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Group Coaching and
Strategy Implementation

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Abstract

Many executives struggle with the problem of getting things done. They know that they need to get everyone on board—from top to bottom—to make the organization work, but they don't really know how to go about it. Without the presence of a team culture they tend to do things their own way, often resulting in uncoordinated decisions and actions. Executives who behave like ships passing in the night, act in ways that are neither in the interests of the organization or themselves. The implementation of strategy will suffer.

This article discusses how to get things done by applying the group coaching methodology, in particular how it can make a difference by insuring that everyone in the organization sees the direction for the business and how their job fits into the "big picture." In the process, executives become mutually invested in encouraging behaviors that insure that everyone works together toward common goals. I present a specific case example to show how group coaching positively affects strategy execution, highlighting the conscious and unconscious psychological processes that induce tipping points for change.

Group coaching can be an effective way to create a truly networked organization and to minimize the paranoid thinking that often emerges in matrix-like companies with virtual, highly diverse teams. As part of a group coaching intervention, executives assume constructively challenging follow-up roles, supporting one another to stay on the agreed-upon track. By fostering a greater sense of accountability and trust, 'management by fear' is overcome, lateral communication breaks down the silo mentality, and the path is opened to a boundary-less company and real information exchange.

Key words: Group coaching; strategy implementation; execution; psychodynamics.

Thinking is easy, acting is difficult, and to put one's thoughts into action is the most difficult thing in the world.
—*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

A good plan implemented today is better than a perfect plan implemented tomorrow.
—*George Patton*

Even if you're on the right track you'll get run over if you just sit there.
—*Will Rogers*

Introduction

The challenge for many senior executives is to get everyone, from top to bottom, on board to make the organization work—to implement whatever decisions have been made. Knowing how to go about it, however, is another matter. Without the presence of a team culture, executives will likely do things their own way, often resulting in uncoordinated, even conflicting decisions and actions that are not in the best interests of the organization nor themselves. Implementation of strategy will suffer. The following case study illustrates how group coaching can be an effective way to have everyone 'sing on the same page'—and accelerate execution.

Ships passing in the night
Pushed to action by rapid evolution in the petroleum industry, the executive team of a global energy company knew they needed a high-tech transformation of their solid but complacent organization if it was going to be sustainable. To facilitate the transition, the CEO hired Jim, a brilliant professor of engineering, as new Chief Knowledge Officer. Around the same time, John joined the team as Vice President of Technology, Products and Services. An experienced petroleum industry executive, he was seconded by one of the company's major shareholders to get a large offshore drilling project up and running.

However, the new members of the team actually worsened what was already an ineffective decision-making body. Within months of their arrival, war had broken out

between the 'outsiders' and the other executives team, many of whom complained bitterly about Jim's disorganized (even rude) manner, in particular his handling of email and other communications. He seemed to respond when he felt like it (or not at all). Likewise with executive team meetings: sometimes he didn't show up. Relationships among the executive team members were aggravated by the rivalry between John and the CEO. John came across as a know-it-all and every meeting seemed to become a contest over who was right about minor matters instead of focusing on important issues.

Before long, the two newcomers were being blamed for all that was wrong with the organization—the scapegoats for its mediocre performance. With the company's commitment to the offshore energy project and specific deadlines to be met, pressures were mounting. Yet although overruns would be extremely costly, there seemed to be no urgency within the executive team to move forward with the project. Turf fights for resources seemed more important than alignment and working for the common good. Constructive communication was missing, as was all sense of trust. The entire team was failing in the execution of its intended goals.

As matters weren't getting any better, the CEO decided to bring everyone on the senior executive team together for what he called a "high-performance team intervention". The aim was to reflect on their interpersonal relationships, work practices, leadership styles and organizational culture, under the guidance of an experienced external group facilitator. The underlying agenda was to create alignment and become more effective in implementing the corporate transformation process.

