

Assessing Coaching Clients: Avoiding the Traps

Jan Schmuckler, Ph.D.

Jan M. Schmuckler Ph.D. Consultation

(510) 562-0626

email: jan@janconsults.com

Thomas J. Ucko

Ucko Affiliates

(415) 924-7010

email: tom@ucko.com

Assessment is a key part of the coaching engagement. There are a great number of assessment tools in the marketplace for examining skills, styles and behaviors. Coaches use a variety of assessment tools for feedback to their clients. This article lists some of the instruments that we commonly use and briefly describes each one.

There are a number of pitfalls in the assessment phase that can prevent a coach from completing a successful coaching project. It is important to recognize what these traps are so that we can guard against them. This article describes some of the common traps and suggests strategies to avoid them.

INTRODUCTION

After contracting with coaching clients, assessment is usually the next step in the coaching process. Assessment involves collecting information from the client and others in order to provide the client with feedback. The feedback is then used as a guide in preparing an individualized development plan—which provides the foundation for the actual coaching process.

Self-assessment tools (e.g., MBTI, FIRO-B, etc.—see Table 1) are given to clients so they can better understand themselves and their behavior. Some tools are focused on overall personality or “style” while others concentrate on a particular aspect of personality such as how conflict is handled. Various forms of 360-degree feedback provide information about the client from other members of the organization, customers, or partners. (The term “360” refers to feedback from all around the client—from above, e.g., bosses; from the side, e.g., peers or customers; and from below, e.g., reports.) The information is gathered through a series of structured interviews or standardized instruments or a combination of both. Once gathered, the coach summarizes the information, highlights strengths and challenges and gives feedback to the client. The themes that emerge provide information to the coach and client on what development needs to address during the coaching engagement. Observation is also useful in the assessment process; the coach gets to see the client in a real working situation—for example, leading a meeting or making a presentation. The coach can then provide direct feedback while the event is occurring or immediately afterwards.

Those who coach—whether HRD practitioners, organizational consultants, or full-time coaches—can easily fall into some of the pitfalls of the assessment

phase. (Note: To simplify, from here forward we will refer to all those providing coaching, whatever their discipline, as “coaches.”) In this article, we list some of the instruments we use (see Table 1) and briefly discuss them. We focus on the common traps of the assessment process and some of the strategies that can be used to avoid these traps. HRD practitioners can be helpful to external coaches, because they know what instruments and assessment tools the company routinely uses as part of an overall development program, and which ones the person being coached has already completed. Coaches will not want to duplicate the company’s assessment process, but may want to provide some additional tools beyond what the company provides.

In the next section, we explain some of the tools and their usefulness to coaches. We address self-assessment tools, 360-degree feedback instruments and interviews, and observation.

Table 1. Selected Assessment Tools

<p><i>Self-Assessment Instruments</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) • I-Speak Your Language • Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) • FIRO B • BarOn EQ-i • DiSC Classic Profile
<p><i>360-degree Feedback Instruments</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CheckPoint • Profilor by Personal Decisions Incorporated (PDI) • Individual Interviews
<p><i>Observations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff meetings • Other meetings • Presentations

SELF-ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

Self-assessment tools are useful in pointing out the client's specific behaviors, interpersonal needs and styles. Coaches decide which tools they want the client to complete, based either on information from the initial interview with the client or on a predetermined set of instruments that are given to every client. Our list is built on the instruments that we currently use. However, there are many more instruments that other coaches use.

The FIRO-B measures interpersonal needs in three areas: *inclusion*, *control* and *affection*. For each of the three interpersonal needs, the FIRO-B provides a measure of how much each need is Expressed or Wanted by the client. The results show the various ways the client interacts with people. This tool, in combination with information from other assessment tools, can help the coach and the client identify patterns of behavior that comprise the client's leadership style.

Two surveys of personal styles that are based on the personality typology developed by Carl Jung are the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and I-Speak Your Language.

