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Getting People to Change

Influencing Behaviour through Effective Coaching

By Sacha Lindekens
and Raluca Graebner

The effectiveness of coaching is determined by its ability to drive behavior change in the coachee. To do that, it is essential that coaches spend time and energy focused on the coachee's motivations and enhancing his commitment to change, rather than simply discussing a plan of action. This article identifies the key motivational levers to pull to inspire coaching change and some tried and true strategies to pull these levers.

A couple of years into a career as an executive coach, one of the authors of this article had a career-changing moment. The client was an ambitious, brilliant executive, but one who had been described as “slippery and untrustworthy;” a “climber” who stepped on others and distorted the facts to get ahead. During the coaching sessions, he was quick to point out that his (less than stellar) 360 feedback was a reflection of other people's issues and not his. After some back and forth, the coach and coachee ultimately reached a set of action steps to address the concerns highlighted. This was a hollow victory however, as soon after it became clear that the client was not going to do anything to change. He had simply agreed to put something on paper in order to get the coach ‘off his back’ and temporarily placate his boss. While this is a fairly dramatic example, the challenge of getting buy-in from the coachee is common in coaching relationships.

If your job involves coaching—for instance, as a manager coaching a subordinate, or as an internal coach debriefing a 360-survey with a leader in your organization—it is very likely you have encountered this type of situation, or that you are dreading the time when you will.

The ultimate goal of a coaching relationship is getting results. Results can be: gains in customer satisfaction, bringing new, innovative products into the market, or improving team morale. However, regardless of the type of concrete, measurable result, it all starts with a change in the behavior of the coachee: she will hopefully better understand and implement strategy, or use her strength in relationship building to bring two divisions together in creating a product, or simply stop micromanaging. Getting people to change behavior is at the heart of coaching effectiveness.

To produce this change in behavior, a coaching relationship rests on two pillars, in ways not dissimilar to the doctor-patient relationship:



Getting people to change is at the heart of coaching effectiveness

- 1. The action plan.** For a coachee, this pillar provides the answer to the question: “WHAT should I do?” It is an important tactical piece. In our doctor-coach analogy this would be the prescription you get as a patient. The vast majority of newer coaches (or managers) mistakenly focus the bulk of their time here, believing that if only the coachee knew what to do, they would do it.
- 2. The influence.** Writing a prescription is only half the work of good doctors: they need to also ensure that the patient leaves determined to buy the medication and then diligently take it according to doctor’s orders. In 15 minutes, doctors need to establish trust, credibility, and intimacy with patients sufficient to spur action. Now, to their advantage, coaches have more than 15 minutes; but they also have a far lesser incentive working in their benefit. Therefore, it is essential for coaches to tackle a question coachees always have, although rarely acknowledge out loud: “WHY should I do this, again?” To put it in business terms, the coach has to be a salesman, influencing the coachee into action.

The influence pillar is essential to getting real results. A great development plan will yield no impact without buy-in and commitment from the coachee: the coachee needs to truly take ownership of the action plan in order to take the often painstaking steps to change.

What drives people to change?

In our years of experience as coaches, we have found it useful to draw insights from the health field when it comes to motivating people to change. The same four factors are in action when somebody needs to adjust their actions in the workplace, as when they are looking to stop smoking or lose weight:

1. Confidence in her ability to change her behavior. This will impact how much energy the coachee will put in initiating or maintaining a change.
2. How important she believes the change to be: does the coachee *truly* believe this change is needed and consequential?
3. Social support: to what extent do others facilitate and enable the coachee’s change?
4. Actual ability to make the change: are there limitations in place that prevent the change? Moreover, does the coachee have the necessary resources to make a difference?

Since coaching is a two-way relationship between the coach and the coachee, we felt it was critical to add a fifth factor, underlining and centering all others:

5. Coach's credibility: is the coach able to build trust and respect with the coachee? Does the coachee feel the coach can add value to her?

How can coaches influence and motivate people to change?

