: Yes. Apparently, when you bite a villager, it really causes problems. They lose blood. They can't come out in the daytime. They get depressed and detach from the rest of the community. Overall, it's a bad situation for everyone involved. That's why the villagers are hopeful that you will agree to stop biting. Keep in mind – these villagers have total respect for you. If you can work on this biting thing, they might work with you less out of fear and more out of respect and admiration. In my world we call this the difference between formal and informal influence and power.

DRACULA: This is my way. I would not be who I am if I did not bite.

COACH: Okay, but I think what we can do here is a technique where we separate your actions from your identity. You can still be you, and not bite, right?

DRACULA: When I bite someone, I am giving them the ultimate gift. This is who I am. I am sharing my immortal essence with others.

COACH: It sounds like you aren't especially coachable here. I guess you are saying that you are biting people to create the culture you want to have around here, and to develop new leadership. However, what I'm hearing is that you have a bit of a blind spot about the pain your biting behavior is causing. And I don't want to get into therapy, but I am also picking up some narcissistic tendencies.

DRACULA: Whatever. Let me ask you something....Sometimes my minions, that is, the vampires who worship and follow me, are not as obedient as I would like. Do you have any methodologies to help bring them into line?

COACH: Do you bite your fellow vampires, too?

DRACULA: No. That is why I ask. I seem to be out of tricks to bring my vampire followers into line. They often seem to be plotting against me so that they can rise to ultimate power.

COACH: Well, I suppose we could discuss an engagement about that....

Discussion:

Notice what happens here. You can't coach a vampire to stop biting. To Dracula, biting is a good thing. He doesn't want coaching to stop biting any more than the senior leadership team described at the start of this vignette seems to care about pleasing their middle managers. That's not to say that Dracula and the senior leadership team are right. They simply don't feel enough pain, if any, to want to change. If you want to coach someone, you have to find a problem that they recognize and that they want to fix.

In the above scene, we discover that Dracula actually is coachable – just not on the issue the villagers want. The coach can work with Dracula on the issue he cares about, which is how to engage his minions. At the same time, perhaps he can coach the villagers about strategies to influence Dracula to change, or on risk prevention and general coping strategies to deal with Dracula's terrifying behavior.

The same might be true for the real coach who presented this case. Perhaps she can coach the middle managers to lead up, or at least cope, with their senior leadership team. Or, perhaps the senior leadership team has some very really issues that they care about fixing – maybe something about executing strategy effectively, accelerating change, or resolving conflicts among their own team.

You can't coach someone who isn't coachable!

Succession Planning for the CEO of a World-Famous Candy Company

Let's say the CEO of the world's most famous candy company comes to you for assistance with succession planning. His idea of succession planning is a bit, well, off the wall. This raises some important issues about how a coach can best react when a client has ideas that seem to go against conventional wisdom or even best practices.

COACH: So you want to come up with a succession plan?

CLIENT: Yes. Can you help?

COACH: Well, perhaps I can ask some questions to help you come up with insights. For instance, it seems like you have thousands of very capable and loyal employees that could rise to leadership positions. You've told me that you have employees who are brilliant at everything from operations to developing great new candy products. Who have you identified as potential successors to you?

CLIENT: Oh, no. That's not my plan at all.

COACH: You mean that developing internal leaders to take over more and more of the candy factory and ultimately succeed you is not what you mean by succession planning?

CLIENT: Goodness, no! My plan is much simpler. What I intend to do is have a contest. I'll send out seven golden tickets in the millions of Wonka bars that we sell every week. The seven lucky recipients of a golden ticket will get a tour of my factory. One of them will end up being my successor. You see, I'll design the tour to uncover all sorts of terrible, spoiled brat behaviors that will quickly disqualify them from being eligible to run my company. I'll also give them a sample product – my Everlasting Gobstopper -- and make them promise to return it to me at the end of the tour. Whomever makes it to the end of the tour without getting turned into a giant blueberry, shrunk down to miniature size, caught in a chocolate tube, molested by squirrels, or some other terrible fate – and also returns the Gobstopper to me....that's my successor. Brilliant, isn't it?

COACH: Wait. You mean to say that – just for instance – some impoverished, uneducated child could find one of those golden tickets, successfully complete your factory tour, give you back a piece of candy, and suddenly he is your successor? And that you will give him the factory even if he has no experience, education, or skills whatsoever?

CLIENT: Exactly.

COACH: And just to confirm: Not one of the thousands of incredibly gifted, capable, creative employees that know the intricate details of your operations and have given their lives to you – working and living in your factory 24/7—is in any way on your mind as taking on increased leadership and ultimately your role? Not one?

CLIENT: You're a little slow, but I think you are getting it.

COACH: [Stunned silence]

Discussion:

The above case is extreme, but it is not uncommon for our clients to surprise us with creative ideas that are different than what many would consider to be best practices. This can be especially true if we happen to be coaching a visionary CEO who has created a remarkable company.

What do you do when this happens, especially if all of your experience and knowledge tells you that the client is making an unwise choice?

Here are your choices in the above case:

- A.** Debate with the client until he sees that he is making a crazy choice.
- B.** Encourage the client to explore a number of options before leaping to the conclusion that his current way of thinking is correct. If he insists on staying the path, help him think of ways to ensure success for the winner of his contest.
- C.** Let the client move forward with his plan and move onto an area where he really wants coaching. After all, he is the client and it is not the coach's job to be directive. Plus, he designed his plan creatively to find a fit with his core

values—even if with a small, random sample.

D. Something else not considered above.

(Some colleagues of mine added that they would rescind the contract with this CEO, given obvious violations of labor and safety laws, but let's assume for a moment that these are not issues).

Personally, if I am brought in as an expert and a coach, I would go for Option B, but also take a moment to ask permission to share my own experience about best practices in succession planning. I would want to know a bit more about why he doesn't hire from within. If he remains 100 percent sure about his decision after we delve deeper into other options, and wants coaching on how to make his idea succeed, I might then coach him about ways to minimize risks and set up the eventual contest winner for success in his new role. Perhaps I could even coach his successor to make a smooth transition.

Once the client seems sure about a path, a great coaching question might be: "It seems you have your mind made up. What support do you want from me as a coach?" Let the client guide the process.

A Superhero's Mild-Mannered Alter Ego Gets Coaching on Leadership Presence and the Coaching Contract

On the surface, the following conversation seems to be about coaching a mild-mannered professional to have more leadership presence. In reality, it demonstrates challenges working with busy clients and supporting them in keeping their commitment to make coaching a priority. Secondly, this particular coach seems to love promoting himself, and one wonders whether that helps or hurts the impact he has with clients.

CLARKE: I apologize again for missing the last two sessions. I had to save – I mean write up an article on that helicopter crash, and then there was that incident with the hostages and the bank robbery.

COACH: I'm glad you brought that up. Before we started our coaching engagement, you and I agreed to a contract. The contract clearly states that you will make it a priority to attend each coaching session. I know that you are busy. All of my clients are. That's why I asked you to agree to give me at least a day's notice if you have to cancel a session.

CLARKE: Again, I'm so sorry. The thing is, in my line of work things just keep coming up.

COACH: Can we agree to recommit to the contract, or do we have to modify it? Maybe it will help if we review the big picture. As I understand it, you requested to be part of the high-potential program here at the newspaper, in order to advance your career. Your publisher suggested it, and you said you wanted to do it, right?

CLARKE: Yes. I've been told that I lack confidence and leadership presence, whatever that is, and to move up in this newspaper, I need to develop some new skills.

COACH: Right. And this program is based on my proprietary *Unleash the Superhero Within* process. It is based on my best-selling book and seminar series, and is used in a number of Fortune 500 companies. Your colleagues – including one photographer, your

publisher, and that female reporter who completed my program last quarter – all suggested that you could benefit from it.

CLARKE: Yes. I am very grateful for this opportunity and will try hard not to let you down.

COACH: You see, that's part of the issue right there. Would a superhero try?

CLARKE: I see what you mean. No, I guess not.

COACH: Would a superhero guess?

CLARKE: No, I don't think so, unless...

COACH: Would a superhero show up late or miss an important meeting?

CLARKE: No, not if people are depending on him or her. That's the thing....

COACH: Exactly! Now for this coaching to work, I need YOU to act like a superhero. I need you to show up on time, or let me know well in advance if you won't.

CLARKE: I'll do my best.

COACH: That's it all over again. Doing your best is just like trying and guessing. Can I take off the coaching hat for a moment and just make an observation?

CLARKE: Okay.

COACH: I feel like you are holding back. If you are holding back in our coaching relationship, you are also likely to be holding back in your role at the newspaper.

CLARKE: There is so much I want to say but I just feel like I can't.

COACH: I understand. That's why I take confidentiality seriously and I want you to be able to tell me anything. Anything at all. Look, even if you told me you were actually a superhero or something like that, your secret would be safe. As long as you don't tell me that you are doing something illegal, or that you will hurt yourself or others, everything you say is safe with me. But we can't develop this level of trust if you don't show up for our sessions. If you start showing up, I am sure you will feel confident sharing with me exactly what's going on. We need to get beneath the surface. I can already tell that you have some real perceptual issues keeping you from unleashing that superhero within.

CLARKE: Could be.

COACH: Do me a favor. Take off those glasses. I think those glasses are a symbol for you. You are hiding behind them, almost like you don't want to be seen or recognized for your inner superhero.

CLARKE: I'm really not sure I want to do that.

COACH: There you go again! You're not sure. Your colleagues all say that you are a decent guy and all that, but they also say that you act clumsy, you are unreliable, and you lack confidence. You are unsure.

CLARKE: Yes, but...

COACH: See, right there again. Instead of saying "Yes, but," say, "Yes, and..." That's from improvisational acting, you know.

CLARKE: I'll try.

COACH: You just went ba0ck to trying. We can come back to this later. For now, let's do an exercise from my proprietary *Unleash the Superhero Within* process. Did I mention that it is based on my best-selling book and seminar series, and is used in a number of Fortune 500 companies? Anyway, I want you to close your eyes....Good. ...Now tell me what you think your top superpower is.

CLARKE: I beg your pardon?

COACH: Superheroes never beg! Everyone has a superpower. Mine is the ability to write award-winning, proprietary programs that get used by Fortune 500 companies. You have to tap into your fundamental talents and turn them into superpowers.

CLARKE: Like X-ray vision, or flying, or super strength?

COACH: Well, metaphorically, yes. But of course no one except Superman has those things. I mean human superpowers.

CLARKE: I don't know. Maybe it's my curiosity? A good reporter has to have curiosity?

COACH: Are you asking or telling me? It's almost like it's an act, like you do this on purpose. Maybe we can explore the benefits you get from acting this way?

CLARKE: Wait. Do you hear that?

COACH: I don't hear anything.

CLARKE: That noise? It sounds like an airplane engine on fire, and people screaming?

COACH: Nope. All I hear is the sound of avoidance. You know, you are never going to unleash the superpower within – as per my proprietary program used in Fortune 500 companies – if you keep avoiding the root cause of your lack of leadership presence....Hey! Where did you go?...

Discussion:

One lesson from the above conversation, aside from the fact that it's really hard to coach an alter ego, is that coaching leaders and executives can require constant renegotiation of our coaching contract. Executives, leaders, and managers are extremely busy. They have multiple priorities. Crises come up frequently.

As coaches, we need to stay on equal footing with our clients and keep reminding them of their agreement to make coaching a priority, show up on time, and be present during our coaching sessions. However, when clients falter, it is not helpful to blame them, get frustrated, or make them wrong.

When I have a client who constantly reschedules coaching sessions, I first step in his shoes and try to see what he might have going on in his life. Then we can try to work out a schedule that works for both of us.

However, my flexibility only goes so far. In my coaching contracts, I clearly state that if the client misses a meeting without giving me notice, then I am under no obligation to reschedule the meeting. Also, when a client breaks our contract, that behavior provides me with data that might point to issues with how he interacts with his managers, employees, colleagues, and customers. For instance, if the client is late with me, the odds are good that he is late with others.

The bottom line: It can be tricky to balance being on equal footing with adapting to the client's needs.

At the same time, what do you think about this coach's blatant self-promotion throughout the coaching process? I've encountered a few too many coaches who don't stop talking about their book, seminar, or brand. It gets old, fast – especially with clients. If you provide value to your clients and listen to their ongoing needs, you will get plenty of business without the blatant and ongoing self-aggrandizement.

Career Coaching for a Frustrated Elf Who Desperately Wants to Be a Dentist

Following is a coaching conversation that, on the surface, is about career coaching. However, it's really about a couple of other things, too:

1. the risks when leadership provides coaching to employees, and their agenda is different than pure professional development;
2. what can go wrong when coaching is not confidential;
3. what can happen when the coach gets directive with his or her own agenda; and
4. why it is a mistake when organizations confuse progressive discipline with professional development coaching.

As you read the following conversation, list the places where the coaching is ineffective, and evaluate the reasons why. What can you learn for your own coaching practice, as well as the conditions you need to set up a productive coaching relationship?

COACH: As you know, management here at the North Pole engaged me because they are concerned that your performance has slipped. Even though you are on progressive discipline for your poor performance as a toy maker, as well as your frequent absences at choir practice, they wanted to invest in some coaching for you to see if we can't get your performance back on track.

HERMEY: Is what I tell you confidential?

COACH: Well, I'm partly here to evaluate your intentions and report back to senior leadership. But I'm also here to try to help you get re-engaged here as a toymaker. Ideally your performance will speak for itself!

HERMEY: Hmm. I don't know if I can trust you. Everyone around here seems to feel like they would be better off without me.

COACH: Well, how about if we give it a try and see if this can bring some value to you. As I understand it, you want to be a dentist, and that might be a factor in your recent slip in performance. Is that correct?

HERMEY: Yes.

COACH: May I ask how you concluded that you want to be a dentist?

HERMEY: I can't say for sure. I've just always had a passion for teeth. Recently I found this book about teeth and I can't focus on anything else. All I want to do is be a dentist. I am fascinated by teeth!

COACH: I hear you, but can you tell me a bit more about why? What is it about teeth that get you so passionate?

HERMEY: I don't know. I love dentistry. I guess I'm just a misfit.

COACH: Well, let's not jump to conclusions. Perhaps if we explore your talents we can understand a bit more. What would you say are your top strengths?

HERMEY: I don't really know that I have any, outside of being a dentist. All I know is that I'm constantly being yelled at by my manager for poor performance and for not fitting in. Let's just say that making toys is not my strength.

COACH: Are you sure? Maybe you do have the talent and you just don't feel motivated.

HERMEY: It's hard to do a good job when I want to be doing something else, like cleaning and fixing teeth, so badly. I am in our Elf choir and I'm fairly musical, but I get so distracted reading my dentist book that I sometimes don't show up for practice. If I had to say, I suppose I'm best at reading my book about teeth and thinking about being a dentist.

COACH: What other career paths have you considered besides being a dentist?

HERMEY: Nothing else really. In the North Pole there's really only one career path for an Elf, and that's to make toys and then maybe get promoted to foreman. Options are limited up here. Then I found this book about teeth and being a dentist. Once I did, it was as if a whole new, wonderful, magical world opened up for me.

COACH: Surely there are other options besides being a dentist? Perhaps if we took some time to explore them....

HERMEY: Why are you so opposed to my being a dentist? You are just like everyone else up here. I thought coaches were supposed to be unbiased, but it seems like you're just a pawn for the leadership team here, trying to keep me in my place.

COACH: Not at all. I'm trying to do what's best for you, for senior leadership, and for the entire organization. How about if we try to explore another line of inquiry, if that's okay with you? Perhaps you can tell me your action plan to become a dentist?

HERMEY: I have a great plan. What I'm going to do is run away to a faraway place until I find a school to get my dentistry degree. Sometimes I'll hike through the snow. Sometimes I'll float on a piece of an iceberg over frozen seas. Eventually I'll get someplace where I can get my degree and set up a practice somewhere.

COACH: You live on the North Pole. That's a long way to travel in the frozen tundra, especially when you are so small and with reports of an Abominable Snowman lurking about.

HERMEY: Who cares? I'm passionate and if you do what you love, good things follow.

COACH: What's your plan to stay warm?

HERMEY: I'm not worried.

COACH: What's your plan to get food along the way, for instance by hunting seals or polar bears?

HERMEY: I'm a vegetarian so I don't have to worry about that either.

COACH: What about the Abominable Snowman?

HERMEY: He'll never find me. It's not like I'm walking around with a big red light flashing around me.

COACH: What I'm saying is that it seems quite dangerous and nobody wants you to get hurt. What are other ways you might learn to be a dentist, while still working here safely and while earning your keep?

HERMEY: I'm stumped. What are you thinking?

COACH: Do you mind if I share my thoughts?

HERMEY: That's why I asked.

