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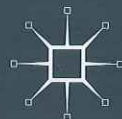
# TRICKY COACHING

DIFFICULT CASES IN LEADERSHIP COACHING



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"*Tricky Coaching* guides the reader on a marvelous journey to the center of the coaching profession. With uncommon courage, the contributors to this book let us go beneath the surface and explore inside the black box of coaching interventions. Aware of the potential risks of the almost non-existent entry barriers to the coaching profession, the authors help to define standards and to reflect on why and how coaching is effective. *Tricky Coaching* provides a mosaic of authentic coaching challenges, insightful stories and psychodynamic wisdom, where coaches who thirst for self-growth will feel at home. Indispensable." – Laura Guillén PhD, Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior, ESMT Berlin

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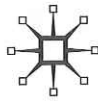
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PREFACE

The market is full of books, videos, weekend courses, and executive programs—all with the good intention of providing some training and guidelines for coaches. Coaching as a profession is still in its infancy, and the plethora of these offerings is the result of an acknowledged need to explore and define the boundaries of coaching. Researchers and practitioners are also working to create models and frameworks to explain why and how coaching is effective. So why did we decide to write another book on executive coaching?

Although the coaching profession is rapidly evolving in the direction of coherence, standard protocols, and rigorous evaluation, we still see a need for further examination and development. As a group of editors coming from a psychodynamic approach to executive coaching, we are particularly concerned that many executive coaches do not have the proper training, or the necessary supervision, to practice effectively. We acknowledge that there is nothing more difficult than examining one's own behavior but, at the same time, we call for greater reflection and analysis on the part of coaches. As coaches, coaching educators, and coaching researchers ourselves, we argue that the coaching profession should continue to be inspired by psychotherapy protocols of case studies and peer supervision, and we also underline the importance of learning from reflection on own coaching practice and the experience of others. In this book, we cover in great detail the why and how of continually seeking greater understanding about the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics that come into play in executive coaching.

When scanning the market for executive coaching offerings, we have been alarmed by the ease with which people can simply pay to post their name on a website, and instantly become an executive coach. We have met people who have made worrying transitions, for example, the tennis coach who segued effortlessly into an executive coach, or the aromatherapist who moved into life coaching and, later, excited about the much higher fees in the executive domain, decided that she was ready to make inroads into the C-suites of organizations. In some cases, a general focus of coaching models available on the market reflects the background of the coaches themselves, many of whom were successful HR directors or executives before moving into a coaching role within their organizations, or becoming external executive coaches. At the risk of appearing cynical,

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## THE DOMINEERING COACHEE

BÜLENT GÖGDÜN

### *Case summary*

Bülent Gögdün is running a group coaching process and faces the challenge of a coachee who dominates discussions and, at the same time, avoids dealing with his own issues, as reflected in management assessment and psychological instruments. At the same time, the coachee expects more "active" involvement from the coach. The coach is concerned whether he is doing enough to meet the needs of the coachee and the whole group involved in this group coaching exercise.

*Context:* This case takes place within a multinational convenience goods company's leadership development program.

### **BACKGROUND**

It's hard enough coaching a dominant and overbearing personality when it's one-on-one; it's even more difficult when you are trying to coach that person as part of a group. This was the situation that I faced during a five-day general management and leadership program for a large convenience goods company. The afternoon of the second day was devoted to coaching sessions in small groups designed to allow participants to discuss current leadership challenges and identify potential solutions through the exchange of ideas. In particular, the participants were encouraged to discuss the results of a management audit and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Step II (MBTI II) survey that had recently been conducted by another institution. The management audit, based on interviews with all the coachees and their line managers, had produced a detailed evaluation of each individual's current performance as well as recommendations for their future development. The results of each individual audit and MBTI II report had of course been handed out only to the respective coachee and the coach prior to the leadership program.

BÜLENT GÖGDÜN

### **MY ROLE AS COACH**

The participants' employer was a keen advocate of coaching and regarded the ability to coach as an essential leadership skill. Indeed, the company offered its own managers training courses on coaching, using the GROW model as a standard method.<sup>1</sup> As one of the coaches employed on this program, I explained the model to my group during the introduction to the coaching sessions (not all participants were acquainted with the GROW methodology) and told my coachees that they could expect the afternoon to be a challenging experience.

