PLANNING A COACHING ENGAGEMENT: A SAMPLE SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

The complications and rationale for choosing a coaching approach for a given application are exemplified using a fictitious case study. The integrative goal-focused coaching (IGFC) methodology is customized and adapted to the particular needs and preferences of the client and to the evolving context of the situation. This is done by supplementing the IGFC model with similarly-focused perspectives in a way that conforms to the principles and common themes of Stober and Grant’s (2006c) contextual model and Passmore’s (2007) integrated model of coaching. The resulting coaching plan is designed to comply with the combined ethics of the American Psychological Association, International Coach Federation, and International Coaching Community.
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CREATING A COACHING PLAN

Coaching definitions tend to vary by the extent to which the preferred coaching approach is directive versus non-directive, goal-focused versus developmental, or performance-oriented versus therapeutic (Ives, 2008). Choosing a coaching approach is complicated by the myriad of perspectives and tools available and by the need to adapt to the specific and changing demands of the situation. Take John’s case for instance.

John is a 44-year-old MBA graduate and VP of Marketing for the southwest division of ABC Electronics. He is the next in line to take over the Executive VP of Marketing position in the corporate office when his boss, Dennis, retires in about 10 months. Dennis believes that John is technically competent to take over but the CEO and other EVP’s are concerned that John’s “communication style” will derail him in the larger corporate environment. John gets visibly frustrated when others can’t keep up with his extraordinary intelligence or meet his high standards of performance. He complains that most people are lazy or careless and that he has to babysit their decision-making processes. Although he genuinely cares about the people he works with, his method of holding people accountable is seen as humiliating, condescending, or intimidating. After a discussion between Dennis and John about the lack of support from the other stakeholders for his candidacy as a successor to Dennis, John has enthusiastically accepted the offer for coaching. John presents for coaching with an expressed goal of improving his communication style in order to win the confidence of key stakeholders in his career progression.

For John, the focus of coaching will be to achieve “sustained cognitive, emotional, and behavioral change that facilitates goal-attainment and performance enhancement” (Stober and Grant, 2006b, p. 2). No single coaching perspective covers all possible contingencies. The coach must adjust to the client’s situation, goals, environment, personality factors, socioeconomic or cultural background, developmental maturity, and readiness for change. In this case an integrative goal-focused approach will be adapted to incorporate other similarly-focused perspectives where needed within a contextual coaching model while maintaining alignment with the common themes, principles, and ethics of evidence-based coaching.

FROM THEORY TO APPLICATION

Evaluating Alternative Approaches

The first and perhaps most important criterion in choosing a coaching approach is the extent to which it is evidence-based (Stober & Grant, 2006b). Without this requirement, coaches may waste time with ineffective exercises or worse, do more harm than good. Section 3.04 of the American Psychological Association (APA; 2010) code of ethics and section 1 of the International Coach Federation’s (ICF; International Coach Federation, 2011) code speak to the responsibility of practitioners to avoid harm first.

Stober, Wildflower, and Drake (2006) identify three features of any evidence-based practice: use the best knowledge available in the field; integrate the practitioner’s own knowledge and experience; and customize the application of that integrated knowledge and experience to the client’s specific needs and preferences (p. 2). With respect to the first requirement, knowledge in the field, there are at least five well-supported single-theory coaching approaches and six integrated cross-theory approaches that may be considered (Stober & Grant, 2006a). These choices may be limited by the second requirement: integration of the practitioner’s own knowledge and experience. An aphorism attributed to Maslow (1966) points out that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Although it is important that the coach feel comfortable with the chosen method, evidence-based coaching requires customizing to the client’s specific needs and preferences first and foremost (Bacon & Spears, 2003; Cavanaugh, 2006; Laske, 2004).

John’s goal to improve his communication style requires a coaching program that addresses a pattern of behavior and not just a one-time specific circumstance. If John’s communication style is primarily a function of habit, a late
report or failed objective by an employee may trigger automatic responses despite a conscious desire to behave otherwise. For this reason, the behavior-based coaching approach using the developmental pipeline may provide a useful model for coaching John (Peterson, 2006). Specifically, the pipeline elements of enhancing capabilities and facilitating real-world practice might be essential areas of focus.

A pure behavior-based approach however, may fail to motivate John to practice new communication skills that may be inconsistent with his thinking and beliefs. Recall that John believes people are naturally “lazy” and “careless”. This attitude may be evidence of potential cognitive distortions such as all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, emotional reasoning, and labeling (Burns, 1980). If so, a cognitive approach may be necessary to reduce the frustrations that drive John’s behavior. The appropriateness of a purely cognitive perspective depends on whether John prefers this more directive, developmental, and therapeutic approach or a non-directive approach that focuses more on goals and solutions (Ives, 2008). Given John’s intelligence, he may quickly absorb and apply the concepts of cognitive coaching or the same strength may cause him to reject guidance from someone else on how he might change his thinking.