COACH: It seems to me that you are being quite impulsive here. You are thinking of putting yourself at significant risk just to become a dentist. I think you are so disengaged with toy making that you are looking for an escape, and being a dentist is what you came up with in order to avoid the opportunities right here in front of you. My guess is that if you took some time to explore other options, we could find you a career path that you will love even more, and perhaps we can even convince leadership to invest in your professional development. But first you have to improve your performance as a toy maker and also show up for choir practice. What do you think?

HERMEY: Whatever....

COACH: May I share another insight?

HERMEY: Why not? You seem to be on a roll.

COACH: I wonder if you might not be doing all of this just to get attention. I mean, here you are in the North Pole, one Elf among many. It's hard to be an individual. I wonder if you haven't picked dentistry just to stand out from the crowd.

HERMEY: Geez, you are quite a shrink. I thought coaching was different than therapy. Why can't you accept that I love teeth and the dental profession is my calling? What have you got against being a dentist?

Discussion:

How would you rate this coaching session? How would the leadership team rate it? The coach? The Elf?

I would argue that this was not a good session for a few reasons:

- There is no clear intent. It seems like the Elf is interested in a different outcome

than the coach and the leadership team. The Elf is interested in pursuing his dream and being accepted. The coach and the leadership team seem more interested in getting the Elf to perform in his current role.

- There is no confidentiality, and so the Elf doesn't trust the coach.
- The coach frequently directs the conversation to represent his and the leadership team's agenda. In essence the coach is doing the leadership team's dirty work for them, by serving more as a manager than a coach.

Another feature of this conversation is that the company uses coaching as a synonym for progressive discipline. In the past, coaching was what organizations did for employees they were probably going to fire. They called this process progressive discipline, basically putting the employee in probation and documenting cause for termination.

Today, coaching has evolved. It is a proven leadership development tool for high-potential employees and top performers. Unfortunately, many people still associate coaching with progressive discipline. It is important for organizations to separate the two different activities clearly.

Finally, would you accept a coaching engagement without all parties agreeing that the coaching will be confidential (unless your client confessed to doing something illegal, or threatened to hurt himself or others)? I wouldn't. Nor would I accept an engagement with an unclear intent, or one in which the client, sponsor, and coach are all in agreement about the positive outcomes to achieve through coaching.

Influence Coaching for the Manager of Some Cartoon Animals Who Don't Wear Pants

The following coaching conversation is about how to help clients set expectations with their employees. The only wrinkle here is that the employees in questions are ducks that don't wear pants.

COACH: What would be a great outcome of our session today?

CLIENT: I have two employees that are driving me crazy. I could really use your help getting them into line.

COACH: So, at the end of today's session, what would be something really valuable that we can achieve together?

CLIENT: Here's the thing. These two employees, well, they don't wear pants.

COACH: They don't wear pants?

CLIENT: Correct. One doesn't wear anything. The other at least wears a nice sailor's shirt and a hat. But, he doesn't wear pants either.

COACH: What else is important to know about these two?

CLIENT: They are ducks.

COACH: They're ducks?

CLIENT: Correct. I have two ducks who don't wear pants working for me. It's really making the other employees uncomfortable.

COACH: And so what would be a great outcome today?

CLIENT: It would be a huge relief if we could come up with a strategy to influence these two ducks to start wearing pants.

COACH: Makes sense to me. Is there anything else before we get started?

CLIENT: Well, I guess we should talk about their performance, too. The one in the sailor shirt is earnest and diligent. He really tries and seems to have a positive attitude, although sometimes he gets frustrated when things don't go his way. The other one is just plain daffy. I can't get him to focus, and some of his behaviors are quite loony.

COACH: Hmmm. Let me make sure I have this. One of these ducks performs okay except that he gets frustrated. The other one is unfocused and, in your words, has behaviors that are daffy and loony. And neither wears pants.

CLIENT: Correct.

COACH: Well, where would you like to start -- on the pants, on the more general performance and behavioral issues, or somewhere else?

CLIENT: I think if we can get them to wear pants, then that would be a huge breakthrough for me.

COACH: Great. So what are your ideas to get them to wear pants?

CLIENT: Well, you are an executive coach. I was thinking that I could hire you to coach them to start wearing pants.

COACH: I don't think that's a good idea. You are their manager, and it's not appropriate for me in my role as coach to do things that you have to do as a manager. However, I can coach you today on strategies to have to get these characters to start wearing pants. First, who should be the one having a conversation with them?

CLIENT: Well, it's either Human Resources or me. I'd rather HR did it, but they aren't especially helpful. HR is run by a couple of chipmunks who are just too polite and politically correct to know how to have this kind of conversation.

COACH: So then who has to do this?

CLIENT: I do.

COACH: Walk me through what you need to say to these two.

CLIENT: That's where I get stuck. I really don't like confrontation.

COACH: Why not?

CLIENT: I guess I want these guys to like me. Yes, they can be annoying, but they are so darn cute and entertaining. They have some charisma.

COACH: Which is more important to you – being popular with these two, or running a team that is professional and productive?

CLIENT: Running a team that is professional and productive.

COACH: May I share a distinction with you?

CLIENT: By all means.

COACH: As a leader and manager, you get what you tolerate. So what are you tolerating on your team?

CLIENT: I am tolerating a dress code where ducks don't have to wear pants but everyone else does.

COACH: What else?

CLIENT: I am tolerating a culture where ducks can behave in any manner they want and get away with it, while the rest of us behave in a professional manner.

COACH: What else?

CLIENT: I'm not sure. I guess I'm tolerating a workplace that hires ducks instead of people, but these two passed our pre-hire screening process with flying colors and nailed the interviews.

COACH: Okay, so given that you are tolerating all of this, what would be a first step to stop tolerating the behavior we are working on now, namely, the not wearing of pants.

CLIENT: I need to have a tough conversation with each one of them.

COACH: Together or separately?

CLIENT: Separately. The duck who wears the sailor shirt is reasonable but sometimes can be stubborn, especially when he is around the duck that's a bit daffy. I think I need to

divide and conquer, with two meetings back to back so they don't talk to each other first.

COACH: Okay. Perhaps we can role play. Pick a duck.

CLIENT: Let's role play with the more stable duck first.

COACH: To save time, let me suggest an approach. As you know, this is a conversation where you need to assert and set expectations. Therefore, the following format works well in these cases. First, you tell the duck what you like and then what you don't like about his behavior. Then you tell him what you expect. Then you come up with some incentives that you can offer or take away to encourage the duck to start wearing pants. It's basically like a performance appraisal combined with a negotiation. Does this approach make sense?

CLIENT: It does.

COACH: So let's hear it.

CLIENT: Okay...Geez, this is hard.

COACH: Say more about why it is hard for you.

CLIENT: I just hate having these kinds of conversations. Like I said before, I like these guys and I want them to like me.

COACH: They are not here right now. Let's just play around and have some fun with this. Give it a try.

CLIENT: Okay. Well, I guess I would tell him....

COACH: Say it as if I were the duck. Let's not make this theoretical.

CLIENT: Look, I really like your diligence and earnestness. You have a real attention to details and I can tell you care. Here's the thing though. I don't appreciate the fact that you don't wear pants. The sailor top is fine, but I don't like the lack of pants. Starting tomorrow I want you to start wearing pants.

COACH: So, what worked?

CLIENT: I think this worked okay. But I forgot the incentives.

COACH: Right. What can you offer this duck if he starts wearing pants, so that there is something in it for him? Alternatively, if you think it makes sense, what can you take away if he doesn't comply with your wish that he wears pants?

CLIENT: Great questions. I'm not sure I have anything I can offer or take away, other than his job, but that seems extreme. All he's doing is not wearing pants.

COACH: What do you know about this duck? What's important to him?

CLIENT: For this duck, I think it is all about pride. He wants to do a good job. He wants to be seen as a key player around here. He wants to be respected.

COACH: How can you connect his desire to be seen as a key player and be respected to wearing pants?

CLIENT: Of course. I can tell him that people will respect him more if he wears pants.

Coach: That's okay, but please remember that here we are looking for things that you control, not just reasons.

CLIENT: I have an idea. One thing I control is how visible he is to our clientele. I suppose that if he starts wearing pants I can get him in front of some of more important clients.

COACH: Wait a minute. You mean you are already putting him in front of clients now, without any pants?

CLIENT: Oh, yes. He is one of our top customer service representatives. He is very polite and clients tend to love him, although they do mention that it would be nice if he wore pants.

COACH: Okay. So what now? Keep working on this duck or move to an approach for the other duck?

CLIENT: The other duck is much more challenging. I think the approach is the same, but he's going to come up with all sorts of objections. Plus, when he gets upset he has this bad habit of bouncing off the walls, floors, and ceilings while making crazy noises....

Discussion:

The above discussion brings up a couple of points for coaches:

1. The coach shouldn't do the client's dirty work. Notice that the client wanted the coach to do what a manager does, namely give performance feedback to his employees. The coach can coach the client to have tough conversations, but should not get involved. This sounds obvious on paper, but if you are a practicing coach odds are good that at one time or another, a client has asked you to step in and "coach" someone else, trying to abdicate his own role.
2. This case gives a good demonstration of setting clear goals up front. The coach explores a bit with the client about what he wants to achieve, and whether to focus on one or both ducks, the pants issue, and/or more general behavioral and performance issue.
3. The coach does a fairly good job of letting the client guide the coaching conversation, by asking where the client wants to go. In a real coaching conversation, the coach could have done even less directing, but this concise format has some limitations.
4. A great coaching question for managers with employee performance issues is, "What are you tolerating?"
5. Another effective question in the conversation is: "Would you rather be popular, or run a team that is productive?" This either/or format is effective, because many leaders operate from a priority that is more important to them than getting results and being successful. Examples include: looking good, being right, being smart, and having status. You can insert any of those as "X" into the question, "Would you rather be X or successful?"
6. While this case doesn't show how much work it takes once coach and client get into role play to really hone a high-stakes conversation, it serves as a good reminder that role play can be a very effective coaching tool.

Romeo Gets Coached About Priorities

What if you had to coach Romeo on some pressing issues with his new love interest?

COACH: Romeo, what would you like to achieve in today's session?

ROMEO: I need your help. I am smitten with a girl. Her name is Juliet. But her parents hate my family and they hate me. I need to find a way to resolve this situation.

COACH: How old is this Juliet?

ROMEO: I'm not sure. I believe that she has not yet turned 14.

COACH: I will assume that the laws in your country and this time permit you to be with someone that young. Tell me about how you met her.

ROMEO: We met at one of those balls where everyone wears masks.

COACH: Tell me what you know about her.

ROMEO: O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear— Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.

COACH: You are very well spoken for a teenager. I hope you are taking Advanced Placement English! Anyway, how long have you known this girl?

ROMEO: We met at that ball, and now it has been a couple of days. I had an amazing conversation with her on her balcony, too. She's all I can think about.

COACH: So, you have basically spent, what, about 20 minutes with her?

ROMEO: That is all I need. YOLO and all that, especially in times of plague.

COACH: Have you been in love before?

ROMEO: I don't think so. I was supposed to be with Rosalind at the ball. But then I saw Juliet and that's when I said to myself, "For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night." Juliet is my first and only true love.

COACH: What's this conflict you mentioned with her family?

ROMEO: It's complicated, but basically her parents hate my family and that means they hate me, too. Meanwhile, my family hates her family equally.

COACH: What would be a great outcome for you in this situation then? That way, we can work backwards from your vision.

ROMEO: Duh! The only acceptable outcome is that Juliet and I are together, true love forever. I don't care what it takes, but it has to happen.

COACH: I'm getting a bit of a red flag here. As you know, I am a coach and not a therapist. I'm hearing a few things from you that suggest that you might be better served by seeing a therapist. Can I just ask some questions for a moment to dig deeper about this worry of mine?

ROMEO: I guess.

COACH: First, what other activities do you do?

ROMEO: Sports, writing poetry, playing music, dancing, riding horses, learning to do battle: all of the usual stuff. But none of those matters next to my love Juliet. I will die for her. Literally, not figuratively, I will die for her.

COACH: There is teenage infatuation, and then there is obsession. You seem obsessed with a young girl you barely know.

ROMEO: You, sir, know nothing of true love.

COACH: Let me ask you about your future together – a teenage girl and you, barely prepared to care for yourselves. What are your plans for the future?

ROMEO: I plan to run away with Juliet.

COACH: How will you make a living?

ROMEO: My parents are loaded. Juliet's parents are rich, too. We have servants. We have gold. We have land. We have peasants. We are pretty much set.

COACH: What else? What's your long-term vision for your life?

ROMEO: Other than running away with Juliet? I suppose that once Juliet and I are together, I will die leading some men into battle, or perhaps the Black Death will come to our town and kill most of us. I expect to live a full life until about 30 or 35 and then die, like everyone else.

COACH: May I suggest something? What about courting her a bit more so you two can really become better acquainted? Or perhaps, you might consider courting a number of young ladies. As they say, there are many fish in the sea.

ROMEO: Sir, when you ask that and when you compare my Juliet to a stinky, slimy fish instead to a flower or a beam of sunlight, I feel like challenging you to a duel. I have told you more than once that Juliet is my true love and that is what she is.

COACH: Let's change our path then. Tell me about how you plan to resolve this conflict you say you have with Juliet's family. Perhaps we can make some headway discussing this topic.

ROMEO: It is not just me who is in conflict with Juliet's family. It is my whole family. We are in a deadly, never-ending feud with Juliet's family. Juliet's family would kill me if they knew we are in love and my family would attack her family if they knew about any of this.

COACH: This is a dangerous situation.

ROMEO: All I know is that if anything happens to my Juliet I will kill myself, I will absolutely kill myself. I will do it by poison or with my dagger, I do not care. And, by the way, if I am confronted by anyone, like Paris, who thinks Juliet is promised to him, I will kill him and all his friends, too.

COACH: That's it. I need to call a big time out. Look Romeo, there are some issues here that I can't address. You seem obsessed to the point that you will harm yourself and others. We need to get you some proper help. Hey – where are you running off to?....

Discussion:

Romeo appears to have some serious issues that coaching probably cannot resolve. Let me count the ways:

- clear threats of harming others or himself;
- ability and willingness to use poison to kill himself;
- access to daggers and willingness to use them to kill himself or others;
- possible statutory rape (in today's day and age);
- apparent lack of parental supervision'
- behavior that might be labeled obsessive compulsive; and
- serious risk of being caught in a war between rival families.

Coaching is not therapy and the coach has an obligation to report potential harmful behavior. A good coach has to know when to call in other resources.

Issues Developing Leaders from the Perspective of an Evil Space Ruler

In this dialog, we see a common issue among leaders who want to develop leaders: Sometimes their own style chokes off the ability of new leaders to emerge.

COACH: What outcome would make this session most valuable for you?

EVIL RULER: In our Empire, we have trouble finding good leaders. By the end of this session I expect you to show me new ways to develop leaders.

COACH: Tell me more about why you are having trouble finding good leaders?

EVIL RULER: Every time I promote one of my captains to a leadership position or give them a challenging assignment, they mess up.

COACH: What happens when they mess up?

EVIL RULER: I kill them.

COACH: This is not an uncommon issue. Lots of leaders have a style that feels like they are figuratively killing off their up-and-coming leaders.

EVIL RULER: I was not being figurative. I literally use my telekinetic powers to choke them until they die. I do this in front of others to set an example. Then I put the next highest ranking person into the leadership position until he messes up and I have to kill him, too. It's really frustrating because no one seems capable of performing to my expectations. I kill about one high-potential leader every week.

COACH: You say your expectations are high. What are your expectations exactly?

EVIL RULER: Absolute loyalty, absolute obedience, and perfect execution of my orders. Or else.

COACH: I see. May I suggest a line of discussion that might be helpful here?

EVIL RULER: Proceed.

COACH: Leadership has evolved from what might be called formal leadership to informal leadership. Formal leadership is based on title, hierarchy, and a command-and-control style. Informal leadership is based more on having a flexible style that builds strong relationships with your staff. It relies on authority that you earn rather than authority that you demand based on your rank and ability to magically choke people. I might suggest that we work together to help you develop informal leadership.

EVIL RULER: I'm not sure. We are on a tight deadline to build a massive planet-sized laser weapon, a group of pesky rebels keeps resisting our rule, and nothing short of domination of the entire galaxy is at stake.

COACH: You are the one who told me that your current style isn't working. How likely are you to achieve your goal of total galactic domination if you can't find good leaders to rise up?

EVIL RULER: [Deep, ominous breathing]

COACH: Perhaps if you give me an example of a current leader, we can develop a strategy to develop this individual to meet your expectations. Tell me about someone that you think has potential.

EVIL RULER: They are all pretty much the same to me, but...One captain has been assigned to find a rebel warrior that also happens to be my son. The warrior keeps escaping, making my team look like buffoons.

