Executive Coaching: Does leader behavior change with feedback and coaching?

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What impact does coaching have on an individual's performance? It's hard to believe that in just a few short decades, executive coaching has gone from a tool to correct the underperforming to today's organizational development tool of choice for leaders and emerging leaders. Indeed, many organizations have turned to coaching to give employees the extra edge they need providing individualized and immediate feedback for today's leaders. But coaching, like many training and development initiatives, still must prove its worth. With millions of dollars spent each year on training and executive coaching, how can an organization know if they are making real progress? Believing and hoping aren't enough. Many professionals want to see more to ensure that their efforts and investments are creating tangible returns. To answer the skeptics and the curious, we took a look at a sample of 237 emerging leaders in a new manager training program at the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) with extensive one-on-one coaching to see how they improved on the skills and practices in the Denison Leadership Development Survey.

The Study

Our study concerns itself with the second year of a two-year long new manager training program at DLA. During the first year, managers completed thirteen online human resource modules covering topics such as attendance and leave, conduct and discipline, fair labor standards act, and drug testing. They also participated in two five-day courses on applications of human resource management and leadership education. At the start of the second year, managers were asked to solicit feedback from their peers, direct reports and bosses using the Denison Leadership Development Survey (DLDS). The Denison Leadership Survey is comprised of 96 items that measure twelve leadership behaviors that cluster into four higher-level quadrants (see sidebar). As part of the design of the program, the surveys were conducted strictly for developmental purposes rather than performance evaluation (Toegel & Conger, 2003). This process ensures that honest and constructive feedback is given to the focal manager.

Each manager received a report comparing their self scores to the aggregated scores given by their peers, direct reports and bosses. After receiving their DLDS scores, managers received four to six hours of one-on-one coaching to help further interpret their results and help them with their developmental efforts. The purpose of the coaching sessions was to help identify patterns, establish goals, and develop and implement an action plan. In addition, coaches worked to keep managers focused on self-development rather than perceiving the results as a threat to self-esteem. Typically, sessions were one-hour, in-person or by telephone, and were not conducted more frequently than once every two weeks.

During the first session, the coach and manager interpreted the feedback results and developed an action plan. Managers considered two key leadership behaviors to target for development. For the second session, coaches helped identify stakeholders to provide ongoing feedback. Between sessions, managers discussed leadership goals with their boss and enlisted their support in providing ongoing advice. For the third and fourth coaching sessions, participants reviewed the implementation of their actions plans and discussed the ongoing feedback received from stakeholders. In addition to coaching, managers completed 24-hours of online courses as part of their program in the second year. These courses augmented their earlier training, covering such required topics as situational leadership, managing change, partnering for results, and optimizing team performance.

The Denison Leadership Development Model

The Denison Leadership Development Model highlights four key traits (Mission, Consistency, Involvement, and Adaptability) that a leader should master in order to be effective. Each trait breaks down into three more specific indices for a total of 12 behaviors.
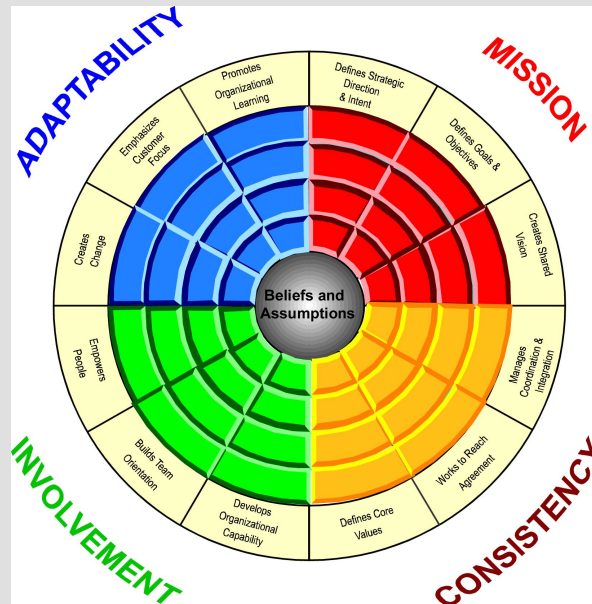
After completing all coaching sessions and before re-taking the DLDS, managers also completed individualized, self-development electives. These electives were targeted toward the leadership goals identified by the manager and his or her coach. Learning activities included attending formal classroom training, participating in peer coaching, receiving informal or formal mentoring, attending leadership seminars or conferences, or shadowing a leader. At the end of this period, one year from the original completion of the DLDS, each manager participated in a second multisource survey to see how they had progressed and make further plans for the future.