The MBTI is better known and more comprehensive. However, it requires that the coach be certified to buy the instrument. Some coaches who are not certified hire a certified MBTI practitioner to administer the instrument and interpret the results. The MBTI reveals the natural preferences of an individual or a team for focusing their energy, gathering information, making decisions, and orienting to the external environment. I-Speak Your Language measures the relative likelihood of using each of the four basic personality styles—Intuitior, Thinker, Feeler, and Sensor. It does not require certification. Generally, a coach would choose one or the other to give to a client, not both.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) is used for understanding how people deal with conflict. The TKI helps the client discover which of five conflict-handling modes the client prefers to use, which may be overused and which may be underused. Coaches can help their clients understand their preferred mode(s), the most appropriate uses of each mode, and how to expand their conflict repertoire by increasing their comfort level with least-preferred modes. This tool is easy to administer and takes about 15 minutes to complete. Certification is not required.

DiSC Classic Profile builds on the work of William Moulton Marston. He theorized that human behavior could be studied based on a person's actions in a favorable or stressful environment. The four dimensions that he identified are: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness and Conscientiousness. DiSC shows clients their individual behavior styles and reveals the environment that is most conducive to success. It can be difficult to interpret. Certification is not required but training is important to fully understand the results.

BarOn EQ-i is the first scientifically validated assessment of *emotional intelligence*, which can be defined as the capacity to create optimal results

professionally and personally through our relationships with others and ourselves. The assessment is administered online, and provides scores for overall Emotional Intelligence and for five major scales: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Stress Management, Adaptability, and General Mood. There are also scores for 15 subscales. There are demonstrated links between high emotional intelligence and effective performance. Emotional intelligence can be learned, and a coach can use the EQ-i results to shape the client's development planning. Certification is needed to understand how to interpret the results.

360-DEGREE FEEDBACK INSTRUMENTS

The various 360-degree feedback instruments allow clients' manager(s), peers and direct reports to answer survey questions and provide feedback on the client's specific behaviors and skills. Coaches will check to see if the organization has a current and completed 360-degree instrument for the client. If so, the coach may decide to supplement or update the information by interviewing a small sample of the client's circle to confirm the client's leadership style, strengths and challenges. The information is shared in the next, *feedback* phase of coaching. If the client has not completed a 360-degree instrument, coaches usually recommend tools with which they are most familiar or are best suited for the organization in terms of cost, amount of data, and ease of understanding. There are dozens of 360-degree feedback tools; we are presenting only a small sample. We use the Profilor® (developed by Personnel Decisions International) and CheckPoint. Both can be taken on-line.

Profilor® has two versions for leaders—one for executives and one for managers—both have established leadership competencies. The instrument provides feedback and recommendations to individuals about their leadership skills, strengths and development needs. Coaches need to be trained and certified by PDI to use the instrument. Profilor® is extremely comprehensive and takes about 45 minutes to complete. The feedback report is lengthy and gives a great deal of information. The instrument has been taken by thousands of leaders and provides cross-industry data with norms that can be useful in working with clients. The "Successful Managers Handbook" developed by PDI, is an in-depth guide to development strategies and activities. PDI also offers a companion guide for executives.

CheckPoint, by Profiles International, covers 70 specific job skills, which fall into 8 major universal competencies and 18 skill sets. The survey takes 20 to 30 minutes to complete. The resulting report is colorful, and easy to read and understand. The report includes a development section that guides the client through specific activities that address developmental needs. Certification is not required to use CheckPoint.

Interviews

Interviews are our preferred method of collecting 360-degree feedback, as we can gather richer and more comprehensive information. We can easily customize our standard set of questions to reflect the preliminary concerns and

issues we have heard from the client's manager and/or from HR. When answers to the questions are vague we can probe deeper. We can pursue promising new directions that answers suggest. Best of all, we can gather specific examples of the client's behavior which we use (with the interviewee's permission) to make the client feedback more concrete and unarguable. However, interviews are time consuming, and when the coach is external, may not be cost-effective for the organization when multiple clients are involved. Whether the coach is external or internal, when multiple clients are in the same department, and use one another as peer responders for feedback, interviews may place too great a time burden on the responders.