The coach had a solid business background in addition to training in the psychodynamic approach to executive coaching. She was interested in how individuals experienced the team's interactions as well as exploring the less visible elements—the patterns of behavior and group dynamics underlying their behavior. Her main goal, however, was to help the members become more aligned and more effective in decision-making and implementation.

She began by requesting an interview with each of the executive team members prior to the intervention. It didn't take long to figure out that Jim and John had turned into

lightning rods for all that was wrong with the executive team and the company. While most of the people she interviewed acknowledged that Jim was brilliant and had come up with some truly innovative ideas, they were unanimous in the view that he was a difficult person to work with. Negative comments were made about John, who was regarded as a very experienced executive but perceived as a company spy for the major shareholder organization that had seconded him.

Although the alienating behavior of the two did not help group integration, she could see that other factors were responsible for the company's mediocre performance and the way that its transformation was stagnating. Several executive team members registered frustration about a consulting firm specializing in strategy and corporate transformation that had presented what seemed like a logical action plan, but when it came to implementation, very little materialized. Each executive seemed to be on a different page, and this lack of alignment had spread a blanket of confusion and disengagement throughout the organization. The absence of clear objectives and agreed processes was jeopardizing execution of the strategy.

Digging deeper during the interviews, the group coach identified a series of problems with the executive team dynamics. To start with, all too often their meetings were felt to be a waste of time, and were described as 'calcified', 'unfocused' and 'ritualistic', with unresolved conflicts both overt and underground. Participation was uneven, leading to a false consensus from which all sense of collegiality and collaboration were missing. The silo mentality was the norm, each executive fighting for the scarce resources available and protecting their own P&Ls. Lines of reporting and accountability for the execution of activities were unclear. Knowledge sharing among people in key functions or divisions was non-existent. The lack of coordination and an absence of specific guidelines to shape decision-making and execution meant that each executive set his or her own priorities. Most of them admitted that these problems had been going on for several years—long before Jim and John arrived on the scene.

It was also pointed out that the existing corporate culture failed to encourage employees to give voice to their concerns. A recent survey had shown that the majority was reluctant to speak their minds or challenge management practice for fear

of retribution. Some executives described the culture as 'Darwinian'—every man (or woman) for himself. Others blamed the CEO for being 'conflict-avoidant', unable to put his foot down to manage group conflict. Apparently he preferred to deal with executives on a one-to-one basis, but was unable to create alignment and unify the team as a whole.

All in all, given the executive team's poor implementation capabilities, company morale was low, the transformation process was stalled, the offshore project was facing expensive delays, and they were on a fast track into the red. As summarized in the coach's interview notes, the consensus was that instead of a team, executives each had a different destination. Even if they had a vision, they were unable to drive a consistent action plan deep into the organization or engage employees to collectively achieve its objectives.

In her exchanges with the members of the executive team, the group coach explained that she would ask each of them to complete two 360-degree questionnaires, one pertaining to the business environment, the other, of a more private nature, to be completed by both family and friends. Feedback results would be discussed during the coaching intervention as a means of sharing information about each person's leadership style, working practices, and contribution to the team. Most importantly, it would allow for an open discussion on team alignment and strategy execution.

The group coaching intervention
The group coach began with a short lecture about high-performance organizations and effective leadership. To break the ice and instill a somewhat playful mood, she asked each member of the executive committee to draw a self-portrait, a picture of how they saw themselves as it related to what was in their head, heart, stomach, past, present, work, and leisure. After expressing skepticism about such (seemingly useless) activity, all the executives became immersed in the task. When all the self-portraits were completed and displayed on the wall, the group coach asked Jim to kick off by telling the group about his drawing. As this was the type of creative exercise he was comfortable with to express himself, he readily agreed.

Through his narrative, the group learned some surprising things about Jim. There were even a few laughs as he recounted some of the outrageous things he had done as a student. Next, the group coach focused on Jim's 360-degree survey feedback reports, which Jim, like the others in the group, had been given the night before. She asked Jim what puzzled him about his observers' feedback, and if there was anything in the report that was not new to him.

