Leadership Coaching: A Case of the Chief Executive

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Based on case study by Diane Brennan, Leadership Coaching: The Imact on the Organization in *The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching: Insights and Issues for a New Era* (2008).

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Abstract

Leadership coaching is an increasingly prevalent focus in today's organization. The past ten or so years has produced numerous articles, journals, books and research documenting the practice and effectiveness of coaching. This article presents a case study that explores the value of coaching for the leader and ultimately the organization.

About the Author

Diane Brennan is a leader within the international coaching community facilitating global conversations around coaching standards, professionalism and professionalization since 2002. Brennan served as the International Coach Federation (ICF) global President in 2008. She holds a Master's in Business Administration, is credentialed by ICF as a Master Certified Coach and has earned the distinction of Fellow in the American College of Medical Practice Executives. Brennan works an executive and leadership coach and consultant. She is an author and co-editor of the book, "*The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching: Insights and Issues for a New Era*" Jossey-Bass (2008). She can be reached at diane@coachdiane.com

Introduction

Understanding one's own impact from the perspective of others may seem intuitive or even insignificant, yet it is the singular most important learning anyone in a leadership position can gain in a coaching relationship. I say this reflecting on my learning as the coach and the client's feedback on his learning throughout our work together.

This case is based on the coaching work with my client John (name changed) who is the chief executive officer (CEO) of a hospital organization in the United States. While the case example involves a healthcare executive based in the US, the situation, concerns and process are applicable to just about any industry anywhere in the world.

About the Client

John, an experienced executive in his mid-fifties, came to coaching at the recommendation of a team of consultants working with his organization. The hospital had received a poor rating on an employee satisfaction survey, and while senior leadership "fixed" many issues identified by the employees, the survey results continued to worsen over a two-year period. It was difficult for John and the leadership team to understand what happened to cause this continuing decline in satisfaction. There was a

palpable sense of skepticism among John and the senior team around the engagement of yet another consultant and process. What would be different this time?

The traditional problem-solution approach was not working and John and the senior leadership team were ready to try something different. Coaching fit the "different" description though it was evident there was uncertainty and misinformation about what coaching really involved. During our initial meeting, John and I talked about what might be different in this relationship. John expressed a readiness for change, though considering Prochaska's Six Stages of Change (Prochaska, DiClemente, Norcross, 1992), I would say John was in the contemplation stage; considering making a change, but had not yet done so.

The Goals

John's goal was to improve the level of employee satisfaction within the organization. He knew intellectually there were actions attributable to him though looking back he acknowledged not having full awareness around the role he played in the process. The overall goal for the coaching did not clearly emerge until about two months into our work together. The intent expressed was to continue to work to evolve the corporate culture and his leadership style from a "command and control" to one of "commitment and learning" for inspired leadership.

The Challenge

John was a very successful healthcare leader recognized nationally and regionally for his contributions to the industry. He led his current organization from near financial disaster to sustained profit in a challenging healthcare environment. John's long successful career allowed him expertise and respect in many facets of the organization. This caused tension initially as John considered the challenges, which in addition to the declining employee satisfaction scores included:

- Increasing employee turnover
- Gaps in staffing and limited ability to cover the staffing needs
- Growing concern about the ability to continue to deliver the quality and service the community had grown to expect
- Feedback from managers of an overwhelming sense of concern, uncertainty and apathy about the ability to correct the downward trend
- Stories within leadership and staff ranks of negativity and uncertainty about the future

The Coaching Approach

My approach to beginning a coaching relationship has foundations in Humanistic Psychology and the work of Carl Rogers (1980) on holding the client in unconditional positive regard, believing in the client and their worth and capability even when they do not see this in themselves. This means creating a safe environment that encourages trust, accepting the client for who he is and being without judgment no matter what.

John and I first met face-to-face in his office one morning for about two hours. We began the relationship with a tentative nature in our dialogue. This introductory

conversation was more of a mutual interview, a gathering of information for both of us. For John it was to determine if, in fact, he wanted to engage in work with a coach and, specifically, with me; and for me it was to listen to, and begin to learn about who this individual was as a leader and a human being.

