

Executive Coaching

Become a more effective coach.



by Howard M. Guttman

THE BEST COACH I'VE ever encountered was Joan H. She was

neither a guru, published author, nor great speaker. She was my first manager, but she was endowed with a superior gene for coaching. My job involved writing articles for publication: a piece of cake—or so I thought. My first assignment was to write an article. Eight agonizing drafts later, Joan judged my article good enough to go!

Joan was a terrific coach whose effectiveness came from six practices:

- **Setting the bar high.** Joan knew what constituted excellence, and she would not settle—or allow me to settle—for less. Joan persevered, draft after draft, without lowering her standards or giving up on me. As a result I reached a new level of excellence.

- **Stating "shoulds" clearly.** Clear *shoulds* provide targets, which prompt desired behavior. Joan didn't simply say: "Rewrite this." Her feedback was specific. Still, her focus was never on how bad my writing was, but on how it could be better. Clear *shoulds* not only provide targets to hit; they also clarify the current "as is" and the gap between the two. My job was to close the gap.

- **Refusing to "rescue."** Joan never said, "This is how I would rewrite it." She put the onus on me, saying things like, "This paragraph is too wordy. How could you express the same thought in fewer words?" She forced me to come up with solutions.

- **Testing for understanding.** Joan never assumed that I knew what was expected of me. She provided feedback, then asked "So, do you understand what you need to do? How will you go about doing it?" This kept me on target.

- **Contracting.** At the end of every feedback session, Joan carefully laid out the next steps: What she expected me to accomplish the next time we met and when that meeting would occur.

- **Having patience.** Joan may have been frustrated by the rework, but she never let it show. I was on a learning curve, and she gave me the time I needed.

Avoid Three Traps

Three traps can derail you:

1. **Colluding with the client** (not pressing the person or team to go beyond their comfort zone). Collusion is "feel-goodism" in the short run, but one of the biggest barriers to lasting behavior change.

2. **Not knowing when to let go.** You can't learn to ride a bicycle unless you pedal on your own. Great coaches aren't rescuers; they don't carry monkeys. They don't have the conversations their client should be having, forge relationships for him or her, or make up for the



person's inability to change. They provide support and guidance.

3. **Giving clients an ultimatum: Go for coaching or go for the door.** Getting a client to change behavior by the threat of repercussions is futile. Instead, focus on facts. Begin the coaching by interviewing those closest to the executive. Does he or she come across as a doormat or as Attila the Hun? When this person enters the room, does the air become thick with tension? Is the person perceived as a team player or Lone Ranger? What do colleagues perceive as his or her greatest strengths and weaknesses? Answers here are the key to behavior change, providing a "reflected self"—a sense of how others perceive him or her.

Data alone isn't always sufficient. Many executives are in denial; their

view of their own behavior is at odds with that of their boss, peers, and direct reports. Sometimes it's possible to eliminate the disconnect by careful questioning: asking the executive what he or she might be doing inadvertently to create these perceptions. In other cases, the client may continue to deny the facts. Then, the coach needs to examine his or her own style. Is it too direct? Is it possible that the client feels threatened?

Sometimes executives know that behaving differently would be to their advantage; but as one executive put it, "I just don't have the stomach to change." When faced with such resistance, refuse to collude. Continue to push the person gently until the desired behavior change is achieved.

Coaching involves following a step-by-step process: collecting and analyzing facts; sharing them with the client in an objective, non-threatening way; transferring the specific skills needed to bring about behavior change; and measuring results. World-class coaches adhere to these six practices and sidestep the traps.

Seven Deadly Roles

Here are seven roles that coaches should avoid at all costs:

1. **Playing Confessor.** Coaching is not about absolution, but behavior change.

2. **Playing Freud.** Coaches don't get paid to fathom the "inner self," but to assess what's observable.

3. **Playing Houdini.** Coaches should not pretend there's magic in coaching. They should explain their process.

4. **Playing Solomon.** Coaches should not think they have all the answers. For the best insights, they need to look to those who interact with their client.

5. **Playing Tarzan.** Coaches don't get paid to carry their client's monkey. The client must carry the burden and learn how to lighten the load.

6. **Playing Shill.** Coaching is not about making excuses, but about changing performance so excuses won't be necessary.

7. **Playing Osama.** Coaches don't win through intimidation, sabotage, or by rattling clients. They help clients, not destroy their ego—or career. EE

Contributing Editor Howard Guttman is author of *When Goliaths Clash: Managing Executive Conflict (AMACOM)*. He is the principal of Guttman Development Strategies, a management consulting firm specializing in building high-performance teams, and executive coaching. hmguttman@guttmandev.com

ACTION: Avoid playing deadly roles.