He responded that he had been quite shocked to discover how he came across to other members of the team. The group coach gave Jim time to express his doubts and confusion about the reports. She referred back to his self-portrait, asking if he could say more about himself. What had got him to where he was now? Reflecting on his life, what were some of the highlights and lowlights? What might account for the group's perception that he was irresponsible, uninterested in others, even hostile?

Through further explanation of Jim's personal narrative, the members of the executive team learned that his grandfather had been a brilliant academic, but his father had followed a different drum—his life marked not by success but failure and the disappointment of one job after another. Jim explained how he had spent a great deal of time with his beloved grandfather, who found in him the enthusiasm and curiosity that his son seemed to lack. Clearly, the grandfather had been Jim's role model, encouraging him to pursue an academic career. Jim told the members of the executive team that his identity as an academic had always been the most important thing to him—something not always easy to nurture in the hardheaded business environment he was now working in. Particularly in his present role, he felt that his creativity could be stifled, so he did whatever he could to protect what he called "the spark."

Listening to him, it became clear that Jim's father represented some kind of "negative identity." Jim had an underlying fear that he would become like his dad—wasting his talents. From his presentation, the group could see that two systems—family and organizational—were in conflict within Jim. The memory of his grandfather supported and rewarded the free-minded genius, whereas the organizational system he had just joined was trying to shackle that creativity. In order to protect the "spark", he reacted aggressively—albeit unconsciously—and kept his fellow team members at bay, resisting all signals to change his behavior.

Now, looking at the information from the 360-degree feedback reports and listening to the group's challenging but supportive comments, he came to realize that not only did other people see this behavior as obstructive, it aggravated the existing problems with the team and the company. In protecting his independence, he was making it even more difficult for them to come together as a team, and his behavior negatively affected the organization.

As for the other members of the team, over the course of this discussion they realized they had never really understood Jim. As he talked about how he experienced the organization, they gained a better understanding of how to make the most of the genius in their midst. It was true that he didn't think the way they did, but it was now obvious that he was as dedicated as they were to turning the company around. The challenge was how they could use his considerable talents to their advantage. How could they get the best out of him, drawing out his strengths while minimizing his disruptive side?

One of the outcomes of the coaching intervention was that Jim realized that he was part of a larger system, and that his behavior was reinforcing the prevailing silo mentality, preventing alignment and hampering execution. Now, encouraged by the other members of the group, Jim listed several specific behavior changes he would focus on to facilitate communication and collaboration with the other team members. He confirmed that he was truly committed to the effective execution of the company's intended strategy and the transformation process. In response, the others voiced their understanding and support of his need to protect "the spark." After all, Jim's ability to think differently could be a powerful source of new ideas and competitive advantage.

Subsequently, each member of the executive team, including the CEO, went through the same process. Each one took the "hot seat" to tell his or her story and was given constructive feedback by the group. Each individual session concluded with an action plan to identity ways in which he or she could personally contribute to the team's alignment and become better at execution.

John was given feedback about his perceived overly competitive behavior. He was also told that he could come across as patronizing, a behavior he was unaware of. For his part, he said he often felt excluded from the other executives' meetings. This led to an open and constructive discussion wherein team members shared their fears that he may have been a "spy" for the major shareholder. This exchange gave John the opportunity to assure the team that his first priority (and that of the shareholder) was to make the offshore project a success. But most encouraging was that the other members were able to understand John's motives, which turned out to be strongly aligned with theirs.

The CEO also received direct but constructive feedback on what he could do to be more effective. In particular, he was asked to run his meetings with a shared agenda that would engage all parties involved, with specific action recommendations at the end to ensure clear process and accountability. Suggestions were made that he could be less "nice" and more prepared to say no when necessary. He came to realize that his tendency towards conflict avoidance actually created conflict.

By going through the group coaching process, all of the executives gained considerable insight into their own and others' strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the session, they had each developed a personal action plan for change—based on their individual feedback reports as well as the comments from the group. They promised to coach each other whenever one of them was straying from his or her specific action points. In addition, the team as a whole had its first real debate to obtain clarity as to the direction the company had to take in order to be successful, and committed to a number of actions to improve on execution.

