

Coaching Can Work, But Doesn't Always

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Appeared in People Management, March 11, 2004

While sitting on the long flight to Samoa, Roger Selden was nervous. It was not the flying, nor the challenge of building a schoolhouse with friends from his church. He was about to try being sensitive to others and a compassionate leader. For 30 years, Roger had refined and used his gruff style. He built and sold two companies and was now co-founder and CEO of United Health Services, a \$1 billion dollar a year health care company.² His fast-paced, hard-nosed style and relentless drive had served him well over the years. But lately he had been worried. They had recently lost their CFO and VP of Sales. The turnover was becoming costly. The culture reflected Roger's style- it had become cut-throat and survival oriented. It had always worked, but he had begun to wonder if there was a better way.

Fortunately for Roger and United, the COO decided to begin a leadership development program. A key feature of the program was to work with an executive coach. A few months later, Roger found himself on the flight to Samoa considering experimenting with a dramatically different leadership style.

Roger's experience is typical of a new wave of an old practice- the use of coaching for development. In the past, people in these roles have been called mentors, guides, trainers, therapists, and sometimes friends. The articles appearing in the Wall Street Journal and Economist about coaching signal the arrival of a practice that used to be relegated to the athletic field. It is likely that if Roger had not begun working with a coach, his style would have remained the same. Or more accurately, he might have tried, but it either would not have worked or only lasted a few days.

Enter the Coach

People change. Recent research has established that people can change in desired ways- and the changes can be sustained over years. But the research has revealed an old axiom- we need others to develop. Enter the coaches. Professionals in these roles range from consultants who add a “consigliere” (i.e., trusted advisor) aspect to their practice, to social workers and therapists deciding to use their skills with people facing work challenges instead of anxiety attacks or eating disorders. The ranks of coaches are growing at a prodigious rate all over the world. The personal attention is both attractive and private. It does not require disclosing one’s foibles or vulnerabilities in front of others. In many countries and cultures in which the “boss” is to be respected, feared, and not addressed with informality, executive coaches provide a convenient and safe way to explore development and change. Or for those whose style is not accessible to other, like Roger.

Scott Taylor was his coach as part of the company sponsored program. His first challenge was to ask Roger what he wanted out of life, what he wanted for his and the company’s future. Roger, like many crusty executives do not often talk openly about their own future and might not even consider what life and work may be in ten or more years. Roger had announced his intention to hand over the CEO role to the current COO in a year or two. So Scott asked what he looked forward to doing after that, what kind of life he wanted to lead, and what he hoped his legacy in the company would be. Roger did not hesitate in his answer. He wanted to be seen as a great leader of the company but without the additional excuses about his intimidating style and Machiavellian tactics. He hoped his family would enjoy spending more time with him, but even that would involve his family seeing him as a different person than they did.

Finding Your Personal Vision- Your ideal Self

In workshops, courses, and lectures on coaching over the past three years, a group of us from Case Western Reserve University have made several discoveries about when it is and is not effective. This follows 17 years of longitudinal studies showing adults can change their habits and develop competencies (both cognitive and emotional intelligence competencies).³ When adults change their behavior, they follow a series of epiphanies, or discoveries that Richard Boyatzis has called the Intentional Change Model.⁴

When [If?] the first discovery does not occur, people don't change. That is the reason most people think leaders are born not made. On the whole, we are lousy at developing people. Despite well-intentioned, sensitive, thoughtful people, most education and training does not produce sustainable changes in behavior. To explore why this occurs, let us suggest an exercise. Take a moment and do the reflective exercise suggested in the side box.

When managers, executives, and advanced professionals do this exercise, they have warm, emotional reactions to the memories of the people who helped them. The feelings come back strongly as they remember moments that may have been tender or challenging, but had a lasting impact. When we recorded these reflections and coded them for which aspect of the change process was primarily involved, we discovered that 80% of the moments people recalled involved someone helping them extend their dreams, reach for new aspirations, consider what it means to be successful or a good person. In other words, these people help us recreate a new Ideal Self (i.e., Personal Vision) or endorse our Strengths and capability in a way we doubted or never considered.