OBSERVATIONS

Some clients benefit from having their coach observe them in a meeting or giving a presentation. Coaches can give the client unbiased opinions and helpful hints on how to improve the client's style and manner. Coaches and their clients decide which meetings would be useful for the coach to observe. Often they will choose staff meetings that the client leads. Sometimes clients want their coaches to observe them with customers or with their peers. In the ongoing coaching sessions, coaches will sometimes role-play difficult situations with their clients. If they have already observed the client in a similar situation, the role-play can be geared to highlight the specific behaviors the client needs to improve. Similarly, when coaches help clients prepare for a presentation, there is no more important data than having observed the client giving a previous presentation—whether at a staff meeting or in front of a larger audience.

The next section of the paper will focus on three traps that can occur in the assessment phase and on the strategies to overcome these pitfalls.

1. Selecting wrong or not enough responders

The Trap

In 360-degree feedback, failing to include enough or the “right” people is a common trap that coaches can easily fall into. Clients sometimes want to avoid “negative feedback” and choose colleagues for the 360-degree process that present them in the most positive light. The data may be biased toward the positive and therefore not accurate or incomplete, leading to a development plan that may not address the right issues. When there are only two people chosen in a category, clients are more likely to try to figure out who said what. The focus can then switch from the overall themes that the coach is trying to get the client to understand to a more personal view of who is an ally and who is an enemy.

The Strategy

Part of the coach's assignment is to help clients and their bosses agree on appropriate responders for the 360 process. The guidelines that we typically use are:

1. We recommend choosing an equal number of supporters and detractors.
2. For interviews, we recommend three to five reports, three to five peers, one to two bosses and one to three customers or internal clients.
3. Sometimes when there is only one customer, we include the customer responses in with the peers.
4. We consider six or seven responders as a minimum number to use when doing interviews.
5. For on-line 360-degree surveys, up to 15 to 20 responders may be used.

Typically, we will ensure that there are at least three people in a category; for example, if there are only two current reports we may add a former report or lump the peers and reports together. We want the focus to be on the themes or patterns that seem relevant and not on who said what.

It is important for coaches to help their clients with the email letter that goes out to the responders so that responders will want to assist clients in their leadership development work, and will be open and frank, having been assured that their responses will remain anonymous.

2. Hearing what you want to hear—and confirming your hypothesis

The Trap

It can be difficult to see our coaching clients with a completely open mind, free of biases and influences. We may be predisposed to view a particular client favorably or unfavorably due to what we have heard from the client's manager or from an HR colleague or referring source. For example, say you've been told in advance that Amy, the IT director, is particularly harsh on her direct reports. If you're not careful, you may already have developed your hypothesis about Amy and the kind of person she is, and what her challenges are. During your interviews, you may hear "harshness" in what her reports are saying, even when none was intended. After completing your interviews and highlighting areas for development, you may give priority to this issue—even though not fully warranted by the interview data—and not even realize you're doing it.

Similarly, we may be predisposed to like or dislike a client due to our personal biases or needs. For example, if you have high needs for acceptance, and the client is friendly and shows an interest in you; or if you value high intelligence and the client is brilliant—you may well go easy with the feedback for that client. Of course the reverse may also be true. Let's say you're someone who's extremely particular about neatness. Your world is spotless and organized. The client, however, appears somewhat disheveled and his office is a mess. Or perhaps you place high importance on openness, and the client is extremely guarded. In

both these cases, you may be inclined to subtly alter your perception of what the client's reports are telling you, and find ways to "ding" the client in the feedback report.

The Strategy

None of us is free of biases and judgments. These "filters" through which we see others and the world around us, are generally invisible to us. In a sense, we are on automatic pilot when we react to others, both positively and negatively. How can we deal with this? The ancient Greek philosophers' maxim suggests a path: "Know thyself." By getting to know and understand your blind spots, "hot buttons," and biases, you can begin to correct for them. If you know ahead of time that you tend to react negatively to people who are self-centered (or overweight, or sloppy, or whatever the case may be), and you have acquired the skill of monitoring your own reactions, you will be better able to ensure that you don't allow the reaction to influence your assessment of the client. This sort of personal development work can be supported by taking time to reflect on your reactions to clients, keeping a log or journal to help you gain more awareness of your biases and assumptions, and by frequent discussions with a trusted colleague or partner.

