

# **LEADERSHIP COACHING: AVOIDING THE TRAPS**

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## **SUMMARY**

Leadership coaching is now being viewed as an effective tool for the workplace, and the number of coaches and HRD practitioners providing coaching services to organizations is on the rise. Training programs for coaches are also increasing. However, few of the programs look at coach self-awareness or teach individuals about the traps of coaching. This article examines some of the traps encountered during the most critical “contracting” phase of coaching and offers HRD practitioners an opportunity to look at some of the traps they might fall into. In addition to examining the traps, the article presents strategies for preventing and remedying the identified traps.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Is there any doubt that coaching has arrived in the workplace? A quick Google search reveals over one million entries on business coaching. Place “coaching” in the Amazon search window. Click. Over 2,000 titles emerge (granted, not all of these will be business or organization related). More than

60 training institutes are pumping out coaches: psychotherapists seeking to avoid the complexities of managed care; human resource development (HRD) practitioners looking to expand their scope; and just plain folks out for new and exciting work are jumping on the coaching bandwagon.

There is both good news and not-so-good news in this renewed interest in and use of coaching. Certainly many managers and leaders are improving their performance and enhancing their careers through coaching. Others are being assisted to reshape company cultures, fine-tune their business strategies, and develop their teams. But there are dangers in the rapid growth of coaching. Many coaches or HRD practitioners providing coaching are insufficiently trained. (Note: To simplify, from here forward we will refer to all those providing coaching—whether HRD practitioners, designated coaches, or others, as “coaches.”) They have simply decided to declare themselves coaches without benefit of acquiring sufficient skills. Others who have been trained in coaching techniques, or may otherwise have developed excellent one-on-one skills such as therapists, often lack the organizational background to place their clients’ issues in the proper context.

But the overriding concern we have about so many new or even well-trained coaches is their lack of self-awareness. Training programs that may do an excellent job of imparting knowledge and skills, do not necessarily place much if any emphasis on developing awareness. Coaches who lack high levels of self-awareness are especially vulnerable to what we call the *traps* of coaching. Yet even the most self-aware coaches are not immune to the traps. In this article, we will identify the specific traps into which coaches are likely to fall during *contracting* — the critical phase of coaching that sets the stage

for the coaching project, and to a great extent determines the coaching project's success.

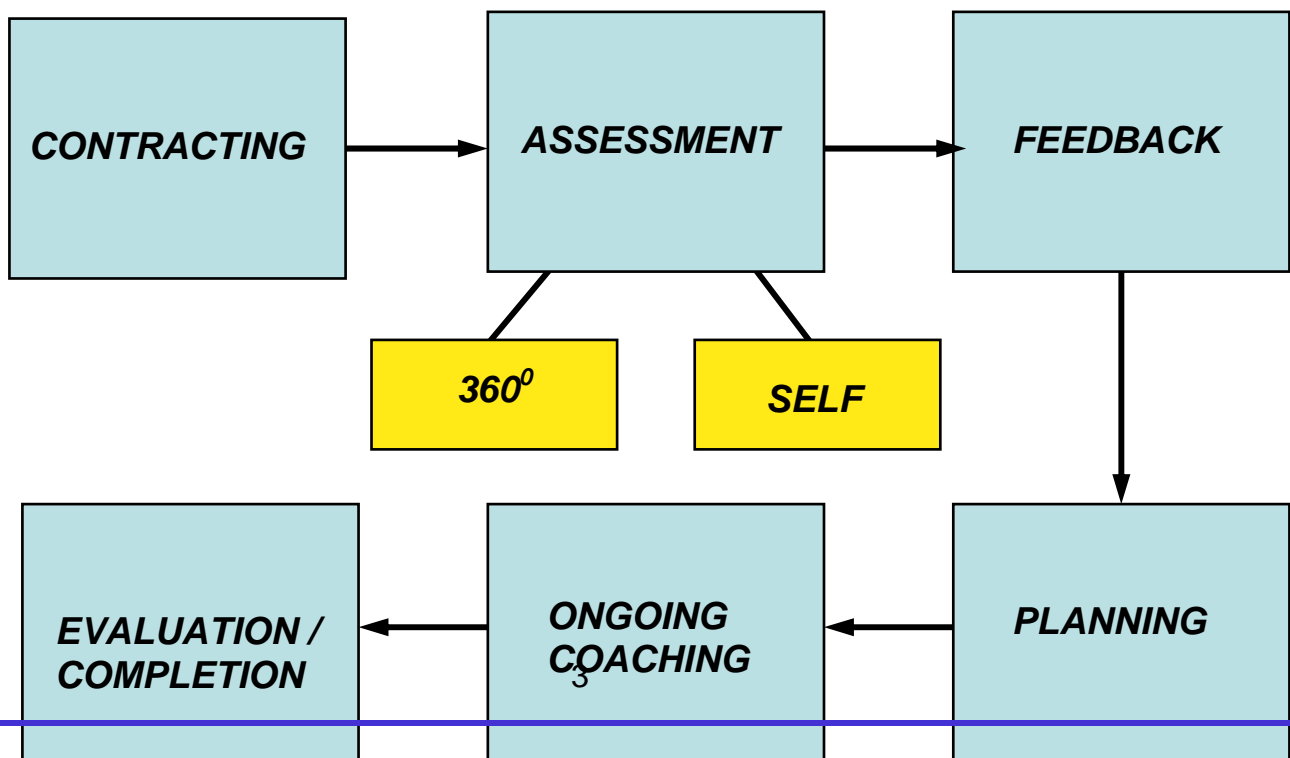
Our approach in this article will be to start by reviewing a basic coaching model, and then explore the four traps we—along with a number of colleagues who assisted us—have identified as potentially most troublesome. For each trap, we discuss the trap itself and the strategy to avoid the trap.

