

COACHING INSTRUMENTS: HANDLE WITH CARE

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One of the signature methodologies of coaching is the use of assessment instruments to develop client data in the initial stages of the relationship. Instruments are regarded as a cost-effective, expeditious means to rapidly develop insight to jump start the coaching work. However, if you are a coach who uses instruments, or an HR professional who evaluates coaching approaches for company assignments, or if you're an individual who's considering coaching for themselves, it pays to consider the role that instruments play in the coaching relationship, and how they need to be employed in order to deliver the value they promise.

One of our essential goals as coaches is to help our clients to open up to a larger world of possibilities; to help them discover in themselves greater freedom of action in the service of their personal and professional objectives. From that vantage point, we have to be scrupulous in considering to what degree our instruments and processes truly support those ends, or unintentionally, work against them. This brief article examines some of the challenges we face in using instruments productively to support our clients' growth. We believe that instruments are a two-edged sword with as much potential to constrain true growth, as to advance it. While, in the hands of experienced practitioners, instruments may have a greater potential for good, even then, they may pose barriers to client growth that need to be recognized and managed.

Instruments in Practice

Before speaking to some of the challenges, where do instruments fit into our practices? We use instruments mainly as a means of assessment. They hold out the promise of validly describing some important ways in which our clients currently experience and function in the world. They provide a starting point and a baseline on which our coaching relationships can build. Depending on the goals of the engagement and our own professional inclinations, we may employ instruments that assess decision making behavior, perceptual style, personality, leadership behavior, interpersonal skill, personal strengths and weaknesses... a host of different qualities that help us start to categorize and characterize this relatively unknown person who is our new client. They help us to start to understand why our clients are stuck where they are; why they may have a difficult time responding productively to the challenges they face; or, what underused assets they may have to help them move beyond where they are. Given that an instrument passes muster in terms of its underlying science -- the research base and history of use -- it would seem to be a ready source of value in providing meaningful insight and a productive beginning point for a coaching

relationship. It provides "content" for the process of coaching. Instruments also make the economics of coaching engagements feasible in that they provide high value for the dollar and make limited time demands on both the coach and client. On their face, instruments would appear to be of obvious value to both participants in the coaching relationship. However, their use is not without risk to the basic goal of individual client growth. Putting aside the question of whether a given coach is sufficiently competent in the use of a particular instrument, what risks do instruments pose as a whole?

Tyranny of Language

Because of how we are cognitively designed as human beings, nothing exists until we have the language to describe it. We can't talk about or even think about something until we can put it into words. Instruments, first of all, supply language. They give us and our clients the words to describe personal experience. The risk is that the words and concepts they supply are not our clients'; they are words we have put in their mouths. They are not words a client would ever arrive at to describe their experience, left to their own devices. It's probably safe to say that no client has ever decided personally and unilaterally, that, in their hearts and minds, they really are "INTJ's". Why is that an issue? We believe that true growth has to be grounded in the personal reality of every individual. It has to emanate from how our clients uniquely understand and interpret their world, their experience, and themselves. The language of instruments is essentially an alien imposition on the way any client would describe themselves. While providing significant content for the coaching dialogue, the language runs roughshod over personal expression. Even though the words and concepts are typically part of the common culture, so that they are understandable and useable by a broad range of coaches and clients, that doesn't mean they are personally meaningful for any given client, or that a client would define the words exactly as we do. There is something inherently, if subtly, alienating about being described in language that you would never personally use. While we might argue that it is the introduction of new language and concepts to describe their personal experience that is part-and-parcel of expanding our client's world, and that it helps them to see themselves and their potential choices in a broader fashion, it is also true that these concepts are imposed from without. They are abstractions, ungrounded in the language of a particular individual's experience.

Also, every instrument cuts two ways. While it introduces one new language/conceptual scheme, it also necessarily excludes many more. As it broadens thinking in its own terms, it also narrows it in other terms. We want to help our clients to be better observers of their own behavior so that they develop the freedom to make choices rather than continue to be the victims of their own automatic learned responses. However, instruments bias that observational capacity, setting the language and terms by which our clients reflect on their experience.

How do we reconcile the tyranny of imposed new language with the goals of personally meaningful growth? When we use instruments -- and we are not arguing against their use at all -- it is important that we take whatever time is necessary to help our clients translate what they hear into language that is their own and personally resonant. When we remember all the caveats instrument instructions typically contain about handling the feedback process with sensitivity, we should recognize deeply that -- however well-intended -- this imposition of new language is also an assault on the personal language and sensibilities of our clients; one that we as their coaches should feel a strong obligation to help them to manage.