When we examined the moments people recalled of others trying to help them in the last year or two, most of them (over 50%) involved someone giving us feedback and focusing on what we needed to do to improve; that is, focusing on our weaknesses. The application of the business practice of “gap analysis” was rampant as the tactic most used to help someone else work on their “development or performance improvement plan.”

No wonder many people do not change. We are often doing the wrong things to encourage and support the exploration of a change. In fact, we are often doing the opposite to what has worked so well for most of us.

This is what happened to Roger Selden. Scott asked him about his desired future and what kind of person he wanted to be. Using several exercises and tests, Roger began to develop an image about his future. He smiled as he thought about it. “Wouldn’t it be great if I could do that?” he asked Scott. But then quickly followed, “But it’s too hard and I’m too old for this. Besides, no one would believe me if I started acting that differently.” Scott pointed out that developing the desired image was the first step. Then he had to consider his strengths before attacking a weakness. Roger kept getting caught in what was likely and began to conclude it was impractical.

The Positive versus Negative Emotional Attractor

Roger got excited and then, almost as quickly began to dampen his enthusiasm He was setting in motion an orientation that would inhibit any change or limit its sustainability. As he worried about the feasibility of the change, he emotionally focused on his weaknesses. His smile dropped as he began to frown. You could see him becoming tense and worried. He had entered the realm of the Negative Emotional Attractor.

Research on neuroendocrine processes and their relationship to psychological and behavioral patterns shows that people can find themselves involved in moving toward the Positive or the Negative Emotional Attractor. The Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) involves arousing the parasympathetic nervous system, neural circuits predominantly emanating through the left prefrontal cortex. When one considers their dreams, hopes and desired vision for the future, your breathing slows, your blood pressure drops, your immune system increases, and you feel calm, elated, happy, amused, optimistic, and hopeful. This appears to also occur when we consider our strengths.

In contrast, when you invoke the Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA), you focus on weaknesses, fear, being “realistic,” or dwell on what happened in the past and what went wrong.. You feel nervous, anxious, depressed, pessimistic, or filled with despair. It arouses and is aroused by your sympathetic nervous system and neural circuits emanating predominantly through your right prefrontal cortex. Your blood pressure increases, as does your breathing. Your facial muscles tighten. Your body prepares for stress or injury, and in doing so elicits the stress response. You get set to defend yourself. In eliciting the stress response, you prepare for “fight or flight” and send blood to large muscle groups as well as closing off neural circuits not necessary to survival.

The PEA allows you to open yourself to new possibilities. The NEA pushes you to fix things that are wrong. Did you ever wonder why it is so hard to loose weight? We believe it is because it is a negatively conceived goal. It is different if you wanted to feel vibrant and look good—and losing weight was part of the way to get there. So the PEA allows you to move toward your aspirations. The NEA inhibits forward movement- it, quite literally, turns you off.

To make a sustainable change in your habits or behavior, a person needs to start with the PEA and move through the NEA. Roger did this with the help of his coach. After soliciting a refined image of Roger's desired future from him, his personal vision, Scott then felt he was ready to look at some feedback. Roger's feedback from the Emotional Competence Inventory (ECI) was not surprising to him. He had heard it before. His direct reports stated in the verbatim comments that Roger is a stubborn man, bullies people with his strong opinions, dominates discussions, constantly makes decisions lower level employees are charged to make, and rarely appears to listen to others opinions. He had tried to change before but was always afraid that if he got "soft" results would fall and he with them.

Scott had to redirect Roger during the discussion. Roger wanted to focus on and explain his weaknesses. This is a common mistake. Once a person becomes embedded in analyzing their weaknesses, they are solidly arousing the NEA and have a hard time keeping the context hopeful and part of the PEA. Scott reminded Roger that he yearned to leave a legacy of doing something important *and doing it the right way*. He asked Roger to describe the person that acted the way Roger had said he always wanted to act. His ideal was someone people felt close to; someone whom others felt valued their ideas; a leader who was able to help people achieve their potential and incredible results because of the confidence and impact he had on them. Once they summarized his strengths of determination, initiative, influencing others, and adaptability, they turned to the "bad news." An image of using his strengths to build a new style began to appear to Roger. But he was cynical about pulling it off.