Keeping in mind these factors that drive change, coaches can pick various strategies to best influence the coachee towards action and increase the chance of getting results. We see these as 'tools' in a coach's 'motivational toolbox'. They are not 'silver bullets' that will automatically solve a coaching relationship and they will not all work with everybody; however, try one out next time you need to get people to change their behavior – it might just work.

1. Build confidence

One of us worked with a CEO to assist him in developing a more collaborative executive team dynamic. After repeated discussions regarding adopting a more inclusive leadership style, he directly acknowledged: *"I get that what you are saying is the right thing to do, I am just not confident in my ability to do it repeatedly."* We have found it essential to invest time in developing a coachee's confidence in his ability to implement a change. Some ways in which you can do it:

- Surface resistance, do not avoid it. Directly discuss non-verbals and 'hesitant yeses' that may be related to an underlying resistance. Ask 'why' repeatedly to drill down to the underlying root causes of the lack of confidence.
- Let the coachee take the lead: encourage him to come up with actions he can take, as opposed to proposing them to him. People are far more committed to actions they come up with. This approach also enables you to better understand the problem from the coachee's perspective.



Leverage the coachee's values and goals as a motivator for change

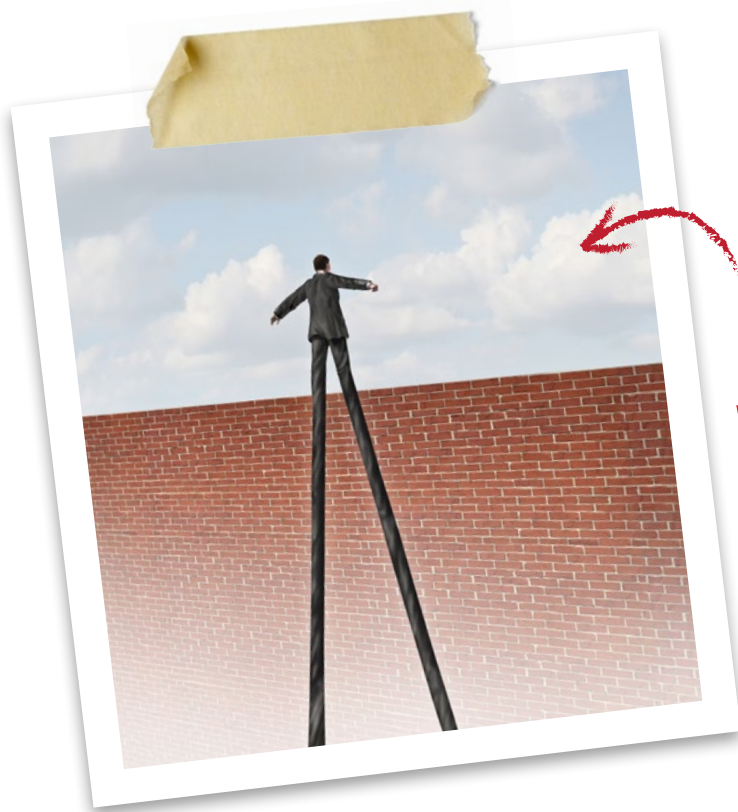


- Encourage the coachee to observe a perceived expert. Aside from trial and error, one of the most impactful methods of learning a new behavior is to watch someone else do it. Jack*, one of our coachees, was anxious when delivering presentations. He identified a colleague he believed to be an excellent presenter, and enlisted her as an internal mentor. When working with her to co-present content, he got a profound 'aha' when realizing that she didn't pay a moment's attention to the sorts of things he worried about.