3. Failing to recognize cultural differences

The Trap

Although in the assessment phase we are gaining information through structured means—360-degree assessments, self-assessments, and planned observations—we are also conducting our own informal assessment by observing our clients in their interactions with us, or as we see them interacting with others in their work environment. When the client is from another culture, we may misinterpret behaviors that are culture-specific and draw the wrong conclusions. For example, most of us know that in many Asian cultures, eye contact is considered impolite, especially with a superior or someone the individual has just met. Unless we knew better, when seen through the eyes of our own culture, we might assess a client who avoids eye contact as rude or disrespectful, which could color our future perceptions of the client.

Cultural differences that can skew our assessment can occur not only with different national cultures but with different regional or corporate cultures as well. Jerry, a highly successful sales executive from the Northeast, was recruited by a laid-back West Coast company. Within a few weeks, Jerry's aggressive style, which had served him so well in his previous position, began to get him in trouble. His colleagues saw him as abrasive and insensitive, while Jerry saw them as timid and overly sensitive.

The Strategy

Awareness of cultural differences is essential. By educating yourself about cultural differences, you will be better able to recognize behaviors you might have otherwise judged harshly and accept them as natural for the person from another culture. In the above example of the sales executive, a coach was brought in to “fix” Jerry. Fortunately, the coach recognized the cultural issues and avoided the trap of assessing Jerry as a bad fit. The solution turned out to be raising awareness of the cultural differences with both Jerry and his colleagues, both of whom eventually made sufficient accommodations to make the situation work.

Education about cultural differences is available from many sources, including three helpful books that we have used: Geert Hofstede’s classic, *Cultures and Organizations*; Franz Trompenaars’ *Riding the Waves of Culture*; and Robert Rosen’s *Global Literacies*. These books are basic texts on cultural differences and each has excellent examples from multiple cultures that provide guidelines to use when working with clients from different cultures.

CONCLUSION

Assessment is the key to the rest of the coaching process since coaches build their work with clients on the results of the assessment phase. It is easy for us to get complacent and not recognize our biases or oversights that can sometimes get in our way. If we follow the strategies offered in the article, we are more likely to have a successful coaching engagement. We find it especially helpful to constantly examine our own behaviors, emotions, and biases, and to call on trusted colleagues with whom we can discuss our cases and our reactions to them.

References and Resources

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BarOn EQ-i: Multi-Health Systems, Inc. 800-456-3003; www.mhs.com

CheckPoint: Profiles International. 866-751-1644; www.profilesinternational.com

DiSC: Inscape Publishing. 888-575-8800; www.inscapepublishing.com

FIRO-B: CPP, Inc. 800-624-1765; www.cpp.com

I-Speak Your Language: DBM, Inc. 800-345-5627; <http://bookstore.dbm.com>

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI): CPP, Inc. 800-624-1765; www.cpp.com

Profilor®: Personnel Decisions International Corp. (PDI). 800-633-4410;
www.personneldecisions.com

Thomas Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI): CPP, Inc. 800-624-1765;
www.cpp.com

Biography

Jan M. Schmuckler, leadership coach and organizational psychologist, works with leaders to achieve their outstanding business results. Her experience with leading global companies in high technology, biotechnology, and financial sectors 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 coaching firm. Her Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology is from the Wright Institute.

Thomas Ucko is a leadership coach and organizational consultant who helps leaders and leadership teams achieve their business and career goals. His clients range from startups to global enterprises. Tom is the author of *Selecting and Working with Consultants: A Guide for Clients*, and has written numerous business and professional articles. He holds an MBA from Fordham University and an MA in counseling psychology from Columbia University.