COACH: What would be a way to motivate and inspire this captain, instead of threatening him with death by telekinetic choking?

EVIL RULER: I do not understand. We are an up or out organization. I only know this approach.

COACH: For instance, how can let this captain know that you care about him and his personal development, and want to help him succeed and even move up in your organization?

EVIL RULER: I do not care about him. We have factories manufacturing tens of thousands of clones every day.

COACH: Look, we seem to be at an impasse. Do you want to address this issue or do you want to keep telling me about things that ultimately are not working?

EVIL RULER: [Deep, ominous breathing]

COACH: How about this....Instead of focusing on punishments, how can you shift your style just a little bit to focus on rewards? What incentives can you offer this captain?

EVIL RULER: He continues to live.

COACH: That's a good start. What else?

EVIL RULER: I am always looking for new people to train as warriors according to my dark mystical tradition, but this captain does not have the natural talent. So I do not know.

COACH: What kind of training, mentoring, or other development opportunities do you have for high potentials?

EVIL RULER: Our organization does not have much of a training budget.

COACH: Another way to look at this is with Blanchard's skill/will framework. According to him, there are four possible situational leadership approaches depending on whether an employee has the skill or not, and has the will or not. You can direct, coach, train, or monitor. Where does this captain fit into this framework?

EVIL RULER: He fits into the grid where he achieves his goals or I choke him mercilessly.

COACH: So you are saying that you need to be directive. I get a different take on this captain. To me, he seems to be very willing to perform, but might lack the skill. Therefore, the most effective approach might be to take some time to train him and help him to develop the skills he needs. This might mean being a bit more patient with him if he makes some mistakes along the way.

EVIL RULER: [Deep, ominous breathing]

COACH: Let's shift to a different kind of style. How can you get this captain to share your vision for galactic domination, so that he is excited to work with you rather than fearful?

EVIL RULER: If he does not share my vision, that is considered treason and he will be tortured and executed immediately.

COACH: Again, you seem to be going back to the negative and to the command-and-control paradigm. A vision is a way of creating a sense of shared enthusiasm for the future by painting a positive, exciting picture that gets others to want to join you. Perhaps we should take some time to understand that captain and what he wants personally and professionally.

EVIL RULER: His main goal is to live and receive my praise.

COACH: It is good to hear that you do use praise from time to time! What else? What is possible for this captain if your armies take over full control of the galaxy, and he contributes?

EVIL RULER: This captain is already in command of one of our largest fighter ships. There is not much of a career path in our organization beyond that position, unless he shows the ability to develop powers like I have. As I told you before, that is not possible for this individual or any others like him. I do not like repeating myself and you are testing my patience.

COACH: Let's try yet another tactic, one that doesn't require you to change your style. You are saying that you value people who have a proclivity towards developing powers like the ones you have. Yet it seems like none of your up-and-coming talent have that proclivity. How can you recruit more people to your side who do have the potential to develop your powers?

EVIL RULER: These types of people are very rare. That is why this captain's mission is to track down my rebel son, and perhaps my rebel daughter, too – and then I can convert them to my side.

COACH: I didn't realize that this is a family business. Why didn't you say so in the first place? So your real issue is that you want to keep things in the family. You only trust your family, but – as is so common in family businesses – the next generation doesn't have much interest in taking over. They are, as you say, rebellious.

EVIL RULER: Yes, in fact they are working with other rebels to destroy my Empire.

COACH: That adds a whole new dimension to things. How do you think your current crop of up-and-coming talent feel knowing that this is your plan? After all, they have been loyal and obedient to you for many years, and yet you intend to promote your own

children who have no experience and do not seem to care much for what your organization does.

EVIL RULER: My children have the talent and will learn quickly. If not, they will suffer.

COACH: How sure are you that your children have this talent, and yet your current up-and-coming talent pool doesn't? It seems like you are making assumptions without data.

EVIL RULER: I can feel it.

COACH: Let me summarize. You started the session stating that you are frustrated with finding new leaders. We discussed developing a more flexible leadership style, but you didn't show much interest in changing your style, let alone investing in training for your current high-potential leaders. The only solution you have suggested is to get your children into the business, who are untested and in fact are plotting to destroy your organization.

EVIL RULER: Yes, you have been useful in helping me get clarity. You may live.

Discussion:

While this particular client is quite rigid, he demonstrates a common problem among many leaders. They have one approach to leading, and it is not always effective in specific situations. The coach has many avenues to take with leaders to help them develop more flexibility:

- learning different communication and leadership styles, so that they can adapt to different individuals and situations;
- working to understand their employees and help them achieve their professional and personal aspirations;
- shifting from a leadership paradigm based on formal authority to one based more on informal authority;
- considering new organizational structures to recruit, retain, and develop leaders; and

- creating a culture that rewards leadership development.

When you work with a leader who is not satisfied with the pipeline of leaders in the organization, what is your approach? Do you focus more on the leader's individual style, the organization's structures, the culture, or take a combined approach? What else would you add to the above list?

There is something else worth noting in this discussion. Did you notice the way that the client's goal for the session shifted? He went from wanting to discuss leadership development to the problem of getting his family into his organization. That is not uncommon in coaching. Often the client comes with one goal in mind and discovers a new priority. The coach can handle this by asking the client whether he would like to focus on the initial goal, or instead go deeper on the new goal. Let the client decide. Of course, if the client keeps shifting goals and seems to be avoiding any accountability for progress, then the coach should discuss that behavior, too.

Managing Up When Your Boss Is an Evil Space Ruler

Here is an imagined coaching session for someone who reports to the evil space ruler from the previous coaching conversation.

COACH: What would make this session great for you today?

CAPTAIN: I need to improve my relationship with my boss.

COACH: Tell me about him.

CAPTAIN: I am scared to death of him. If I do not perform, he will kill me.

COACH: I understand how you feel. I work with lots of high-powered leaders. Many can be intimidating. Some are real jerks.

CAPTAIN: I am not kidding about what I just said. My boss has killed each and every one of my predecessors. I didn't even want this job and he promoted me after killing the guy who used to be my boss. I can't sleep. I can't eat. My blood pressure is through the roof. I'm a wreck.

COACH: So his style is more based on punishment than reward? What else is helpful to know about how he leads?

CAPTAIN: He is a perfectionist and he is impatient. We cannot make any mistakes. He does not like small talk. We speak only when spoken to. He is merciless.

COACH: How would you like the relationship to be?

CAPTAIN: I want him to trust me. He has incredible talents, and I would like to learn from him. But he is so impatient and brutal.

COACH: What motivates him? For instance, what are his goals and aspirations?

CAPTAIN: I am pretty sure that his primary goal is to crush the rebellion and have absolute power in the galaxy.

COACH: What about his personal life? The more we know about him, the more we can find ways for you to help him achieve his goals and then improve your relationship with him.

CAPTAIN: I don't know much about his personal life. The rumor is that he was in love with a woman and she died giving birth to his children, who were then hidden from him for their protection. People say he never got over this tragedy, and if that's true, I don't blame him. I do know that he is involved in some sort of strange, dark cult-like organization. It seems to give him great satisfaction and power. Unfortunately, the group is secretive and I have not been invited to join. Other than that, he's laser-focused on his job. He's a workaholic.

COACH: So then it is accurate to assume that if you can help him crush the rebellion and achieve universal power, then you will stay in his good graces.

CAPTAIN: Bingo.

COACH: What are his expectations specifically for your performance?

CAPTAIN: Right now, aside from protecting this huge planet-sized weapon he is building, I am to find the location of the rebel headquarters and destroy it.

COACH: So expectations are clear.

CAPTAIN: Yes. He is very good at setting clear expectations. The problem is what happens when we do not meet them.

COACH: What about how you get the job done? In other words, what expectations does he have about your values?

CAPTAIN: He doesn't talk values much. He's more focused on results. But I would say that his values include being ruthless, showing no mercy, and crushing the competition.

COACH: How aligned are you with those values?

CAPTAIN: Oh, I can be ruthless, believe me. However, he takes things to a whole new level. I can only aspire to live those values as well as he does.

COACH: How would you assess the relationship between you and him right now? For instance, is he a mentor to you? Supportive? Neutral? Antagonistic?

CAPTAIN: It's hard to know. He doesn't talk about things in that way. The best words are probably paranoid and distrustful. Honestly, I feel like I am just a number to him, almost like a generic clone.

COACH: How can you show him that you are different than the other captains?

CAPTAIN: You mean, how can I stand out?

COACH: Exactly.

CAPTAIN: Oh, the last thing I want to do is stand out. With him, I think the key is to do my job, do it well, and stay away from his wrath.

COACH: What is the best way to communicate with him, so that you adapt to his style?

CAPTAIN: He does not like to hear about errors. That's a problem, because some of my predecessors have not told him the truth about problems. By the time he found out, it was too late for them, and he killed them.

COACH: So what does that mean for you?

CAPTAIN: It means I need to perform and there is no room for error. If things go wrong I need to fix them quickly and before he finds out.

COACH: This doesn't sound like an easy culture in which to work, but I still feel like you are being a bit of a victim in this situation. If you could ask your manager anything, whether to make a request or to learn more about his expectations and how you are doing, how would that conversation go?

CAPTAIN: You're kidding, right? If you are implying that I schedule time to meet with my boss and ask him those sorts of questions, then obviously you know nothing about this guy.

COACH: Let me shift our focus for a moment, if you don't mind. I wouldn't ask this if you weren't paying contracting directly for coaching with me, but why do you continue to stay employed in such a difficult environment? What other career options have you considered?

CAPTAIN: There are none. If I ask for a new assignment he will consider that cowardice and kill me as an example to others.

COACH: You don't have a non-compete agreement, do you? I mean, aren't there other organizations that might fit your style a bit better?

CAPTAIN: There is only one other organization, the rebels. If I even think about defecting, I'll be caught, tortured, and killed. It's like my boss can read my mind, and he will know that I have betrayed him before I even finish the thought.

COACH: Let's take a minute to summarize. Given all we have discussed, where are we at this point? What are your ideas from this conversation so far to build the relationship and eliminate some of this stress?

CAPTAIN: I don't know that we have resolved anything. I can't talk to him. I can't quit. I just need to do my job, do it well, and stay out of his way. Anything else is a death sentence.

COACH: If that's the case, then what ideas do you have to manage your high levels of stress and cope?

CAPTAIN: I like to read science fiction and see science fiction movies. That can relax me. You raise a good point. I haven't relaxed with a good science fiction book or movie in a long time. I need to schedule some time to do that....

Discussion:

A typical coaching conversation about improving one's relationship with a manager opens up more options than in this imagined conversation. Many bosses seem like Evil Space Rulers to their employees, but usually there are ways to strengthen the relationship. What do you like about the questions that this coach asks? What other powerful questions would you ask for a client who wanted to improve their relationship with their boss?

Also, the sad fact for many executives is that coping is a big part of their jobs. As

coaches, we can help our clients get clarity about what they control that they can change, and what they can't. If they face a constraint, as this client seems to be facing, then they need to develop strong coping skills. This can include ways to reframe their situation, stress management, and finding ways to vent that won't get them into political trouble.

Negotiation Coaching for Dorothy Gale of the Wizard of Oz

It always seemed to me that Dorothy could have used a good coach.

COACH: Let me get this straight. You asked the Wizard to give you a way back to Kansas, and when he balked at your request, you agreed to get him the broom of the Wicked Witch of the West.

DOROTHY: Yes. I know it seems like an impossible task, but I couldn't help it. This Wizard has so much power I couldn't say no. Now I am in a heap of trouble.

COACH: It sounds like you don't think you are on equal footing with this Wizard?

DOROTHY: Oh, no. I am definitely not. I am just a farm girl from Kansas. This Wizard is all powerful. How can I be on equal footing with someone like that?

COACH: For starters, how can you reframe the idea that you are "just a farm girl from Kansas?"

DOROTHY: That's who I am.

COACH: That's who you think you are right now. What are other ways you might think of yourself, especially here in Oz? For instance, didn't you kill the Wicked Witch of the East?

DOROTHY: Yes, but that was a complete accident.

COACH: Haven't you earned the trust of the Lollipop Guild, not to mention the Cowardly Lion, Tin Man, and Scarecrow? And hasn't the Good Witch of the North taken a liking to you?

DOROTHY: Well, yes, I suppose that's right.

COACH: And haven't you already survived many trials just to get to Oz?

DOROTHY: Yes. It has been quite an adventure. I've even lived through a huge tornado.

COACH: Exactly! So how can you reframe this belief that you are "just a farm girl from Kansas?"

DOROTHY: You make a good point. I guess I am more than that. I don't know how to put it into words quite yet, but I see what you are saying. I feel better already!

COACH: Let's go back to your last interaction with the Wizard. If you were on equal footing with him, what else could you have done?

DOROTHY: I don't understand.

COACH: For instance, he made what negotiators call an offer. He agreed to get you back to Kansas and help your three friends, if you did something for him. He told you to bring him the witch's broom. You didn't have to accept that offer. You could have made a counter offer.

DOROTHY: Like what?

COACH: I have some ideas, but I'd like to hear what you think.

DOROTHY: I like the idea of a counter offer, but I really don't know the Wizard very well. He seems to have everything anyone could ever want.

COACH: How could you find out more about him?

DOROTHY: Everyone knows about the Wizard. They all say he is great and powerful.

COACH: Even the great and powerful want something. Why do you think he wants the Witch's broom so badly?

DOROTHY: Perhaps he fears her and wants her gone?

COACH: Great point! That shows he doesn't have everything he wants. How else can you find out about his motivations?

DOROTHY: I bet that the Good Witch knows. I could ask her.

COACH: Great! Who else?

DOROTHY: Well, I can ask around the Emerald City. Also, my dog Toto is great at getting into places that people can't; maybe he can stumble onto some useful information.

COACH: Yes! Information is power in negotiations. Another thing negotiators do to gather information is due diligence. The Wizard is making some pretty big promises – getting you back to Kansas, giving a brain to the Scarecrow, giving a heart to the Tin Man, giving courage to the Cowardly Lion. How can you do due diligence to confirm he can even deliver on his promise? I mean, that's a tall order to promise to get you back to Kansas. What if he just disappears and doesn't deliver? What if all he has for your friends are some fake trinkets or glib words of wisdom? What if he isn't all that he appears to be?

DOROTHY: But he's the great and powerful Wizard of Oz!

COACH: Dorothy, one theme of our conversation today is that you can't go into negotiations with your eyes closed.

DOROTHY: So I should have asked him to prove that he can do what he is promising?

COACH: Here's another way of thinking about all of this....Negotiations are all about leverage. How can you gain leverage with the Wizard?

DOROTHY: You sure do ask challenging questions!

COACH: For instance, we talked about all of the people you know here in Oz who love you and want to help you. How can you use them to make your case to the Wizard, and maybe not have to risk your life to get that broom?

DOROTHY: Good point!

COACH: And it's not only people who can help you. Besides people, what other assets do you have?

DOROTHY: Assets?

COACH: Yes. For instance, when you killed the Wicked Witch of the East....

DOROTHY: I told you that was an accident!

COACH: Okay. When your house landed on the Wicked Witch of the East and she died, her slippers someone ended up on your feet. Then, the Good Witch told you that they have magic in them and to never take them off. What do you conclude about these slippers?

DOROTHY: I guess they have some strong magic, but I have no idea what they can do.

COACH: Who do you know who knows something about magic?

DOROTHY: Well, The Good Witch does, but she left before I could ask her more.

COACH: So what can you do now with the friends and assets you have, and your newfound attitude of being on equal footing, so that you can solve your problem and get back to Kansas?

DOROTHY: I guess I don't have to be so rash. I can do more of what you call due diligence, gather more information, talk to all of my friends and ask for their help, send Toto to sniff around, and figure out what these slippers can really do.

COACH: Progress!

Discussion:

The Wizard of Oz, and especially that first scene between Dorothy and the Wizard, is one of the best trainings available for sales people and negotiators.

It gets into all sorts of issues:

- limiting beliefs about negotiating or selling;
- the need to be on equal footing with the other party;
- how to increase leverage by having alternatives or other sources of influence; and
- the importance of planning a counter offer strategy.

At the same time, notice how Dorothy is not aware of her sources of leverage and

strength in the situation. Many clients tend to underestimate their power – whether facing a sales, influence, career strategy challenge. The coach can help the client recognize these assets.

With an effective coach, Dorothy might never have had to put her life on the line or kill the Wicked Witch of the West. The movie would not have been as interesting or as long, but Dorothy would have faced less risk and still been able to get what she wanted.

Coaching the Abrasive General Manager of an Imaginary Taxi Company to Improve Employee Engagement and Productivity

Imagine a coaching conversation with the unscrupulous, nasty boss of a taxi company in a big city, perhaps like Louie DePalma in the famous show *Taxi*....

COACH: What would be a great outcome for today's session?