The same danger exists with the psychoanalytically informed approach to coaching which is also directive, developmental, and therapeutic (Ives, 2008). Yet a psychoanalytically informed coach may have an advantage if John’s behavior is a result of a tendency towards arrogance or narcissistic behavior (Kilburg, 2004). Because John’s relationships with others may be overly self-focused and his view of authority is potentially immature for the requirements of his position, an adult development approach may also be reasonable (Berger & Atkins, 2009).

On the other hand, John’s behavior may be a function of perception resulting from culture clashes on time management perspectives if John is a product of a time-scarce environment and the employees come from a time-plentiful one in which case a cultural perspective is important (Abbott & Rosinski, 2006).

Since all of the above may be true at times, we are led to consider including various elements of alternative perspectives together through an integrative cross-theoretical approach. These include goal-focused, adult-learning, positive psychology, adventure-based, multi-cultural, and systemic approaches among others (Stober & Grant, 2006a). Even among these comprehensive models however, there are still elements that lead to a desire to integrate the integrated approaches (Ives and Cox, 2012). Ives and Cox (2012) warn that an eclectic mix of tools and procedures must still follow a theoretically grounded approach.

Jonathon Passmore (2007) does a convincing job of wrapping multiple perspectives together (including the integrated cross-theoretical ones) into systemic layers of understanding from the humanistic coaching partnership to the core of psychodynamics, cognitions, and behaviors. He supports these elements through adaptive coaching actions that can respond to a growing understanding of client needs and preferences. Stober and Grant (2006c) also synthesize the various evidence-based approaches into a common set of principles and themes in their contextual approach: the formation of a collaborative relationship that supports accountability, enhances awareness of the issues, helps clients find ways to take responsibility for change, and builds motivation and commitment to take action that leads to desired results (2006).

Using these integrative and contextual frameworks allows us to shore up a given approach with aspects from other compatible coaching perspectives where needed. For example, the non-directive humanistic, systemic, and multi-cultural coaching perspectives could be layered on the Integrative goal-focused coaching (IGFC) model and woven throughout its process. IGFC, as described by Anthony Grant (2006) is non-directive and places its focus on goal setting, action planning, and commitment (Ives & Cox, 2010). John’s confidence in his own superior intelligence and high standards of performance appears to indicate that he prefers a non-directive approach that focuses on performance rather than feelings but as noted earlier, he may benefit from some aspects of other approaches as long as they don’t dominate the engagement. IGFC’s action-learning component requires self-reflection, which
links the goal-focused approach with the cognitive-behavioral perspectives without making them a central focus (Abbott & Rosinski, 2007). Grant (2006) describes this dual aspect of IGFC as changing the viewing and changing the doing. Using IGFC as the core within an integrated contextual model, the coaching plan is created in such a way as to draw in aligned elements of other perspectives.

Creating and Applying a Coaching Plan

Typically, the client’s true coaching preferences won’t be known until after the first couple of meetings. Until then, the integrative and contextual approaches to coaching can be used to start off the coaching process. The first steps in any coaching plan are to make initial contact and develop the coaching relationship.

Make initial contact

During the initial contact, the coach and client agree on the roles and responsibilities of each party and discuss coaching styles and preferences. Expectations around ethical considerations like confidentiality and conflict of interest will be discussed and the parties will set preliminary meeting schedules. In this case, an agreement is made to commit to at least twelve hours of coaching (International Coach Federation, 2011). During this step, if John’s preference for non-directive, goal-focused, performance-based coaching is indicated, the generic model of goal-directed self-regulation is tentatively used to frame the rest of the coaching plan.

