GIVING FEEDBACK TO LEADERS: AVOIDING THE TRAPS

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Giving clear and direct feedback to leaders is important to the success of the coaching experience. For HRD practitioners and external coaches who provide coaching services to organizations, this is a critical part of their leadership coaching. Yet there can be significant pitfalls along the way. This article examines some of the traps encountered during the feedback phase of coaching and offers HRD practitioners an opportunity to look at ways they can miss the mark. The article also highlights some of the strategies for preventing and remedying the identified traps, and recommends that the HRD Practitioner explore some new behaviors when delivering feedback.

INTRODUCTION

The feedback phase is at the heart of the coaching process and one of the most critical phases in the coaching model. When the feedback phase is not executed skillfully, the entire assignment can go awry. This article highlights four key traps that coaches can fall into when giving feedback to clients, and will offer some strategies to avoid these traps.

Those who coach—whether HRD practitioners, organizational consultants, or full-time coaches—need to hold up a mirror to the client's behavior even when the feedback is very difficult to share or hear. (Note: To simplify, from here forward we will refer to all those providing coaching, whatever their discipline, as "coaches.") Yet, for a variety of reasons, giving feedback presents problems for many coaches. This became real for us at a professional conference several years ago. In one workshop the presenter gave the participants a case study to "work" in which a coach had collected information about the CEO. Later in the session several participants, in turn, role-played giving feedback to the "CEO" in front of the audience. Without exception, each of the role-players softened the feedback or downplayed its importance. What was going on here? This wasn't even a real situation and yet the coaches were holding back. We concluded that the process of giving feedback is problematic for many coaches, perhaps especially when the client is a high-level, "important" person—even if the individual is only role-playing a CEO!

We believe that the feedback phase has high potential for coaches to critically rethink and revise some of their behaviors. In the next section of the article, we focus on four of the traps and also on the strategies to overcome these common pitfalls.

1. Failing to prepare the client.

The Trap

Coaches sometimes assume that clients welcome feedback and that they want to work on improving their behaviors. Otherwise, why would they be in coaching? Yet clients are often less than enthusiastic about some of the data that the coach is presenting. The mistaken assumption on the coaches' part occurs especially when they are excited about the information and the consistency of the messages that they have collected. According to What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback, the myth is that "If feedback has all the correct ingredients in its delivery – clear, specific, timed right, non-judgmental and speaks only to behavior – it will be accepted as given." However, we know that clients actually choose what they will accept and what, if anything, they will do about the information, and that preparing the client ahead of time will increase the chances of acceptance. By not adequately preparing the client, coaches can fall into the trap of getting less acceptance of the feedback, and more anger or more resistance.

The Strategy

It is the responsibility of coaches to make the feedback process known and visible to their clients. Coaches who prepare for feedback sessions with clients by helping their clients understand the feedback process are more successful. Preparation may include discussing the feedback process with the client prior to sharing the data, and/or determining which models will be useful for the client to fully appreciate the feedback information. Pictures or models can be "worth a thousand words."

Sometimes we find it helpful to remind clients of the "1% rule." This "rule," invented by one of our colleagues, states that no matter how strongly the client disagrees with the feedback, no matter how much the feedback seems off-target, the client is to assume that at least 1% of the feedback is accurate.

Often the Johari Window is used to help clients understand that they have blind spots like all of us. This model is one of the ways that coaches can prepare their clients for what kinds of feedback they will be receiving. Another way to prepare clients is by asking them what they typically do when they hear feedback and have them describe a situation from their previous experience. A VP of Sales in a biotech company told the coach that in his previous company he usually would disregard feedback if he did not respect the source or if he thought the person had an axe to grind or was using the feedback for political gain. The coach assured the client that in this case there was no political gain or axe to grind, so that the client could take in the feedback. Some additional questions coaches can ask clients are: "Are you willing to entertain a new way of listening? Are you willing to suspend your beliefs about how accurate the data is? Are you willing to stop yourself from guessing who said what?"

These tactics can be very useful when the coach senses that the client is resistant to getting disconfirming information. Often the client is asked at the beginning of the data collection phase or even in the contracting phase how they like to receive feedback. It's a good idea to ask again when preparing for feedback.

In a large non-profit, Vickie, a client who did not like to get "bad" feedback, told the coach in the preparation phase to give her positive feedback first, then give corrective feedback, and end with a more positive summary. This was useful information for organizing the feedback session. Additionally, Vickie was told the steps of the feedback stage including what happens after the feedback is given. She learned that she would have a few days to digest the data and her coach would give her support after she had time to reflect on the feedback. By knowing all the steps involved in feedback, she accepted the feedback very well, including what she saw as "bad" feedback. Some clients need a lot of preparation and others need less, depending on how they receive feedback and their level of trust.

2. Flooding the client with data.

The Trap

Most 360-degree processes generate an enormous amount of data. As coaches we may feel that all of the information can be useful to the client. The trap for coaches is that clients can become so overwhelmed by the large amount of data that they don't take it in or they discount it and don't take it seriously.

The Strategy

Coaches often have to decide what feedback is really useful for their clients and what information is redundant or not important to focus on at the time. When conducting interviews, coaches generally receive more information than the client can handle. Coaches can choose the information that will be most useful for the client and stay focused in the feedback session on these key elements. For example, it is useful to pull out three key strengths and three to five key challenges that the client is facing.