2. Drive the importance of making the change

This is a fundamental pre-requisite to the coachee actually taking action; yet, it is one that is sometimes taken for granted, especially if the coaching is part of a programmatic effort in an organization or is being led by a manager who simply expects compliance. Just because someone takes part in a leadership development program or a performance review session does not mean they are actually committed to making a change. Here are some ways in which you can further push for this:

- Identify and leverage the coachee's internal motivations: what is she hoping to accomplish through the coaching process? More generally, what are her life and career goals and fears? These aspirations and concerns serve as an implicit accelerator or braking mechanism in the coaching process, and exploring them is time well spent. For Sarah, a salesperson one of us coached, the key was answering the question "What is it that I WANT?" The answer (advancement within the organization) helped frame future conversations between Sarah and her coach in a way that was meaningful to her.
- Perception is reality. Using feedback data (e.g. a 360 assessment) as a support for coaching is a great way to drive home the point why change is important. However, even when the data speaks for itself, some coachees doubt the evidence and question whose view of reality is more accurate—their own, or that of the feedback provider: "I don't believe they are right" or "they just don't understand" is a common way of putting it. While the coachee may indeed be 'right', this is beside the point: by debating the rightness of the feedback, she is guaranteeing that her feedback providers will not see her as more effective or credible. Jose, a manager, had his effectiveness impaired by his shy demeanor. He did good work, but was reluctant to speak up in meetings or publicly present a point of view to his colleagues. Jose started by denying the whole coaching exercise: "I don't see why I should prove myself. I do great work and that should be obvious without having to jump through all these hoops." As coaches, our job is to dissuade coachees of thinking in these terms by pointing out that changing perception makes a REAL impact, as our credibility is bestowed upon us by others.
- Discuss the consequences of inaction, and do not 'sugar coat' the message. What if the coachee takes no action? What will be the impact on others in the organization, and on organizational results? This sounds like a hypothetical exercise, but it can make the consequences of the coachee's actions more 'real', and she might not be satisfied with this reality. In these conversations, it is understandable that coaches will have a temptation to soften hard-to-hear messages. The problem, as we have learned the hard way, is that softening the message can really damage the impact of the coaching, by giving coachees a 'way out' if they do not want to confront the facts. The goal is to not obfuscate the data, nor bully the coachee, but rather to deliver a sense of urgency if the urgency is really there. A little fear can be a powerful motivator. But be direct AND caring. Deliver the feedback as straightforwardly as possible, while empowering the coachee to take action to address it.



Surface the coachee's resistance, do not avoid it

3. Use social support

"It takes a village" – people say about child-rearing, and the same is true for making a change in your life (it is no coincidence that Weight Watchers uses peer groups to help their members lose weight). Making others aware of the coaching process will help keep the coachee accountable and on track. Besides needed encouragement, colleagues, bosses, and friends can also provide useful advice, perspective and accountability:

- Involve the coachee's manager in the action planning process (if you are not the manager, that is). Ideally, the coachee would walk his manager through the action plan and ask for input or advice. Since coachees oftentimes care about the managers' perception, it usually makes them more likely to take action rather than file the action plan away in a drawer. This became exceedingly clear to one of us when working with a leader named Helene, who was regularly critiqued for being too lenient on under-performers. In initial discussions with her coach, Helene agreed with the need to push her team members harder. Yet, no behavior change occurred... until her supervisor dinged her on her performance review. Then Helene sprung to action and got far tougher on her direct reports in a remarkably short period of time. As coaches, we sometimes need to tap into external sources of motivation (managers, spouses, etc.).
- Get the coachee to publicly acknowledge part of or his entire action plan. Public commitments are lasting commitments. Especially if the coachee has received feedback from colleagues or subordinates (for instance, through a 360 assessment), he should follow up with the feedback providers and share the main feedback themes and his proposed actions. He will be more likely to see the actions through. According to LRI research, he will also be more likely to be seen as a credible leader.
- Use 'social proof' – Robert Cialdini, the renowned author of *Influence* talks about 'social proof' as one of the main catalysts of human behavior.



* Focus on the strengths to overcome limitations



This is simply the idea that: all the other people are doing it, so maybe I should, too. Sometimes, providing examples of colleagues who are trying a behavior or tool will make the coachee more likely to try it. Another way to leverage ‘social proof’ is to create cohorts of individuals tackling similar challenges (as is done in CEO support groups such as Vistage, public speaking forums such as Toast Masters, or high potential development programs).