GM: I want to figure out how to make more money. If you look around here, what do you see?

COACH: I see a few cars here in the garage, and a group of taxi drivers sitting and talking.

GM: Exactly. How can I make more money if my drivers are sitting around all day gabbing?

COACH: So if I'm hearing between the lines, you want to come up with a strategy to make your drivers more productive.

GM: Right. I want them out making money by doing what they are supposed to be doing, which is driving people around and collecting fares. Not yakking it up and trying to get laughs.

COACH: So what ideas do you have to make this happen?

GM: Beats me. I yell at them. I insult them. I make fun of them. Nothing seems to work.

COACH: This might tie back to that 360-degree feedback assessment we did last week. Remember? The one where you threw me out of your office after you heard the results?

GM: Well, there didn't seem to be much positive that they had to say.

COACH: Let's go back to those results. What do you remember hearing?

GM: According to my colleagues, I'm nasty, mean, verbally abusive, and often my morals are questionable. They even accuse me of sexual harassment of our lone female driver.

COACH: Now that you have had time to think about all of this, what do you conclude about that feedback and how it might relate to the productivity issues in the company?

GM: I've come to the conclusion that they totally get me. They are dead on about who and what I am. In fact, what they have done for me is pinpoint my strengths. You've been telling me about strengths-based leadership, about how if we can find out strengths, we can focus on them and use them to their fullest. Based on the 360, I've learned that I should build on my God-given ability to be nasty!

COACH: I'm not sure that this is the intent of the strengths-based leadership advocates.

GM: Then what do you suggest?

COACH: Let me ask you a bit of a provocative question: Have you earned the right to lead with this group?

GM: I beg your pardon? I am the general manager and dispatcher of this company. I control everything that goes on around here. Without me, this whole place shuts down.

COACH: How would the taxi drivers – the ones that you want to be more productive – answer the question about whether you have earned the right to lead?

GM: Okay, okay. You don't have to rub it in.

COACH: What I am seeing, I think, is an issue with engaging your team. Part has to do with your leadership style, and you seem to have some behavioral blind spots that we can address, if you are willing. At the same time, let's look at some of the key people you need to engage, and make sure you are using the best approach. Where should we start?

GM: Well, the driver who is most respected by the group is this guy who has given up on his life and now considers himself be a full-time, professional taxi driver. The rest of the crew is just driving taxis while they wait for other things to happen in their life. They're all a bunch of losers and they have no other choice but to drive taxis for me. The gang

comes to this guy for advice all the time. If I can get him to be more engaged, then the rest of these losers will come into line.

COACH: Later we can come back to your perceptions of the group as losers, because I think that might be part of the problem. Continuing our discussion about the informal leader, what do you think motivates him? How can you adapt your approach to be more aligned with the things that matter to him?

GM: He's pretty much given up on life, as far as I can tell. But I guess he is a decent guy, someone who cares about other people, and so the group loves him. He's pretty much the opposite of me.

COACH: What's the best strategy to engage him?

GM: Like I said, my strength is being nasty. I yell. I cheat. I insult.

COACH: How's that working for you?

GM: Okay, fair point. But if I try to be nice to this guy, I'll be faking it. It's not in me to be nice to him, or really to anyone, unless I want something from them. Plus, I think he's a big loser. They all are.

COACH: So you lie, cheat and manipulate in everything you do, but when it comes to being nice, you suddenly insist on being authentic?

GM: Yes. I have my standards and I have to draw the line somewhere.

COACH: Let's pause for a moment. There are a few issues that are coming up and I want to be sure we focus. First, you keep coming back to your belief that your team is a bunch of losers. That might have implications for how you act and come across to them, and how they respond to you when it comes to their productivity. Second, we can focus on each team member, especially this informal leader, and find a way to better engage them. Third, and probably related to both of these, we can pick a couple of simple behaviors that you can practice so that it becomes more natural for you to interact well with this team. Or, maybe, you have an idea about where to go from here. What do you want to work on?

GM: This is all very complicated. I like my simpler approach of yelling, insulting, and being nasty.

COACH: Which is more important to you – justifying the way you are now, or improving the productivity of the taxi company?

GM: Okay already. I get it. Let's work on whichever thing will get you out of here the fastest.

COACH: I'm not sure that's the best criteria for choosing. Let me run you through the approach for each. First, if you want to discuss your belief that your team is a group of losers, we need to explore the costs of that belief, reframe it to something more positive, and then make it a habitual way of perceiving your team. If we do that, new behaviors emerge that can be authentic and quite effective.

GM: That sounds like a lot of work.

COACH: It's not easy to make new habits. It can take six months to a year. You have to be committed. The results are well worth it, though. It can transform the way you and your team work together.

GM: Next.

COACH: Next is to do what we started doing. We discuss each team member, understand his style and motivations, and develop a strategy to engage him. We do this one person at a time.

GM: How long will this take?

COACH: Again, it takes time, because you are developing new styles of communicating. We develop an approach for each person, and it takes time to implement it because you are trying out new skills.

GM: And the third thing?

COACH: Based on the 360-degree feedback you received, we pick one or two simple behaviors – like smiling or saying kind words – and work to make those a habit. This process also takes six months to a year. The results are amazing, because you get to ask your team members for advice about how you are doing.

GM: That sounds like an awful idea.

COACH: I'm afraid there is nowhere to hide if you really want to change how you interact with people and how you engage them.

GM: This is all too much work. I have another idea.

COACH: Great! It is best when the client comes up with the approach!

GM: What I'm going to do is fire you first, and then I'm going to make a rule that drivers can't be in the garage unless the car is broken down or it is the start or end of the shift. Otherwise, they need to be driving the city and getting fares. At the same time, I'm going to hold back their pay unless they hit certain revenue goals. That will fix things. Now get out!

Discussion:

This general manager provides another example of a coaching client that few coaches would accept. He is unethical and not coachable. Regardless, the conversation does allow the coach to show off some methods for approaching issues related to employee engagement, along with perceptual and behavioral coaching.

What do you think worked and didn't work in this session? Do you think the coach made any progress? After all, the client did come up with an idea to improve productivity. It is a simple idea and, while Draconian, might get more immediate results than a lengthy behavioral or perceptual coaching process.

A few thoughts:

- Coaching leaders and managers can feel like untangling a knot. In this situation, the coach tugs at different parts of the knot: perceptual issues, behavioral issues, and situational coaching about engaging specific employees. This layered approach takes patience and the savvy to know when to stop tugging on one part of the knot and move to another. Often coach and client switch among different lines of inquiry to make progress.
- When the coach offers suggested approaches and solutions – whether at the

client's request or not -- the client often rejects them. Rather than debate with the client, use their response to your advantage. Now you can challenge the client to come up with his own ideas. For instance, "Well, given that you don't like my approach, it's your turn. What do you see as the best way to address your challenge?"

- One of the first questions, "So, what ideas do you have to make this happen?" is a great way to start a coaching session after the client shares his goals for the session or the coaching engagement. It is a high-level question that allows the coach to learn about the client's thinking.
- The question, "Have you earned the right to lead?" is a provocative question that shifts the focus from employees, colleagues, and managers to the client's own leadership. It is best to ask this question after you have established trust and know that the client is coachable.
- Coaching about employee engagement is tricky when the coach asks general questions about leadership style rather than focusing in on specific individuals to engage. You can't engage "them" all at once. Engagement requires a strategy to engage each employee or team member one at a time. That's because each person has unique aspirations, styles, and potential. Also, different employees have different levels of performance that need to be addressed in different ways.
- A number of coaches use various strengths-based approaches. Here, you see one weakness of these approaches. If a client has a significant behavioral issue that could derail his career, it is important to address that issue before it festers. The client in this imagined case is over-the-top in his nastiness, and one would hope that few organizations today would tolerate anything close to his style. However, in my coaching practice, I still see examples of people with serious blind spots. For instance in healthcare, it is not uncommon to meet physicians who have abrasive personalities. Their personalities are tolerated in the high-stakes operating suites, but when the physician transitions to an

administrative role, he often has work to do to adjust his style. In fact, there is a whole niche of coaching dedicated to what's called "disruptive physicians." Similarly, in the technology world, coaches often work with brilliant but extremely difficult company founders. In other words, while this case is fictional, some leaders have serious issues about attitude and behavior that need to be addressed in order for them to keep advancing.

Conflict Management between Two Underwater Creatures, One Lovable and Outgoing and the other Grumpy

The scene that follows is based on two underwater creatures who seem to be in constant conflict. They have different styles, motivations, and approaches to dealing with issues. One could imagine any number of famous characters that could benefit from this kind of coaching: Batman and Superman, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock during their early careers, The Three Stooges, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd, Laverne and Squiggy, SpongeBob and Squidworth, and so many more. Popular entertainment and literature is filled with characters that create tension.

In this case, you could imagine SpongeBob and Squidworth having the conversation that follows, although here we will call them Sea Creature 1 and Sea Creature 2.

COACH: The owner of the company suggested you could both benefit from a coach. Apparently you both are often in conflict, and customers are noticing?

SEA CREATURE 1: Good morning! I can't wait to get started.

SEA CREATURE 2: Yes, we are often in conflict, and *[pointing a finger at Sea Creature 1]* it's entirely his fault.

COACH: Before we start pointing fingers, let's get clear on intent. What would be a good outcome from our work together?

SEA CREATURE 2: It would be great if he would leave me alone and go work and live somewhere else.

COACH: That's a bit extreme. What would be a good outcome in terms of making your working relationship more effective?

SEA CREATURE 1: For me, this is the best job ever. I love the people here, including you.

COACH: That's much more positive.

SEA CREATURE 2: You are already taking his side.

COACH: The first step in resolving a conflict is being willing to resolve the conflict. I see that one of you is willing. What about you? *[Looks at Sea Creature 2]*.

SEA CREATURE 2: I guess, if it will bring me more peace and quiet.

COACH: So I can take that as a yes?

SEA CREATURE 2: Fine. Yes.

COACH: I interviewed each of you before this session to get your perspectives on what's going on. It seems like there is a disconnect because Sea Creature 1 really likes you, Sea Creature 2. He has great respect for you and wants you to be happy. However, Sea Creature 2, you seem to take a much darker view of the situation.

SEA CREATURE 2: He won't leave me alone. He is constantly knocking on my door at home. He drives me crazy at work. And he is always so happy and cheery for no reason at all. Sometimes he even breaks out into song because he is so happy, and I can't stand it when he does.

COACH: I'm glad you shared all of this. We are fortunate that there are statistically validated assessments that give us data about different people. That way, instead of getting frustrated by how they behave, we can understand their unique style and learn to work better with them. You both took the assessment I sent you. Would you like to hear some of the results, so that you can know each other better?

SEA CREATURE 1: Oh, yes!

SEA CREATURE 2: Fine.

COACH: Well, it looks like one of you is largely a logical, introverted person, has an attitude that might be considered skeptical, and makes decisions with a lot of analysis about risk. He is also more subdued in terms of energy level. Meanwhile, the other is largely intuitive, extroverted, very trusting and positive, and makes decision on the spur of the moment. Also, he tends to be off the chart in terms of energy level. So, when you hear this, what can you learn about how to work with each other better?

SEA CREATURE 2 [*Looking at Sea Creature 1*]: All of this data proves why he is so annoying.

SEA CREATURE 1: I don't see it that way at all. It takes all kinds to make a better world. That's why I am so happy that you and I work together and live next door.

COACH: Sea Creature 2, how can you use this information to get along better at work?

SEA CREATURE 2: I'm not sure but at least I have scientific proof about why he is so annoying.

COACH: You find people who are trusting, positive, spontaneous, and high-energy to be annoying?

SEA CREATURE 2: No, just this particular sea creature.

COACH: What do you appreciate about him?

SEA CREATURE 2: Well, one thing I can say for sure is that things are always interesting when he is around.

SEA CREATURE 1: Thank you. I appreciate that.

SEA CREATURE 2: Be quiet.

COACH: Let's keep building on this conversation. What do both of you have in common?

SEA CREATURE 2: Nothing.

SEA CREATURE 1: We both love our jobs at the company.

SEA CREATURE 2: Speak for yourself.

SEA CREATURE 1: We are both neighbors.

SEA CREATURE 2: Unfortunately.

COACH: Sea Creature 2, we are not going to make any progress if you keep being negative. Do you want to resolve this conflict or not?

SEA CREATURE 2: Okay, fine. But you keep ganging up on me. You don't know how annoying he can be!

COACH: So, what request can you make to him about how you work together that can make a positive change in your relationship? And please don't ask him to just leave you alone or disappear. You have to work together, like it or not.

SEA CREATURE 2: Fine. What I would like is for him to be more considerate of my personal space.

COACH: Perfect. Sea Creature 1, does his request make sense to you?

SEA CREATURE 1: I will do whatever it takes.

SEA CREATURE 2: It's simple. Stop pushing me to do things I don't want to do. Stop involving me in your stupid adventures. Stop knocking on my door at all hours of the night. Give me some space.

COACH: Can you give a specific example from work?

SEA CREATURE 2: Yes. It would be great if he would stick to his work in the kitchen and not disturb me when I am helping customers at the cash register.

COACH [to Sea Creature 1]: Is that something you can do?

SEA CREATURE 1: Sure, but I love the customers and I love seeing them eat my delicious food. So sometimes I come out to serve the food and entertain the customers.

COACH: How can you do that without being a distraction to your colleague?

SEA CREATURE 1: I will try.

COACH: What about you, Sea Creature 1? Do you have a request for Sea Creature 2 so that you work better together?

SEA CREATURE 1: I really like working with him and consider him to be a friend.

COACH: That is very nice. *[Looking at Sea Creature 2]* Did you want to respond to these very kind words?

SEA CREATURE 2: Whatever.

COACH: I sense there is some history between the two of you. What past issues need to be cleared up so we can move forward?

SEA CREATURE 2: Don't even get me started. I can't count all the times he has made my life miserable.

SEA CREATURE 1: I don't have any resentment at all. He is one of my dear friends.

COACH [to Sea Creature 2]: How willing are you to forgive your colleague for anything he might have done, intentionally or unintentionally?

SEA CREATURE 2: Not very willing. There is so much he has done to make my life miserable.

COACH: What would you like to do to clear this history up then? For instance, if you aren't willing to offer complete forgiveness, we can go through each grievance you have.

SEA CREATURE 2: No, I don't need to remember these things. Fine. I forgive you.

SEA CREATURE 1: Thank you! I would forgive you if there were anything about you that made me angry, but there isn't.

SEA CREATURE 2: Do you see what I mean about how annoying he is?

COACH: Maybe if we focus on something bigger than each of you we can get to some results. Let's talk about the customer. How can you both put aside your differences and adapt to each other's unique personalities to better serve your customers?

SEA CREATURE 2: I can serve the customers perfectly fine on my own. Every time he gets involved, things go horribly wrong.

SEA CREATURE 1: I love our customers!

COACH: It seems like one of you is in denial about any conflict, and the other is taking no responsibility for changing his own behavior. What will each of you give up, or commit to doing differently, to make things more workable?

SEA CREATURE 1: I promise to help my friend see that every day can be the best day ever.

SEA CREATURE 2: I can't believe I have to work here.

Discussion:

Conflict can emerge among colleagues for a number of reasons: different goals, different incentives, different styles, and some past event that has caused ongoing resentment.

This conversation pairs two very different personalities. As usual with cartoon characters, it is hard to produce specific results without changing the basic parameters of their personalities

Still, this conversation shows some questions to ask and lines of inquiry to pursue that can help to make progress when a client or clients face a conflict:

- “Are you willing to resolve the conflict?” This is an important starting point to confirm that both parties want to improve the relationship. Often one or both will say yes at the start of a session, yet it becomes clear later on that they didn’t mean it. In that case, the coach can call out the difference between what the clients said and how they are behaving. The question, “Would you rather be right or improve the relationship?” can often get things moving again.
- “What do you appreciate about each other?”
- “What do you know about the other person’s style, and how can you adapt to it?”
- “What motivates the other person, and how can you help him get it while also getting what you want?” (This questions was not asked above, but it can be a powerful question).
- “What happened in the past, if anything, that you need to clear up?” Some relationships have turned sour only because of some misunderstanding or issue from the past. By discussing it openly, sometimes the relationship improves.
- “How can you work together on a bigger goal that you both share (e.g., serving customers)?”

- “What request can you make of each other to improve the relationship?”

A second implication of the above conversation is that using data from a validated assessment tool can help the people involved in the conflict to learn more about each other, accept each other's styles, see the strengths that the other person(s) bring to the table, and learn to adapt.

Also, while it didn't happen in this case, it makes a lot of sense for the coach to interview each party to the conflict separately. This approach isn't always possible, because sometimes only one person wants coaching. However, when applicable, a series of separate interviews or coaching sessions helps the coach learn about the issues, determine how open to coaching both parties are, anticipate problems, help the parties involved to discover common ground, and plan a strategy when both parties come together.