Seductive Simplicity

The process of developing true personal understanding in the service of growth is not easy in any respect. We know from our own personal experience how difficult it is to recognize and challenge our own deeply held beliefs and habits, even the ones that have only caused us grief. As coaches, we all intellectually understand that instruments are inherently reductionist, in that, even the most sophisticated, reduces the complexity of an individual human being to a limited set of descriptors. However, the risk for our clients -- and even ourselves -- of being seduced by the attractive simplicity of our instruments is constantly there. Partly, it's that even when we intend otherwise, our brains try to make life simpler for us than it actually is. Our brains are happiest with simplified, predictable models of reality. As we evolved, neurological shorthand served us well in taking rapid action in the face of threats without risky delays caused by laborious data processing. However, those habits of mind can lead us to value and practice simplicity in a context where it creates risk rather than removes it.

Without impugning the motives of instrument purveyors, their success depends on making their offerings attractive to us and our clients. Recognizing that everything communicates, they design beautifully formatted, multi-color reports, full of graphs and charts that convey seriousness, professionalism, and a "scientific" precision. How precise they actually are, or personally relevant in a particular situation can get lost in the light show. We also know there is a well-established bias in Western culture in favor of anything that seems "scientific", in that quantitative data is assumed to be more credible and "valuable" than qualitative. The existence of a differentiated model with a means to locate an individual on different scales conveys scientific legitimacy to clients who do not have the experience to know otherwise and who, at any rate, depend on their coaches to make those determinations.

Experienced coaches recognize that instrument feedback is mainly an expeditious path to a meaningful developmental discussion. They know that people are much more than the list of properties supplied by our instruments (More senior, sophisticated clients are also wary of excessive simplicity or

formulaic approaches). However, instrument feedback is a difficult bell to un-ring once it's been delivered. The risk is that the allure of simple-to-obtain insight encourages unintended collusion between coach and client in accepting instrument feedback that may-or-may-not be genuinely helpful, or at any rate, is not sufficient by itself as the basis for a personal growth agenda. Einstein said, "Everything should be as simple as possible, and no simpler". It is our responsibility to judge where that line is in our coaching work.

Conclusion: Handling the Two-Edged Sword

Our brains abhor a vacuum. The very existence of language to describe experience can create an irresistible, but unjustified, illusion of understanding. Questioning the utility of our instruments should not fatally undermine our confidence or our client's. It should highlight the importance of an attitude of informed reflection that is always willing to raise questions in the service of greater, more nuanced understanding. Instrument feedback represents hypotheses that take on potential utility only after they have been vetted through our client's eyes and experience and taken possession of. While it might seem most logical for a coach to settle on one set of instruments, using them sufficiently to become skilled in applying them, it may pay more dividends in terms of client development, to use a diversity of instruments that together produce a richer information base. Using a variety of instruments that "speak different languages" also helps us to not rely excessively on a single assessment model, or inadvertently fall into self-fulfilling prophecies. Accepting feedback data with an experimental mindset, as "prototypes" for clients to test on their own real life events and then evaluate, helps us to ground our clients in a truly individual, personal level of understanding.

Research in the relative effectiveness of different forms of psychotherapy, concluded that it wasn't the particular methodology that mattered -- each could be effective or ineffective. What mattered most was the therapist, and their capacity to create a trusting working alliance with their patient. The same is likely true for coaching and the use of various instruments. In the right hands, any instrument can be useful, and in the wrong hands, none of them produce real client value. There is a second lesson from psychotherapy: effective interpretations -- new language that enlarges a client's understanding -- are usually one small step ahead of where they already are in their self-knowledge. They have one foot still in the present, even as they take a small step forward into a new level of understanding. While coaching is not psychotherapy, there is good reason to believe that we can best serve our clients by not barraging them with new language that tries to move them wholesale into a new level of understanding, ungrounded in their own interpretive reality.

Stephen Colbert, the comedian, coined a term which has since entered our cultural lexicon -- truthiness. It connotes something that sounds true, but really is based on our own hopes and beliefs, and not on a rigorous appraisal of

reality. Coaching instruments, unless carefully and thoughtfully applied, have the potential to produce truthiness rather than truth. In supporting our clients growth based on an authentic grounding in their own personal truths, it is our task to not be seduced by truthiness or willing to compromise with language that is not our clients.

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