

Brief Coaching of Executives

by Dr. Peter Szabó

Successful coaching does not imperatively need to be arranged over a long period of time. Three examples from coaching practice make clear how customer competencies can be made accessible for sustainable results within a short time.

- Example 1: the experienced manager in the consumer goods industry, who under challenging conditions decided to implement her leadership role more offensively, realizing during the coaching session that she was considerably farther advanced in this regard than she had ever presumed.
- Example 2: the young industrial manager who does poorly in an internal management assessment, but within a few weeks of a coaching is able to gain the full trust of his supervisor.
- Example 3: the bank director accustomed to success, who faced with a complex career decision, departs a conversation invigorated because he has discovered that he has already begun realizing what is really important to him in his life – fully independently of the career move at issue.

In all three cases, only a single coaching session took place. All three customers came to me event-related, 'just in time' on the basis of a current need and their own free decision. Before coaching the situation seemed gridlocked, but in conversation viable options for action developed. The result in all three cases proved sustainable – despite or perhaps just because of, the brevity of the coaching.

As a Brief Coach, I see my contribution in enabling executives a usable start in the desired direction within a conversation. Experience shows that clients subsequently know how to carry on. So coaching can be designed in a way to make further coaching superfluous.

Customer competencies thereby play a particularly significant role in my work for the sustainability of the success. Because the customers' own competencies are also effective when the coach is no longer there.

Case Example 1: Finding Highest Form

Coaching Agreement:

The request for coaching came from the head of human resources of a consumer goods distributor. Effective support was needed as quickly as possible for Helen, a high-level manager, who had to answer to strategic needs under the most difficult circumstances. Helen would contact me directly. We clarified up front the confidentiality of the coaching sessions as well as my fees. A defined number of sessions was not agreed upon. Rather, coaching should terminate as soon as the customer could proceed independently.



For the first two meetings I respectively calculate at the doubled rate, since in my specialization in Brief Coaching the greatest added-value is generated in the first hours of the coaching process. Should the client not realize any benefit in the first meeting, the payment obligation is waived: without any improvement or breakthrough there is also no claim on fees.

“I am already considerably farther on course than I thought even this morning,” Helen said at the end of our one-hour meeting. “It is now entirely clear to me what I will increasingly do from now on. I’ll contact you if need be to arrange another conversation.”

Beginning of session:

The discussion had begun with a brief presentation of an uncomfortable starting position by Helen:

The sudden departure of a top-level manager had resulted in a lack of executive support for a crucial, strategic prestige project and the understandable uncertainty of the few thousand employees in her charge. At the same time Helen is asking herself about the proper timing for her next personal career move.



“What should happen today, in order that our conversation should have been worth it for you?” Helen decides after momentary consideration to begin with herself: “I need to learn to assert myself under these adverse conditions more emphatically, opposite the CEO as well as within the project team.”

We first examine possible effects in case she should actually succeed in this. It rapidly becomes clear that dealing with precisely this topic is valuable.

“Imagine a scale between 1 and 10. 10 means you assert yourself fully and with the necessary emphasis, while 1 is the opposite of that. In your own spectrum of action, where have you been on this scale recently?”

After careful consideration Helen sets the range points at 2 and 4 on the scale. “Somewhere between 2 and 4,” she remarks. “Sometimes I manage better, but last week with the CEO, I just wasn’t demanding and clear enough, and one of my requirements dissipated.”

Helen’s view was directed towards that which at the moment in her behavioural repertoire appeared to be missing – she was staring at her own deficit.

My coaching question consciously targeted the opposite view – the capabilities that she at the moment did not yet perceive.

“What are you now already doing between 2 and 4 that you were not yet doing at 1?”

Helen willingly tells of various changes that she has successfully introduced during the last couple of weeks. She has namely consciously started focussing on few priorities and leaving off doing other things. She cancelled her attendance at a management event, and gave an internal customer the choice to decide which of two orders would temporarily be postponed. We briefly discuss how she managed to make such disagreeable decisions and in the end to carry them off, although both cases were not easy. I ask again in order to understand the behaviour with which Helen succeeded in asserting herself.

Goals:

Helen does not want to be stuck at 2 or 4 – her target is to reach at least 7 or 8 on the scale. I assimilate Helen’s forward-directed energy, curious to grasp how much she knows of her desired future behaviour: *“Let’s assume you have somehow made it to 7 or 8. I also don’t know right now whether that’s possible or how you would manage it – but just imagine to yourself that you were already at 7 or 8. What concretely would you be doing differently at 7 or 8 than you’re doing now?”*

In the following ten minutes Helen develops a very detailed and multilayered picture of the desired changes in her own behaviour. I ask her how project team members will notice this, how the CEO will notice in her next contact with him, and what the first thing is that will attract the attention of her closest co-workers if she reach-

es 7 or 8 on the scale. We discuss too how the respective partners will probably react in conversation, and what positive effects Helen is hoping for regarding the uncertainty in her management area.