John had not considered a coach until this project. We discussed coaching, what it is and what it is not. John wanted to understand what coaching would mean for him personally. What was involved, how much time, how could he take the time in an already full schedule? As we talked, I asked if we might begin coaching now explaining that it is easier to understand coaching when you experience the process. John was willing so we agreed to engage in the process.

I explained some basic tenets of coaching:

- The confidential nature of the relationship
- An equal partnership
- The expectation for openness and honesty flowing in both ways
- A trusting and safe environment
- The importance of direct communication and feedback
- Choice and responsibility

John and I worked together in a one-on-one coaching relationship for an initial three months. After our on-site meeting, we met by telephone conference call twice per month for one-hour sessions. During the initial period, John requested expanding the coaching to include meetings with the senior team, both individually and as a group. As we expanded the work to include the team, we decided to use a behavioral and communication styles assessment. The assessment provided a simple way to succinctly gather information about the group that gave a common context and voice to their experience (Rogers, J., 2004). It was a tool that allowed for more in-depth discussion and examination of how the group related with each other and the larger team.

Our work together involved open, honest dialogue that required accountability for one's own actions, including those that were less than desirable. Where there might have been a tendency to defend "mistakes" or direct "blame", John and the team learned to accept responsibility, listen to feedback and to look for the learning (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, Switzler, 2002).

Measures of Success

The impetus for hiring me as coach for this assignment was the steadily decreasing employee satisfaction results. The survey completed one year after beginning the project showed an increase in employee satisfaction with summary comments from the survey company stating, "The hospital culture is improving in many areas of employee satisfaction thus strengthening the commitment of employees and managers." According to the survey company, there was a statistically significant increase in the employee satisfaction scores compared with the surveys from each of the two prior years. All of the satisfaction measures demonstrated improvement. Those related to the coaching assignment that had a statistically significant change included:

- Attention to Employee Needs
- Communications
- Employee Involvement
- Leadership – Organizational
- Leadership – Departmental
- Fairness

A resurvey was done the following year as the organization moved to a more specific instrument with enhanced reporting capability to include comparative data for organizations within their region and size range. John and the team were very proud to report scores that ranked above the comparative data in each area. The survey company asked what the organization had done to achieve such an increase in satisfaction. While the organization engaged in work other than coaching to improve their employee satisfaction, I would posit that the work that was most significant was related to coaching and John's commitment to the process, the learning and to change. John's willingness to engage, listen, reflect, explore, experiment, and to trust me and the process of coaching made the difference in the results John and the organization achieved.

Conclusion

The skepticism that surfaced during our initial conversation around coaching quickly vanished as John engaged in the process. We worked together regularly over the course of a year and with decreasing frequency in the second year. John became acutely aware of creating safe space for open and honest feedback, staying out of judgment and the importance of accountability. His emotional and social intelligence (Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008) strengthened as evidenced by his growing awareness, respect, engagement and appreciation with others. He created an environment for ongoing learning among the team and as an organization (Senge, 1990). This change was noticed and acknowledged by individuals within and outside the organization.

I had the opportunity to speak with the senior leaders as part of two feedback evaluations John requested during this process. There was noticeable change from one year to the next. One indicator of this change was that people reported John seemed more aware of his behavior and there was a shift from:

- Telling to Listening
- Blame, judgment and defensiveness to awareness, flexibility and a willingness to explore and engage in a conversation
- Controlling to acknowledging
- Fear and blame to trust

As I began the work with John, I had moments of uncertainty myself. Would John achieve what he wanted? Was I the right person to work with him in this process? Was coaching the right process? These and other questions can come into our consciousness and distract us as we face challenge and uncertainty. Refocus, stay present and be sure to have a mentor coach or supervisor who will support you in your learning and growth as a coach.

The work we do as coaches is a contribution that strengthens the foundation of individuals and organizations. It was a pleasure to work with John and his team. I appreciate his granting me permission to document our work together.

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