Online Assessments in Leadership Coaching

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Introduction
"The wild west." Those of us who have been involved in the field of leadership coaching for the last 20 years have often heard or used this phrase applied to the field of coaching. Fortunately, leadership coaching has followed a similar developmental path to many nascent professions. At Table Mountain Consulting Group (Table Mountain), we have not heard this phrase applied to coaching as frequently as in years past. This is due to the professionalization of coaching through global independent credentialing bodies such as the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE), as well as regional bodies such as the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). Of these organizations, ICF is arguably the most well-known and as such, has the biggest influence on the field of leadership coaching.

Coach Credentialing Bodies and Assessments
An interesting development in coach credentialing has been the stance taken toward the use of assessment tools to support leadership coaching. While organizations such as ICF support the use of self- and 360 assessments in service of leadership coaching, certification or qualification on assessment instruments is not part of the requirement to be credentialed as a coach. This is due in part to the breadth of the coaching field, ranging from life coaching to executive leadership coaching. Coaching professionals focused on leadership coaching in the context of organizational life are much more likely to include the use of assessment instruments.

Assessment for Development
There's a body of research supporting the use of assessment for development. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) started out as the research-based think tank in the 1950s, focused on the study of leadership in an organizational context. After years of research, CCL turned that research into practice in 1970, when it pioneered the use of assessment for development in leadership development programs. Business psychologists have been using assessments for decades in support of coaching and development. Top ranked executive education programs around the world include assessment instruments as part of leadership coaching. When looking at where money is applied across a leadership coaching engagement, it is fairly typical to see about 40 percent of the spend allocated to the assessment phase of a leadership coaching engagement. A thorough assessment process on the front end provides useful information about a leader's current performance and make-up, making it possible to chart a clear course toward a desired future state. As the saying goes, it's hard to know where you're going if you don't know where you are.

While using assessments in service of coaching is not required as part of a coaching credential, it is a best practice. For the coach, having access to assessment data can enable the coach to quickly understand the coachee's personality traits, values (drivers/motivators) and impact on

others. While a coach would gather this information over time without self-report and 360 assessment, having quick access to this useful data enables the coach to partner more effectively with the coachee. Understanding the coachee's personality traits and values enables the coach to flex, to best serve the coachee. Another clear benefit of having assessment data is that it supports the coach and coachee in quickly identifying strengths and development opportunities. Assessment data also enables coach, coachee and key stakeholders to more quickly craft actionable goals and a comprehensive development plan.

An important foundational element of an assessment process is that coachee's benefit through increased self-awareness. Personality assessment data provides information about what "autopilot" looks like for a coachee. Knowing this makes it a lot easier for leaders to recognize when a situation requires them to disengage their autopilot and access behaviors that may be less natural for them and better suited to the situation at hand.

Ethics and Confidentiality

Confidentiality is foundational to every coaching ethics code. When using assessments in service of leadership coaching, it is important to have informed consent of the individual with full disclosure of the purpose and use of the assessment instrument. In coaching, a standard practice is for assessment data to be owned by the coachee or team taking the assessment. Given that the purpose of coaching is for development, it is critical that assessment data remain confidential. Having said that, since organizations invest in coaching and need to see a return on the investment, as a standard practice, the coach can support the coachee in identifying themes in the data to share with key stakeholders to enable key stakeholders to best support the coachee's development. After the coach and coachee have met for an insight session to review and integrate the assessment data, it is a fairly standard practice to have the coach facilitate an alignment meeting with the coachee, coachee's leader and HR business. Best practice is for the coachee to take the lead in sharing key strengths and development needs and seek feedback and input from key stakeholders. This sets the stage for accountability, an important element in a successful coaching outcome.

Choosing Assessments
A Google search using "assessment tools for leadership coaching" resulted in over 38 million results. Determining the quality of assessments and when best to use them is a key challenge faced by decision-makers. It is not likely to serve an organization well by relying on the top few results from a Google search. With the myriad choices available for on-line assessments, it's all too easy to select and use instruments that are inappropriate at best and damaging at worst.

Most organizations that engage leadership coaches have an HR function. It's fairly typical for HR leaders or business partners to provide input related to the use of assessments. It is very likely that individuals and organizations bring to the process their own historical biases around assessments. In order to mitigate this, a suggested approach is to first develop an assessment strategy. In many cases, organizations lack an assessment strategy and as such, it is understandable that decision-

makers turn immediately to the selection of particular assessment tools. When this happens, the likelihood of successful use of assessments is much diminished. Having a clear understanding of the function that the assessment will serve is an important criterion in making an informed choice about which assessment(s) to use.

