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It's Complicated...

Coaching relationships in organizations

I got a call the other day about a potential client. The caller, an employee of the man who was the potential client, described him as a “narcissistic, oblivious, controlling vice president of human resources.” As I explored and asked questions about the coaching need, the caller kept saying with a deep sigh, “well, it’s complicated.”

“If you are coaching clients that work in and are sponsored by a system, you are inevitably working in pre-existing intricate patterns of relationships that are either supporting or hindering your client’s goals.”

Isn’t that the truth about coaching in organizations? The complexities are abundant, including relationships with bosses, peers, customers and subordinates; power and authority dynamics; organizational goals; performance criteria; leadership development competencies; legacy patterns of behavior from cultural norms; sponsorship and confidentiality challenges; and the list goes on. I will deal with some of these challenges below.

Importance of Relationship Patterns

If you are coaching clients who work in and are sponsored by a system (i.e. an organization, group or institution that is initiating or paying for coaching), you are inevitably working in pre-existing intricate patterns of relationships that are either supporting or hindering your client’s goals.

After working with leaders in various organizations for years, I have one conclusion about a common denomina-



tor in successful system-sponsored coaching engagements: For organization-sponsored clients to achieve their coaching goals, they must shift the relationships in the system they work in, in some way, shape or form, so that they relate to or show up differently to others; and so that others can relate differently to them.

System View Coaching

The challenge of the coach working in organizations is to be aware of the patterns in how clients relate to and operate with the people around them. This means taking a systems view to coaching that supports both the client and the sponsoring organization. As an organization development professional, my definition

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of coaching with a system view is: “being aware of the parts, processes and relationships in the system the client resides in, and considering their influence and impact to the client and their goals.”

There are three big lessons I have learned about effectively coaching clients and their relationships in complex systems in order to produce results from the process (see box below).

When the coaching process includes a system view and leverages important relationships, we can of-

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Three Lessons for Coaching Relationships in Complex Organizations



Clarify Sponsor’s and Client’s Commitment

Explore fully with both the client and the sponsor what is at stake and what commitment they are willing to make. Both parties need to own their role and engagement in the process. We are all familiar with coaching commitment issues,

but I often see coaches overlook the criticality of the sponsor’s participation. If the sponsor isn’t actively supporting the client and the process, it’s worthy of pause and cause for concern. Take, for example, my recent coaching sponsor at a private investment firm. She was too busy to provide feedback, support or communicate directly in any way with the client in between the official sponsorship conversations where she readily pointed out all the client’s performance issues. Let’s call a spade a spade. She was not too busy. She was avoiding her responsibilities as manager and not fulfilling her role as sponsor in the process.



Include Key Relationships Across the System

Identify the critical relationships that can support or hinder the client’s goals and include them in the coaching process. Get their feedback and lay the foundation for their support of the client’s developmental process. If the client has patterns of feedback breakdowns and you are skilled in coaching dyads or small groups, consider coaching the relationships as part of the program. This means beyond individual coaching, you contract to include: boss with client coaching, peers or subordinates with client, or group coach-

ing with the client and their working teams. This kind of relationship coaching is not just about getting feedback; it’s about holding a container for the conversations that need to happen and supporting the changes needed in the relationship to support the client’s goals.



Contract Carefully and Continuously

I can’t stress enough the importance of careful and continuous contracting as the dynamics change in the systems in which we coach minute by minute. The organizational landscape is a slippery slope that needs strong boundaries, unbreakable integrity and clear lines of confidentiality. Recently I found myself in a precarious boundary situation coaching two senior leaders in a large public financial services firm. The coaching sponsors requested private conversations with me multiple times to discuss urgent issues and inadvertently attempted to extract confidential information about coaching conversations with my client. It was near excruciating to receive the upset reactions when I held my boundaries and shone the light on their behaviors from a system view that were contributing to the issues at hand. Though it was a risky proposition, it was necessary to call out behavior patterns in the relationship for which they were responsible, which could hinder the client’s success. By careful contracting even in the moment with them, I was able to maintain sponsorship support and create a container for the sponsors and clients to have safe, direct and honest communications with each other. Managing this kind of relationship complexity can’t be taken lightly and can be a powerful catalyst for relationship transformation between clients and sponsors. ●