## LEADERSHIP COACHING MODEL

Our model of leadership coaching consists of six phases that are derived from our own experience and from organizational consulting frameworks such as Peter Block's model in *Flawless Consulting*. The phases are: *contracting*; *assessment*; *feedback*; *planning*; *ongoing coaching*; and *evaluation/completion*.

## THE COACHING PROCESS

Figure 1



The first phase, *contracting*, is often considered the most critical step in the coaching assignment. It's the phase where all the factors of the coaching project will be discussed and decided upon. During the contracting meeting, it is important to not only cover what the client wants and expects from the coaching process. It is equally important to tell the client what you, the coach, can offer and what you need from the client for the project to be successful.

During contracting, there are certain traps that coaches can fall into when they haven't paid enough attention to the key elements of this phase. When various aspects of contracting are not given full attention, the entire project can be jeopardized.

After the contract is agreed to, the coach conducts the *assessment phase*. Survey instruments or interviews are used to examine the client's skills and behaviors.

After the assessment data has been collected and analyzed, the *feedback phase* begins. In this phase, coaches present the findings of the assessment phase to the client with a clear picture of the client's current behaviors and/or skills.

In the *planning phase*, clients prepare a development plan based on the feedback they received. The plan identifies the goals they want to work on and how they will work with the coach and other resources to achieve these goals.

*Ongoing Coaching* is next. During this phase, the client and the coach meet on a regular basis, in person or by phone, to work on the goals that the client has agreed to and that are part of the client's development plan.

The last phase in our coaching model is *evaluation/completion*. Here the coach is preparing the client for closure or jointly determining whether or not to continue coaching and renew the contract.

Each of the phases in the coaching model has particular traps or pitfalls that the coach can easily fall into. When we are not aware of the traps or forget to stay alert, we can ensnare ourselves and limit our success as coaches.

In the article, we examine only some of the traps of the *contracting phase*, because this phase is most critical to project success.

## **1. Belief that we can coach anyone successfully**

### The Trap

A mistaken belief that we can coach anyone successfully can get us into trouble and result in the client not being well served.

Coaches sometimes think that they can work with any client that comes their way without evaluating the situation or the person for fit and readiness. Coaches can get caught up in the excitement of wanting to help or solve a problem. They may think, “This trap won’t happen to me, because ..” (e.g., “I am experienced”). In some cases, coaches may urgently need income or wish to please their organizational bosses, and be blind to the obvious problems that are presented in the preliminary meeting.

There are a number of factors that can interfere with our ability to be successful with a particular client. These include:

- Significant difference in values.
- Negative judgments about the client’s behavior.

- Lack of sufficient coach availability.
- Insufficient personal “chemistry” (which may lead to the client not trusting the coach enough to be adequately open).
- Different philosophy/orientation to change.
- Different coaching focus (for example, whole person versus business issues only).

Sarah, an external HRD consultant, was having a slow year. When a client company, a large financial institution, called regarding a coaching project, she fairly jumped at the chance. The individual in question, a sales manager, had been accused of harsh treatment by several of his reports. When Sarah met Ted, the coaching candidate, it soon became clear that he felt no need for coaching, but was going along with it to satisfy his boss’s requirement. In addition, Sarah was low-key, soft spoken and slow-paced; she thought carefully before speaking. Ted, on the other hand, was loud, fast-paced, and spontaneous. To make matters worse, Ted’s manager ruled out 360-degree feedback or any interviewing or surveying of Ted’s reports, on the grounds that “he wanted to keep this quiet.” Not surprisingly, the project turned out to unsuccessful, with none of the coaching objectives being reached. In retrospect, Sarah realized that the combination of her eagerness to get the work and her over-confidence in her ability to coach anyone had done her in.

### The Strategy

It is important for coaches to understand their own style, the type of clients with whom they work best, and the situational elements that can undermine the project. As in the example above, when the coach and client’s

styles are vastly different, and when some basic conditions of a successful outcome are not met, we know that the fit is not good. Similarly, the coach must examine other aspects of fit, as described in “the Trap” section above—negative judgments, availability, chemistry, philosophy, and focus.