With all this concentrated development, what kind of effect would this have on the manager? Would we see a difference in how others perceived them?

The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) is highly-regarded government agency that supplies the nation's military services and several civilian agencies with the critical resources they need to accomplish their worldwide missions. DLA oversees a staff of more than 23,000 civilian and military employees who work in 48 states and 28 foreign countries. It supplies almost every consumable item America's military services need to operate, from groceries to jet fuel. DLA has supported every major war and contingency operation of the past four decades, from the Vietnam War to operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, and Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

The Results

To see whether the sample of 237 managers changed over time we conducted dependent-sample t-tests on the mean scores to determine the significance level of differences from time 1 to time 2. We found that managers made the biggest (and statistically significant) changes from the boss perspective. In fact, managers increased on all 12 out of 12 indices (p<.01) as rated by bosses and most notably in Developing Organizational Capability (see Figure 1 for change in percentile circumplex which compares the manager to 8,651 leaders in our benchmark database). Similar results were found among direct reports. Again, from the direct report perspective the focal manager increased significantly on all 12 indices (p<.05) with the biggest gain seen in Developing Organizational Capability (see Figure 2). Next, while the focal managers did increase on all twelve indices from a peer perspective, the statistically significant gains came in two indices (p<.05), Developing Organizational Capability and Working to Reach Agreement. Finally, what behavioral change did focal managers see in themselves? They increased significantly (p<.05) on three behaviors, including Developing Organizational Capability, Creating a Shared Vision, and Defining Strategic Direction and Intent.