Develop the relationship

The IGFC model is somewhat weak on tools and techniques for developing the relationship even though it is the first step in Stober and Grant’s (2006c) contextual approach and the first layer of Passmore’s (2007) integrative coaching model. Although John is enthusiastic about his higher order goal of being promoted, he may not be as enthusiastic about the assigned goal of changing his communication style. He may only be in the contemplation stage of Prochaska and DiClemente’s (1984) TTM change model. His initial contact with the coach therefore, may not be completely voluntary. Combined with the typically busy schedule of senior leaders, John’s commitment to the coaching engagement may weaken rapidly if the coach does not develop a strong relationship early in the process with which to encourage responsibility and commitment. The humanistic coaching approach is best suited for this because its primary strategy is to leverage the coaching relationship in order to motivate change (Stober, 2006). The coach will use unconditional positive regard, listening skills, and open-ended Socratic and probing questions in a non-directive and empathetic process. Combining Bridges (1986) transitions model for change with a humanistic strategy, coach may empathize with the discomfort John feels about having to leave behind any behaviors he believes were instrumental to his success thus far. A humanistic approach may also break through any cultural barriers if John’s behavior is partly a result of poor acculturation. Although a sole emphasis on a humanistic approach may feel too therapeutic for John in the long term, it is critical in the initial stages of developing the coaching partnership and later when delivering feedback.

Assess the need; identify the issue

Ives & Cox (2012) affirm that one core feature common to most coaching approaches is a “focus on the achievement of a clearly stated goal, rather than problem analysis” (p. 18). Grant (2012) has demonstrated that solutions-focused coaching questions result in a more positive client experience, greater self-efficacy, and more action taken than when using problem-focused questions. Despite the desire to emphasize solutions versus problems, even proponents of the goal-focused approach recognize the need to identify the real issue (Grant, 2006). In this case, all John knows is that he needs to improve his communication style but he may not know exactly what that means or why it really matters.

To assess John’s initial understanding of the issue from his own perspective, the coach may ask him solution-oriented questions such as “what would you like to improve and how?” If there is a lack of self-awareness, then
the coach needs to help John identify the gap between his desired impact on others and his current impact. The behavior-based Gaps Grid compares current to desired state as seen by John and others and is consistent with a performance-based approach (Peterson, 2006). To improve his awareness of his current state, the coach can ask John to use self-monitoring techniques such as metacognition. In addition, the coach can offer John the choice of a number of assessments. Rich data often comes from 360 degree interviewing by the coach because questions can be tailored to the situation and the coach can dig deeper than a generic assessment might allow. This might not be appropriate for some respondents whose personal or cultural preferences are for a more indirect method of feedback (Rosinski & Abbot, 2006). If John discounts the data due to its source or the coach’s interpretation of it, a self-assessed personality test such as the Hogan Development Inventory might be useful (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). Hogan assessments provide profiles based on how others see people who respond to the assessment the same way. John can hardly argue if his own self-assessment agrees with others. Another approach might be to assess John’s strengths using the Values in Action (VIA) survey and then facilitate understanding how a strength such as knowledge or intellect might be used positively or negatively (Kauffman, 2006).

At this point, the coach must pay particular attention to the ethics of behaving as a coach versus treating a patient therapeutically (International Coaching Community, 2013). If these analyses indicate potential mental illness, the coach will educate the client on the benefits of seeking help from a licensed mental health practitioner. A second caution on ethics is maintaining confidentiality of the feedback received (American Psychological Association, 2010).

**Determine the goals**

The coach facilitates goal-setting by helping John to ensure all goals are self-concordant, motivating, and enabling (Cox, 2006; Grant, 2006). John’s goals need to be aligned with his values, interests, and personality to avoid the paralyzing effect of cognitive dissonance (Grant, 2006). The coach will use probing questions to determine alignment and then help John reframe the goals to be more congruent if necessary. A goal to “communicate positively with employees” may not be self-concordant or motivating if John believes the problem lies with the employees. A more aligned goal may be “to use communication strategies that sustain maximum performance”. This is another application for the VIA assessment which measures “values in action” or the Hogan Personality Inventory which measures personality styles. Again, John’s own cultural background is a factor to consider in goal alignment.

Most importantly, John’s higher-order goals must be distilled into actionable lower-order goals that if achieved will result in measureable, observable behavior change. The coach can facilitate this process using SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time bound; Cox, 2006; Grant, 2006). An example of actionable lower-order goals might be “to express positive intent before diving into delicate conversations as measured by direct follow-up feedback from others”. Note that goals are stated positively (approach goals) versus negatively (avoidance goals) in order to maximize motivation (Grant, 2006).

**Develop the action plan**

In the IGFC model, the client is responsible for his own action plan but the coach facilitates that process to ensure that it incorporates certain key elements essential to a positive result. This includes the IGFC elements of monitoring success using real-time self-reflection, evaluating outcomes based on goals, and adjusting behavior as needed (Grant, 2006). Positive coaching psychology may be integrated to leverage John’s strengths when designing action plans. Drawing from Bridges (1986) transitions model and the systemic coaching approach, the coach will also solicit actions from the client to help others forgive his past behaviors, deal with the impact of his new behavior on others, and create contingency plans for unexpected outcomes.
Act. The first action in John’s action plan is to maximize commitment and resolve to change. Using concepts from adult development theory combined with IGFC, the coach can facilitate that process by using motivational interviewing in an attempt to shift John’s decisional balance of the perceived benefits of changing versus the benefits of staying the same (Berger & Atkins, 2009; Janis & Mann, 1977). An example of such a motivational question is “How might improving your communication style spill over into other areas of your life?” Other techniques from IGFC involve shifting John’s decisional balance by non-judgmentally reflecting back to him his reasons for staying the same in the hopes he will recognize the futility of that choice (Grant, 2006).