It is as important to know when to *stop* a coaching project, as it is whether to *start* in the first place. Sometimes, the lack of fit is not apparent until well into the coaching cycle. Either way, at front end or well within the project, once the coach perceives a problem with fit, the coach must raise the issue with the client and offer to make an appropriate referral. None of us can be successful with every client who comes our way. The important thing is to determine whether you can work well with the person and, if not, take the necessary steps to transfer the client to another coach. If in doubt about fit, it may be worthwhile to discuss the issue, in confidence, with a trusted advisor.

## **2. Failing to ask for what you need.**

### The Trap

Sometimes as coaches we spend so much time concentrating on what the client’s needs are that we forget to ask for what we need. In a coaching project at a semi-conductor company, the client, Jim, was at odds with his boss who seemed to favor other members of his team. The coach spent a good deal of time listening to the client and trying to sort out what Jim needed. However, the coach did not hold Jim accountable for his homework assignments and for the new behaviors Jim was to try out with his manager. By not asking for specific commitments to completing homework assignments

and to working on coaching goals outside the coaching session, the coach was not successful in engaging the client in taking the coaching process seriously. As a result, the project failed to meet its intended outcomes.

### The Strategy

To have a successful coaching engagement, it is important for coaches to negotiate their own needs and wants as well as to focus on the client's wants and needs. There are certain conditions that enhance a coaching assignment, and it's up to the coach to get those conditions met by the client. A good strategy for coaches is to develop a list of their wants and needs prior to a contracting meeting so that they can be certain of asking for everything they need. These may include, for example: administrative assistance in scheduling interviews; prompt return of phone calls; periodic feedback from the client or the client's manager; and completion of homework assignments.

### **3. Failing to contract with all the right people.**

#### The Trap

Even experienced coaches can fall into the trap of thinking that their initial work is complete when they have contracted with their individual client. This ignores the key relationship between themselves and the client's manager, and the role of internal human resources or organization development practitioners. Failing to include the client's manager can have several undesirable consequences. For example, the client's development may be out of alignment with the organization's strategic directions or with the manager's expectations for his or her report. Not including the manager

in your contracting also reduces the possibility of guiding the manager to assist in your client's development by taking advice from you on how to do this best.

If you didn't include the internal human resources or organization development practitioner in your contracting, you have not only failed to make a valuable ally in your work, you have likely alienated your referral source—and perhaps limited your opportunities for further assignments. You have also opened yourself to the possibility of lack of cooperation and in extreme cases, even sabotage. (As externals, we have experienced sabotage more than once from internal consultants who believe they should have gotten the assignment or who resent the greater stature of external coaches.)

### The Strategy

The obvious cure is to consider who else needs to be in the loop in any particular coaching project. Certainly the client's manager and internal HR, HRD or OD practitioners are likely candidates. In some organizations, even the manager's manager may need to be included. You may well need to informally coach the client's manager to gain maximum leverage in your assignment. Often, the boss is part of the problem, and contributes to less than stellar client performance by failing to communicate expectations clearly, or by softening feedback when the client is off course. We like to contract with the manager (at whatever level) by saying that we'd like to offer our recommendations on how he or she can best manage the client. This gives us the opening, or "permission" to give the manager feedback as needed. Additionally, HRD practitioners can be a valuable resource for skills training opportunities and for seeing clients on a regular or daily basis to

reinforce the coaching goals or to give feedback when the client is on or off target.

#### **4. Not contracting to raise difficult issues.**

##### The Trap

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 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, dislike us, or send us away.

##### The Strategy

The trick here is to raise the issue at the very beginning of the project during the contracting phase. One way is to alert the client that difficult issues *always* come up in a coaching project, that these issues *must* get on the table for the project to be successful, and that you want to make sure that you are *both* okay with raising difficult issues with each another. Another way is to tell the client that you will be providing feedback—both from the assessment and as needed during the project—and that some of it may be difficult to hear. Then ask, "How would you like to receive difficult feedback?" In our experience, most clients when asked this question, will act surprised and say something like, "Why, just give it to me straight." If the client takes exception to receiving difficult feedback, this is cause for discussion. Perhaps

the client is not ready for coaching. Whichever method you adopt, you will have gained permission in advance to raise difficult issues and give straight feedback. This will make the actual conversation, when it comes, immeasurably easier.

As we have seen, there are many traps that await us in the coaching process, especially in the contracting phase. No matter how much experience we have, we must recognize that we may not be able to coach everyone successfully. Unless we are constantly vigilant, we may fail to ask for what we need, to contract with all the right people, or to raise difficult issues. In this article, we have offered strategies that our colleagues and we have found to be effective in avoiding these traps. By honing both our self-awareness and our awareness of the traps that await us, we can enhance our effectiveness in this critical contracting phase, and increase the likelihood of achieving the desired coaching outcomes.

## **REFERENCES**

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## **BIOGRAPHIES**

**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**

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Thomas Ucko is a leadership coach and organizational consultant who assists leaders and leadership teams to achieve their business and career goals. His clients range from global enterprises to startups. Mr. Ucko also teaches in the Coaching Certificate program at John F. Kennedy University, and is the author of *Selecting and Working with Consultants: A Guide for Clients*. He holds an MBA from Fordham University and an MA in counseling psychology from Columbia University.