

MANAGING THE DOUBLE AGENDA IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

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Abstract

The primary problems addressed in executive coaching are business and management issues; increasing performance; stimulating employees' motivation; applying different kinds of strategies to conflict management; and answering critical questions. It should be noted however, that in almost every case where executive coaching is sought, executives present dysfunctional belief systems that interfere with their management and leadership tasks. This situation creates the need to work on a double agenda in order to achieve long term results, namely: (a) devising work-related action plans, and (b) teaching executives to challenge and restructure their dysfunctional belief systems. In general, in clinical settings, it is relatively common to start working on emotional problems and tackle practical problems later on (Dryden & DiGiuseppe, 1990). However, in organizational settings this may not be always feasible. Making executives aware of how their own emotions interfere with their work-related tasks is not always enough, because of the consequences and the urgent need to resolve practical problems. In this context, we have developed an original framework that enables us to intervene on the double agenda, integrating coaching models from two approaches into the problem solving process: (a) solution focused coaching, and (b) cognitive-behavioral coaching. Our coaching framework increases the level of rationality employed in assessing options and the probability of applying the agreed action plan. Finally, we show how our integrative coaching model can be applied using a case study from our own practice and the implications for future coaching training programs and research.

Keywords: executive coaching; coaching framework; dysfunctional belief systems

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Introduction

The primary problems addressed in executive coaching are business and management issues (Joo, 2005), such as increasing performance, motivating employees, applying different kinds of strategies to conflict management, and answering critical questions. It should be noted however, that in almost every case where executive coaching is requested, executives present dysfunctional belief systems that interfere with their management and leadership tasks (Anderson, 2002). The usefulness of Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and its benefits in Executive Coaching has been extensively covered in several articles/publications (Anderson, 2002; Grieger & Fralick, 2007; Kodish, 2002; Criddle, 2007).

REBT offers a very clear and practical model for teaching leaders and managers how to manage their dysfunctional emotions which prevent them from attaining their goals. In the cognitive ABC model, A stands for activating events, B stands for dysfunctional / irrational beliefs, and C stands for emotional, behavioral and biological consequences. In other words, the ABC model posits that our dysfunctional emotions are not directly determined by the events in which we find ourselves, but by the way we perceive, assess, and think about the events. Therefore, in order to change and prevent emotional problems arising, we need to challenge and change our dysfunctional belief systems.

Criddle (2007) also offers a description of the dysfunctional belief systems that impede productivity and efficiency in the workplace, providing concrete examples of their impact upon performance. DiMattia and Ijzermans (1996) categorize the main forms of rigid and absolutist beliefs as follows:

- (A) Perfectionism – an over-concern with failing in the tasks, goals or the expectations of others;
- (B) Need for approval - an over-concern with being liked or with receiving disapprobation from others;
- (C) Need for comfort – placing too much weight on how one feels about doing something;
- (D) Low frustration tolerance - an overly rigid and demanding attitude about the exact way tasks, assignments, and procedures must be or should be carried out.

This can often result in the following attitudes and behavior of

employees in the workplace (Criddle, 2007):

- not being able to say NO to deadlines, tasks, etc. when this is inappropriate;
- avoiding potential conflict where a situation needs to be dealt with;
- not risking speaking up, when one's own ideas differ from others;
- not thinking "outside of the box", when one might otherwise do so;
- not making the necessary decisions in a timely and independent manner, without the approval and support of everyone involved;
- covering up problems rather than seeking the appropriate help to solve them;
- becoming angry with individuals who make errors or who don't follow procedures to the letter;
- the stifling of creativity and risk taking by subordinates;
- subordinates hiding errors and not discussing work problems;
- a very tense workplace and work atmosphere, which inhibits smooth productivity;
- the avoidance of unpleasant or difficult tasks;
- lack of self-discipline and good organization in one's work;
- the avoidance of difficult tasks where the payoff is months or years down the line;
- a propensity to focus on tasks with immediate or short-term payoffs.

