



The Look & *Sound* of Leadership™ *Executive Coaching Tips*

SINCE 1990

READINESS IN COACHING

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Why do some coaching engagements achieve positive transformations while others get stuck in the starting gate? This month's coaching conversation explores who's coachable, who isn't, and why.

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Troubled history. Tough decision.

Darryl supported the decision I was making. We didn't know what Grace would think of it.

I was withdrawing myself as the coach for one of Grace's direct reports, a lawyer named Sterling.

Sterling, most agreed, created swirls of difficulty in every endeavor. His constant difficulties had prompted the company to get him coaching. But soon even the coaching soon had it's own swirl of difficulties.

For example, once Sterling had finally selected me as coach (and oh my! that process had been a swirl of difficulties!), I'd given him three tasks. I give these same tasks to almost everyone I coach. They are not onerous. Most leaders complete them in a week or two. If travel is brutal or assistance is minimal, the tasks might stretch to a month. But in Sterling's case, more than four months had gone by and he'd only completed one of the three tasks.

Finally, I had decided I would go no further. I was withdrawing as his coach. Darryl, the head of HR, had arranged this meeting so I could explain my choice to Grace.



But I didn't want to use my time with Grace and Darryl to rehash my history. Rather I wanted to discuss Sterling's readiness for coaching. Or, more precisely, what I perceived as his lack of readiness for coaching.

The most helpful document I had for discussing who is and who is not ready for coaching was deep in my archives. I pulled it out and refreshed it for the occasion.

Shortly after we all sat down, I handed the [document](#) to them both. It read:

READINESS IN COACHING

To be ready for coaching,
look for leaders to display...

<p>CURIOSITY</p>  <p>Does the executive shift comfortably from leader to learner?</p> <p>Is the leader interested in the people around him? The systems around him? In himself?</p>	<p>SELF-REFLECTION</p>  <p>Does the executive have an established habit of thinking about herself?</p> <p>Is she familiar with her inner life?</p>
<p>SELF-RESPONSIBILITY</p>  <p>Is the executive accountable?</p> <p>Is there a sense that her word is her contract?</p>	<p>RESILIENCE</p>  <p>Does the executive have a sense of health?</p> <p>Despite life's "thousand natural shocks," does he seem solid and stable?</p>



Who's coachable?

After giving them a minute to look the document over, I said, "About twenty years ago, when coaching was in its infancy, a bunch of coaches developed this list. We wanted to help organizations understand who we thought was, and who was not, a good candidate for coaching."

Darryl said, "Oh! So you didn't intend this for someone you were going to coach. This was for someone like me."

"Right," I said. "We'd found out the hard way that a lot of companies wanted coaches to come in and fix things that weren't fixable."

"Like what?" asked Grace.

Looking at the ceiling, thinking, I said, "Like, they'd want us to hold someone accountable, which of course as outsiders, we can't do. Or they'd want us to swoop in and fix someone they hadn't been able to fix for a decade. But we're just coaches. We're not healers. So we developed this list to say, look, if you want us to work with your executives, they have display at least a few of these."

"Not all four?" asked Darryl.

"Didn't have to be," I said. "But at least two."

"And what'd you find out?" ask Grace.

"About what?" I answered.

"Did most executives have two or more?"

"Well," I said, "in the bad old days, the only people getting coaching were the 'problem people.' If you were getting a coach, you were probably getting fired. And they were on their way to getting fired partly because they didn't have any of these things." I lifted the page and gave it a little shake. "We thought they were uncoachable."



“I’ll bet that still happens sometimes,” said Darryl.

“But less and less,” I said. “Most of the time these days, coaching is for high performers.”

“But not Sterling.” Grace’s voice had an edge to it.

Darryl and I turned to look at her but didn’t speak.

Curiosity

“That’s what you’re saying,” she said. “You’re saying Sterling doesn’t have even one of these traits.” It was her turn to give the list a little shake.

She stopped speaking and looked at me. She was every bit the executive – throwing the ball to me, then sitting back to see what I would do with it.

I was happy to speak. I was prepared to maintain a coach’s confidentiality: I would not share with Darryl or Grace the specifics of any of my conversations with Sterling. But I would report behaviors and actions. And I’d be as accurate as I could.

“That’s it exactly, Grace,” I said. “I’m sorry to say that in all my dealings with Sterling – and I’ve had quite a lot at this point – I have not seen him display even one of these traits. I don’t think he’s ready for coaching.”

She took that in. Then she looked at the sheet again and said, “Could you teach some of these?”

“That’s an interesting question,” I said. “Can you teach someone to be curious?”

“Sure,” she said. “Why not? We’ve all been curious as kids.”