Conflict Avoidance Coaching for Two Overly Polite Cartoon Rodents

The previous coaching conversation portrayed a conflict between two characters. But some organizational cultures and personal styles lean more towards conflict avoidance and so much politeness that it becomes difficult to get results. The following imagined coaching conversation with two overly polite cartoon rodents illustrates this point. If you remember the Goofy Gophers, the two characters that follow might ring a bell.

RODENT 1: Thank you so much for seeing us.

RODENT 2: Yes, yes. We can't thank you enough. It is such a pleasure to be working with you.

COACH: Thank you. I appreciate it very much. What outcome do you both want to achieve?

RODENT 1: Please, you tell him.

RODENT 2: No, no. You go first.

RODENT 1: No, please. I must insist. I asked you first. You go.

RODENT 2: Very well then. Our manager tells us that we are too polite. Now, we can't imagine that anyone would ever have a complaint with someone for being too polite.

RODENT 1: Yes, can you imagine someone having a complaint about being too polite?

COACH: Politeness is a virtue. Could your manager perhaps be suggesting that you are so polite that you don't always get results?

RODENT 1 *[Looking at Rodent 2]:* What do you think?

RODENT 2 *[Looking at Rodent 1]:* I'm not sure. What do you think?

RODENT 1: Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say that.

COACH: I'm a bit confused. Your manager shared that, compared to your colleagues, you both are at the bottom of the productivity reports. How willing are you to improve those results?

RODENT 1: Very willing. We are always very willing.

RODENT 2: Yes. Of course. We definitely want to make our manager happy.

COACH: Great! What are your ideas to be more productive?

RODENT 1: Well, this is a conundrum.

RODENT 2: Yes, to say the least.

COACH: May I make an observation?

RODENT 1: Yes, please!

RODENT 2: I concur!

COACH: I get the impression that you both are so polite that you sometimes avoid the difficult conversations required to move things forward. By avoiding conflict with all of that politeness, it becomes difficult to say what needs to be said and get results.

RODENT 1: Oh my.

RODENT 2: We are so sorry about this!

COACH: What ways can you see to move towards getting results, but still without damaging relationships?

RODENT 1 *[To Rodent 2]:* Your turn, please. I've been going first this whole time. I don't want to dominate the conversation.

RODENT 2: Oh no, you are not dominating, not at all. Please, you go.

RODENT 1: That just wouldn't be right. Please, we await your ideas.

RODENT 2: I must say I am drawing a blank. Perhaps as our esteemed coach you can tell us what we can do?

COACH: Well, coaching is really about having the client have their own insights. That way, you are the ones who are accountable for new behaviors and attitudes.

RODENT 1 [*Clapping*]: Brilliant!

RODENT 2: Yes. Very well said!

COACH: Who do you know who gets results without hurting other people's feelings or offending them?

RODENT 1: Great question, yet again.

RODENT 2: You are an amazing coach.

COACH: Thank you. Now could I please trouble you to answer my question?

RODENT 1: Of course. Thank you for that push.

RODENT 2: Yes, we really appreciate it!

RODENT 1: It makes all the difference.

RODENT 2: Yes, yes! Thank you!

[Silence]

COACH: I get the sense that neither of you really wants to say anything other than polite platitudes. Look, you have projects you are working on, correct?

RODENT 1: I love the alliteration. "Polite platitudes." Well done.

RODENT 2: A coach and a poet. How wonderful! You are amazing!

COACH: Please give me an example of a project that might be stalled right now.

RODENT 1: Oh, no, I wouldn't want to talk out of school about others on our team. We are delighted and honored to work with our fellow colleagues.

RODENT 2: Yes, it is a true privilege.

COACH: But your projects face more overruns and delays than any other projects in the company. Why do you think that is?

RODENT 1: Great question. You really make us think.

RODENT 2: Yes, you are profound in your wisdom. I learn so much from you.

COACH: For instance, here is a project that you did for a customer a year ago, and yet you haven't even asked the customer for payment. How can you be a bit more assertive and get paid for your work?

RODENT 1: You are right on about how important it is to get paid.

RODENT 2: Getting paid is great. Excellent point again! Direct hit!

COACH: Not to force the issue, but it is your job to ask for payment. Which of you can ask the customer for money?

RODENT 1: Yes, one or both of us should do that.

RODENT 2 *[Looking at Rodent 1]:* Which do you think? One or both?

RODENT 1 *[Looking at Rodent 2]:* You decide. This is something you are so good at.

RODENT 2: But not without your help.

COACH: Let's say you both ask together. What would you say to the customer?

RODENT 1: Excellent question. I think that we should take some time and make a plan.

RODENT 2: Perhaps we can plan with you, as our coach. Or alone. Whichever you think is best.

COACH: I give up.

Discussion:

Leaders and managers sometimes lean heavily on one of three areas:

- Ego. They focus too much on how they look, being right, having status and prestige, and getting credit.

- Results. They get results at all costs, including damaging relationships that matter long term.
- Relationships. They avoid tough conversations in order to preserve relationships, and at the cost of results.

In the above dialogue, the two rodents are so focused on protecting relationships that they can't get anything done. As with many cartoons, they seem programmed to the extremes, and yet they still illustrate the need for balancing these three elements.

A coach with non-cartoon, multi-dimensional characters can work with clients to balance ego, results, and relationships.

Bad Coaching from One of the World's Most Famous Detectives

This imagined coaching conversation switches gears. Here, the coach is the character, and he does a great job demonstrating a couple of bad coaching habits.

DETECTIVE: What seems to be the issue?

CLIENT: My career is at a standstill, and I'd like some coaching.

DETECTIVE: Elementary, my dear client! I can tell by your dress that your career has stalled because you are too casual.

CLIENT: Not quite. Today is casual Friday. I think it has to do with some other things.

DETECTIVE: Of course. You are in constant conflict with your manager and he is holding you back out of resentment. I just read a study showing that conflict with one's manager is a huge reason for career derailment.

CLIENT: Um, no. I have a strong relationship with my manager. Also, I didn't say my career has derailed. I'm doing fine and want to do better and advance.

DETECTIVE: Yes, I see that now. What you need is more training.

CLIENT: I haven't received much value from our training programs. I was thinking what I need is some more challenging assignments to show what I can do, perhaps something international.

DETECTIVE: Hmmm....Yes, you should take an assignment in Poland. That's an emerging economy where you can really show what you can do.

CLIENT: My company doesn't have a presence in Poland.

DETECTIVE: Exactly. You should build a presence in Poland. Then you will really show your manager what you can do.

CLIENT: There's an opening for a General Manager in our Brazilian office. I wanted to discuss the pros and cons of applying for that role.

DETECTIVE: Yes. I should have noticed by the photo you have of a Brazilian beach. From this I deduce that you are in love and your lover lives in Brazil. You should take this role to complete your life.

CLIENT: That's a postcard of Cancun, Mexico, and someone sent it to me. I'm happily married with kids.

DETECTIVE: I feel like you are not being coachable....

Discussion:

It is easy to see when another coach is directing the conversation too much, not listening, and blaming the client for not being coachable when the conversation goes poorly. They act more like a stereotypical detective than a coach.

What about you? When in your coaching do you tend to jump in with an answer, instead of probing more deeply with the client?

Coaching on Process Improvement for the Bank Manager in *It's a Wonderful Life*

I can't watch the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* without thinking about the 2007 financial crisis. In modern times, George Bailey and his leadership team, especially Uncle Billy, would be arrested for criminal negligence. In the conversation that follows, a coach tries to work with George to make changes.

COACH: George, I'm so glad that your building and loan company has been saved by the people in Bedford Falls and that you didn't jump off that bridge. At the same time, I've been hired by the regulators to provide some executive coaching to you to make sure this never happens again.

GEORGE: Great. That was a close one and I'm glad that Mr. Potter wasn't able to shut us down.

COACH: As I understand it, your Uncle Billy lost \$8,000 of the building and loan company's money. What are you doing to make sure this kind of negligence doesn't happen in the future?

GEORGE: Uncle Billy can be a bit scattered sometimes but he's a good fellow.

COACH: Okay, but what kinds of processes will you put in place so that nobody just leaves thousands of dollars around where someone can take them?

GEORGE: Yes, yes. Processes. I'll get on that. We're more of a family business, a friendly establishment. We have faith in the goodness of human nature.

COACH: I'm not sure that faith is a sound business strategy. When can you commit to showing me some new processes for handling big bundles of cash that will satisfy the regulators?

GEORGE: Fine. Next time we meet.

COACH: The regulators have noticed that you lend money to almost anyone in Bedford Falls and, when they can't pay, you are quite generous in extending terms. They are worried about whether you are making loans that people can't afford.

GEORGE: I don't like your insinuations. These are hard working people. We are putting them into homes. Sometimes they get a bit backed up, and we work with them. That's why they all stepped up to help us pay back the \$8,000 that Uncle Billy lost.

COACH: The regulators are concerned that maybe they were donating money out of the mortgage funds you provided to them. That's a red flag. Anyway, I am being paid by the regulators to coach you. What kind of process changes can you make so that you are making good loans and not setting people up so that they can't repay you?

GEORGE: Fine. I'll get a plan to the regulators by the next time we meet, along with a plan for new ways to manage cash.

COACH: Great. I look forward to following up with you next week during our next meeting. Meanwhile, what are you doing about Uncle Billy specifically?

GEORGE: Like I said, he's a good fellow. He felt just awful about almost putting our building and loan company out of business, putting me at risk of going to jail, giving Mr. Potter control of the town, and making me almost jump off that bridge.

COACH: Okay, but again, what specifically are you doing about Uncle Billy?

GEORGE: Like what?

COACH: Well, I want you to decide on the best approach. However, if you need some general ideas, usually when an employee shows gross negligence and almost causes an entire bank to fold, they are fired, if not sued or sent to the authorities. At a minimum, they are severely disciplined and put in a lesser position somewhere where they can't cause too much trouble.

GEORGE: I can't fire him. He's family, for crying out loud! But he is getting a bit older. I'll make sure he isn't in a position to handle the company's cash. We all learned valuable lessons from this experience, and I think Uncle Billy understands that what he did was a mistake.

COACH: I'm getting the idea that all of these issues go a bit deeper than just processes and decisions about employees. Can we look at your own leadership for a moment? How do you need to show up as a leader so that the building and loan company thrives, doesn't take unnecessary risks, and continues to be in a strong financial position to help the people of Bedford Falls?

GEORGE: Here at the building and loan, we have a friendly, family-oriented culture. My father started this company for the people of Bedford Falls, and I intend to continue his values. That's all there is to it.

COACH: How committed are you to leading this company?

GEORGE: Now look here. I don't know what you are suggesting, but I don't like your tone. You know as well as I do that my original goal in life was to travel the world and build skyscrapers. That hasn't quite worked out. But I've found the love of my life and, thanks to a Guardian Angel, I've realized that I make a difference. I matter. And leading this company is something I've come to accept and love.

COACH: You see angels?

GEORGE: Never mind. Keep going on with wherever you were going with this line of thought.

COACH: Let me suggest a distinction. In management, there is micromanaging, appropriate delegation, and abdication. When a bank somehow misplaces enough money to shut down, and the CEO – you – suggests that not much needs to change, how would you describe your management approach?

GEORGE: I see what you are saying, but I am not going to become a jerk like Mr. Potter.

COACH: Tell me more about why you keep mentioning this Mr. Potter.

GEORGE: You don't want to know how I know this, but if he ever gets control of this town, it will be a disaster.

COACH: Can I ask a provocative question? I get the idea that you are falling into one of the temptations that Patrick Lencioni discusses in *The Five Temptations of the CEO*. Here is my question: Which would you rather be: popular and well-liked, or respected?

GEORGE: I love this town and everyone in it...

Discussion:

This is an interesting coaching case because it gets to the heart of changing an institution. Does George Bailey have what it takes to put processes in place, hold employees accountable, and create a culture that balances a family atmosphere with appropriate controls?

Notice that the conversation starts with a pure business-oriented focus, specifically about how to put in place sound processes. Often a coaching conversation starts with logical issues, and then it becomes clear that the coach has to move beneath the surface. Here, this means discussing George's style with the employee who caused the problem, and then how he shows up as a leader in general. George might even have to confront the possibility that he abdicates as a manager, and that he needs to be more forceful while still maintaining a friendly culture.

He resists discussing these areas, and the coach will have his hands full identifying ways for George to balance his need to be liked and popular with the regulatory requirements of running a building and loan company that stays solvent.

If you took over the coaching from here, what would be your next line of inquiry?

Coaching a Lesser Superhero to Develop a Strong Personal Brand

COACH: I understand that you want to develop a stronger brand?

SUPERHERO: Yes. It's really frustrating for me. My friends all have amazing powers. Some can fly. Some have mutations that make them amazing warriors. Some are billionaires who have developed technologies that turn them into dangerous weapons. A few turn into massive monsters when they are angry. Some even mimic the superhuman powers of insects and animals. But I'm just a normal human who happens to be really good at archery.

COACH: And you are not happy with your brand now?

SUPERHERO: No one even knows who I am. How can I compete with people who can control the weather, travel through time, or shoot spider webs?

COACH: Okay, but there are superheroes without super-human powers, and who have great brands. For instance, I'm thinking about Batman, Wonder Woman, and Iron Man, to name a few. What can you learn from them?

SUPERHERO: None of these are good examples. Batman's got some really dark stuff going on in his head. I'm not tortured like him. I'm also not a billionaire. I am a regular guy with some military experience. I have a wife and kids. Wonder Woman is human, but she has some magic bracelets and an invisible plane. Iron Man is a lot like Batman – he has unlimited money to make his toys. Again, I'm a normal guy who didn't come from some sort of hidden Amazonian civilization and who doesn't own a Fortune 500 Company.

COACH: Okay, then. Let's start with your strengths. What are your top strengths?

SUPERHERO: I told you. I'm really good at archery. I can't believe these guys even let me hang out with them, now that I think about it.

COACH: Say more about that. Why do they let you hang out with them?

SUPERHERO: Well, I am fearless and tenacious. I'm a good lookout, or scout. I am a great team player. And they trust me.

COACH: Those are pretty interesting attributes. In addition, how can you turn the fact that you are a regular guy into a strength?

SUPERHERO: Well, unlike those other superheroes, I'm just a regular guy, like you say. Maybe I give people hope that they can be superheroes, too.

COACH: So what do you conclude so far?

SUPERHERO: Maybe my brand isn't about the archery. I like this idea of branding myself as a regular guy with extraordinary courage, who has earned the trust of the top superheroes on the planet.

COACH: Wonderful! What about how you present yourself to the public, like the way you dress?

SUPERHERO: I used to wear these green tights and a green shirt, like a Robin Hood kind of thing. But I think that looks kind of stupid in the modern age.

COACH: So what can you do instead?

SUPERHERO: Well, I like riding motorcycles. I was thinking of going more for some leather, kind of toughening up the image that way.

COACH: These are great thoughts. Who can you go to test out some of these ideas?

Discussion:

Personal branding is a wonderful issue to address with clients through coaching. The approach is to help the client identify their strengths, come up with their unique advantages, and develop a consistent brand – from messaging to personal appearance.

If a minor superhero can benefit from coaching on his brand, then we all can.

What other lines of inquiry would you want to cover with this client, or with anyone seeking an improved personal brand?

Coaching Ralph Kramden of *The Honeymooners* on Starting a Business

In the classic television show *The Honeymooners*, Ralph Kramden was famous for making big mistakes with his money. In one episode, his wife adopts a puppy and buys some dog food made out of choice horse meat to feed it. When Ralph's neighbor Norton finds the food and tries it, he loves it and shares it with Ralph. Ralph immediately believes that he has a million-dollar idea. One imagines what would have happened if he had hired a business coach.

COACH: I understand you want some coaching on a business venture?

RALPH: Yes. I have another one of my million-dollar ideas and thought that hiring a business coach would be a good idea.

COACH: Wonderful! What's the idea?

RALPH: My wife has made this incredible spread that I am going to call "Krammar's Delicious Mystery Appetizer" and that I can market for millions. I just need some capital.

COACH: Why is it a mystery appetizer?

RALPH: You see, my neighbor Norton found it sitting here in my kitchen. I guess my wife made it for us. It's a gold mine! We don't know the recipe, but we know it is delicious. We just need capital for production, and off we go!

COACH: But you don't know the ingredients?

RALPH: Who cares about that? It's delicious!

COACH: What are the costs to buy the ingredients?

RALPH: You are a small thinker for a business coach, aren't you? What I'm telling you is that this stuff is delicious and is going to make us millions. I just need an investor who can get us into production.

COACH: How much of an investment do you figure you need?

RALPH: That's not how it works. Once I find someone with money, they'll set us up with as much money as I need and I'll be on my way.