We are both conscious that at this point in time we are speaking of pure hypotheses; by her own estimation Helen is now somewhere between 2 and 4 on the scale. Nonetheless the scenario of 7 or 8 develops a visible attraction and appears to engender a fortified determination in her; Helen now knows with perfect clarity what she wants to achieve.

More Resources:

In listening I cannot avoid the impression that she is farther advanced not only hypothetically, but also already in her actual managerial behaviour, than has been clear till now. So I ask her: *“Helen, what examples come to mind from the last few days and weeks, in which you showed rudimentary signs, or were at least for a short time closer to the 7 or 8 in your own behaviour?”*

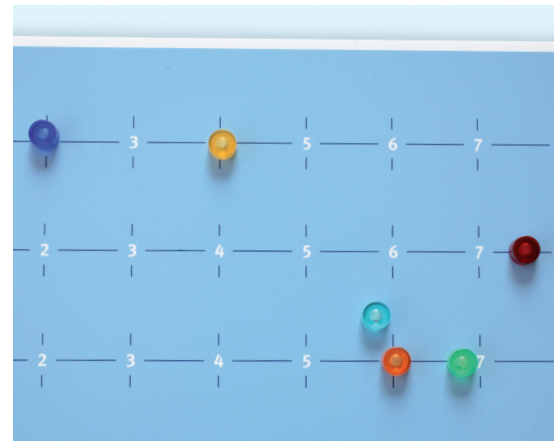
Three current examples occur to Helen. “The” one situation with the CEO lies somewhere around 6 anyway; another example from a departmental meeting lies at 7, and a further example with the project team is also somewhere around 6. “Yes,” Helen intones, “in the last project meeting I really did react differently. One of these endless discussions started again, and I didn’t let it go on. I just decided. I honestly admit I was somewhat annoyed in that situation, but then surprised myself at how easily the decision was accepted and since then productively implemented.”

From the analysis that followed of the example with the CEO (at 6 on the scale anyway) Helen gains valuable hints about what she could do more of in order to get not just a polite answer, but a clear commitment from the boss.

Wrapping up:

Based on the success factors from the three successful examples Helen drafts an action plan for her concrete steps of change within the next 72 hours: “It is entirely clear to me now, what I will increasingly do.”

I am pleased for her because it is always more promising of success and more sustainable to increasingly employ already proven behaviour than to develop entirely new behaviour. With a closing look at her target scale Helen remarks with some surprise, “I am already considerably farther on course than I thought even this morning.” We conclude the session without making another appointment.



Scaleboard

*Estimation of behavior at the start of discussion 2 – 4,
Target objective 7–8,
Examples of high performance found at conclusion 6 – 7*

In the meantime I have received 2 brief e-mails from Helen. Her new behaviour is working. In addition she has accepted a challenging job offer.

The coaching fashioned itself relatively easily, since the customer wanted to start change with herself and within a short time found her way back to competencies of which she had lost sight. Gentle but insistent questioning in the direction of her capabilities had sufficed.

“Our desires are presentiments of the capabilities that lie within us. Precursors of what we will be capable of accomplishing. What we know and desire presents itself in our imagination as outside of us and in the future; we feel a longing for what we inwardly already possess. In this way passionate anticipation transforms what is truly desired into a dreamed-up reality.”

Johann Wolfgang VON GOETHE

Case Example 2: “Changing” the Boss

In some cases, executives are not interested in rediscovering their own capabilities. Rather, they wish that another person would change. This is the coaching challenge in the second example.

“In a workshop for the extended management we all generated a personal DISC profile. For ‘I’ for interaction/influence, I had a value of around 30, while my colleagues had values around 70. I’d also like to be there, because for success in my job it’d be especially important. For example, in interaction with my boss, how can I influence him to grant me his unreserved trust? I notice again and again that he doesn’t have confidence in me, doesn’t give me responsibility, that he takes direct influence and so on. At the same time I can only perform fully if I can count on his complete trust.”

This is a brief summary of the concerns of the 38-year-old industrial manager John.

Competencies of action:

The common search for useful competencies of action (to advantageously influence the boss) presents itself in this case difficult at first. There do not appear to be any examples worth mentioning in which John would appraise himself with a DISC value higher than 30.

Only when I ask him:

“How did you manage at thirty-eight years old to get so high up in the hierarchy?”, do we really



find anything. Throughout his career there are significant examples of successful interaction and exercise of influence. For example five years ago, as he received full responsibility for the renovation of an entire production facility and based on that success was subsequently promoted into his current position. With animation he tells how he accomplished things, and I ask how exactly he gained the trust of his superiors. Thanks to this recovered memory, John notes a number of ideas that he wants to test and implement in the near future. What particularly pleases him is that the manner of exercising influence is authentic and suits him well, and that it has worked before.

Competencies of observation:

Nevertheless for John the anxious and sceptical question remains open: will his boss really react positively, when he tries out his new behaviour ideas? Will his boss entrust him with decisive projects without reservation?

We agree that with our coaching session we can change neither the actual reality nor his boss. However, we can definitely influence what attracts John’s attention in his boss’s behaviour and what doesn’t. Until now John had noticed primarily if the boss ‘yet again’ demonstrated no trust. It would be all the more important also to notice when the boss ‘for once’ demonstrated the desired behaviour.