Tools versus Instruments

Most people tend to use the terms "tool" and "instrument" interchangeably. Since there is such a range of assessments, at Table Mountain we have found it helpful to define tools differently from instruments. A key differentiator for us in determining whether an assessment is a "tool" or an "instrument" has to do with the psychometric properties of the assessment. Psychometrics speak to concepts like reliability and validity. Using reliability and validity as criteria, instruments are more psychometrically robust than tools. Instruments have a solid research underpinning and have been developed using best practices in testing and measurement. Tools may not have solid reliability and validity data but may provide an intuitive framework for people to be able to organize their thinking to engage in meaningful dialogue related to a particular topic such as change, influence or appreciation of difference.

Personality Assessment

In leadership coaching that includes psychometric assessment, personality assessments (tools and instruments) are frequently used. Personality assessment tools are self-report surveys, usually designed to measure against a theoretical model of personality. Examples of popular tools such as this include the Meyers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), DiSC, Insights Discovery and others. They tend to be quite accessible to the end user and enable the coach and coachee to engage in meaningful dialogue focused on a range of topics relevant to personality at work. The limitation of personality tools like these is that their scales tend to lack the granularity that is helpful when dealing with the nuances of personality at work. Compared to research-based instruments, tools tend not to measure the full breadth of personality. From a test construction perspective, tools are typically less statistically reliable and valid. It is illustrative that personality researchers seeking to publish research in peer reviewed journals are required to use validated instruments rather than tools. Typically, personality psychology journals will not accept research based on tools, as they do not have the psychometric properties to provide enough confidence in the data being reported.

The most widely accepted, well researched model of personality derives from an invitation that psychologist Gordon Allport issued to the personality research community in 1936. He challenged researchers to take the 4,500 or so adjectives in the unabridged English dictionary and to find the smallest number of synonym clusters to account for all these adjectives (Howard, 2004). To do this well required factor analysis, a complex statistical process that is painstakingly slow and prone to error when done without the aid of computers. It was not until the advent of mainframe computers in the 1950's that the "answer" emerged when researchers Tupes and Christal gained access to a US Air Force mainframe computer. However, few in the mainstream research community had ready access to computers until the mid-1980's when PC's became available. It was not until the 1990's that the bulk of the personality psychology community agreed that they had

the clear factor solution to satisfy Gordon Allport's 1936 challenge. From this work, emerged five personality factors which are consistently generalizable across populations around the world. This "solution" to personality is known as the Five-Factor Model (FFM) or the Big 5. . The factors in the FFM are typically designated as Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness.

The best known and most well researched personality instruments based on the FFM are the NEO series of instruments by McCrae and Costa. These researchers developed their instruments in the Laboratory of Personality and Cognition at the National Institute on Aging. There are now several personality instruments based on the FFM, some of which are used in clinical and counseling settings, as well as for training and development, and some more recent instruments designed specifically for HR training and development applications. Prior to the development of FFM instruments, many personality researchers used the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) in their work. As the research base for the FFM evolved, personality psychologists began to switch to FFM assessments.

While the NEO assessments do very well in measuring the FFM, the assessments were designed for academia and tend to use psychologically oriented language that is not that useful for end users in an organizational context. There are several big five assessments that have gained popularity for use in organizations. These are well designed, research-based assessments that can best support an organization's talent strategy, including talent acquisition, assessment of potential, coaching and leadership development.

A couple of the most frequently used personality assessments based on the FFM are Hogan Assessment Systems "Hogan Personality Inventory" and Paradigm Personality Labs "WorkPlace™ Big Five." Both have solid psychometric properties and measure the full range of the Big Five model. When considering which personality assessment to use, it is helpful to think about the intended function of the assessment. For instance, in leadership coaching applications, it is helpful for the language used in the assessment survey and reports to be accessible to the coachee. Language that is too psychologically oriented may be more difficult for leaders and managers to understand and apply in their everyday work lives. Of all the personality assessments our team has reviewed, we have found that the WorkPlace Big Five offers the best balance between psychometric rigor and end-user accessibility. This assessment was specifically designed for use in organizations and, as such, contains language that is organizationally friendly. Most other assessments in this class use language that is somewhat more psychological, making them less accessible to end-users.

Values Assessments

A class of assessments that are really useful and less commonly used in coaching are assessments of individual values that are relevant in organizational life. Values can be thought of as motivators or drivers and tell us where people are likely to focus their energy. Values also inform the types of activities or projects people are likely to be passionate about, as well as the kinds of interactions or situations that are likely to trigger an emotional reaction. As an example, let's take Dave, who was

recently promoted into a Director role in a manufacturing company. One of Dave's highest ranked values was Independence. He really appreciated the fairly hands-off approach of his previous leader. As he was integrating into his new role, he found himself frustrated by his new leader's expectations about the extent to which Dave needed to keep his boss informed about his work. This is an example where having information about individual values helped Dave understand his reaction to his leader's expectations and made it easier to negotiate an agreement.