A potential drawback of the IGFC model by itself is the reluctance to explicitly visit the past and understand the root cause of problem behavior. This simply challenges the coach to do so without dwelling on the negative. For this reason, the next action step of an integrated plan uses the core of Passmore’s (2007) integrated coaching model to address behaviors, cognitions, and emotions holistically and systemically. The coach begins by asking John to use the IGFC metacognition techniques to simply pay attention to this thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the moment without judgment or to record them after important interactions with others (Grant, 2006). Using questions that compare times of failure with times of success, the coach helps John identify systemic triggers related to the environment surrounding his communications (Neal, Wood, & Labrecque, 2012). By also examining thoughts and emotions associated with successful conversations compared to unsuccessful ones, the coach can use concepts from cognitive-based coaching yet still maintain a solutions focus. Using the same positive/negative comparisons, the coach can address potential transference issues by contrasting the players involved in past successes with those involved in poorer communications. Again, the coach will be cognizant of the ethical boundaries between practicing psychotherapy and coaching (International Coaching Community, 2013).

Borrowing from behavior-based coaching, the third action step involves building capabilities by helping John practice new communication skills in a safe environment (Peterson, 2006). This can be done through role-plays or by helping John script conversations he intends to have with others. Typically, goal-focused coaching is non-directive so the coach will not prescribe solutions (Grant, 2006). This can be a disadvantage however if John cannot draw from good personal success stories. If the coach possesses the necessary content expertise, and the client is receptive, the coach should offer it along with other training sources and feedback. Again, the humanistic approach with its emphasis on unconditional positive regard is essential in giving feedback. These and the remaining steps in John’s action plan are executed iteratively while monitoring, evaluating, and adjusting his behavior and plan as needed.

Monitor, evaluate, and adjust

A key strength of the IGFC model is its emphasis on self-reflection and adjustment (Grant, 2006). When metacognition is used in conjunction with clearly defined actionable goals, the client is consciously self-coaching in the moment. As Grant (2006) explains, “focused attention on the self allows individuals to better access the internalized mental representations of the standards and reference values by which they evaluate their performance” (p. 155). John may need instruction and practice using this skill so that it doesn’t lead to counterproductive rumination. For example, John can be encouraged to ask himself questions like “Did I express positive intent just now? How did it feel? What thoughts made it feel that way? Can I sense how the other person feels right now?” John can also be encouraged to obtain direct feedback from others combined with performance data in order to measure the outcome goal of communicating to sustain maximum performance.

Self-reflection is supported by the coach with questions like “what went well and what would you change about your interactions this week?” In addition to monitoring progress, both parties should periodically ask the same questions about the coaching process itself. In addition, the coach may offer to obtain confidential feedback from others on John’s progress periodically through the coaching engagement.
Terminate

The frequent evaluation of clearly defined goals in the IGFC model makes identifying a clear point of termination easy once the desired results have been met. On the other hand, the same feature may result in the engagement going on indefinitely if goals are not met unless there is some explicit agreement to terminate. Given the humanistic foundations of this approach, the potential for transference and countertransference may make the separation difficult at the end of the engagement. One way to ease this eventuality and also help maintain new behaviors is to immediately schedule a single follow-up maintenance session for three to six months out.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The choice and application of any particular coaching methodology must be customized and adapted to the particular needs and preferences of the client and to the evolving context of the situation. Various models can be integrated together as long as they conform to principles and common themes of the contextual model as described by Stober and Grant (2006c) and to a reasonable standard of ethics such as those espoused by the ICF or APA. Perspectives need not be isolated to one viewpoint such as cognitive versus humanistic but should be applied using consistencies in directive versus non-directive coaching, solution versus developmental focus, and performance versus therapeutic emphasis. The IGFC model is a comprehensive framework that allows a great deal of flexibility to incorporate useful aspects of the many other approaches and perspectives available. It is best used for clients who prefer a non-directive, solution-focused, performance-enhancing coaching approach and may not be suitable for all clients in all situations.
REFERENCES