Experimenting with a New Roger Selden

Scott suggested that maybe the workplace was not the best setting to experiment with the

change. He suggested that the church congregation Roger often talked about might be a better place. Roger leaned back in his chair and his face lit up. He had not thought of starting outside the organization, but the perfect opportunity to try a new leadership style was being planned. A small group of people in his congregation were going to go to Samoa to build a schoolhouse for a village. Roger could see himself getting into his natural command control mode and taking over the leadership for the project. He decided instead to set up a plan to be like his ideal leader. “These members don’t know what I am like, they don’t know I am a CEO of a company; they have not experienced my command style. This is a clean slate,” They crafted a specific Learning Agenda. Although it might sound like a semantic quibble, a Learning Plan documents experimenting and trying things. This feels different than a Performance Improvement Plan- the former aroused the PEA and the latter arouses the NEA.

After the trip to Samoa, Roger could not wait to tell Scott that the project was a tremendous success. They worked as a team and he was not carrying the load. When he was called on to lead a piece of the work, he asked questions and listened to others before solving the problem and laying out the solution. He was amazed at the capability of the others. He said he did catch himself once or twice when he was on the verge of interrupting someone or arguing about a choice someone else had made.

Roger felt transformed. For the first time he had experienced himself influencing others in a way that strengthened others but still brought out tremendous results. Even at home, Roger focused on “being patient and listening completely to family members.” His son told Scott a few weeks later that he saw a difference in his Father, “He seems quieter; you can tell he is really trying to listen.”

Now it was time to take it back to the workplace. Roger had enough “small wins” outside of work. He was excited about the challenge, realized it would not be easy and that he would have setbacks, but he was eager to try. A month later in a coaching session with the head of sales, Scott asked the sales VP how Roger seemed to be doing. The VP asked, “What have you done to him. He is not interrupting me as much. He has a few times but catches himself and apologizes. He is really trying and, amazingly, making a little progress. People can’t believe it. It’s nice.” Roger was becoming the kind of person that had eluded him for years. Roger was becoming his ideal leader.

The Intentional Change Process That Works

To complete the picture, the process adults go through when they sustain improvements in their habits is described in Figure 1. As Roger Selden did, people go through five discoveries, or epiphanies. The first, as described, is the development of your Ideal Self- your image of your desired future and the person you want to be. The second discovery is the assessment of your strengths and weaknesses which emerge when comparing how you appear to others (i.e., the Real Self) to your Ideal Self. The third discovery is the development of a Learning Agenda and Plan. How will you get closer to your Ideal Self, building on strengths and working a few weaknesses? The fourth discovery is the experimentation and practice with the new behavior. The fifth discovery could be the first, the establishment of a trusting relationship with someone who can help you through each of the steps in the process. This is where the coach of today becomes an essential element in the growth process by helping people, like Roger, capture and become their dreams.

Further reading:

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002), The New Leaders: Transforming the Art of Leadership into the Science of Results, London: Little Brown.

Boyatzis, R.E., (in press) "Core competencies in coaching others to overcome dysfunctional behavior," to appear in Druskat, V., Mount, G., and Sala, F. (eds.) Emotional Intelligence and Work Performance.

Boyatzis, R.E., (2001). Developing emotional intelligence. In C. Cherniss, R.E. and D. Goleman (eds.), *The emotionally intelligent workplace*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Boyatzis, R., McKee, A., and Goleman, D. (2002). Reawakening your passion for Work. Harvard Business Review. 80(4). 86-94.

