

## **Building Strong Coaching Partnerships**

### **James Brook**

The starting point for a coaching assignment is typically a problem that threatens to derail the client's career. Therefore, upon engagement, the client's focus of attention and initial expectations typically centre on their problems and weaknesses. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, they have learned through experience that their career success depends largely on overcoming issues and remedying weaknesses to fit into the normative competency standards prescribed by their employer. Secondly, like most of us, clients are conditioned throughout their lives and careers to focus on remedying weaker areas; this strategy is assumed the quickest path to success. Parents, grandparents, teachers, social leaders, managers and other agents in their development all reinforce this deficit-based mindset. It is hardly surprising then that clients obsess and fear their weaker areas and want to remedy them as quickly as possible. Coaching provides a means to get help with weaknesses in a confidential, reflective environment. Similarly, the coach's own beliefs and associated practices are influenced by weakness-based beliefs and assumptions. To move away from this deficit-based mindset, a coach should reflect on and challenge their own underlying beliefs about human growth and excellence. Executive coaching is by definition facilitating improvement of client performance, development and personal fulfilment. However, there is typically too little appreciation by the coach of the unique strengths, positive action routines and enabling relationships that have contributed to the past and current successes of the client.

Strengths-focused coaching, seeks to emphasise the centrality of strengths and successes in facilitating client performance improvement and growth. My experience with a growing number of clients suggests that focusing on their strengths focuses energy and effort. Individuals start seeing old problems and performance blockers through a 'strengths lens. For example, a senior manager of a large Pharmaceuticals company, overcome belligerent and overly critical behaviour in team meetings. He had undertaken several communication skills training courses without success. It became clear that the manager's strength, and source of some of his greatest career milestones, was his critical reasoning ability. However, when the manager overplayed this strength or used it inappropriately, he was perceived as 'pouring cold water' on co-workers' opinions and of being obstinate in defending his points of view. Coaching the manager helped him develop positive action routines to use the strength more selectively, balancing critical reasoning with appreciative feedback, open inquiry and commitment-based influencing techniques. Toxic routines gradually dissipated and stakeholders noticed a significant change in the manager's behaviour.

Personal and organisational transformation often occurs when beliefs and assumptions are brought into full awareness, constructively challenged and translated into new action repertoires. If beliefs and assumptions are wrong, what follows is flawed. I would suggest that many coaches still use a deficit-based mental frame and approach assignments with the aim of 'fixing' the client. They are essentially colluding with the 'dark side' of client identity and mental framework, exacerbating fears and self-limiting beliefs. If this is replaced with a more strengths-focused, appreciative mindset that

builds upon natural strengths and talent, the client's full potential and resourcefulness will almost certainly be unlocked.

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