

# **The Dark Side of Assessments**

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Exceptional coaches are committed to helping individuals and organizations make significant shifts toward growth. Assessment instruments provide an opportunity to increase a client's awareness of the influencing elements including strengths, character, motives and desires. These instruments reveal the light of truth for the client, focusing on both the possibilities and obstacles uniquely important to their coaching goals.

The many advantages of assessment instruments have led to a broad and seemingly limitless selection. Their popularity and growth are fueled by a new generation's passion for self-awareness, and an industry of social networking providing platforms for sharing our discoveries.

This new territory, with its vast choice and accessibility, brings great responsibility. Our responsibility as facilitators of change includes being aware of the dark side of assessments, even when we ourselves contribute to the eclipse by standing in the way of truth and casting a shadow on the results.

In this "change at the speed of light" environment it's essential that the discerning coach recognize and mitigate the eclipse an assessment may have in both the selection phase and the interpretation and use phase.

## **The dark side of assessment selection:**

The first responsibility for the coach is selecting the appropriate assessment considering both client and their situation. The darkness threatening selection includes our own bias and the organization's bias.

### **The Expert Coach Bias**

Your selection of assessment has been shaped by your coach training as well as your specific coach experience. In other words, you have a bias toward a certain assessment or an assessment type.

As coaches, our own bias for specific assessment tools limits our potential impact. Consciously or not, this dark side appears when coaches choose the same tool for all clients. Rationalizing, we lean on our expertise and strategic partnerships - both warning signs of eclipse.

Why choose expert status for a specific tool? Validated assessments are valued for their rigor and reliability. With this rigor comes an expectation of knowledge and appropriate administration of the tool - thus the certification. Recognition as an expert is enticing as a way to set ourselves

apart from generalists coaches. The investment of both time and money results in a bias to use this tool either solely or predominantly. We search for a return on our investment. We stick with what we know.

*-We become experts in administering select tools as a strength, but this strength becomes a weakness if overused.-*

To avoid this bias and the shadow which eclipses the truth, recognize that no tool is perfect for all situations. Be open to and stay aware of the available tools and their appropriate uses as part of your role in moving the coaching profession toward a future of change and growth.

An opportunity to flex your assessment bias is through your relationships with a client organization.

### **The Inflexible Organization Bias**

Organizations often select an assessment tool for use throughout for consistency. Having a common language and reference for all employees is a compelling reason for such a mandate. But this mandate has a dark side.

Enterprise wide implementations have many benefits and help organizations and their people break down silos, improve communications, and get results. It's no wonder these implementations are attractive. The darkness overtakes an organization when there is only one assessment choice for everyone and every situation.

Organizations are stronger when they embrace the diversity of the individuals within. The inclusive organization needs to honor the individuals within the organization as well as the context of the need for an assessment before blindly jumping into the process. For example, an assessment of senior executives that includes strategic thinking and decision making at an enterprise level might not be appropriate across the whole swath of management in an organization. The same competencies don't necessarily apply.

*-Keeping our primary responsibility - to the client - front and center and avoid the dark side of assessments.-*

Resistance to exploring alternatives to the norm come in many forms including: (1) because we've always done it this way; (2) we want to be fair and offer everyone the same assessment in our organization; and (3) we have an agreement with our strategic partner to use only their tools. Regardless of how it starts, staying with one assessment has its dark side.

Challenging the use of 'our tool' for each situation and focusing on the goal at hand, not solely on the financial benefit nor ease of implementation, will provide more valuable and lasting results. It is the role of the coach (either internal or external) to shed light for the organization to recognize the risks.

## **The dark side of assessment interpretation:**

Once a tool is selected, the potential to eclipse the truth moves into execution and interpreting the results. The shadows cast by expectations and fears held by the coach, client and participating stakeholders can influence the outcomes of an assessment both individually and organizationally.

### **Shadow of Expectations**

Coaching is initiated for a reason. Whether to preparing for the future or overcoming obstacles, these predetermined reasons create an expectation bias. In an effort to create a business case for engaging a coach, the organization may inadvertently spread this bias through communications to participants in 360 assessments.

As participants answer questions and provide feedback, they are doing so with the lens of the topic provided as the business case. A client selected for coaching to help reduce their tendency to micromanage influences the feedback from that lens.

As the feedback is collected and interpreted, we look for evidence to support our own thesis of the presenting problem within the results, a form of confirmation bias.

It's the role of the coach to increase the light on all areas, recognizing the presenting problem (or area of focus) is not always at the root of the behavior.

### **Invasion of Privacy Shadow**

The popularity of self-awareness may have increased thanks to our young inquisitive generation, but that doesn't mean everyone wishes to share their results. Resistance to taking assessments includes the need to protect individual privacy. And in the era of big data and surveillance, it is critical for coaches and organizations to proceed carefully.

*-It's critical to acknowledge and respect the concerns of sharing assessment results. -*

Why are there concerns? The concerns are as varied as the individual, and individuality is one of the many reasons for resistance in being labeled.

Coaches and coach organizations must consider the need for privacy before engaging in an assessment. As with any employee data, it is less about the assessment itself and more about how the organization will use and protect the information. Which leads to the final shadow of assessments.

## **Shadow of Reductive Labels**

We humans love shortcuts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the world of personality assessments. The assessments themselves are not an issue, they have the potential to provide insight if used appropriately and most importantly along with other data. The dark side of assessments creeps in with the use of the data.

Initially implemented with good intention (to improve communication and transparency) having employees broadcast their personality or other designation is an ill-fated use of an otherwise valuable tool.

Encouraging or worse mandating your employees post their designations on their desks, walls, office doors, in their email signatures, even on t-shirts - fuels the dark side. How many of us have seen "my top five strengths" or "my MBTI" or "My HBDI" profiles shared broadly in an organization, and in that situation how many times have you seen that information used to typecast someone or to justify criticism?

The fall-out to having your profile broadcast includes the influence on your behavior and your organization's behavior.

*-Those shortcuts we love as humans have now reduced your complexity to a four letter label.-*

Placing too much attention on one label encourages bad behavior. On the shadow side of this emphasis comes permission to be more like your profile. The aggressive or directive leader continues their negative behavior and simply says 'it's my personality, deal with it.' Surely this is not the intent of sharing our profiles.

On the other side of the label, consciously or not, decisions are made based on the assumptions we have about that particular label. 'An introvert wouldn't be good at leading this project.' 'An extrovert wouldn't do well with this team.' 'We only hire risk takers in our organization.' Whether it's the four letter, two letter, color, animal, or other label - it's a reduction of our complex personality and capabilities within the organization.

## **Coaching Adapts**

Everything has elements of light and shadow, assessments are no exception. From their selection through the interpretation and lingering effects in organizations, assessments have a dark side. Reminding ourselves of this dark side and doing what we can to stay ahead of it is critical to bringing the coaching profession into the future.

## **About the Author**

Linda DeLuca is an executive coach with more than 25 years experience helping independent

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