Side Bar/Box

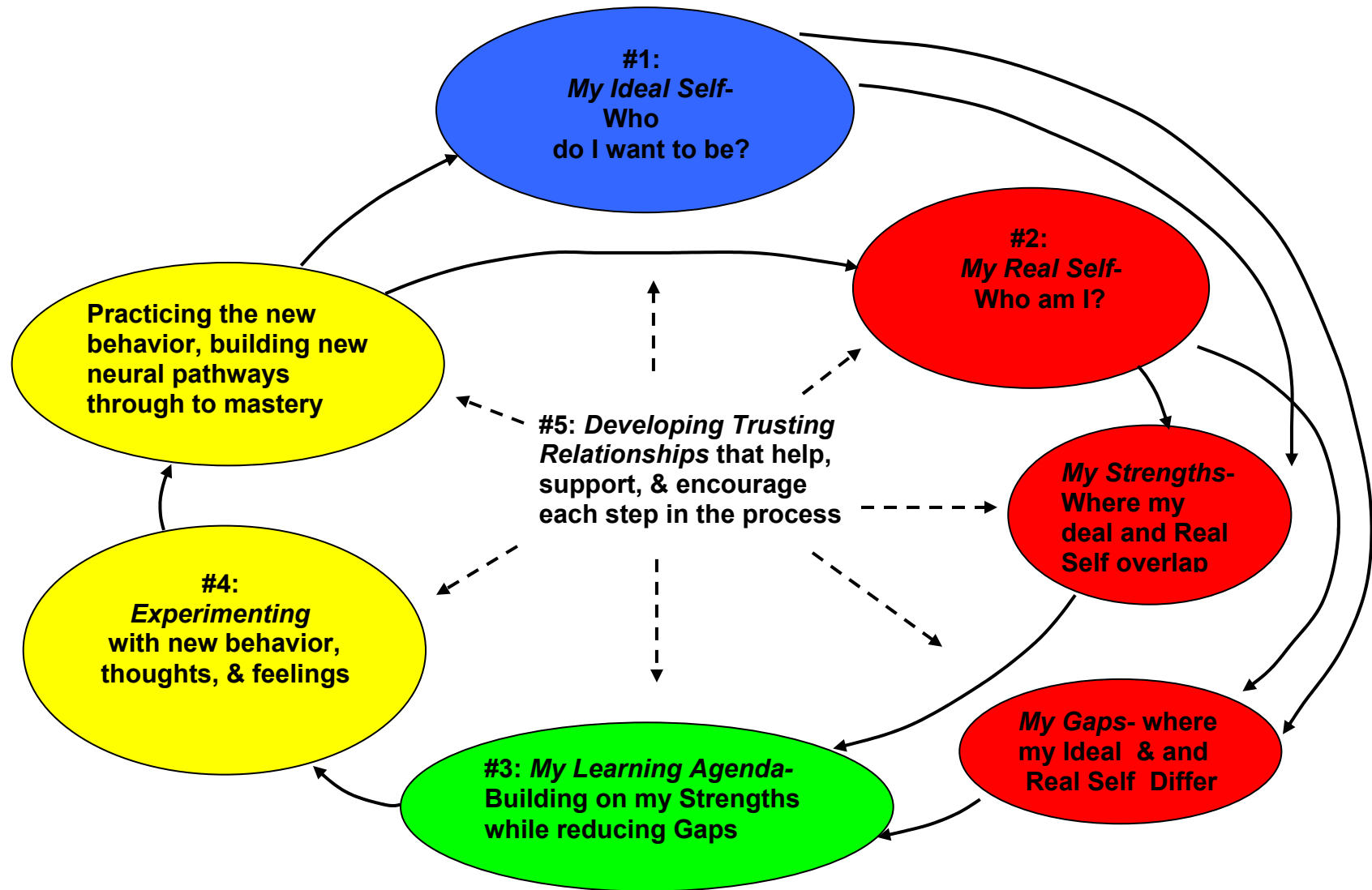
Reflection

Think about the people in your life who helped you the most. Think of the people who helped you achieve what you have in life and work and become the person you are. Write their names on a sheet of paper. Next to each name, describe moments you remember with them that had a lasting impact on you. What did they say or do? Thinking back about those moments, what did you learn or take away from them?

Now think of the people who tried to help, manage, or coach you over the last two years. Think of the moments with them. What did they say or do?

Go back to each of the moments remembered from the first list and ask yourself which stage of the Intentional Change Model was involved.

**Figure 1. Boyatzis' Intentional Change Theory
(formerly known as Self Directed Change Theory)**



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² Roger Selden's and the name of the company were changed to protect his privacy.

³ These studies are summarized in Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002), The New Leaders: Transforming the Art of Leadership into the Science of Results, (London: Little Brown).

⁴ In earlier work, this model was called the Self-Directed Learning, but developments of it with complexity theory have resulted in a more appropriate and accurate label.