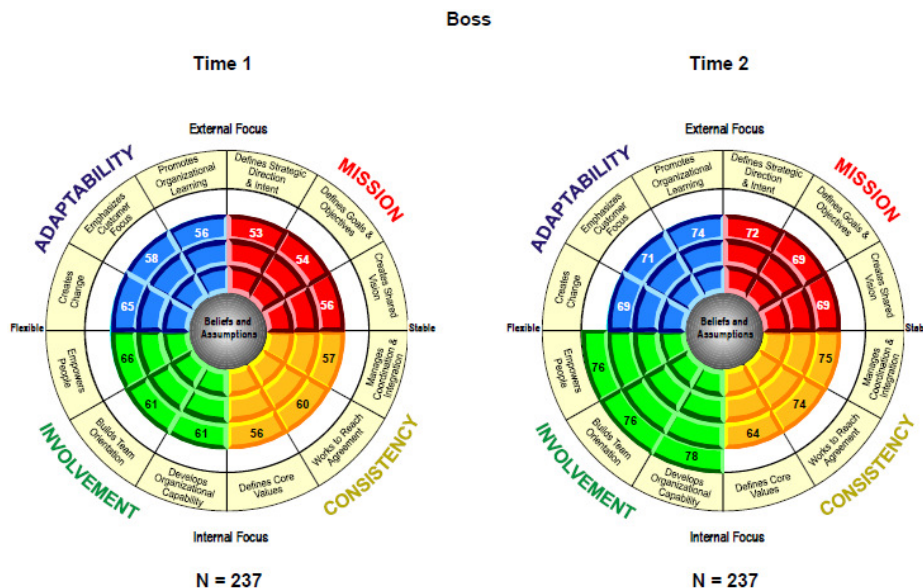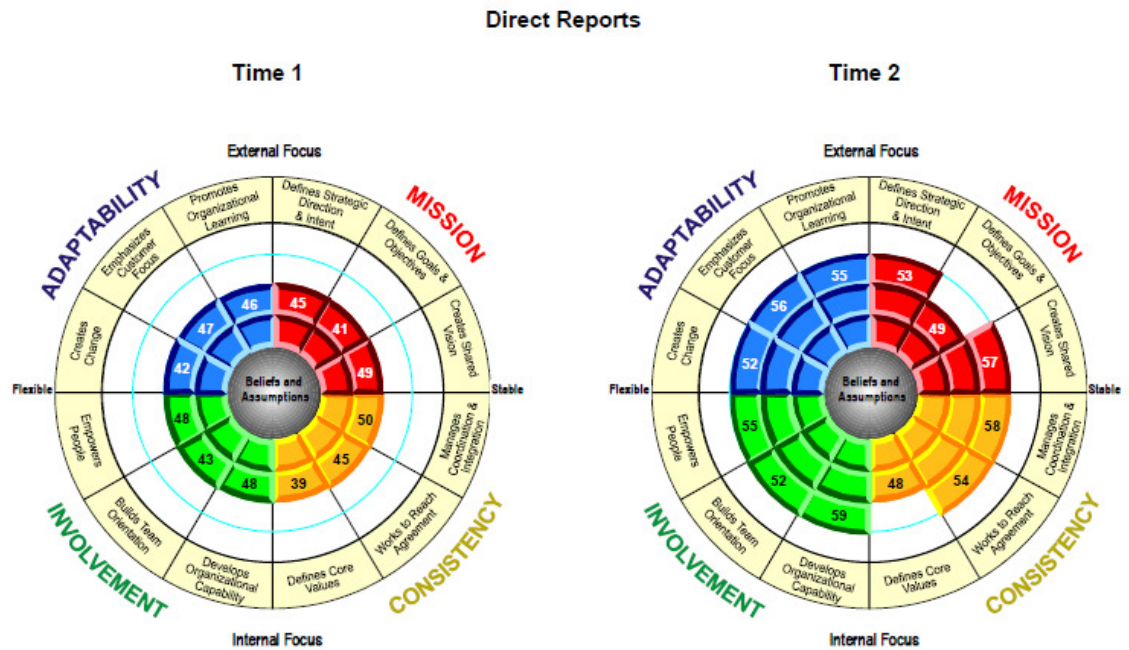**Figure 1: Change from Time 1 to Time 2 from Boss Perspective**

Figure 2: Change from Time 1 to Time 2 from Direct Report Perspective

Implications and Best Practices

With millions of dollars spent and hundreds of hours administering multisource feedback surveys and coaching, empirical evidence is needed to determine their utility. The gains found among managers in this study offer growing support for the value of multisource feedback and one-on-one coaching by discerning the significant improvements made in a program at DLA. There are several implications of these results for implementing these surveys along with coaching in your organization.

We know from experience that many 360 programs fail. As Brutus and Derayeh (2002) found in their study of over 100 companies, every organization which failed in its multisource objectives also failed to facilitate a feedback process. In other words, recipients only received the reports in the mail or electronically with no discussion of the results. In our study, however, feedback was one part of a comprehensive training and development program. These findings demonstrate the results that are possible by encouraging and requiring focal managers to participate in developmental activities and discussions based on their multisource feedback.

But how exactly does the coaching lead to behavior change among these managers? This study, along with the academic literature, offers several insights into how and why behavior change occurs. In coaching sessions, managers were cued to develop implementation intentions to respond in effective ways to anticipated situations. Gollwitzer (1999) defines an implementation intention as: "When situation x arises, I will perform response y." Forming implementation intentions requires people to specify critical cues ahead of time, and can therefore elicit the intended behavior automatically once a cue is encountered. These implementation intentions

lead to greater cognitive accessibility of the desired behaviors. Thus, coaching leads to behavior change by articulating intentions for future behaviors. Focal managers begin to formulate automatic behavior patterns to anticipated cues, such as handling conflict or motivating subordinates.