4. Address limitations.

Ultimately, expectations for change need to be realistic. There are certain points—real thresholds—beyond which a person cannot change. One of us remembers working with Gill, a partner in a consulting firm who openly acknowledged that in his very first performance review, as an associate entering the firm, was given the feedback that he was too direct and blunt. His first performance review as a partner, several years later, contained the exact same feedback; yet, his success in the company was undeniable. If your coachee is unable to change a certain aspect of her behavior:

- What is plan B? How can the coachee put in place coping mechanisms so that her weakness does not become an impediment to her success? (e.g. partnering with someone who has a strength in the area she is lacking). If possible, can the manager re-distribute workloads to best take advantage of the coachee’s strengths, rather than focus on the weakness?
- Use the coachee’s strengths to overcome or neutralize limitations. One executive we worked with was a bit passive, which caused him to struggle to drive a vision and direction with his team. However, on the other hand, he was exceedingly collaborative and an excellent listener. In order to leverage his facilitative strengths, his coach encouraged him to conduct a group strategy session with his direct reports, to identify potential options and associated benefits and risks. By relying on his core strengths he was able to take action.
- Take a results-based approach. We sometimes hear from our coachees the argument “A leopard does not change his spots;” and moreover, does not want to (“I like who I am”). That’s fine; as coaches we are not trying to change personalities. We are simply trying to get business impact; if the coachee believes there is another, preferable way of getting there, then great—provided she can still accomplish the critical business objectives. If not, she is faced with some tough choices, but it *is* ultimately her choice. Framing the effort in these terms may help the coachee take the path of least resistance.

5. Build trust and respect

As a coach, you are your own most powerful tool for influence. Developing a strong personal rapport with the coachee can go a long way in motivating him to make a change.





- Personalize your support as a coach. Be aware of people's individual styles and orientations: some need data in order to understand a situation, while others see data as meaningless and react to specific stories; some will only arrogantly see the positives in their feedback, others will harp only on the negatives. To be most effective, it is often necessary to speak the coachee's "language," like in the case of one of our clients, a baseball fan, for whom using a baseball metaphor during coaching helped drive the point home.
 - Leverage the power of reciprocity—if people are given a small "gift", they feel compelled to offer something in return. For instance, as a coach, practicing self-disclosure models appropriate vulnerability, and the coachee will be more likely to do the same in return.
- Establish your expertise. This is especially important for coaches who are not in a sanctioned position of authority or supervising the coachee. It can be as simple as creating some level of comfort that you have done this before (For instance, during one of the coaching conversations, you may say something like: "The way I've seen this used before is..."). Knowing the business and talking in business language, as opposed to HR terms, is also paramount.
- Do not underestimate the power of liking. Taking the time to make a little chit chat, build intimacy, and discover common areas of interest (e.g. kids, golf), can go a long way towards building good will during more challenging times in your coach-coachee relationship. One of us began sending their coaching clients holiday cards and, in return, received a case of wine and an invitation to dinner with the executive and his family. This personal connection enabled the coach to gain a far better understanding of the client's hopes and fears, which translated into greater coaching impact.

In summary, our belief is that impactful coaching is usually driven by harnessing motivations rather than providing a novel idea that the coachee has not implemented. The vast majority know what they can do to improve, but have a litany of excuses as to why they cannot or will not follow through. Addressing the motivations is far more likely to yield meaningful behavior change.

*All names have been changed.



Sacha Lindekens is a Principal with Leadership Research Institute. He works with a variety of leaders, from owners of mid-sized family businesses to senior executives within Fortune 50 companies, and in multinational organizations in Asia and Europe. Sacha holds a Master's Degree in Counseling Psychology from Rutgers University, and a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Florida. He can be contacted at sacha.lindekens@lri.com.



Raluca Graebner is a Leadership Consultant and Coach with the Leadership Research Institute. She works with clients in sectors such as: finance, technology, business consulting, and media. Her expertise includes working in dispersed teams and across cultures. Previously Raluca worked in the Talent Assessment Group at Goldman Sachs and consulted for the World Bank and the International Finance Corporation. She holds a PhD in Organizational Psychology from the George Washington University, where she also served as faculty. She can be contacted at raluca.graebner@lri.com.

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