It is essential that the pragmatic business person be clearly aware of why, from a business point of view, it is important to identify and change these obstacles. It must be clear in business people's minds how any given change or intervention will help them attain their business goals (Criddle, 2007).

In general, in clinical settings, it is relatively common to start working on the emotional problems and tackle practical problems later on (Dryden & DiGiuseppe, 1990). However, in organizational settings this may not be always feasible. Making executives aware of how their own emotions interfere with their work-related tasks is not always enough, because of the consequences and the urgent need to resolve practical problems. That is why we often find ourselves in the position of using the REBT-ABC model in an informal way, as a learning tool in situations where difficult events are being immediately experienced. That brings us to the need to work on a double agenda in order to produce long terms results, namely: (a) devising and establishing work-related action plans - i.e. practical approaches, and (b) teaching executives to challenge and restructure their dysfunctional belief systems - i.e. emotional approaches.

Our goal is to develop a coaching framework which is more appropriate

to the organizational needs of companies and to offer the opportunity and benefits of working simultaneously on both practical problems and on emotional problems which a coaching client may face. The present paper reviews coaching models deriving from two different approaches (a) solution focused coaching, and (b) cognitive behavior coaching. Drawing on these two models, we have developed an original way of combining these two models into a single coaching framework, which we have named the CBT-GROW model, and we demonstrate how it is applied by presenting a case example from our own practice.

The GROW-model and Dysfunctional Beliefs

GROW (Graham, 2006, 2010; Whitmore, 1992, 2009) is a popular model used by managers for: (a) structuring meetings, (b) employee coaching, and (c) stimulating employees to come up with their own ideas and approaches to problem solving instead of just presenting problems they have encountered. GROW is an acronym, where G stands for Goal, R stands for Current Reality, O stands for Options or Obstacles, and W stands for Way Forward (Action plan).

The Solution Focused approach identifies the need to avoid intervening at emotional and cognitive levels (Grant & Green, 2003). The house of change coaching model identifies four factors which influence an employee's ability to attain goals. The basement of the house contains emotions and thought and the roof is formed by situation, behavior and goal. Solution Focused Coaching (SFC) is a humanistic approach which recommends focusing on stimulating employees to find solutions by themselves. In this respect it is not always necessary to intervene in the person's emotional and belief systems. Sometimes emotions and dysfunctional belief systems interfere with the employee's ability to find solutions. In such cases, REBT can provide useful complementary intervention techniques to address the obstacles raised by the dysfunctional belief systems and emotions of managers and employees.

During the GROW - Options-Obstacle analysis several questions are frequently asked:

- What changes in the external environment can we exploit?
- What new technologies can we access?
- What new markets could be open to us?

- What are the major strategic directions of the business?
- Which are the weaknesses of competitors, if any?
- How can I find, or how can I create a competitive advantage?
- Which is the most beneficial option to me/us now?
- What are the cost and benefits of taking this action?

Questions like these often activate dysfunctional beliefs resulting in emotional problems. The cognitive distortions which emerge during the Options-Obstacle phases of the GROW model are further assessed, disputed and restructured at almost the same time as working on the practical problems, by applying REBT in a informal way.

Integrating both formal and informal coaching

McCall, Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) emphasize and encourage a holistic approach by integrating both formal and informal elements. They believe that the most effective way to learn and develop a new skill or behavior is to apply and practice it on the job and in real life situations.

In our Executive Coaching framework we have relied upon the 70/20/10 formula: (a) 70% from real life and on-the-job experience, tasks and problem solving, (b) 20% from feedback and from observing and working with role models (c) 10% from formal training.

It is well established that the actions, behavior and attitudes of employees are a function of their consequences and antecedents. Behavioral antecedents are factors which increase the probability of a particular behavior appearing (for example: rules, procedures, processes etc). Behavioral consequences ensure that a type of behavior will increase or decrease depending on the type and quality of the consequence (for example: positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, penalty, and extinction) (Skinner, 1974).

Using positive reinforcement and operant conditioning in order to ensure the stability of the newly acquired behavior seems to be an essential requirement for real life and on-the-job intervention. These techniques can easily be included in the GROW model - in the Way Forward element.