Similar to implementation intentions, Taylor and colleagues (1998) have researched behavioral change as a result of two types of mental simulations. The first mental simulation is to rehearse each step involved in reaching an envisioned end state. This is contrasted with a second type of mental simulation—often found in the self-help literature—which only visualizes the outcome of an end state (e.g. I will be the top sales associate). Taylor et al. (1998) find that the mental simulation of envisioning the step-by-step process of reaching an end goal produces progress in achieving that goal while simply envisioning successful completion of it does not. They attribute these results to the regulation of emotion and the effective use of planning and problem-solving capabilities that are engaged while envisioning the step-by-step process needed to reach an end state.

The purpose of most coaching programs is to set explicit implementation intentions (e.g. "In the future when x happens, I will do y"), and to mentally simulate the step-by-step process needed to reach an end goal. Therefore, to the extent that both intentions are articulated and step-by-step processes are envisioned, behavior change is more likely to occur. For example, one manager in the program said that with her coach, "We took the developmental themes and translated them into goals and then developed specific action plans for each of them." These actions plans included specific behaviors for enhancing teamwork. The process of constructing these plans was to simulate the step-by-step processes that would be needed to improve on this behavior in the future.

The third way that this intervention (and others like it) can facilitate behavior change is because the survey itself offers a conceptual vocabulary of effective leadership. It becomes especially useful if it's written in the language of business, as is the DLDS. Many people have not thought about the categories which represent effective leadership, nor have they defined the specific behaviors they will enact given this knowledge. The multisource feedback experience enriches vocabulary and provides a greater variety of leadership behaviors (Denison, Hooijberg, Quinn, 1995). The process itself cues attention and makes the focal manager more aware of their own behavior and behavioral repertoires associated with effective leadership. For example, one participant said, "The concepts all make perfect sense, but you get caught up in your day-to-day…you don't pull back and think it through. Having a candid discussion with a coach who has the experience in articulating those concepts to those of us who are subconsciously aware of them but haven't had those discussions to bring it to the forefront is very useful." As this manager indicates, in future situations managers are cued to notice more and can respond with a greater variety of behaviors.

Finally, as we found in this study, these changes were most noticeable among bosses and direct reports. This is not surprising as most of the behaviors outlined in the DLDS describe upward and downward interaction patterns. Therefore, they are, by definition, most likely to be observed by bosses and direct reports. However, we also found that peers saw managers more likely to work to reach agreement. This includes helping people reach consensus, promoting constructive discussions, and working toward win/win solutions. The aggregate change on this dimension suggests managers begin to see these behaviors as demonstrating effective leadership, notice when situations arise that need such leadership, and implement the new behaviors they have identified through the survey language and with their coach.

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In sum, our findings suggest that structured coaching sessions with multisource feedback are a winning combination to change managerial behaviors toward more effective interactions, especially from the boss and direct report perspective. These results, and the structures needed to implement them, are within the reach of any organization willing to dedicate the time and resources to develop its managers.

Related Resources:

Brutus, S., & Derayah, M. (2002). Multi-source assessment programs in organizations: An insider's perspective. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 13, 187-201.

Denison, D. R., Hooijberg, R., & Quinn, R. E. (1995). Paradox and performance: Toward a theory of behavioral complexity of managerial leadership. Organization Science, 6(5), 524-540.

Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. American Psychologist, 54(7), 493-503.

Taylor, S. E., Pham, L. B., Rivkin, I. D., & Armor, D. A. (1998). Harnessing imagination: Mental simulation, self-regulation, and coping. American Psychologist, 53(4), 429-439.

Toegel, G. & Conger, J. A. (2003). 360-degree assessment: Time for reinvention. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 2(3), 297-311.

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