COACH: I'm not sure that's an accurate description of how it works. Regardless, what are you willing to give them in exchange for their investment?

RALPH: Why, a share in the business, of course! They're going to be even richer than they are now!

COACH: How much of a share?

RALPH: Again, you with the details.

COACH: Well, I'm trying to help you figure out some key numbers you need to know. You are going to have some fixed costs if you set up a factory. You are going to have some direct costs to pay for the ingredients. If you don't know how much all of this will cost, you don't know how many units you have to sell to make a profit. You also can't estimate the worth of the business when you go to potential investors.

RALPH: Oh, the profits will come all right. I need to let you taste this stuff. Then you'll know immediately what I'm talking about. This business is worth whatever a gold mine is worth.

COACH: Who are your suppliers?

RALPH: You're not listening to me. This is a HUGE opportunity.

COACH: So you don't even have suppliers. Let's look at timing then. How long will it take to ramp up and start being cash positive?

RALPH: I expect that with the right investor we will be profitable as soon as he signs the check and we start manufacturing.

COACH: How will you market this mystery appetizer?

RALPH: It will sell itself. You just have to taste it and you are hooked! Every grocer in the country is going to want this stuff.

COACH: It seems to me that you are not willing to look at the numbers, create a supply chain strategy, or even or create a marketing and distribution plan.

RALPH: I'm a visionary. It's not in my nature to worry about the details.

COACH: I'm not sure that what you are being is visionary. I think you are being a bit foolhardy.

RALPH: I can see that hiring you has been a big mistake and a waste of my time and money. I am going to my boss, Mr. Marshall, to ask him for some capital. Once he gives it me, you'll see clearly who is right and who doesn't know what he's talking about.

COACH: I imagine so.

Discussion:

The above imagined conversation explains why I don't work with many unfunded start ups. Most won't succeed, most don't have the money to pay a business coach, and most of the founders are overly optimistic and not especially open to coaching.

Instead, I prefer to coach well-funded, growing businesses. They – or their investors – can pay for coaching on how to get the business to the next level of maturity, as well as how to coach the founder(s) to build a strong team, strong culture, and present the company's story effectively to additional investors.

What about you? In what circumstances, if any, would you be willing to coach a start-up still in the idea phase?

Coaching a Post-Apocalyptic Military Commander to Influence the Remaining Humans that His Newest Recruit is “The One” that Prophecy Predicts

How much fun would it be to coach Morpheus of *The Matrix* on influence skills? Recall that not everyone believes that Neo is The One, despite Morpheus’s faith and best efforts. The following conversation is a good example of how to coach a client during high-stakes influence situations.

MORPHEUS: I need to influence the human race that Neo is The One.

COACH: The One?

MORPHEUS: Yes, the human who saves all of humanity by taking on the machines.

COACH: How have you been influencing people now that Neo is The One?

MORPHEUS: The Oracle suggests that he might be The One, and I have faith that he is The One.

COACH: So you are basing your entire influence strategy on a computer-generated Oracle and your faith?

MORPHEUS: Correct.

COACH: Let’s start with the politics of the situation. Influence is a political game. You need enough people on your side to win. Who is on your side?

MORPHEUS: Well, right now, just me, really. And The Oracle certainly is interested. My crew is skeptical, except maybe for Trinity, but I think she just has a thing for Neo. Even Neo doesn’t believe that he is The One. The Council thinks this is all a bunch of magical mumbo jumbo.

COACH: Perhaps we can pick one person you need to get on your side and start there. Influence happens one person at a time, and you need a different strategy to influence each person. If you pick one person that you need to influence, I can take you through a process that will help you achieve your goal.

MORPHEUS: Okay, how about if we start with the leader of the Council?

COACH: Sure. What would be a specific, measurable goal that tells you that you successfully influenced him?

MORPHEUS: He agrees that Neo is The One, of course.

COACH: What is the best way to influence this person? In other words, what's in it for him?

MORPHEUS: Well, the survival of the entire human race is sort of a big deal.

COACH: So what are some reasons you can give him that Neo is The One, besides just talking about faith and the Oracle?

MORPHEUS: None, yet. I'm only just training him now. But once everyone sees what he can do in the Matrix, then that will convince them.

COACH: So he has amazing talents?

MORPHEUS: He will. I am sure. Of course, right now his training has just started, and so he fell off the building when he tried to jump across the gap to the rooftop next door. But everyone fails the first time.

COACH: You have had other people who you thought were The One?

MORPHEUS: Yes, but they didn't work out.

COACH: And you are sure that this Neo guy is The One, even though he couldn't jump either?

MORPHEUS: It's early yet. I know that he is The One.

COACH: Okay, but again, you need reasons that matter to the other person. What reasons can you give to the member of the Council you mentioned?

MORPHEUS: Like I said, if he accepts Neo as The One, then he can have confidence that humans will be saved from the machines.

COACH: What would he say to that logic?

MORPHEUS: He would say that he has more faith in a military strategy, not this mystical prophecy stuff. He would say that Neo is untested, and could easily be yet another failure in my attempts to find The One.

COACH: How would you respond to these objections?

MORPHEUS: I tell him that he – and everyone else -- will know that Neo is The One once he gets into the Matrix and starts taking on the agents. Wait and see.

COACH: Is it possible that your goal to influence people that Neo is The One is premature? What might be a more near-term goal that is more realistic?

MORPHEUS: Well, at least they should keep an open mind. Maybe once they see what Neo can do, they will believe.

COACH: Would you like to switch the goal and go from there?

MORPHEUS: Maybe that's a good idea, even though I know that Neo is The One. You don't seem to have any faith, either, and I'm not sure I can continue to use you as my coach if you don't....

Discussion:

Coaching clients to influence people in high-stakes situations can be a powerful coaching solution.

In this case, the client learns that his goal might be premature given the facts of the situation. He chooses a better goal.

From there, coach and client can use the following process to help the client prepare:

1. Confirm the goal, based on the person being influenced.

2. Understand everything relevant about the other person, in order to find the best approach to influence him. For instance, what are his goals and motivations? What incentives might matter? What pressures? What are his values? What is his vision for the future? Would it make more sense to just ask the other person what it will take to get his support?
3. Once the client chooses an approach, ask about the objections the other person will raise. Plan to address those.
4. Determine where to have the conversation.
5. Consider tactics in case the conversation takes a turn for the worse. For instance, what happens if the client gets emotional, or new facts emerge?
6. Role play. Role play almost always helps the client strengthen his approach, be more concise, and eliminate conversations that won't go anywhere.
7. For issues with many stakeholders, like this one, draw a political map and identify pockets of support, resistance, and neutrality. Develop a strategy to get enough people on the client's side.
8. Repeat steps one through six above for each person. As the coach notes, you influence one person at a time. Each person has different reasons and incentives that matter to him or her.

Change Leadership at ACME in Response to Defective Products

COACH: As I understand it, you are experiencing challenges leading change at your company?

CEO: Yes. It seems that many of our products are not working the way they are designed. We are getting complaints.

COACH: What makes you want coaching?

CEO: My product managers are resisting.

COACH: How so?

CEO: Well, take one of our most popular products, our rocket-powered roller skates. When our biggest customer, a coyote in the Southwestern USA, purchased a pair of these skates, they launched without warning and caused the coyote to fly over a cliff. When the coyote tried again, he was propelled into a rock wall. Unfortunately, the product manager for these skates is not taking kindly to the need to focus more on quality.

COACH: What are his reasons for resisting the change?

CEO: He says that his quality is fantastic, according to how we measure it at the company. You see, when a customer puts an order into the mailbox, he often receives his product within one second. We have developed technology to deliver our products almost instantly. Our shipping process makes Amazon's delivery time look glacial.

COACH: And this manager focuses on your delivery time but not product safety or quality?

CEO: Yes. It's the same with the product manager of our ACME Leg Muscle Vitamins. Once again, the coyote, our biggest customer, purchased this product from us, and ended up getting flattened by a truck. Our legal liability costs are going to be the end of us if we don't fix our quality. But again, this product manager doesn't seem to care. He

says that our mission includes having fun, and now he insists on creating products with comical effects.

COACH: So one issue is about measuring delivery time instead of product safety and quality, and another is about clarity about your mission?

CEO: I think that's accurate. It's the same with all of our product managers – whether the manager of the ACME jet bike, the ACME grease, the ACME female roadrunner costume, the ACME giant mouse trap, the ACME iron birdseed pellets and giant ACME magnet, the ACME do-it-yourself rocket sled kit, or the ACME bed springs. Don't even get me started on our ACME giant rubber band or ACME boomerang! The managers of all of these products have some reason or another to keep their products exactly the way they are – regardless of the suffering they cause.

COACH: Who on your management team supports the change?

CEO: I feel totally alone. It's almost like I am in some sort of joke that I don't get, like ACME is part of some sort of show and exists exclusively for the pleasure of an audience that I can't perceive.

COACH: That's kind of an existential thought. How about if we get back to some more practical solutions? You've identified a couple of root causes so far. What are your ideas to make the change process move forward?

CEO: So far, what I've been doing is walking around the plant and telling each manager what I expect.

COACH: And?

CEO: It's not going well. One manager put ACME bird seed in my tuna sandwich. Another detonated one of our ACME bombs in my office. A third laid down one of our ACME instant roads out of our parking lot and I ended up driving into a lake. If we don't do something soon, I'm afraid that the coyote will stop ordering from us, and he represents 87% of our sales!

COACH: What ideas can you think of that build on your initial observations? You said you are measuring delivery speed, but not quality, for instance. And you said that the mission is being misinterpreted.

CEO: One idea is to measure how often our customers fall off cliffs, get hit by trucks, or squished by anvils. Then we can take that information and set up a new reward system based on quality and safety.

COACH: Great idea. If you measure it you can manage it. What else?

CEO: Well, I think I need to reach out personally to our biggest customer and talk to him. That coyote's purchases over the years have put my three kids through private school. I think we should get his input. I also want to thank him for his patience and years of loyalty.

COACH: I love that idea, too. What else?

CEO: Maybe I need to do a better job educating people about what our mission really means and stands for.

COACH: So let's summarize. If you were going to identify the one or two key habits that could make the changes you want start moving forward, what would they be?

CEO: Definitely measuring product safety and reliability, and then rewarding our product managers on how well that meet up to the safety and reliability standards we set. I also want to be more involved with our biggest customer.

COACH: What does this mean for you and how you lead?

CEO: I need to stop putting up with the insubordination of some of these managers. I have a great idea for that, and it involves pouring some of our famous ACME glue on their chairs and keeping them right where I can see them.

Discussion:

Leading change is hard. Executives who lead change can benefit from having an objective coach. That way, they can bounce around ideas and share concerns in a confidential and a safe environment, with no political agendas involved.

Some of the themes that come up when coaching leaders about change include:

- Shift the client to focus on key habits and what to measure. Here, the company emphasizes delivery time and not safety or reliability, and so it is no wonder that products are defective. You can't manage what you don't measure.
- Challenge the client to consider his own leadership behaviors and how these behaviors might need to change.
- Discern who supports the change, who doesn't, and who is on the fence. That way, the client can build momentum among supporters, enlist those who are still on the fence, and neutralize those who are resisting.

What other lines of inquiry would you want to pursue with a leader who is facing resistance to change from his organization?

Coaching Dr. Jekyll, Disruptive and Abrasive Scientist

There is now a field of coaching dedicated to disruptive and abrasive managers. The clients are typically superstars with highly valued skills. However, they also have behavioral blind spots that cause them to come across as abrasive, even disruptive. For instance, some coaches have an entire practice devoted to working with physicians who try to cross over to hospital administration, but lack the emotional intelligence to do so. Similarly, some sales executives generate huge numbers for their companies, but also feel that they can behave however they wish.

There are archetypes for these types of people throughout the fictional world, people who sometimes transform into monsters. Examples include The Incredible Hulk, Beast Boy, Hellboy, and of course, Dr. Jekyll and his nefarious alter-ego Mr. Hyde.

COACH: What would make today's coaching session the best hour of your week?

DR. JEKYLL: I need your help. I feel like I am turning into a monster.

COACH: Well, let's not go too far with hyperbole. However, I have conducted a 360-degree verbal assessment with some of your colleagues. It does seem that at certain times you do exhibit behaviors that are not productive.

DR. JEKYLL: I used to have this under control. But now it's like my dark side is taking over.

COACH: I love that metaphor. Sometimes we have behaviors and we can't control them. Fortunately, I can introduce you to a behavioral coaching process that works well with people facing your condition. By the way, it's not an uncommon situation. Many smart, accomplished professionals like you have some abrasive or disruptive behaviors.

DR. JEKYLL: I don't think you understand. I am pretty sure I am murdering people.

COACH: I like that you are showing some awareness about your behavior. One of the first things I want you to do is take notes about when you feel angry. Keep track of any

patterns that you notice, like whether certain people or types of meetings trigger the behavior.

DR. JEKYLL: This even happens at home, when I am sleeping. I wake up the next day and know that I did something awful.

COACH: I'm an executive coach, not a dream analyst. You do raise a good point, though. If you are having nightmares about your behavior and your anger, I can also refer you to a good therapist I know, while we work on behaviors at work. Together, we can make a lot of progress.

DR. JEKYLL: So how will you help me? What is this behavioral coaching process?

COACH: It's quite simple and foolproof, really. What we do is choose one behavior that you can turn into a habit.

DR. JEKYLL: Like not murdering people?

COACH: That's too figurative. We need to pick something simple, like taking deep breaths when you feel stress, or smiling more frequently. Then we can layer in a variety of ways to make the behavior a habit.

DR. JEKYLL: I hardly think that smiling more often is going to keep me from turning into a monster.

COACH: Let me finish. Once we pick a behavior, every week we will meet for support. And every week we will add a new tool to help you make the behavior a habit.

DR. JEKYLL: I think what I really need to do is develop a potion that keeps me as I am.

COACH: Well, the "potion" here is based on simple, proven cognitive psychology. You see, the first thing we do is have you take notes about when you are tempted to let your unproductive behaviors – the monster as you say – show up. Then we will look at what is triggering your response and deal with those things. For instance, it might be that when you are with a certain person, these behaviors are more tempting. Perhaps you are tired or hungry during a certain time of day, and lose your will. Until we have data, we won't know for sure.

DR. JEKYLL: I have been collecting data for a year now.

COACH: Excellent! The next thing we can do is get you to ask a few of your more supportive colleagues at work to support you. They can encourage you when you show the new behavior, and gently prod you when the old, ineffective behaviors show up again.

DR. JEKYLL: I'm afraid I don't have many colleagues left. They tend to die when they stay around me too long.

COACH: Yes, it is not easy to take advice from our friends and colleagues. I can show you how to receive advice and feedback productively. From there, there are many techniques we can try to keep supporting you as you make this new behavior a habit.

DR. JEKYLL: This is so painful to go through.

COACH: It is very stressful. In fact, stress is one of the biggest reasons why we lose control over our behaviors. One strategy we will build into our coaching is to find out how you can best relieve stress. That way, when you are tempted to go back to your old, abrasive behaviors, you have space to choose more productive ways.

DR. JEKYLL: I don't know about this.

COACH: That's the perfect attitude! Not knowing! Other things we will try might include positive affirmations, self-talk, pre-planning, visualization, using a vision, and anchoring positive emotions to the new behavior while anchoring painful emotions to the old behaviors. All of this is proven, and as you are a doctor, I assume you are familiar with the literature.

DR. JEKYLL: This seems too simple. You just don't understand. Some people literally die when they see me turn into this monster. I don't do anything to them, and they just die.

COACH: Yes, and that's why we also want to build in some emotional intelligence training. If you can read people better, you can learn to interact with them better. That way, instead of dying as you say so poetically, they respond positively to you.

DR. JEKYLL: *[Sighs]*

COACH: Excellent. Well, we should get started. So, which behavior do you want to choose to make a habit? Smiling more? Looking people in the eye? Taking deep breaths and relaxing when people annoy you? What's the one behavior that you think will have the

most impact when it comes to keeping you from turning into that monster you say you become?

DR. JEKYLL: I feel stressed now, like the monster is starting to come out. You need to leave now!

COACH: No, I am your coach and will stand by you as you achieve your aspirations. This is a great opportunity to jump right into the process. Now, please sit back down. Hey! Stop coming towards me with that look in your eye....

Discussion:

In the above conversation, the coach tries hard to roll out a behavioral coaching process. It seems, however, that this particular client might need much, much more than a coach to handle his issues. Also, the coach doesn't listen well. He doesn't respond to the cues that the client is giving about the magnitude of his situation.

In the real world, behavioral coaching is a great approach to work with executives and managers to make more productive behaviors habitual. Often this work also leads to handling underlying perceptions and beliefs that support the old behaviors.