When using a 360-degree instrument rather than interviews, the coach can engage the client in deciding what information is most relevant and useful. By asking questions such as "What stands out?" or "What surprises you?" the coach can begin a collaborative process of identifying the most important information. Either way, with interviews or surveys, focusing on a limited amount of data will ensure greater success with the coaching assignment.

In a coaching assignment when one of us was new to the field, the coach provided the client with a bullet list of six "areas for improvement." This was a case where the client educated the coach. The client asked, "How can I possibly focus on changing six things at once?" He was absolutely right of course, and the coach learned a valuable lesson.

3. Failing to Deal with Resistance.

The Trap

Often, even with the best of coach preparation, clients will resist accepting feedback. Like all of us, our clients have blind spots. They have self-perceptions that don't match how others see them. A significant part of our job as coaches is to shed light on these blind spots and help our clients see themselves as others see them. Yet when faced with challenges to a deeply held self-image, they may display anger, justify their behaviors as necessary, or claim that whatever it is, they don't do it anymore. By falling into the trap of failing to deal with the client's resistance, coaches collude with the client in shielding the client's blind spots and severely limit the possibilities of a successful coaching assignment.

The Strategy

The most effective strategy to deal with client resistance is to notice and call attention to the client's behavior. In a recent coaching assignment, the coach collected 360-degree feedback on his CEO client that included a strong consensus that the CEO had great difficulty hearing bad news. As the client read the feedback summary, he slammed the pages down on the conference table and shouted, "I don't want to hear this!" The coach waited a moment, and then said, "What you just did...that's what they're talking about." At first the CEO said nothing. After a long pause, he finally said, in a quiet voice, "Oh." The coach asked the CEO if this was how he typically reacted to bad news. Looking somewhat embarrassed, he replied, "Well, it's not usually this extreme." When asked what impact he thought even a less extreme negative reaction to bad news might have on his staff, the CEO grudgingly acknowledged that it could inhibit people from telling him about situations where his action was needed. The coach's willingness to deal with the client's resistance allowed the coaching to proceed past what might otherwise have been a difficult impasse, and resulted in significant learning for the client.

4. Avoiding or softening tough feedback.

The Trap

Giving feedback that significantly contradicts the client's self-perception can be difficult in the best of circumstances. We may hold back from giving straightforward and direct feedback. We may "pull our punches" and soften our feedback or avoid it entirely, fearing the client may become angry or dislike us. For internal coaches, this tendency may increase if the client's position is several steps above the coach's in the organization's hierarchy. External coaches may fear losing the assignment. In either case, coaches may allow clients with strong or aggressive personalities to intimidate them.

The Strategy

Certainly preparing the client, as described in the strategy for the first trap above, is critical. It is equally important for coaches to prepare themselves. How can you do this? Here are some possibilities. First, anticipate the client's reactions. Based on previous interactions with the client, what is he or she likely to do or say when receiving difficult-to-hear feedback? Consider various possibilities. For each one, come up with a strategy for dealing with it. Then practice, either by mentally rehearsing your responses or by role-playing with a trusted colleague.

Another way to prepare yourself is by addressing your own fears and concerns. Many of us have outdated "self-talk," silent inner dialogue or beliefs left over from childhood that suggest we will fold or feel badly when subjected to another's anger or rejection. For example, if we notice strong feelings of anxiety when planning to give a client "tough" feedback, this may indicate an underlying belief that we can't handle a powerful negative response from the client. In this case, it will be useful to "dispute" the belief, by imaging the worst-case scenario and reminding ourselves that we can deal with such a situation, and have successfully dealt with such situations in the past.

A Note on In-the-Moment Feedback

Feedback is not limited to the feedback phase. It is often useful to give 'in the moment' feedback to a client as the behavior is happening. Giving feedback in real time creates a "coachable moment" and can give the client insights that might not otherwise occur. For example, at a coaching session with a Chief Technology Officer (CTO) in his office, the coach noticed that during the conversation, the CTO periodically looked down at papers on his desk. The coach called attention to what the CTO was doing, and wondered aloud whether this behavior might account for the feedback from the CTO's reports that he didn't seem interested in their concerns. The CTO immediately recognized the connection, and committed himself to focusing his attention on whomever he was meeting with.

Feedback is essential to coaching. It gives clients insights into their own behavior that may have been unknown to them and helps clients understand how others see them. How coaches deliver feedback is critical to its acceptance and usefulness. In this article we have examined some of the key traps encountered during the important "feedback" phase of coaching and have offered coaches an opportunity to look at some of the traps they might fall into. In addition, we have presented strategies for preventing and remedying the identified traps. We hope this article will stimulate coaches to reexamine their behaviors during the feedback phase and try some new ones.

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Biography

Jan M. Schmuckler, organizational psychologist and leadership coach, works with executives and managers to achieve outstanding business results. Her 25 plus years experience with leading companies in high technology, biotechnology, and financial sectors around the world brings unique perspectives for competing more effectively. Currently, Dr. Schmuckler is Director of the Coaching Certificate Program, John F. Kennedy University, as well as heading her own consulting firm. Her Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology is from the Wright Institute.

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