In our work, we've noticed that conflict in important work relationships can often be better understood by exploring individual values in addition to understanding differences in personality traits. For an example of a psychometrically sound and organizationally friendly self-report values assessment, see the WorkPlace Values Profile. This values assessment measures 16 values distributed across two dimensions: self to other and mental to physical. The report provides a rank ordering of the 16 values, comparison to a norm group, interpretive text for each value, reflective questions to help process the data, as well as a graphic depiction of one's values arrayed across four quadrants that are created by combining the two dimensions of self-other and mental-physical.

Online 360 Assessments

An important element of assessment that drives self-awareness includes key stakeholder perceptions of the coachee. Self-report data on personality traits and values helps us understand what autopilot (automatic or habitual behaviors) looks like for a leader. Combining 360 data provides a picture about how the leader impacts others. When combining these data, we get a sense of the extent to which a leader has developed the self-awareness and agility to know when it's okay to be on autopilot and when to disengage autopilot and show up in ways that are less natural and more effective for a given situation. This crosswalk between self-report data and 360 data provides rich information that can help inform development goals.

In 360 assessment, stakeholders typically include the coachee's leader, peers, direct reports and often a group of "others." Semi-structured stakeholder interviews are a useful way to gather information and provide opportunities to get at nuances in a way that is not feasible with an online 360 assessment instrument. Compared to online 360 assessments, interviews are more expensive and typically don't allow for as many stakeholders to provide input.

There are a growing number of online 360 providers. If one is looking for an online 360 that provides scoring benchmarked against leaders at a comparable level in comparable sized organizations, the Benchmarks™ 360 suite or VOICES™ are both solid choices. If looking for a flexible platform with easy customization and the ability to add custom competencies and items, the WorkPlace Performance 360 is a good choice.

When using online 360 assessment in support of leadership coaching, our approach is to collaborate with key stakeholders to determine the leadership competencies that are most relevant for the coaching initiative. This enables us to customize a 360 assessment that best meets the needs of the coachee and the organization.

Human Resource Optimization

A common adage is that people are an organization's most valuable resource. As such, many organizations spend a lot of time and money on development. When time and money are appropriately focused, the return on investment is visible to key stakeholders. Something that is becoming increasingly evident is that the return on investment for development is likely to pay off most when the competencies that are important for success in a role align with an individual's natural wiring. This concept was described by the team at Paradigm Personality Labs and is aptly named Human Resource Optimization (HRO).

When people engage in behaviors that are naturally supported by their personality traits, they tend to get energized and feel good about the work. When an individual needs to improve their effectiveness in a given competency, it is easier to improve and takes less energy, if that individual's personality traits naturally support the competency in question. For example, if someone is naturally conceptual and enjoys complexity, they are more likely to experience success in developing competence in strategic thinking than someone who generates pragmatic ideas and understands the world through the details.

When an individual's natural trait energy is not aligned with the requirements of a competency, rather than putting a lot of energy into development, it may be worth exploring a compensatory strategy. An example of a compensatory strategy for a leader who is not naturally strategic might be to enlist team support to generate out-of-the-box ideas when a novel solution is required.

The application of HRO is built into a unique WorkPlace assessment report called the Trait Capacitor report. This report provides information about an individual's trait energy in relation to competencies selected from a competency library. The report leverages research on the five factor model of personality to provide a trait energy rating for each competency selected. This unique report enables one to quickly ascertain the extent to which an individual has natural energy to perform a competency. When combined with the online WorkPlace Performance 360 report, we have access to trait energy information and performance data, enabling us to have informed conversations about which HRO strategy makes the most sense.

Conclusion

Standards of practice in leadership coaching continue to evolve. The use of online assessments to support leadership coaching has become the norm. Increasingly, organizations are looking for assessments based in science, that are accessible to end users and that promote the use of a shared language to discuss behavior in the work place. Best practice in assessment for development continues to reinforce the use of assessments to drive self-awareness and to inform development planning. When used appropriately by certified or qualified practitioners, individual and 360 assessments enhance the application of coaching in organizations.

About the Author

Dr. Johan Naudé is a licensed psychologist and leader. He is an expert in the use of assessments and coaching in organizations. Johan served as a US Army Officer and Operational Psychologist, supporting special operations forces with assessment and development services, something for which he continues to make time. For over a decade Johan led a global team at the Center for Creative Leadership and he has coached and trained individuals and teams in North America, Europe, Asia and Africa. As CEO of Table Mountain Consulting Group (Table Mountain), Johan continues to support organizations across a range of industries in the private and public sectors. Through his work at Table Mountain, Johan designs and delivers leadership development programs, executive and team coaching initiatives, and supports a range of assessment services, including assessment for talent identification and assessment.

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