



Bounce! Hit! Part II

Hybrid Coaching Style Prepares Executives for Future Success

By Chris Morgan

*The first **Bounce Hit** article described the need for a hybrid approach to business coaching: one that brings out both the optimum, non-judgmental, mental state for learning, yet still provides candid feedback about performance. In addition to cultivating a receptive and positive learning relationship, this article discusses the idea that exactly **what coaches focus on matters** much more than some believe. When coaching high performers, the agenda should focus more on developing the targeted skills, knowledge and competencies required for future roles.*

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Bounce-Hit?

Tim Gallwey was a progenitor for much of the executive coaching practices that have grown into a billion dollar industry since the 1970s. His fundamental idea, initially put forward in *The Inner Game of Tennis*¹ was that there is an optimum mental state for performance, learning and enjoyment. His Bounce-Hit drill and its many variations were designed to calm mental 'interferences' such as self-doubt, self-consciousness, anxiety and fear. This allows, so the theory goes, superior performance to be achieved.

Focus on what matters

But in truth, paying attention to when the ball bounces and when the ball hits the racquet is much more than a technique to bring about non-judgmental self-awareness. Paying close attention to the ball is essential for tennis performance, regardless of mental state. It puts the player's attention just where it needs to be. Indeed, it is common to hear similar instructions from a traditional coach to "Watch the ball!" Perhaps more animated, even frustrated, but still "Watch the ball!" Gallwey didn't give his students exercises that just helped them relax (like breathing deeply or imagining a calming scene of billowing clouds). *That's because what he asked them to focus on mattered directly to their performance.*

We need to follow and lead

To attain the right 'non-judgmental' mental state for learning, many executive coaches abide by a facilitative coaching style that simply follows the coachee's interest, asking open-ended questions and paraphrasing their responses. "What would you like to talk about? Tell me about that. What happened? Where? When? How much? OK so you seem to be saying this. That's interesting!" This kind of conversation has the characteristics of a psychotherapeutic dialogue. Many coaches are wedded to this strictly non-directive coaching style, but I think it is a flawed approach.

The choice of where to put the coachee's attention matters, which is why we need to direct the conversation. Executive coaches need to determine the agenda and take leadership on the key areas to focus on, the areas that require attention for the benefit of the individual and his or her organization.

No black boxes

Conversations with mental health therapists should be black box exercises. The focus is on personal matters, intimate matters, confidential matters for which the sanctity of a discreet, private and completely non-evaluative environment is appropriate and necessary.

But coaching in a business context is different, or at least it should be. Unlike personal therapy, with executive coaching there are two clients: the individual being coached and the sponsoring organization. Such an arrangement can be a marvelously rewarding win/win situation whereby improved skills, knowledge, competence and

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What's humanly possible »

motivation benefit the individual and the organization alike. But only if it is set up that way. Two things are necessary for successful executive coaching:

1. Set the right expectations about the double-headed nature of the client with clear ground rules for what is confidential and what could be shared.
2. Make the development expectations, coaching goals and progress review transparent.

Interestingly, this puts considerable responsibility for developing the 'coachee' back on his or her boss. They too will need to be transparent and articulate what they expect. They will have to invest time in defining development needs and reviewing progress. They will need to be thoughtful and explicit about career advancement opportunities. They may well need to find work opportunities that provide the required learning experience and exposure. And finally they may need to fund or otherwise resource relevant training experiences that an executive coach cannot provide. The win/win requires both transparency and commitment from all parties.

Focus on stepping up

Having sold over four million copies, *The Goal*² Eli Goldratt's business novel from 1984, has also had a broad influence on coaching practice. He postulates that for an organization to have an ongoing process of improvement, it needs to answer three fundamental questions:

1. What to change?
2. Change to what?
3. How to cause the change?

Too often executive coaching only attempts to answer the first of Goldratt's questions 'What to change?' without fully considering the second 'To what?'

Good coaches know that setting clear goals is essential for helping individuals to improve. Typically, the agenda for coaching is drawn from the coachee's own self-evaluation and from co-worker input, largely in reference to performance in their current role. But detailing the requirements for a future role is likely to be more helpful. It's often implied but rarely stated directly that we should coach our clients to be able to step into their boss's shoes. The exercise of helping our clients think through and explore what a potential future role would require can be a transformative learning experience in itself. Playing this 'game' with a coach has the benefit of satisfying all parties - the coachee, their boss and the business enterprise.

Walk a mile in your boss's shoes

In practical terms, it helps to think about future roles in terms of responsibilities, competencies and skills. Most organizations will already have job descriptions that detail the responsibilities and reviewing this artifact is one simple and helpful developmental activity. Executives who consider and try to make a contribution to these broader responsibilities will put themselves on the high-potential track.

Helping the coachee to 'walk a mile' in their boss's imaginary shoes is another exercise for developing two critical and intertwined competencies: strategic thinking and empathy. After all, empathy is the experience of understanding another person's

situation from their perspective. This appreciation of the broader context and set of responsibilities is an inherently strategic perspective.

Perhaps because it is familiar territory, executive coaches tend to focus more on developing their clients' leadership competencies, such as communication, working relationships and emotional intelligence. While these are all fundamental, we need to be careful that we don't focus on competencies at the expense of ignoring the technical/functional skills and knowledge required.

A colleague and I just wrapped up an assessment of competencies and skills for 400 employees at a mid-sized bank. Interestingly, we found that competencies scored relatively high while the low scores and needs for development were in the role specific skills required to perform well. Correspondingly, the organizational development plans that followed were geared to develop the skills and subject matter expertise more than general leadership competencies.

While much of the literature since David McLellan's original study about the topic in 1972³, indicates that most variation in managerial performance comes from competencies and not from job specific skills and know how, we cannot accept this premise without considering the context. Since the '70s there has been an increasing premium put on knowledge workers and technology. We might have entered an era where demonstrating strong general competencies is considered table stakes and superior technical know-how and other craft-specific skills have become the performance differentiator. And increasingly it seems that leaders need to have technical chops to get their people to respect and follow their direction.

In closing

People learn more when they have clear expectations to shoot for. Our finest educational institutions are built around well-defined curricula and testing for a reason. Doesn't it make sense to apply the same fundamental concept to business coaching?

As coaches, we can do a better job of ensuring success by clearly articulating the expectations for career advancement in terms of role specific skills and knowledge as well as competencies. From here the development curriculum of work projects, training and on-the-job coaching can be built around the assessed gaps.

This sounds straightforward, yet in my experience such focus is a rarity. Too often executive coaching exercises are black box interventions, where the coach is simply following the coachee's interests with little transparency or linkage to an agenda that targets the development of what is required to perform in future roles. Too often the result from this approach is coaching engagements that go on for years, that may even be well appreciated, but that ultimately fail to deliver future leaders who are ready to step up to the next level.

As coaches, we bring our best game by adopting a hybrid style encouraging the right mental state for learning while providing candid feedback that is informed by clear guidance on what is expected for future roles.

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1. Tim Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Random House, 1976
 2. Eli Goldratt, *The Goal*, North River Press, 1986
 3. David McLelland, "Testing for Competence Rather Than for Intelligence", 1973