Through the intervention, they started to act for the first time like a real team. They were prepared to work together—to align themselves behind the intended action plan—realizing that implementation, not protectionism, was the most difficult part of their job. They were now able to communicate consistently to employees where they as a team were going. The corporate transformation plan had now become a living thing.

Need for follow-up

At a follow-up meeting several months later, the group coach learned that Jim had made significant improvements to his behavior. He had become less of an "anarchist." A newly hired assistant was helping him stay organized. He also mentioned (inspired by the intervention) that he was working with an executive coach who kept him on track. In addition to addressing issues at work, the coach had also helped Jim to better understand aspects of his life in the personal sphere. One of the things they had explored together was not only the way he perceived his father, but also his relationships with authority figures in general. Upon further reflection, he came to realize that his father, despite struggling with work, had positive aspects in other realms that Jim could be proud of. These new insights contributed to a more positive and balanced state of mind. Jim became much less irritable and was more at peace with himself. And, as the others confirmed, being less stressed helped him develop better relationships with others. His constructive stance was contributing to a new collaborative equilibrium in the organizational system.

The same comments were made about John. Because he was no longer viewed as a spy, the other executive committee members started to welcome him to their meetings. By letting him in, they saw how his expertise could benefit the execution of the offshore project. John had truly become integrated in the team.

Further prompting by the coach confirmed that the members of the executive team now felt that as a group they had become more effective. There was greater openness among them, marked by real dialogue and exchange of ideas. There was a sense of accountability, more trust, and less management by fear. This in turn reinforced their alignment on the direction the company should be taking. Decisions were now being implemented and the company was seeing progress and moving forward.

Looking back at the coaching event, the executives marveled at the extent to which they had bonded after such a short workshop. They commented on the fact that they were now able to speak their minds, to be vulnerable, and had developed a greater trust and respect for one another. With this trust they had progressed in constructive conflict resolution, leading to a greater sense of commitment and ownership, and, most importantly, obtaining better results. What's more, the experience of the group coaching intervention made them realize that well-intended action plans were

meaningless without addressing the people issues within the equation.

The executive team members also commented that the group coaching intervention was a great way to create a truly networked organization, as it minimized the paranoid thinking that had previously been the norm within their virtual, highly diverse teams. It broke down the silo mentality and opened up the path towards becoming a boundaryless company, engaged in real information exchange. No longer was secrecy the norm; all of them were prepared to contribute to a more agile, learning organization. And last but not least, the group coaching experience had helped them to be more effective in confronting the Achilles heel of the organization: execution. (See Figure 1 for an overview of the group coaching process.)

How to help individuals and organizations change?

Top executives need to realize that corporate transformation is not an abstract exercise. It involves people. And to have people work together is not a given. To make corporate transformation successful, people need to be co-opted. To get them on board, however, can be an uphill climb, full of resistance.

Generally, by the age of thirty, our personality has stabilized. But even if it has greater plasticity earlier in life, we are still able to change our behavior at later stages. Later life-stage behavior change, however, is not easy—as can be seen with many senior executives. Many of them are at the summit of their career trajectory, and have got there as a result of habitual behavior patterns. It may be apparent to others that aspects of their behavior are dysfunctional, but most often the individual in question sees no compelling reason to change since these behaviors have served them well thus far. As a result, many of them lock themselves into what I call a 'mental prison', they cling to habitual behavior, hoping for a different outcome and then putting the blame on others when things go wrong. Even if they are willing to make an effort to change, they don't really know how to do things differently. They haven't yet realized that mental health is having a choice – choosing to do things differently.

Busy executives who want to reinvent themselves don't seek change through lengthy

therapeutic procedures. Because of their overwhelming responsibilities and time constraints, they seek more expedient quick fixes. Clearly, the challenge is to develop a method of intervention that is similar to more traditional therapeutic approaches—addressing, for example, out-of-awareness resistance to change—but in a way that is perceived as meaningful, effective and manageable for executives.