### **THE APPROACH**

My group consisted of four managers who, although they all worked for the same company, were all located in different regions and performed different functions. I began the session by asking my four coachees to draw self-portraits to illustrate what was going on in their heads and hearts, in their private and professional lives, what had happened in the past, and what they expected to happen in the future. One by one, they presented their self-portrait to the other three, using the illustrations to outline what they saw as the major leadership challenges. I asked them to start their presentation by giving us their first impression of their MBTI II report. All the while I interjected with questions such as "What makes you feel happy?," "What makes you feel uncomfortable?," "What makes you feel disappointed?," writing down these questions on a flip chart so that they remained visible during the whole session.

Throughout the coaching session, all four participants were active in helping one another explore their work situations in detail and identify possible solutions to the problems they faced. They were all very interested in the GROW model, and repeatedly asked questions referring to it. Their interventions appeared on the whole to be very meaningful and helpful, so I gave them plenty of time and space in which to discuss the issues they brought up with each other. And although I was happy to sit back and let them direct the conversation, I occasionally interjected with my own questions, comments, and suggestions, particularly when I felt that there were issues to explore further or that there was more feedback to give. About halfway through the session (that is, after the second coachee had finished his presentation) I asked the group whether the session was meeting their expectations, to which they replied that it was.

### **THE CHALLENGE**

As their MBTI II reports indicated, three of the coachees emerged as rather reflective personalities whereas the fourth, Thomas, was a very talkative and extrovert character who tended to dominate the conversation. While the other three

seemed to relate to one another and freely exchanged ideas during the discussion, Thomas—even when he shared another’s opinions—only offered non-emphatic and inflexible statements. He let the others speak first and then advanced his own ideas, sometimes without reference to anything the others had said. It’s not that he wasn’t listening—he was listening to me—but he certainly didn’t appear to be listening to the other coachees. I quickly realized that Thomas was a dominant individual, who would try to take control and that, as coach, I should do something to protect my domain.

Despite Thomas’s overbearing presence, I felt that the group as a whole was doing well and that it was OK to give them plenty of space. The other three coachees were keen to discuss essentially human issues—such as interpersonal relationships within the workplace—in a quite uninhibited way whereas Thomas, who was a manager responsible for IT, tended to introduce somewhat more abstract topics for discussion, for example, what people in other departments considered to be the function of IT services. This was not entirely surprising, as Thomas had stated right at the beginning of the session that his long-term target was to become the company’s CIO. When he steered the discussion round to his favorite topic I was happy to let him use the conversation to serve his own agenda.

At the end of the session, I asked the group for feedback. Three of the participants said that it was an easy and smooth session and that they could talk about personal issues in a relaxed and uninhibited environment. They appreciated the honest discussion and one of them declared that the session had exceeded her expectations. Thomas, however, was not so complimentary. He felt I had not given him any real feedback on his MBTI II report and that he would have liked me to have taken a more active role—“coaching rather than facilitating the discussion,” as he put it. Thomas also felt that the session had been too relaxed and that I should have taken the four of them outside their comfort zones, a comment with which another coachee agreed. According to Thomas, we had also spent too much time on the self-portraits, an exercise that he clearly thought had very little value, although this was not a view shared by his colleagues.

Most significantly Thomas, besides his general criticisms, remarked that he wished that we could have started our conversation during dinner the previous evening (the delegates and their coaches had gathered socially for a city tour followed by dinner). Indeed, although I had been able to talk with my other three coachees the previous night, Thomas and I hadn’t had the opportunity to speak at all.

At the end of the coaching session I agreed to meet Thomas the following day so that we could talk about his report. As he had specifically asked me to be more challenging, I cast a critical eye over his MBTI II report once more and drew up a list of ideas with which to test him. This was quite untypical of my normal procedure, which is to identify and build on the strengths of my coachees rather than to deal with weaknesses. This is because, time and time again, I find myself coaching people who focus obsessively on what they do not do well instead of building on

the things they are good at. Normally, I only raise negative issues when I feel that they are critical for the effectiveness, growth, or happiness of my coachees.

Working through Thomas’s management audit I noticed a couple of interesting comments to the effect that Thomas had a tendency to talk around subjects without getting to the point; that he would avoid giving direct answers; and that he might sometimes fail to listen to what others had to say. While acknowledging that Thomas was an IT expert, the report recommended that he work on strengthening his self-confidence and at the same time review his possibly over-ambitious career goals.

