Coachability

It drives field performance.

by Howard M. Guttman

Look closely at the next candidate for a slot on your senior management team: How coachable is he or she? It's not likely that this will be among the top 10 interview questions you'd ask. Yet, an executive's coachability—the willingness to enter one's *discomfort* zone to change behavior—is a key marker of success.

Members of top teams serve as ultimate role models. To the extent that they demonstrate a capacity to break away from the tried-and-true to take their performance to new levels of play, the more likely others will follow. A high-performance team's unique strength is its ability to continually ratchet up performance and change behavior accordingly.

Intention here is paramount. Is an executive's intention to change stronger than the lure of remaining comfortable with past ways of operating? We worked with a CFO whose new job required him to speak confidently before investor groups. He was introverted and feared public speaking. But rather than get stuck in the "That's who I am; I've never done that before" story, he focused on "How do I do that?" and "What would it look like for me to succeed?" The CFO's intention was to show up as a confident public presenter. And, his intention, combined with skills training, propelled him forward well beyond previous limitations.

Coachability is too important to be delegated exclusively to professional coaches. The leader is vital to triggering team members' motivation for self-discovery. The leader can jumpstart the change process by holding a mirror to a change-resistant team member: "Here's what I'm getting from you. I've given you feedback, but haven't seen much change in behavior. Here's the gap; how do you plan on closing it?"

On high-performing teams, where peer accountability is standard, colleagues on the team often assume the responsibility for helping a colleague break away from the grip of unproductive stories. On such teams, the question becomes: Who is best qualified to provide coaching?

The top team of a consumer goods manufacturer was having trouble with one of its members, a newly appointed marketing executive with a retail background and a chronic need to be the center of attention. He felt the transition to consumer goods would be a cakewalk, so he didn't bother to master the basics. For him, team meetings were opportunities to strut his stuff, challenge the leader, and dominate discussion. His cockiness led to poor performance, but he refused to acknowledge his shortcomings.

The team leader confronted the situation, but to no avail. He next asked

several colleagues to provide coaching support to their faltering marketing colleague. They couldn't penetrate the executive's defensive armor either. In the end, the executive was terminated. The group president and team leader concluded, "Sometimes, even on a high-performing team, you can only work at it for so long before you conclude that the person opts not to let go of an unproductive story and change."

From Team to Me

The mind is a powerful ally—or foe—in one's coachability, as the contrasting examples of the receptive CFO and irremediable marketing executive attest. And, while leaders are ultimately responsible for making the call on the coachability of their players, every team member has an obligation to turn the tables on himself or herself by asking: "Am I up to the task of continual-ly reinventing myself to meet ever-more-demanding performance standards?"

Self-diagnosis is tricky, but we've seen executives engage in it with great candor and effectiveness. They begin by checking out the stories rattling in their head, asking themselves: "What are the conversations I'm having with myself?" and "Are any of them *core-limiting beliefs*—stories that get in the way of what I profess to want?"

For example, had the aforementioned CFO hung onto the story, "I'm inherently shy and can't speak before groups," he would have fallen victim to a core-limiting belief. Yet he became a dispassionate observer of his story, a third-party observer who realized that his stories didn't run him; he could change his stories in order to progress to the next level of performance.

Executives resist change for many reasons. Some don't see the "What's in it for me;" others disagree on the need for change; others are distrustful and ask, "What's the real agenda here?" Still others are unclear about what the end state of change would look like for them. And then some shy away from their discomfort zone.

The challenge is to part the curtain to see what's behind the resistance.

Testing Coachability

How coachable are the members of your top team? Ask eight questions:
● Are team members focused on the future, or are they stuck in the past?
● Do they listen to the rationale for change or defend the status quo?
● Do their discussions revolve around their intent to change and how to make it happen, or do they continue to debate the need to do so?
● Can they take a depersonalized look at themselves and their situation?
● Do they let go of core-limiting beliefs and stories about themselves?
● Do they see the positive reasons and higher payoffs for change and the costs of being stuck in past "stories"?
● Do they partner with a coach on the journey forward?
● Is their intention to change converted into an action plan—and do results mirror that intention?

Team leaders also need coaching; so ask yourself the same questions and answer them honestly to determine just how coachable you are to achieve high performance. **LE**

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ACTION: Assess your coachability.