Taking all the above information into account we decided to integrate (a) solution focused techniques (SFT) (Grant & Green, 2003) with (b) REBT (Neenan & Dryden, 2002; DiMattia & Ijzermans, 1996; Visser, 2010; Daniels,

2007), into an original coaching framework which we called the CBT-GROW model (see Figure 1).

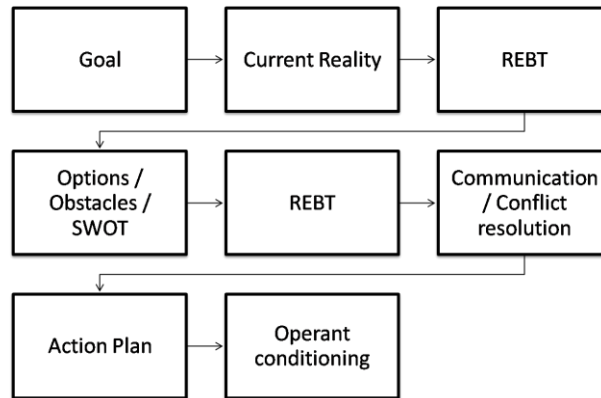


Figure 1. CBT-GROW Coaching Framework¹

Case study

In order to illustrate the way we integrated the above mentioned techniques into the CBT-GROW coaching framework we will present a case study from our own private coaching practice. In this particular case we applied our theories to our practice and succeeded in effectively managing the double agenda.

The intervention consisted of two coaching sessions, each with a duration of 120 minutes, structured using the GROW model. The first session was used for assessment and establishing the intervention plan (September 2014), while the second session focused on following-up the way the action plan had been put in to practice and applying emendations (January 2015). The

¹ Figure 1 shows the elements and the sequence involved in integrating cognitive, behavioural and skills development techniques into executive coaching

participant in the coaching session was a Sales Manager with the goal of changing specific behaviors of one of his subordinate Area Sales Managers.

Goal. An industrial components distribution company requested a coaching session in order to help them motivate the Area Sales Managers (ASM) to (a) report their daily activity and (b) detail a weekly client meetings plan.

Reality. At that point in time, the Area Sales Managers had not established a weekly clients' meeting plan, and were presenting only sporadic reports of their daily activity (an average of once a week). Asking the Sales Manager the question: “*What have you tried so far, in order to change the ASM’s behavior?*” we obtained responses suggestive of a high level of anxiety and an approach to interacting with the ASMs which was indicative of insecurity. A possible reason for this behavior was revealed by the statement: “*If he left the company this would prove that I am a poor leader*”. At that point of the discussion we made use for the first time of the ABC model in order to challenge the dysfunctional belief system of the Sales Manager.

Options / Obstacle Having assessed the likely obstacles to applying the established behavior change strategy (from the Sales Manager - SM), three different kinds of dysfunctional beliefs emerged:

1. *What if that the subordinate does not comply with my instructions? (He must comply – demandingness) – SM*
2. *What if I am not be able to achieve the planned goals? (I must achieve the goals – demandingness) – ASM*
3. *Conflicted relationship – in their meetings they also discussed non work related themes (such as politics, science, food etc.), and during these conversations they classified each others’ opinions and point of views, in terms of the SM’s submission of his authority and lack of respect (low frustration tolerance to criticism and different opinions) - on the part of both the ASM and the SM.*

At that point in time we decided to continue by:

- introducing the ABC model to the SM and teaching him to use it also with the ASM.
- teaching the SM communication and conflict resolution techniques.

Action Plan / Way Forward (Visser, 2010; Daniels, 2007). To stabilize and maintain the achieved skills and behaviors, we recommended attaching consequences to both desirable and undesirable outcomes, using predominantly

positive reinforcements. Example:

Planning and Preparation Activity

- Objective: To prepare for the visits of the week ahead (according to a worksheet)
- Method: Completing the form/worksheet by the sales consultant
- Delivery method: by email, as an attachment
- Deadline: Saturday 12:00 noon
- Expectations: 5 visits per day in Bucharest / Ilfov, or 3-4 visits abroad
- Positive reinforcement for meeting the deadline: immediate – social reinforcement, weekly – financial benefits
- Negative consequences for non-compliance or delay in delivery: immediate - coaching session, long term - financial loss / penalty.