The process is not glamorous. It takes six to twelve months to help a client change a behavior in the workplace. However, the results can be significant. The client learns new behaviors. He addresses specific situations that have gone poorly in the past. He also gets comfortable receiving feedback and advice from colleagues, and then using that feedback to keep improving.

If you don't use a behavioral coaching process in your coaching, you should consider building it in to what you do.

What do you learn about coaching from the case of working with Dr. Jekyll?

Coaching on Thinking/Communication Flexibility for an Ultra-Fast Superhero

Some coaching clients have a unique communication and/or thinking style. This style makes it hard to adapt to others and vice versa. Let's imagine this scenario playing out with one of the many superheroes who move at lightning fast speeds, an apt metaphor for executives and managers who think quickly and communicate with a bottom-line style.

COACH: You are frustrated because other people can't seem to keep up with you?

SUPERHERO: Exactly. It drives me nuts to have to slow down for them.

COACH: Your situation is common. Many high achievers get annoyed by other people. One thing that works in this situation is to review some data about your thinking and communication styles compared to others.

SUPERHERO: Go ahead, but make it quick.

COACH: You completed a couple of assessments last week, including DiSC and the ProfileXT. I assume you reviewed the results. Briefly, the DiSC assessment showed that you are a driver and you like to get to the bottom line. This means that people who need more step-by-step instructions will frustrate you, and that to them, you might come across as impatient. Also, it might seem to them that they need to read your mind to know what you are saying.

SUPERHERO: Yes, agreed. What about the other assessment?

COACH: The ProfileXT compares you to other people in similar functions. Here, we learn that your energy level is off the chart. You can do multiple tasks while others tend to do one thing at a time, and need more handholding to get things done. Also, your thinking styles are also a couple of standard deviations away from the norm. This means you process much more quickly than most people. What do you take away from these assessments?

SUPERHERO: I see why so many people seem so annoying to me. They move so slowly!

COACH: Yes, but now we have data so that you know how to adapt to different types of people. We can treat the situation logically, and not just let your frustration get the better of you. Given the information in your assessments, what are some things you can do to relate better to your colleagues?

SUPERHERO: I'm not sure. I have two managers. My manager in my day job at the newspaper is totally bureaucratic, takes forever to make a decision, and is always covering his butt. I can't stand him. The other is a genius scientist who helped design my ultra-fast suit and who helps me stay so fleet-footed. He and I get along great. I suspect he and I have similar profiles, while my day-job boss and I are on opposite ends of the spectrum.

COACH: So which of your two managers do you want to discuss with me?

SUPERHERO: I guess I just have to slow down and be patient with the boss I can't stand, even though I find him to be useless and annoying. He is the one who signs my paycheck, after all.

COACH: It won't be easy. You can only adapt so far without feeling like you are really outside your comfort zone.

SUPERHERO: It's not just my boss. I get annoyed when I have to be with most people in my regular life, when I'm not being a superhero. They all move like snails. They can't keep up. I generally keep to myself to avoid them, until I'm needed to save the day.

COACH: What ideas do you have about addressing this frustration?

SUPERHERO: I keep getting invites to join various leagues of superheroes and mutants. I resist because I've grown used to keeping to myself and because they seem kind of like freaks to me. But it might be that if I join one of these groups I might meet more people who are kind of like me. I hear that there are quite a few superheroes and mutants who move at lightning fast speeds.

Discussion:

Normally, reviewing a couple of robust assessments with a coaching client takes hours, not the equivalent of a couple of pages of dialogue. Regardless, assessments often help a client to have insights about how to adapt to different types of people, and how to find environments that better fit his style and natural traits. Using a data-driven assessment usually accelerates the coaching process by helping the client to gain awareness. Also, the client shifts from being frustrated by people who are different to understanding why those differences exist. That way, he becomes more tolerant.

Which assessment or assessments do you use? In which situations?

How statistically valid and reliable are your assessment tools? That's an important question, because you don't want to be using tools that are no better than fortune cookies or astrology.

Quick Boundary Setting with a Cartoon Bunny

This coaching session covers two topics. The first is about setting boundaries when a client seems to cross legitimate lines of behavior. The second is about using the client's behavior during a coaching session as information that can help to guide the coaching process itself.

BUNNY: What's up doc?

COACH: I'm not a doctor. I'm an executive coach. Did you want to work with a doctor?

BUNNY: Nah, it's just something I say.

COACH: Could you please get off my lap? That's not really appropriate behavior.

BUNNY: No problem, doc.

COACH: Hey! You just planted a huge kiss on my lips. That is completely unacceptable! According to the International Coach Federation code of ethics, the coach and client are not supposed to get involved romantically. I ask you to please respect my personal boundaries.

BUNNY: Gee whiz, doc, I'm just trying to be friendly.

COACH: From now on, I ask that you please stay in your seat on that side of the table. Stop it – why are you pulling my hat over my face?

BUNNY: It's just something I do. Usually It gets lots of laughs.

COACH: That's not okay in this setting. Management hired me for exactly these reasons. They tell me that you lack respect for personal boundaries. You're always doing things that push the limits – kissing people without permission, not considering personal space, and playing all sorts of jokes on people.

BUNNY: This kind of behavior is what I'm drawn to do.

COACH: Other famous celebrities understand the line between being on camera and being off camera. They know when to drop the act. By the way, would you mind NOT chewing on that carrot during our session? It's distracting.

BUNNY: Whatever you say, doc.

COACH: I discovered plenty of examples of other questionable behaviors when I did a confidential 360-degree feedback exercise with some of your colleagues. For instance, you interrupted a famous opera singer while he was trying to perform, to the point that he had a breakdown. You also pretended to be a barber, and then you tormented your only customer to the music of *The Barber of Seville*. As a third example, you did a Vaudeville act with your duck friend, and stole all the applause.

BUNNY: It's not my fault that I have all the talent.

COACH: Are you willing to change your behavior or not?

BUNNY: Doc, I'm all ears....

Discussion:

One gets the idea that dragging this conversation further would not lead to any additional progress.

In my coaching career I have worked with clients that had issues maintaining proper boundaries. These issues showed up both at the client's work and also during our coaching sessions. The coaching became a laboratory to make new behaviors habitual.

In the case of this cartoon bunny, it seems clear that he doesn't care to be coached. Thank goodness that our clients are not cartoon!

In the real world, presumably the coach, sponsor of the coaching (e.g., management), and the client would all be on the same page before the coaching commenced.

The takeaways:

- As noted throughout this book, you can't coach someone who isn't coachable.
- Be sure that the coach, client, and sponsors are all on the same page about the goals of the coaching.
- Don't start a coaching engagement until you are sure the client is invested in the coaching process.
- Set clear boundaries and rules of the road for the engagement up front, and assert as needed to preserve them.
- If you observe a behavior in a coaching session that raises a red flag for you, it is likely that this behavior also happens outside the coaching session. You have every right as a coach to use the behaviors you notice to guide some of the coaching process.

Coaching a Female Superhero to Break Through the Glass Ceiling

Let's imagine a coaching conversation with a female superhero, and see if there might be parallels to coaching female managers and executives who feel held back in their careers.

SUPERHERO: I feel kind of like an imposter.

COACH: That's not uncommon. There's even a condition called The Imposter Syndrome. It applies to people who feel like they are a fraud despite their significant achievements. Women and men have it, but I definitely see it among many powerful female figures.

SUPERHERO: That's helpful to know. Meanwhile, it seems like my male counterparts don't take me seriously. It's like I'm a sidekick to them, even though I'm my own superhero.

COACH: What do you think might be the root cause for this?

SUPERHERO: I think it's because I'm a woman. Most of the big superheroes are men. They don't take women superheroes as seriously as they should. Why is Superman a man while Supergirl is seen as a girl? She's Superman's older sister and yet she allows the name Supergirl to stick.

COACH: How do you want to be perceived?

SUPERHERO: I want to be respected. I want to be seen as a strong, smart, amazing superhero, like the male superheroes.

COACH: Do you mind if I turn things around a bit?

SUPERHERO: Go for it.

COACH: How would a strong, smart, amazing superhero dress for the public?

SUPERHERO: What are you getting at?

COACH: Let's start with how you are dressed right here with me.

SUPERHERO: What? You mean the cleavage, the bare midriff, and the super tight short shorts?

COACH: Yes. In your opinion, how effectively does this outfit convey "smart and strong" and demanding of respect?

SUPERHERO: Well, you can't argue with the abs. But no, maybe not smart. I can't help myself. It's like I am compelled to dress for a 20-something male nerd who happens to love comic book conventions and scantily-clad women.

COACH: If you took more control of your personal appearance, how would you dress?

SUPERHERO: Less flesh, more serious.

COACH: Great. What about how you interact with the male superheroes?

SUPERHERO: I need to step up my confidence and assert more with them. First of all, usually I keep to myself and fight my own arch villains. But I'm also part of a league with some of the men, and we work together whenever a super villain threatens all of humanity. The usual male characters lead that, not the women. I feel like a bit player.

COACH: You mean that you don't feel comfortable expressing your opinion or demanding more of a role?

SUPERHERO: Kind of. The guys talk so much more. It can be hard to get a word in edgewise, and then sometimes I feel like they gloss over what I have said. Most of the time, I know my ideas are better than their ideas, and that's really frustrating.

COACH: Where can you go for support, besides your coaching sessions?

SUPERHERO: That's the thing. There aren't a lot of female superhero role models. There's Supergirl and Wonder Woman. They are definitely the pioneers who paved the way for the rest of us. There are quite a few female mutants who are pretty powerful – and don't think I don't notice that the whole group is called the X-Men despite this fact. As a whole, none of us have achieved anything near the notoriety of the male superheroes.

COACH: That seems like a pretty good start.

SUPERHERO: Yes, I will reach out to a few of these women before our next meeting.

COACH: Excellent. Let's go back to how you interact with the men. You said you feel like a bit player.

SUPERHERO: Yes. I guess I need to work on being more assertive. There are all sorts of advice books about this, like *Lean In*. Some of them inspire me, but then I read the reviews and I became conflicted, because some of the reviewers trash these books as being degrading to women. It's all a big mess and I don't know what to think.

COACH: It is confusing. What does your gut tell you?

SUPERHERO: I know I can be as strong as any of the male superheroes. Batman has nothing but a cool outfit, great brand, and a bunch of toys. Spiderman is basically a teenager. Aquaman is irrelevant, unless a bunch of dolphins happen to be threatening humanity. The Hulk and The Thing are cavemen. I just have to get in there and show what I can do, and have faith in myself. And I am definitely getting rid of this hooker costumer for something more dignified!

COACH: So what can we discuss for the rest of the session?

SUPERHERO: I'd like to role play some conversations. For instance, I need to talk to Superman so that he sees me as more of an equal and less of a side kick. Do you think we can practice how that conversation should go?

COACH: Absolutely!

Discussion:

Many female executives struggle with all kinds of systemic, cultural, and internal conflicts that can be barriers to their success. This is in addition to the "usual" issues that executives face about improving productivity, performance, and impact.

I doubt that this imagined conversation comes close to doing justice to the myriad issues that successful women face, and I certainly don't want to trivialize them with a brief parody. However, it makes more sense to me to open up a conversation at the risk of being criticized than to avoid the conversation altogether.

What else would you have asked this imaginary female superhero? If you were going to create a coaching plan for a female executive, what lines of inquiry would you want to include for a comprehensive approach?

Coaching a Passionate Skunk on a More Flexible Communication Style

Pepe Le Pew was a classic cartoon character known for his strong odor and relentless approach to finding love – almost always with a cartoon black cat that looked like a skunk after a mishap with some wet paint.

What if Pepe were also a CEO who struggles with romance?

The imagined conversation below is more in the realm of personal domains than leadership coaching. However, successful executives often ask for coaching in the personal realms, and so we might as well be prepared to step into this type of situation.

SKUNK: As you know, I am quite successful in business. It is love where I suffer.

COACH: So what would you like to achieve after this session?

SKUNK: I would like to know why I stumble despite my obvious charm, good looks, and French accent. It pains me to say this, but perhaps it is time for me to learn a new approach.

COACH: Well, I'm not a life coach or an expert on romance, but I can certainly ask some questions and be a sounding board if you like. Okay?

SKUNK: Oui.

COACH: Where would you like to start?

SKUNK: As I said before, I am a good looking skunk. I am skilled in the ways of love and romance. But when I approach females, they run. I am tired of the chase. There must be an easier way.

COACH: In our executive coaching session, we have worked on developing a more flexible influence style – sometimes using logic, sometimes negotiating, sometimes listening and collaborating, sometimes calling on a compelling vision of the future. If you were to

think of courtship as a kind of influence conversation, which style would you say comes most naturally to you?

SKUNK: None of those. I am like a predator, pursuing my prey.

COACH: How's that working for you?

SKUNK: Not good. I have had restraining orders placed against me, I often find myself in dangerous situations, and it is rare for me to have a second date. I even have been arrested for pursuing inter-species relationships, although in my defense, that cat looked a lot like a skunk.

COACH: Just to be sure, this doesn't happen at work, correct? I don't want to learn that there are harassment suits pending against you.

SKUNK: No, no. For some reason, at work I am focused like a laser beam.

COACH: Good. Remember when we talked about balancing ego, results, and relationships in some of your high-stakes conversations in your executive role?

SKUNK: Oui.

COACH: How might you apply that triangle to your love life?

SKUNK: Well, perhaps I emphasize my ego a bit too much, and I definitely go for results – the conquest if you will -- with so much passion that perhaps I turn off the ladies.

COACH: If that's true, what are the implications for new approaches?

SKUNK: I suppose I need to slow things down a bit, be less forceful. Perhaps the ladies cannot handle all of this masculinity and sheer force.

COACH: That's one way of looking at it. So what are some specific action steps you can take to change things?

SKUNK: Well, I am currently on a number of skunk dating sites. I send many, many text messages to potential matches. Some are some pretty spectacular photos of me. Perhaps I will try a new dating site, and taking more of a low-key approach.

COACH: What else?

SKUNK: There is a lady I am chasing right now. She continues to run and hide from me. Perhaps I need to let her go and see if she becomes more interested.

COACH: Excellent. You know, this gets back to something we worked on in your role as an executive. Remember how we looked at your need to be in control?

SKUNK: Oui. Then we worked on surrendering a bit more to things outside my control?

COACH: How might the work we did here apply to your love life?

SKUNK: You are very perceptive, for an American coach. Yes, I can see how this insight would apply. The women that attract me are very independent, and that is something I love about them. Indeed, I must let the process of love unfold a bit more organically.

COACH: Exactly.

SKUNK: Wait. Do you see that skunk outside the window? Oh my! She is like a goddess who has come down to Earth to tempt me!

COACH: Are you sure that's a skunk? It looks like a cat went under that fence with the "wet paint" sign on it, and now she has a stripe of white paint on her back.

SKUNK: I am afraid that love waits for no skunk. Excuse me please, and I look forward to our session next week.

Discussion:

How do you handle situations in which the client asks you for coaching outside of the realm of leadership? Once a client opens up about business and career, he is likely to trust you enough to ask about personal situations.

In this case, the coach makes it clear that he is not an expert in the personal domain of romance, but is willing to offer support if he can. What do you think of this approach? Would you do the same, or stay within the established scope?

Notice that he also tries to bring in distinctions from the leadership coaching work in the hopes that they might apply here.

Unfortunately, as is often the case both with cartoon skunks and executives, the client understands intellectually what to do, but won't put his newfound commitments into action. At the end, his old patterns triumph.

How would you open the next session with this client? How do you handle situations in which the client commits to do something and doesn't follow through?

Group Coaching: Strategic Planning and Core Values for a Couple of Super-Villain Industrialists

Let's assume that you have to coach a couple of super villains who are in the midst of strategic planning, including clarification of their core values. There are many super villains from whom to choose, but one could imagine a group strategic coaching session with both Lex Luther (arch enemy of Superman) of LexCorp and Norm Osborn (super villain who becomes the Green Goblin) of Oscorp.

Coach: Both of you want to do some group coaching about your strategic plan, and especially your core values. Where should we start?

CEO 1: I want to destroy Superman.

CEO2: It's time for Spiderman to be squashed like the bug he is.

COACH: I hear you both, but I'm confused how these intentions go along with strategic planning and the core values of your company.

CEO1: Every product I make from now on will be based on finding uses for kryptonite that bring Superman to his knees and ultimately render him powerless.

CEO2: And all I want to do is develop ways to mutate the human genome in ways that give me unlimited power and allow me to defeat that pesky Spiderman.

COACH: I guess I'm missing the vision. You both are successful industrialists making products that are global in scope. What's a larger vision that captures what you are as a company? Surely it's bigger than taking down a superhero?

CEO1 AND CEO2: Not really.

CEO1: It seems like we have huge vision, but when it comes down to it, we both want to destroy our nemeses.

COACH: Why don't we start with your customers? Who are your customers?