“I guess. Maybe you could,” I said, shaking my head doubtfully, “but I think curiosity will be hard for Sterling. Over every exchange I had with him, I don’t think he’s asked me more than two or three questions. He’s just not curious. Not about the coaching. Not about me. Not about things that are going to



impact him. Curiosity is not in his nature.”

She said, “You’re right. He doesn’t ask questions, does he? I think I’ve seen that as a sign of competence.”

“And it might be,” I said. “One of the most amazingly competent leaders I ever coached was practically devoid of curiosity. He wasn’t the warmest or fuzziest guy you’ve ever met, but he was terrific. He didn’t need much coaching. And *he* wasn’t curious. Maybe that’s how Sterling is.”

“But you don’t think so,” she said.

“I don’t. No.”

Self-Reflection

Going to the next item on the list she said, “How would you ever know if Sterling is self-reflective?”

“You’d hear it in his language. People who are self-reflective ask themselves certain questions. Why did something happen, or what does something mean. And then they talk about those thoughts. Those thoughts are self-reflective.”

Grace gave a smile. “I’ve been talking about this with one of my daughters. She’s so reactive. I keep telling her, ‘I’m not looking for any specific answer, I just want to know you’re thinking about yourself.’”

How old is she?” Darryl asked.

“Twelve,” she answered.

“Well, what do you expect?” he laughed.

“But she’s never been been reflective. And I think it’s important,” she said.

“Why’s that?” I asked.



“I think the only way we can really get better is through reflection. And she is so smart. This girl could do anything she sets her mind to. But not if she doesn’t learn to reflect a little. At least that’s my opinion.”

Putting his fingers on “Self-reflection” and “Self-responsibility,” Darryl asked, “Do you think these two are connected?”

“In what way?” Grace asked.

“Well, could you ever really become self-responsible if you’re *not* self-reflective?”

With some passion I said, “Oh, I’ve worked with plenty of leaders who have an enormous sense of self-responsibility – they hold themselves to a very high standard – but they’re not reflective. They do not think about themselves.”

Convinced, Darryl chuckled, “You’re right. I know folks like that.”

“Do you give homework?” Grace asked.

“Sometimes,” I answered. “Why do you ask?”

“A friend of mine got coaching and he talked about the homework his coach gave him. And I was thinking, that guy is super self-responsible. I’m willing to bet he got his homework done just like he gets everything else done.”

“A self-responsible leader makes life easier for everyone, don’t you think?” I asked rhetorically. “If I can really trust you to do what you say you’ll do, even if it’s just replying to my email, life gets so much easier.”

Grace said, “That’s one I think people would agree on about me. I am pretty damned responsible. But you think Sterling isn’t?”



“Not in my experience, Grace,” I said. “When Sterling and I had agreements, he rarely kept them. I didn’t see much self-responsibility in him.”

Resilience

Grace pointed her pen to the last item on the list. “Doesn’t resiliency come with maturity? I had this young woman in my office almost all of last year, and she was all in a tizzy because the word ‘vicious’ showed up in her [360-degree feedback report](#). She just couldn’t let it go. And I thought, ‘Oh, kiddo, get over it. I promise – when you’re older you’ll see this is really a nothing-burger.’”

“I don’t link maturity to resiliency,” I said. “I know plenty of young people who are amazingly resilient. And I know a lot of grown-ups I don’t think are resilient at all.”

“How are you defining ‘resilience’?” she asked.

“I think the way you are. Resilience is determined by how fast you bounce back to the middle of the road when something knocks you off course.”

“And how big was the thing that knocked you off?” Darryl said. “I see some people hit a hole and I think, wow, that must’ve been an enormous hole because they suddenly stop their car and they’re running around and changing tires and whatever. And other people hit the very same hole and it’s like nothing. Not even gravel. Just – *poof!*” He blew an imaginary feather.

“You don’t think the first group – the ones changing the tires – are resilient?” I asked.

“Not to me!” he answered.

“I’m sticking with the bouncing back idea,” Grace said. Then to me, lifting the page, she said. “I’m not certain if Sterling has these or not. But you don’t think he does.”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” I said.

“Then I won’t push you,” she said. “I know you’ve done good work here with others so I’m going to



trust your judgment. But I think I'm going to find him another coach. I'd like to give him another chance.”

I assured Grace that was fine with me. But I suspected – and time proved me right – that Sterling was just not ready for coaching. When a leader doesn't have even one of those four criteria, it's hard for him to achieve *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

Core Concepts:

- Coaching is most effective with high performers
- Use the four traits to assess whether to coach “difficult people”
- [Download the PDF](#) of the four traits

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