As can be seen, we integrated cognitive and behavioral techniques into the GROW model in order to obtain the results expected by management, resulting in a CBT-GROW model. The occurrence of the specific behavior was measured as a percentage of the expected occurrence.

The results of this intervention produced an improvement in the quality of the relationship between the Sales Manager and the Area Sales Manager and a significant change with respect to the second coaching goal, namely the planning activity for weekly client meetings by the ASM, but had limited success in changing the behavior of the ASM with respect to the first coaching goal, namely reporting daily activity, more specifically, the reporting after each meeting of developments during meetings with customers. As can be seen in Figure 2 after the first intervention beginning in October 2014, the ASM maintained the behavior of planning weekly clients' visits.

During the second coaching session with the SM, we undertook a behavioral analysis and appraised the possible dysfunctional beliefs of the ASM. Using information from the written correspondence between the SM and ASM, we hypothesized that the ASM's dysfunctional beliefs included low discomfort tolerance for writing a report after each client meeting, which could provide the explanation for the avoidance and procrastination displayed when reporting meetings (see Figure 2). This hypothesis would need to be tested and, if correct, addressed in a coaching session with the ASM.

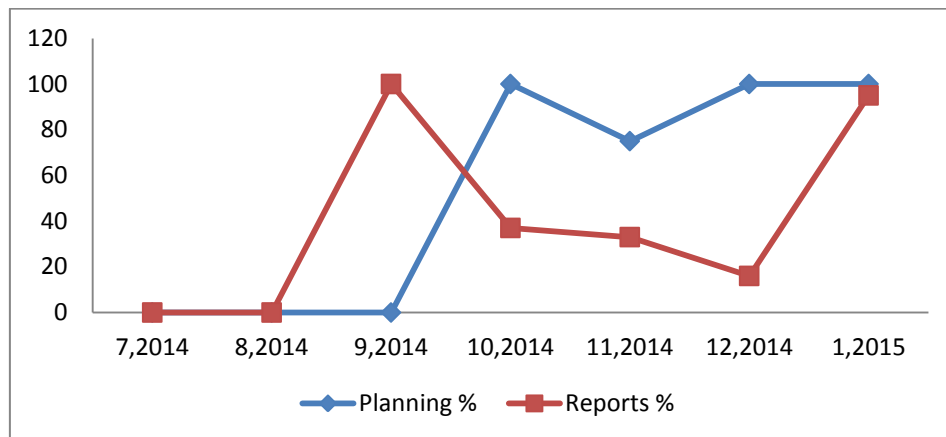


Figure 2. ASM Planning and Reporting behavior change over time²

Conclusions

Starting from the coaching needs of the clients, we came to use in almost equal measure cognitive, behavioral and solution focused techniques in order to help them attain their goals. The framework presented above emerged from practice and offers a balanced integration of cognitive and behavioral techniques and strategies, while also incorporating practical and skills development solutions and training.

The question raised regarding the coaching framework presented would be - *What is the level of efficacy in achieving organizational and personal goals using informal REBT Coaching compared to a formal REBT Coaching session?* Future research might help to clarify this. Based on our coaching experience, this coaching framework might contribute to a significant degree to achieving organizational goals, but may not address those core beliefs which are integral to long term personal development. However, in certain urgent and budget limited situations, it may prove to be the best way to address clients'

² The figure shows the percentage of planning and reporting activity by the ASM

problems. Based on the results presented in our case study using a CBT-GROW coaching framework, and bearing in mind the limited range of our study, we should also mention that in order to increase the levels of performance, motivation and efficiency when engaging in an organizational or behavioral change strategy, it would be beneficial to address the dysfunctional belief systems of all employees involved in the intervention, and be beneficial to teach the managers who are the coaching clients to do so with their employees.

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