CEO1: The military is my biggest customer.

CEO2: Me, too!

COACH: So maybe we can start by looking at how this customer's needs are evolving and how you can serve their current and emerging needs.

CEO1: It's pretty simple. The military keeps placing order with us for next-generation military technologies that make soldiers invulnerable, the kind of things that also happen to be huge threats to superheroes.

COACH: These orders come all the time, no matter how often your products backfire or kill innocent humans?

CEO2: It seems like it. They keep coming back for more. It doesn't matter whether we send them a defective robot that destroys a city, or a bomb that threatens to destroy all of humanity. They keep coming sending business our way.

COACH: What about the competition? What competitive threats do you face?

CEO1: I don't face any, as far as I know. It's almost like the military treats me like a monopoly. And they should. I am the brightest evil genius in my market.

CEO2: Me, too. In fact, he and I almost never bid against each other. It's as if we were in different universes.

COACH: What about your mission and values? A good strategy often starts there.

CEO1: My mission is simple: Kill Superman and rule the world.

CEO2: Me, too, except I'm going to kill Spiderman. I also plan to rule the world.

COACH: What about your core values?

CEO1: My company's core values are very consistent with our mission. Our top three values include: innovation, ruthlessness, and domination. You can't be ruthless and dominate without also innovating.

CEO2: My company's values are quite similar and also include unscrupulous experimentation on human subjects, uncontrolled laboratory environments, and complete lack of transparency.

COACH: Can I play devil's advocate for a moment? Are you sure these are the right values for attracting the best minds in the world to grow your companies?

CEO1: There seems to be no shortage of evil geniuses and bodyguards who join my payroll. I am very persuasive.

CEO2: Ditto.

COACH: What are your top opportunities and threats?

CEO1: Opportunity – Kill Superman and rule the world. Threat -- Superman.

CEO2: Opportunity – Kill Spiderman and rule the world. Threat -- Spiderman.

COACH: What about your strengths and weaknesses?

CEO1: Our top strength is our ability to come up with an almost unlimited number of diabolical weapons. Our weakness is that there is always some fatal flaw in our products that allows Superman to thwart us. Every single time.

CEO2: Agreed. Our strength is the ability to create almost every possible superhuman mutation you can imagine. Every month we come up with a new one. I can give you a tour so that you see them in our glass cases, if you want. Our weakness is that there is almost always something we forget or don't think about, and that allows Spiderman to destroy our latest work. It is really frustrating.

COACH: So what would be your top strategic priorities for the coming year?

CEO1: I am going to develop even more diabolical weapons. I like the idea of coming up with one new one every month, unless Superman happens to be fighting some other villain or alien invasion and isn't around. Then I can take it easy.

CEO2: I like that goal. If we can keep coming up with evil human mutations, we achieve the double bottom line of serving the military with irresponsible products and also killing Spiderman.

CEO1: Thanks, coach. This is incredibly helpful.

CEO2: Yes. Are you sure you don't want a full-time position with my company? I assure you there is no downside at all.

Discussion:

Coaching is an effective way to work with executives and their teams on strategic planning. The strategic coaching process is much less invasive than consulting, and honors leadership and employees in a company for their experience and knowledge.

While this imagined conversation shows how a typical strategic planning session might progress with the help of coaching, unfortunately the two CEOs involved are a bit too myopic and morally repugnant to be serious clients.

Let's say you were working with a CEO and team that failed to see the bigger strategic picture. How could you help them uncover the blind spots in their thinking?

A Superhero Seeks to Expand His Power Base, Maybe

Do you remember the original *Batman* television series with Adam West as Batman? In that series, Batman had a red Batphone that allowed him to call the Commissioner of Police of Gotham City anytime he wanted, and vice versa. Imagine that as a coach, you are concerned that Batman only has this one contact, and you want to help him expand his network of important contacts.

Note that usually the coach lets the client choose the topic and outcome. However, let's assume that in this case the coach has been hired to coach the client through a series of leadership discussions.

COACH: You hired me to help you improve your leadership in general. Part of what we look at during this process is what's called your power base. Your power base is your network of important relationships. With a strong power base, you learn about all sorts of opportunities before they are posted publicly. It also becomes easier for you to get things accomplished. Given this, what part of your power base would you like to discuss so that we can strengthen it?

BATMAN: I'm in good shape here. I get all the opportunities I need from my Batphone.

COACH: Okay, but just as a benchmark, most people have anywhere from 25 to hundreds of people who make up their power base. One contact isn't sufficient to achieve everything you need to achieve, especially as a superhero in a huge metropolitan area.

Batman: I'm pretty sure I'm fine. Commissioner Gordon calls me on the Batphone whenever the City needs me. If he can't reach me there, he shines the Batman logo in the sky.

COACH: What if you need, say, a fancy new device to catch criminals?

BATMAN: No problem. I am good friends with businessman and playboy Bruce Wayne, and he gets me whatever I need.

COACH: So you do have a power base made up of more than one person. That's a good start.

BATMAN: Kind of.

COACH: Who else is an important relationship to nurture?

BATMAN: Well, the Boy Wonder Robin is my chum and trusty sidekick. He can't do much without me and I won't let him drive the Batmobile, but he can hold his own in a fight.

COACH: So he might be what you call a "B" or a "C" contact in your power base.

BATMAN: If you say so.

COACH: What if you are in some sort of trouble and need to change the city's stoplights to red in order to stop traffic, or shut down the power for a while to stop a villain's diabolical machine, or get in touch with a general in the army?

BATMAN: I just call the Batphone and Commissioner Gordon takes care of it.

COACH: I don't see how the police commissioner can control what other departments in a massive City, state, and national bureaucracy do for you.

BATMAN: I don't know how he does it, but if I want something, I either call the Batphone or I get in the Batmobile and drive to his office. He's always there and he's always helpful.

COACH: I feel like we are not making much progress. Look – most highly successful people have a lot of trusted relationships. They have a Batphone, if you will, that connects them to lots people with money, resources, and information, not just a couple. For instance, I have a client who knows the top venture capitalists, CEOs, newspaper editors, television news anchors, heads of major charities, and heads of the major government and educational institutions in the world. You seem to be resisting this concept.

BATMAN: You have a good point about getting information. Don't forget that my Batcave includes the most advanced computer of the times. It can spit out a piece of paper with an answer to almost any question I ask. Everything else I can get from Commissioner Gordon or Bruce Wayne.

COACH: Okay, so basically you are saying that you are able to catch every single super villain in the city with the help of only one police commissioner, one extremely busy billionaire, and a computer that looks like it is made out of a refrigerator box and Christmas lights?

BATMAN: Correct.

COACH: Humor me. Who else do you know well in this town?

BATMAN: Well, I know Commission Gordon's daughter Barbara. She is a librarian and sometimes does research for me. I also know Catwoman, the Joker, King Tut, the Riddler, the Penguin, Mr. Freeze, and Poison Ivy.

COACH: Other than Barbara Gordon, can any of these people help you in positive ways?

BATMAN: No. I would call most of them arch enemies. However, in different circumstances, I could perhaps see Catwoman and me falling in love.

COACH: So you basically have a handful of people who support you, plus a computer made out of what look to be Christmas lights, and at least eight people who want to kill you?

BATMAN: More than that. I only listed the major villains. Also, don't forget that their henchmen want to kill me, too. I have to have hundreds of enemies.

COACH: I've never heard of a power base like this. You have significantly more arch enemies than supporters!

BATMAN: Is there a point to this coaching?

COACH: Well, again, let's say you know that a super villain is hiding out in a big skyscraper. Wouldn't it be good to know the big landlords in town so that you have instant access?

BATMAN: That's not important. Robin and I just throw up a Bat rope and climb up the wall. Then we smash through the window and get our villain.

COACH: Okay, here's another scenario. Let's say that one of these villains catches you and puts you and Robin in some sort of torture device designed to kill you. Who should you have in your power base that can come and get you, besides Commissioner Gordon?

BATMAN: I don't need anyone. Every time Robin and I get trapped in one of those machines, our enemy puts it on a slow timer and we have plenty of time to figure out how to escape – usually right before it is too late.

COACH: I give up.

BATMAN: That's good, because the Batphone is ringing. I have to go.

Discussion:

Usually clients are far more interested in discussing their power base than in this parody of the old *Batman* television show. That's good, because relationships is one of the most important currencies our clients have.

Good lines of inquiry about power base include:

"Who do you know now who brings mutual value?"

"How can you strengthen each relationship?"

"Who are people that don't support you? How can you isolate, neutralize, or win over each person?"

"Who do you need to know to achieve your vision for their career?"

"Where do you have to be visible, and how do you have to show up as a leader, to attract more people to your power base?"

A Humble Hobbit Has to Reframe Some Limiting Beliefs

What if you had to coach a hobbit like Bilbo Baggins from *The Hobbit* before he starts a great journey? The client is unsure of why he was chosen for a great adventure, and has some beliefs about his size and stature that are causing worry. The coaching focuses on his perceptions. In this case, let's assume that the client depicted here is coachable.

HOBBIT: Thanks for driving all the way to the shire.

COACH: I'd been meaning to talk to you about that. It's a much longer drive than I thought. Either we have to switch to phone or Skype conversations, or we are going to have to talk about fees. But we can do that later. What would you like to achieve in today's session?

HOBBIT: Recently a wizard that I know invited me to go on a dangerous adventure with him. I don't understand why he chose me or why he would want a small hobbit to accompany him.

COACH: And so you would like to get some clarity about that?

HOBBIT: Yes. Really what I want to do is have the right mindset going in to this adventure. Right now I am doubtful about my ability to contribute anything to this great wizard and his team.

COACH: What reasons do you think the wizard had for choosing you?

HOBBIT: He told me that I am the only hobbit who travels outside of my shire, and so I am adventurous, at least as hobbits go. Also, he has had some favorable dealings with my mother's family.

COACH: You are saying that a wizard's judgment is not enough for you?

HOBBIT: I feel small and unimportant. Why would he choose a hobbit at all? I am not at all courageous, certainly not compared to the wizard or the warriors he has picked.

COACH: What strengths do you bring?

HOBBIT: I don't know that I have anything to offer. Hobbits are mostly known for gardening, keeping a nice home, and helping out other hobbits in the shire with domestic projects.

COACH: You do seem stuck. What might be a way to reframe your belief that you are unimportant?

HOBBIT: I don't know. That's simply how I feel compared to everyone else going on this adventure.

COACH: Who have you met so far on this team?

HOBBIT: Only the wizard. I will meet the rest of the group very soon. I know that when I do, I will feel even smaller and less important. This wizard does not pick warriors without great thought.

COACH: That's an interesting statement. It appears that you trust the wizard when it comes to picking other team members, but you don't trust his choice in picking you.

HOBBIT: Good point.

COACH: How can you use that insight to come at this with a different, more productive belief?

HOBBIT: I suppose the new belief could be something like, "If this powerful wizard chose me, he must see something in me that I can contribute."

COACH: Let's take it a step further. What you just said makes it about what the wizard sees in you. How can you tweak it just a little to be about something *you* see in yourself?

HOBBIT: Maybe, "If this powerful wizard chose me, I have something that I can contribute."

COACH: How does that feel when you say it?

HOBBIT: It's helpful. I feel more confident when I hear myself say that.

COACH: What's another way to reframe this belief? For instance, you haven't even left your home yet or met the team. What would be a belief that allows you to let things unfold, rather than jumping to conclusions about what you do and don't bring?

HOBBIT: If I look at it that way, then I could come from the belief, "If I take this adventure one step at a time, I'll be able to focus on the work at hand and contribute as best I can."

COACH: How does that feel when you say it?

HOBBIT: It's a bit long, but it definitely makes sense and brings some relief.

COACH: How about if you take a bit of time to edit it down to something that works for you, and we keep going?

HOBBIT: That works. Of course, we will have to put the coaching on hold for a bit, unless we can connect via Skype in places like the Elf Kingdom, dense forests, and steep mountains.

Discussion:

It is rare for a client to reframe limiting beliefs as quickly and as willingly as this hobbit has done. However, the process is the same. The coach works with the client to come up with a new, more empowering belief.

Note that the new belief can't be something that challenges a deeply held belief that the client already has. Otherwise, the client will be pushing against a deeply held belief, and that's like fighting a dragon. For instance, if the client has the belief that he can't trust anyone, it doesn't make sense to keep repeating, "I can trust people." That approach is simply an invitation to keep remembering the unproductive belief.

However, the belief, "If I give people tools, training, and oversight, they can do the job" is potentially workable. That's because this second example doesn't mention trust at all, and doesn't challenge the first, default belief that the client already has.

Here, the coach does a good job picking up on a statement the hobbit made, about

the wizard and his judgment. This enables the hobbit to come up with a new way of looking at things.

Also, the coach plays with different ways of seeing the situation. This opens up new choices.

The coach depicted here gets directive in his suggestions. That's not ideal, and an actual conversation would require more lengthy exploration. When helping a client to reframe a belief, ultimately the client has to come up with the answer. However, sometimes the reality is that the client needs suggestions before he can have an insight. The coach can help provide ideas in this situation – as long as the client ultimately shapes, chooses, and owns the final outcome.

What is your approach to shifting perceptions? What would you have wanted to ask this hobbit?

Group Coaching for Executives with Magic Significant Others

It is hard to keep personal relationships from bleeding into the workplace. So-called helicopter parents sometimes call managers on behalf of their children who work at the company. Sometimes spouses get involved, too. Here we see a group coaching conversation with two characters famous for having their family issues interfere with their work.

COACH: Let's follow up on our work from last week. Your homework was to set boundaries with your significant other and her family. Who wants to start?

CAPTAIN NELSON: I will. I told Jeannie to stop using her magic to help me and she agreed. Sure enough, a group of spies from China tried to kill me and Jeannie wouldn't help. I almost died because of this exercise! When she uses her magic, I get in trouble. When she doesn't, I get in trouble. I can't win.

DARRIN: Samantha is pretty good about not using her magic to help me, although now I'm getting paranoid. She came up with some pretty good ideas for an ad campaign for a client of mine, and I was sure she had used her magic to come up with those ideas. We got into a big fight about it. It turns out she was telling the truth and I felt like a big jerk.

COACH: It's hard to set boundaries, isn't it?

DARRIN: Samantha's magic isn't the only boundary issue in my life. I also have to worry about my mother-in-law. This past week she split me into two copies. One copy was serious and the other copy was fun. She took the fun copy along with her on a trip and left the serious copy behind to work. I almost lost a client and got fired because my serious side was so boring.

CAPTAIN NELSON: Jeannie is more than enough for me to handle without any of her family getting involved. She turned me into a chimpanzee after our last Leadership Circle meeting and I almost got sent into space on a rocket ship as a test subject.

COACH: What did you both learn from this experience?

DARRIN: I learned that my mother-in-law will do almost anything to make me look like a fool and break up our marriage. She never accepted that her daughter married a mortal.

COACH: I don't want to bring in a cliché, but when you marry someone, you marry her family, too.

DARRIN: Tell me about it. Right now I think she has placed a beautiful witch into a modeling role with one of my advertising accounts, just to get her to seduce me and get Samantha to leave me.

CAPTAIN NELSON: I learned that if I marry Jeannie, she will lose her powers and become mortal.

COACH: And?

CAPTAIN NELSON: I don't know. Maybe next season.

COACH: So how can you both cope with what seems to be ongoing issues with your magical significant others and your work?

CAPTAIN NELSON: I think I just have to roll with it. One day I suddenly wake up with the voice of a world-class opera singer. The next day I become an instant virtuoso piano player. I go from having x-ray vision when Jeannie wants to help me pass my eye examination, to being able to paint a Rembrandt. I always have to explain myself to Colonel Bellows.

DARRIN: Me, too! It seems like my whole life starts with a problem, then something magical happens, and then I need to explain it to Mr. Tate. What's interesting is that, each and every time, things end up fine and I'm ready for the next mishap.

CAPTAIN NELSON: That's true. It's as if everything gets wrapped up within 30 minutes.

COACH: So what do you both conclude from our work today?

CAPTAIN NELSON: I guess we both love the women in our lives, and have to accept a certain amount of chaos. It makes things interesting and things always seem to work out fine.

COACH: It is hard to balance work and the rest of life, isn't it? That's why some experts now call it work-life flow instead of work-life balance. For next time, I'd like you to keep track of the positive things your magical significant others do for you, so that we can appreciate and acknowledge them. Okay?

Discussion:

Coaching sitcom characters is never easy because sitcoms tend to follow a formula. Characters are often placed in the same situations week after week, and we don't always see the growth we might expect in real life.

Regardless, how would you coach a client who can't seem to separate work and personal life? Is this separation even possible today?

What would you list at your top coaching questions in this type of situation?

Thank you!

Please remember to visit the **Center for Executive Coaching** for more resources:

<http://centerforexecutivecoaching.com>