

Authentic Leadership Growth in Executive Coaching Happens in Three Stages

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Drew always seemed to be looking around the corner for what was next. At 60, Drew had reached the top ranks of his corporation, reporting directly to the Chief Executive Officer and frequently interacting with the Board of Directors. Drew rose through his organization's ranks on the strength of his technical abilities, and the company rewarded him handsomely. Throughout his career, Drew demonstrated and valued excellence; he didn't suffer fools easily. As Drew reflected on his organization and position, he recognized that he had few role models for leadership; under stress, which seemed increasingly frequent, Drew was not an effective collaborator, particularly among new and unfamiliar faces. After a few egregious blow-ups with talented associates, Drew knew that he had to do better, or he would spend the next years constantly apologizing to others or finding himself outside of the organization.

As the pioneering Swiss psychoanalyst observed, "you are what you do, not what you say you do," and "we cannot change anything unless we accept it." An executive who approaches coaching from a developmental perspective arrives at the coaching engagement with enthusiasm, excitement, and some mix of dread. Many have worked so long at perfecting their ambitions to rise that meaningful change is often difficult. And the many challenges executives encounter are resistant to improvement because their behaviors have successfully served their ego and professional pursuits.

Certain events contribute to an executive's need for coaching. Among those events are significant transitions (e.g., becoming a manager of managers), poor emotional intelligence, failure to collaborate (e.g., "I'm the most competent person in the room), and underdeveloped self-awareness. Many of these can come in combination, and the coach and client must unbundle and unpack the desire to change to reach a desirable outcome. This article highlights the three forces — catalyzing, capitalizing, and conditioning — that successful coaches employ to help an executive leader achieve greater congruency between thought and action.

Catalyzing

In this stage, the coach and client work to understand and develop a clear, deep, and significant assessment of the forces driving and restraining personal change, growth, and development. Without a trustworthy partner capable of openness and confidentiality, the reinforcing systems for status quo behavior overpower the desire to change. The authentic coach recognizes that the request for help is just one of several steps in catalyzing desire and visualizing successful outcomes. This stage commits the client to a personally meaningful change, not one arising from an organizational mandate. The coach commits in a singular way to the client.

Along with personal identification, both vision and dissatisfaction must exist. Many years ago, pioneering Organization Development practitioners and scholars in the Formula for Change model

observed the change could not occur without these forces¹. In addition, they observed the force of resistance, or what Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey might refer to as the “Big Assumption,” to which we anchor and that has power over us until we are able to understand it, and thereby develop². In other words, the coach and client work to reduce suffering and to increase congruency, resulting in the unleashing of many positive attributes.

Capitalizing

In her groundbreaking article, Darya Funches identified three gifts of Organization Development practitioners: heart, discernment, and presence³. These gifts are relevant and inspire authentic leadership coaching engagements. The coach brings heart and hope to the client’s situation and works with the client to envision possibility to probability. In discernment, the coach and client work to distinguish important from unimportant. When we are present, we bring our best to the situation. Heightened self-awareness and the effective use of self-promote presence.

Dependent on the needs presented by the situation, the coach will engage the client and its stakeholders to understand and promote change. As the client goes through a series of discussions and activities, they will practice and try new behaviors to align attitudes, behaviors, and ways of thinking, establishing a mindset that can reliably learn and grow.

The active work in this process is effective to the extent that it is not transactional. The skilled coach works with the executive to identify and to mine glide paths to improvement. The burden doesn’t make it better, and if the catalyzing stage is held to its intent, a rhythm for results in a psychologically safe relationship is required. The client and coach work to capitalize on strengths that support effective behavioral change.

Conditioning

Conditioning establishes and advances the process of the executive stepping more fully into their capabilities and capacities. The work of earlier stages is cumulative and includes recognizing choice for healthy development and effective leadership. The days of command-and-control administration are long gone if they ever existed. We are now moving into the COVID endemic world, where authentic leaders and their organizations prosper because of executive ability to form community and engage with many. Depending on the success of the work, the client executive can foster newly gained insights to the benefit of others.

In conditioning, we help the client understand motivations and encourage them to apply them to future activities. If the client has made it this far and seems unwilling or unable to make further progress, achievements should be recognized and celebrated. Both the coach and client have

¹ Richard Beckhard and His Contributions to Organization Development. Retrieved from <https://www.shmula.com/27874-2/27874/>

² Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to change*. Harvard Business Review Press.

³ Funches, D. (1989). Three gifts of the organization development practitioner. In W. Sikes (Ed.), *The emerging practice of organization development* (pp. 149-164)

adjacent seats to power and influence, one personal and the other organizational. Many executives see person and organization as inseparable, confirming that life and work are blended rather than separate. The choices we make are influenced by integrity and guided by values that honor the dignity of the individual and advance diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As we return to Drew, his improvements resulted in his increasing influence on his team and organization. Rather than hold onto old ways that had served him well, he now sought feedback and diffused situations by paying attention to his triggers and communicating his feelings in ways that welcomed and invited participation, resulting in improvements to the company's innovation pipeline. Drew learned new approaches to problem-solving and decision-making that grew diverse people and ideas around him and grew inclusiveness. Authentic Leadership coaching provided Drew with renewed energy and purpose that languished in the absence of catalyzing, capitalizing, and conditioning.

In the successful Authentic Coaching engagements, executive priorities and actions align. Successful engagements also result in changes to enduring relationships with family and friends. At a deep level, the coaching will have resulted in the executive bringing more of who they are to what they do and their best to every situation. For many, this journey is difficult, and, in the end, authenticity is the pathway for personal, team, and organizational prosperity.