

Get the Most Out of Executive Coaching

by Steven Berglas

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Remember “light bulb” jokes? My favorite was, “How many shrinks does it take to change a light bulb? One, but the light bulb must *want* to change.” It’s true: Unless or until a person decides to commit to change wholeheartedly, no coach can help move him or her one-millimeter off the dime.

Worse yet is the fact that, unlike light bulbs that lack the capacity for self-deception, humans bamboozle themselves all the time. Whether it’s a smoking cessation program or working with a coach to improve management skills, people claim they want to change or drop dysfunctional behaviors from their lives, but then fight like Ninja warriors to defend them. Worst of all, irrespective of how intelligent or professionally powerful a person is, it is a virtual certainty that after embarking on a change process, they will be partially or fully derailed by the feeling, “Better the devil I know than the devil I don’t know.”

The reason why backsliding on our ostensible commitments to change is so common is because most change is the result of compliance to a demand, incentive, or threat. “Lose weight or you’ll suffer a heart attack” coming from an M.D. is a directive most folks won’t ignore. Unfortunately, when incentivized to

change in this manner falling off the wagon is common because our motivation wasn't to change, it was to avoid a premature death.

Psychologists who have studied intrinsic and extrinsic motivation since the 1970s — most notably, Professor Edward L. Deci — demonstrate that when a person acts in response to extrinsic motivators — the promise of money; the threat of punishment — commitment to a behavior is short-lived. This is why *when the cat's away, mice will play*. Mice don't *want to change* their behavior, i.e. playing games, but they do when cats are present. However, since change (the cessation of play) was instigated by an extrinsic force — Tabby — if Tabby isn't monitoring the mice, these rodents instantly revert to form.

What, then, should you do if you *think you want to change* and, like so many of your peers, put your faith (and a huge financial commitment) in a coach? Is it possible to develop an authentic commitment to executive coaching through sheer willpower alone? No. But what you can do is develop a mindset — i.e. new “automatic” cognitive messages — that will help you counter your own resistance to change.

What follows are the exercises I use most often to help new clients initiate coaching with the best mindset possible. If, prior to the onset of coaching you experience the attitude adjustments they are designed to foster, the change process should be profoundly less anxiety- and resistance-provoking for you than it is for those who dive in unprepared.

1. Ask yourself, “*Cui bono?*”

Recall a golf lesson or the clumsiness you suffered during an introductory yoga class. Now recall how you responded when the club pro or *yogacharya* gave you critical feedback. No big deal, right? Well if you've never been to an executive coach, I guarantee that the first critique you receive will not be a NBD experience.

Why? Golf or yoga are peripheral to an executive's definition of self. Being a stellar manager is central, so when someone pokes that realm of your self-concept the usual reaction is "ouch!"

The best way to reduce the possibility of being stung by an executive coach's constructive critical feedback is to remind yourself that it is (a) not ad hominem and as such, (b) comparable to the club pro's efforts to correct your slice. To do this with ease, learn to employ the Latin phrase "*Cui bono?*" — literally, "as a benefit to whom?" — after each critique you receive. The rational portion of your brain knows that no competent coach would gratuitously put you down. Now you need to train the more primitive, more reactionary parts of your brain to think that way too. By making "*Cui bono?*" the mantra you bring to assessment sessions with your coach, you can learn to accept that any and all feedback from him or her is intended to be helpful, not hurtful.

2. Be sure you wouldn't rather hire a cheerleader than a coach.

Many consultants and coaches know that they can build lucrative client bases by treating protégés the way Little League coaches deal with their pre-teen charges: Everything the kid does evokes a "good job" or "atta boy!"

The problem with an automatic "good job" reaction is that it is useless and often — even by pre-teens — seen for what it is: Balm for under-developed egos. An 11-year-old with burgeoning self-esteem would much rather hear "keep your eye on the ball" after striking out than "good job," but if you want to hear cheering regardless of how you perform, *caveat emptor*. An ethical coach doesn't bring pom-poms to meetings with clients, so hire to your needs.

3. Learn the difference between participation and commitment.

Having spent 30 years as a psychotherapist and coach, I can assure you that acting the role of a “participant in a change process” is not nearly the same as being committed to actually changing yourself. Many people claim to be involved in a change process when, in fact, they are holding their true selves in abeyance. Years ago, many gay men married women because they held the deluded belief that the process of being part of an intimate heterosexual dyad would change who they were. In time, virtually all discovered that suppression doesn’t work and that role-playing without conviction has no chance of effecting change.

Coaching cannot change you one iota unless or until you’re really committed — until you have skin in the game. Before I work with a client who needs to make major changes, I share the aphorism my baseball coach once told me to drive home the distinction between authentic commitment vs. going through the motions: “There’s a huge difference between participating in baseball and being committed to it; it’s like a bacon and egg breakfast. The chicken participates in the breakfast. The pig, on the other hand, was fully committed.”

Since you won’t change unless you really *want* to, and nothing — not the highest-priced coach or public declarations about your intention to change (which, presumably, will humiliate you if you fail) — will help you to succeed, it behooves you to learn how to thwart your worst tendencies in advance of tackling change. This is what cartoonist/philosopher Walt Kelly, in his possum persona, *Pogo*, was referring to when he said, “We have met the enemy and he is us.” If you accept this fact of life, coaching — and every other change process you initiate — will become surprisingly simple.

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