When Thomas and I met the next morning I presented my observations, based on the results of his audit and MBTI II report, and waited for his feedback. He certainly appeared to be listening but he didn’t really respond to what I said, at least not in a constructive way. Ironically, this was precisely the sort of behavior that had been recorded in his audit and MBTI II report. There was no working relationship between us; no meaningful exchange. Thomas having complained that I had failed to challenge him rigorously enough during the group coaching session the previous day, now seemed to be getting nothing of any value out of our one-to-one session. Indeed, it soon became clear that he was not very happy—particularly with the results of the management audit.

### MEETING THE CHALLENGE

This assignment presented me with three distinct challenges:

1. The coachee does not discuss “real” issues but is disappointed when the coach doesn’t either.

At the beginning of every coaching session I ask my coachees about their expectations and what topics they would like to explore. This allows me to map out the direction I take in the session. To ensure we stay focused I often ask them in the second half of the session whether they are happy with the procedure so far and whether there are other topics they want to talk about. When coaching a group of people, I try to avoid raising issues that I think will show one or more of the coachees in a bad light or put them on the spot in front of the group. Unfortunately in this case this approach didn’t work. Even the one-to-one coaching session was ineffective, although on reflection this might be because I had already lost the trust of my coachee.

With the benefit of hindsight, I think I should have intervened more aggressively during the group session instead of letting Thomas sit out and leap in right at the end to make sure he got the last word. His strategy ensured that his opinions were never exposed to analysis by the rest of the group and he was never challenged. I also think that I should have challenged Thomas during the group session myself—for instance, by asking him why he chose to talk in



a more general, abstract way about IT instead of the particulars of his management audit.

2. The group is doing a great job. But where is the coach?

There is nothing more satisfying for a coach than to interact with a group that works well together and is fully engaged in the coaching process. There are two ways in which the coach can contribute to such a group. The first is to coach as if part of the group itself—in other words, ask questions, answer others' questions, guide the conversation, and encourage the group to explore various areas without actually taking control and adopting the role of leader. This was essentially the approach I took in this case. The other method is to adopt the role of observer or adjudicator, challenging the group whenever appropriate and getting the group to reflect on the process by interrupting the discussion at critical points and holding a mirror up to show the group how they are interacting with one another. This obliges the coachees to adopt a self-critical attitude and really analyze their thoughts and actions. And that's what I didn't do, but probably should have done, in this case.

3. One person dominates the coaching process—and it is not the coach.

One way of taking back control from a domineering coachee is to encourage the others to express their ideas and opinions freely and frequently so that no vacuum is left for the alpha-coachee to fill. In this group, however, the three other coachees gave their best and yet Thomas was still dominant. Thomas's *modus operandi* was interesting: He allowed the others to speak first and then made his comments, so that he always had the final say. The effect was deceptive: At first it appeared that Thomas (though clearly an extrovert) was being considerate and holding his tongue in order to give the other, more introverted participants space. With the benefit of hindsight I can see that it was simply a ruse to sidestep the discussion and avoid being challenged. The effect was to undermine the others' contributions. I should have tackled this by asking Thomas to speak first every now and then.

Occasionally, a dominant member can be recruited by the coach as a kind of "partner," using their confidence and enthusiasm to open topics for discussion. Unfortunately, this was not possible with Thomas, who failed to engage with me in any meaningful way. We remained wary of each other throughout: I was afraid of Thomas usurping my position as coach; he was distrustful of me and the whole coaching process.

### THE DOMINEERING COACHEE: COMMENTARY 1

*Antonio Galvan Luna*

This case clearly exemplifies the fact that coaches need to be prepared to adapt to a coaching session, especially a group session, and not to expect the session's

participants to adapt to the coach. During group sessions it is almost impossible to find homogenous groups, in terms of attitudes and personalities. These differences can make us work with the group dynamics in order to achieve the goals required.

In my opinion, the biggest challenge for the coach in this case was dealing with the specific type of personality that Thomas presented, which, in my experience as a coach, trainer and consultant, is fairly common in organizations of all kinds. Thomas's behavior during the group sessions closely resembles that of several people I've come across during training sessions I've conducted and which have also made these sessions quite challenging. For example, I once met a recent economics graduate who wanted to become a top investment banker at a Swiss bank. This person was participating in a session about building effective work teams for a French manufacturing company in Mexico, where he worked as a purchasing trainee, but his attitudes were very similar to those described in the case: He constantly insinuated that it was a waste of time; instead of talking about challenges in his current position, he talked about his plans; he continually asked questions about recruitment in big companies; and, of course, he evaluated the session with a very low score. I met these personalities so frequently in the companies for which I do interventions that I started making a list of characteristics that I found in people demonstrating this behavior:

- Very ambitious career or personal goals.
- A strong desire to showcase their talents, abilities, successes, or plans.
- A significant tendency to attribute positive outcomes in their lives to their own skills.
- Strong preference of individual activities or tasks over group work.
- Strong preference for mastering technical knowledge over soft skills.
- Bad listeners.
- Highly competitive.
- Always on the lookout for new information or skills that they think will give them an edge for achieving their goals.
- Charismatic, although their confidence is based on many of the previous points.
- See people as resources.
- Need to appear invulnerable to others.

I must clarify that this list is the result of empirical observation, and in no way tries to identify a specific type of personality; nor is it the result of formal research. Also, I am not implying that these characteristics are necessarily negative. But it was interesting to find similarities in attitudes, expectations, and behavior across the people who presented these characteristics. Moreover, it was even more interesting how they posed very similar coaching challenges, especially group sessions.

To my mind, once a personality with these characteristics is identified during a group session, a different approach should immediately be used with both the group

and the individual coachee. Although in general I prefer plenary-style sessions with groups, one approach that I have found useful under these circumstances is to let the group work in dyads, pairing the main coach with the problematic person as a team. This way that coachee feels he or she is getting all the attention needed and will find the session more rewarding from the beginning. This individual session can be used by the coach to identify and target the motivators behind the coachee's problematic behavior. For example, while working with another similar coachee, I presented her with the results of a recent study by the Center for Creative Leadership that revealed that 60 per cent of top managers think that inspiring commitment and leading people effectively are the most useful leadership abilities to gain success. I also presented her with some negotiation theories that emphasize listening and empathy, which caught her attention. Then I tried to make her reflect whether or not she had these abilities and what it would take her to obtain them. I also explained that these sessions precisely intended to develop these abilities. This led to a brief discussion in which we confronted ideas and, surprisingly, her evaluation of the session was very positive. In subsequent training sessions, this coachee was more participative and open to cooperating with the group as a whole.

Another approach I have found useful when confronting this kind of personality is to use experiential activities with the group, like role-playing activities in this case, which will challenge the participants with realistic situations. When the coachees experience, rather than just discuss, what it is to take decisions as an executive, for example, they generate their own sense of urgency to learn the necessary skills and abilities to make a good choice.

I have also found other profiles that pose challenges to group sessions, like the founders of family businesses and older managers, and in these cases I have also benefited from working with them using these approaches.

As to the "Where is the coach?" question, I think the coach conducted an excellent session in this case, especially since the GROW model is the standard coaching technique used in the company. The GROW model encourages the coach to act as a facilitator, letting people generate their own learning through intimate discussions, rather than presenting the coach's perspectives or direction.

In conclusion, I think that coaches need to "listen" hard to the group, and adapt to what they hear, so that the experience is a rewarding one for all participants, and that the objectives are met.

### THE DOMINEERING COACHEE: COMMENTARY 2

*Gerhard Liska*

I would like to start by looking at the three distinct challenges Bülent identified in this case.

1. The coachee does not discuss "real" issues but is disappointed when the coach doesn't either.

A good question to start with is, what is the "real issue" for Thomas? The description of the coachee as an IT expert may raise the question of how familiar, ready, and skilled (in terms of empathic listening and the capability to sense and name emotions) he is to feel comfortable enough to deal with an emotional approach in such a group setting. The approach taken for this session seems to me emotionally driven, reflected, for example, in starting with painting a picture, and then addressing emotions and emotional states throughout the session. It could be that Thomas felt rather insecure and under pressure in this situation. Insisting on facts and figures could be his coping reaction. He could also have felt the need to relate to his understanding of what a coach should do. Should this hypothesis be true, a one-to-one coaching discussion would be a more appropriate setting for Thomas.

Another hypothesis is that Thomas probably tested how far he could go without hitting a clear-cut boundary. Obviously he had been allowed to withdraw by raising a "sterile" issue, in other words to stay within his comfort zone. Probably this should have been addressed immediately by inviting him to step outside this comfort zone. This would mean that the issue was not to provide him with feedback on his report (which he received the next morning without any evidence of seeing value in it) but rather to confront him with his reluctance to step out of his comfort zone, should this hypothesis be true.