Group coaching

Group coaching has proven to be a highly effective intervention to prepare executives for individual and organizational change. In comparison (as I have learned from experience), one-on-one coaching is not as powerful for creating tipping points for change. Although individual interventions can be valuable, they don't create the intensity and focus that we see happening in a group coaching session, and are less effective in bringing a group of executives onto the same page.

After a group coaching intervention, the group members assume a constructively challenging follow-up role supporting one another. In contrast, in one-on-one coaching, follow-up tends to rely upon an executive coach, whose availability will vary, often leaving individual executives very much on their own. In group coaching, individuals benefit from the peer group; they become mutually invested in encouraging the new behaviors that each has identified and committed to, working together to achieve their goals. This "group contagion" is a powerful way to make change happen. It makes group-coaching intervention a highly effective method for aligning teams in the pursuit of shared objectives.

Creating tipping points

Having observed thousands of executives during various group coaching interventions, I have witnessed the following complex (conscious and unconscious) psychological processes for inducing tipping points for change:

1. To start, a group intervention provides a context for *cathartic experiences*. The group setting allows executives to get things off their chest; a forum (at least figuratively) for "emotional cleansing." The group becomes an enabler of bringing repressed feelings, fears, and covert conflicts to the surface. Bringing out into the open the things that trouble them can be an extremely powerful

emotional experience. Under the right circumstances, use of the narrative technique provides an opportunity to re-experience and transform deeply troubling incidents, helping executives understand why they do what they do.

2. Listening to the other executives' life stories and challenges, the members of the group come to realize that they are not alone in their confusion. They are not the only ones who feel like impostors in the organization: others struggle with similar fears. This realization can bring a great sense of relief. *Mutual identification* with specific problems brings the team together and offers opportunities to discuss more effective ways of dealing with knotty issues at work.

3. Taking a *psychodynamic lens* to the discussion can set in motion a process of association as to why an executive does things in a particular way—Jim and John being good cases in point. It spurs reflection on whether there are better ways to solve whatever problems they may be struggling with. Is a behavioral repertoire that was appropriate at one point in time still effective in the present? Should other ways be explored to deal with specific issues? One tool to help executives change is transferential interpretation—the realization that we tend to act towards people in the present based on models of the past. Understanding old patterns of interaction can help unpack dysfunctional behavior. By recognizing long-standing maladaptive patterns, the link between existing relationships and the distant past is made meaningful, thereby improving the chances for change.

4. In addition (encouraged by the other members of the executive team), such reflections can lead to a *willingness to experiment* with doing things differently—and by doing so creating new scenarios for the future. Executives may come to realize that they can free themselves from their psychic prison. In many instances, such self-understanding and insight moves people a long way along the road to personal and organizational change.

5. Bear in mind that every presentation—not just one's own—offers the opportunity for *vicarious learning*. Executives come to realize that learning not only occurs through participation in dialogue (being in the "hot seat"), but also vicariously through observing and listening to other people's stories. This kind of learning implies retaining and replicating effective behavior observed in others. Since there are always executives in the group who are admired for

the way they deal with life's adversities, they may become role models, the kind of people others seek to emulate. Imitative or mirroring behavior—identification with the other—is an important part of the interpersonal learning process and a very powerful force for change.

6. During the group coaching process (if done well), the executives become a *real community*, members of a "tribe" that have gone through the same emotional experience. The tribe offers a great deal of mutual support whenever one of them embarks on a new challenge. This feeling of social belonging also becomes a very powerful catalyst for change.

7. A group setting is also an opportunity for *collective learning*. Occasionally, didactic instruction by the group coach can be beneficial, although in my experience it should be given sparingly. Explanation, clarification and even direct advice about how to do things better within the group can reduce anxiety and establish control when there is a troubling issue, but it should not only be the coach who offers suggestions; executives themselves are vast troves of expertise. Here again, vicarious experience can be extremely powerful. Executives draw from their own rich experiences to share information about work issues and recommend different approaches and ways of doing things. And by giving advice to others, they are practicing the supportive and challenging behaviors that help the team function better.