“Let’s assume that in reaction to your successful efforts your boss would really begin to behave differently. How would you recognize the first positive signs?” I ask and do not back off until John names a number of indications for which he will look and by which he will clearly acknowledge progress in his boss.

When we meet three months later coincidentally, John mentions that although the situation at work is absolutely crazy, collaboration with his boss is now really good.

I have no information about what really helped, whether it was John’s new behavioural repertoire, his newly-gained self-confidence or his refined perception for discovering reassuring hints from his boss’s behaviour, or even if the boss changed.

From a systemic standpoint I would assume that every change John makes influences his interaction with other people and their reactions. From a constructivist view it can also be that John simply perceives different parts of reality and now gives increasingly greater attention to positive signs from his boss that he overlooked before.

What can assuredly be said is that John will continue to maintain his target-oriented behaviour sustainably, as long as he receives fortifying reactions from his boss.

“No problem can be solved by the same mindfulness that led to the problem.”

Albert EINSTEIN

Case Example 3: Out of the Decision Dilemma

Sometimes the basis for decision-making is exceedingly complex. And the decision becomes an irresolvable dilemma if none of the options is really able to satisfy. Bank director Ernest, accustomed to success, sits before me and needs nearly thirty minutes to present what is for him the core in the upcoming decision between two internal position options. He has to decide within the next four days. The multi-national bank stands amidst upheaval somewhere between the actual and a new organizational diagram with a great many variables.

“How can I support you in the remaining 30 minutes?” is my question.

“I don’t know,” he says. “In the four days until the decision I won’t have enough time anyway to do what I’d really like. You know, until now I’ve made all my career moves according to external circumstances. While actually for a long time I have wanted to proceed from myself and my own needs, to shape my own life according to my own visions.”

I ask him if we should stick with this topic for a moment and he says yes, that would actually be important.

“Let’s turn this topic into a scale between 1 and 10. Where are you now on this scale, if 10 would mean that you shape your life on your own?”

After careful consideration he indicates 2.5, and subsequently we discuss for almost twenty minutes about what at 2.5 is already different

than at 1. We speak of his small successes between the bank and his family, his regular athletic engagement as a youth trainer and from quite personal aspects that at least let a 2.5 be a 2.5. I ask him of which of all these things he is most proud.

“Of the fact that I’m here now. I moved heaven



and earth to get this appointment, postponed two internal meetings, drove here from Zurich, and now I am actually here and have started taking time for myself, even though it’s going to cost me the whole to weekend to catch up on what I missed.”

I wanted to know if he needed anything else from me for his decision before we concluded. “There is no such thing as the perfectly foreseeable decision anyway, but however I decide, the main thing is that I continue with my real goal.” With these words he headed back to Zurich with the self-confidence of a man who had begun taking time for himself.

When contradictions appear irresolvable, I can as coach sometimes be helpful in gaining another view, so that possibilities of choice are expanded.

From a mutual acquaintance I’ve heard that Ernest is well along in arranging his own life.

“There is no connection whatever between the problem and the solution.”

Steve DE SHAZER

In all three examples there were the following commonalities in coaching procedure:

- Speaking of capabilities instead of deficits
- Asking about what works instead of asking what is missing
- Developing solution ideas instead of analyzing causes
- Finding out how things look beyond hindrances, and thereby working out the solution in reverse
- Using scaling questions to gain tangibility and distance

All three examples stay close on the trail of executives' competencies. The point is to make the strength of what has succeeded and of desired visions usable for new options of action. What I as a coach contribute to the conversation is correspondingly simplistic:

1. To persistently ask about options of action that are present and desired.
2. To tap customers on the shoulder if their view is fixed on unsolvable problems and deficits, and to invite them to expand their field of vision in a more expedient direction.

"Can Executive Coaching really be so easy?" you might justifiably and critically ask. This article is an appeal for pragmatic simplicity. Simplicity that leads to success is, however not always easy to achieve. The particular challenge for the coach consists in remaining consistently simplistic (not oafish), even when things become complex, and to presuppose customer competencies even when they do not seem obvious.



Peter Szabó:

Is 50 years old, married and the father of 3 children. He received his doctorate in law and acquired management experience for 15 years in the insurance business. 10 years ago he became independent and the first to transfer solution-focused methods (according to Steve De Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg) to the areas of coaching and training. He founded SolutionSurfers in Lucerne, which in the meantime is the largest provider of coaching education in Switzerland. In 2005, along with Insoo Kim Berg, he authored "Brief Coaching for Lasting Solutions." The book has been translated into six languages. Peter Szabó teaches coaching at a number of universities in Europe and North America and holds workshops for companies and institutions worldwide on the theme of Brief Coaching. In his private practice he specializes in Brief Coaching for Executives.

Contact:

Dr. iur. Peter Szabó
Unt. Batterieweg 73
CH-4059 Basel
peter.szabo@solutionsurfers.com
www.solutionsurfers.com