2. The group is doing a great job. But where is the coach?

The group coaching session Bülent describes is sometimes referred to as supervision in Austria and Germany, though the Anglo-American tradition has a different understanding of what supervision is. Bülent states that the session was to "allow participants to discuss current leadership challenges and identify potential solutions through the exchange of ideas." This points to a setting characterized by a reflective approach, a discussion process including feedback between peers, and the notion of self-directed group work.

In such a setting the role of the coach could indeed be more the role of a facilitator who provides the framework and takes care of the group process. Taking this notion of self-directed group work into consideration, the session seems to have worked out quite well for three of the four participants.

The clarification of the assignment seems to be important here. It makes a difference if the session is announced as a session in which participants will receive feedback from a coach, or a session in which they will receive feedback from their peers.

3. One person dominates the coaching process—and it is not the coach.

This is of course a difficult issue, one particularly related to group coaching. In a self-directed group process, the role of a coach or facilitator could be to focus the attention of the group on addressing or even stopping the obviously disturbing behavior of one person. The question is whether the group *does* perceive such behavior as disturbing or disruptive. If they do, the

## THE DOMINEERING COACHEE

facilitator (supervisor/coach) could offer the group a framework to deal with the situation. Again, this would foster the notion of self-directed learning and foster understanding of the coach's background role, supporting and facilitating processes within the group.

Thomas's domineering stemmed partly from the fact that he was allowed to act differently than the others, for example, bringing in a "sterile" issue. This automatically singled him out, compared to the others. Whether this can be perceived as domineering in my opinion depends on various influence factors.

One of these is whether a participant claims the lead in the group or "merely" dominates in the sense of accumulating/demanding a lot of time and attention from the others when dealing with his issues or when bringing in his standpoints. Of course handling both aspects of domination effectively requires different approaches. From this case study, it is difficult to say which aspect of domination might have been predominant and therefore more important.

There is another important issue here that it would be worthwhile to explore further: How much time (in terms of spoken intervention) or how much dominance should a coach have in such a coaching session in order to support the process and trigger development in the coachees?

### POST-CASE NOTE

#### *Bülent Gögdün*

The feedback following this particular assignment revealed that Thomas had given the coaching session a very low score. Thomas was obviously dissatisfied with my coaching technique and when I asked him to elaborate, he explained that he felt I had stayed too much in the background and had not taken a proactive role or provided much input. He was clearly disappointed—and so was I. As a coach, I naturally want my coachees to value my work and get something useful out of my coaching sessions. But on this occasion I was left with the uncomfortable feeling that, for Thomas, this was a great learning opportunity lost.

I, on the other hand, had learned a valuable lesson.

Looking back, I can see that I need to develop a broader and more flexible approach to my coaching technique. In this case, it would have been helpful if I had been able to maintain a supportive and encouraging attitude while at the same time remaining ready to challenge individual coachees (in this case, Thomas) whenever it would create impact. Most coaches have their own style and tend to apply their preferred techniques and procedures to every assignment. But there is a strong case for developing a repertoire of methods and the ability to adopt a range of styles to suit the specific requirements of the job.

### NOTE

1. The GROW (goal, reality, obstacles/options, way forward) model is a structured, problem-solving methodology frequently used in coaching.

# 11

## "JUST LOOK AT YOURSELF! HOW COULD ANYONE BE LED BY YOU?"

SVETLANA KHAPOVA AND YUVAL ENGEL

### *Case summary*

The case is written from the position of a participant in a coaching program who is finding it difficult to digest feedback and feeling insulted as a result of the intervention. The coachee is perplexed about the coach's role in the process, and the lack of conditions of psychological safety in the coaching process.

*Context:* This case is set in an internal leadership development program at a public university in The Netherlands.

### BACKGROUND

As is the case with several leading universities around the world, a Dutch university had recently introduced leadership development programs for its academic and administrative staff. The idea was to identify hidden potential and to invest in the development of possible candidates for leadership positions. Deans and faculty directors were asked to nominate a few candidates for selection by the "leadership program manager" who would select a group of 15 to become part of a new six-month leadership development program.

Among the nominated participants was Sonya, an associate professor of cross-cultural management and newly appointed director of a new research institute that, at the time, existed only on paper. Sonya's task was to get the institute up and running within eight months. She was well aware of the fact that she had hardly any time for participation in the leadership program. But at 32 she was young and, as a newly appointed foreign national—she was Russian—felt honored to have been nominated for the program by the faculty board. So despite her already busy schedule, she accepted the nomination.