8. A further positive force for change can be the *altruistic motive*, the desire to put the needs of others above our own. While helping for helping's sake—the genuine desire to make things better for others—may seem selfless, the act of giving to others brings numerous benefits. Helping others—offering support, reassurance, suggestions and insight—can have a therapeutic effect, boosting each executive's level of positive emotion, self-respect and well-being.

Creating alignment for strategy execution

Many senior executives struggle with the problem of getting things done. They know that they need to get everyone, from top to bottom on board to make their organizations work, but they don't know how to really go about it. They don't know how to achieve matrix-like alignment for strategy execution.

What they don't know is that without the presence of a team culture, executives do things their own way, often resulting in uncoordinated, even conflicting decisions and actions. The challenge for organizations will be to stop such dysfunctional behavior. The conundrum is to have people act aligned in reality, not just on paper. It's here were group coaching can make a difference by insuring that everyone within the organization can internalize the direction for the business and see how their job fits into the "big picture." Group coaching creates the awareness that without alignment, strategy execution suffers or fails because executives will not know what steps to take and when to take them. The creation of a clear roadmap through group coaching will positively affect a company's success in execution.

What's more, having gone through a group coaching process, the participating executives become aware that they are not at the mercy of life's vicissitudes; they have choices. They come to realize that living a full life—discovering how to reinvent themselves, their teams and their organizations—is not just the luck of being dealt a good hand. On the contrary, it often comes down to their ability to make the best of a poor hand. By seeing things in perspective—that there are other ways to deal with life's adversities—the group as a team can co-create a better future.

But while recognizing the need for deep individual and organizational change, it is often seen as something that *others* should take responsibility for. We overestimate the value of what we have—and underestimate what we may gain by giving something up. What's needed to achieve the desired equilibrium is an honest true exploration of what change means to ourselves, to our teams, and to the organization as a whole. We need to *own* the change – something that does not always come naturally. We should accept that even if we can't change the direction of the wind, we can adjust our sails to reach our destination.

Figure 1

The Group Coaching Intervention

For a high-performance group coaching intervention, I start by interviewing all the participants. It's a way of assessing the major issues—and also preparing them for the event (talking about the general outline of the sessions and the use of questionnaires). It's also my way to make an assessment of whether the executives are able to handle what can be a very complex intervention. During these interviews I look for traces of psychological mindfulness, the capacity to be open and responsive, and whether the potential participant has a serious interest in greater self-understanding. I also assess whether they are truly interested in making the organization a better place to work. Interviews are an opportunity to sift out people who have a genuine interest in the people they lead from those who are merely looking out for number one.

Depending on the number of executives in the group, the event will be spread over three to four days. It's also important that one or two follow-up sessions are scheduled to make sure that everyone is following through on whatever commitments they have made. At the end of the event, a "contract" is made on what to work on (individually and as a team) during the time they are away between coaching sessions. "Homework" assignments are monitored by each other. Mutual coaching is an important part of the design of such an intervention.

It's recommended (in particular when working with a top executive team) to run the coaching intervention together with an additional facilitator. Doing it together allows for a fuller and more complete view of what happens in the group and serves to overcome blind spots. Having two people in the workshop at all times gives each of the facilitators the opportunity to move in and out of active and passive observational modes. The interchange between the coaches also provides a model for the executives of ways of relating to each other and handling conflict.

The basic material for the event consists of the preliminary interviews, the feedback given in the questionnaires, and the "life" case study. Often, I open the intervention with an interactive lecture concerning high-performance organizations, organizational culture, and leadership styles (exemplary and dysfunctional). As an "icebreaker" I may use the self-portrait exercise. At some point each member of the executive team must volunteer to sit in the "hot seat." To go through this experience is extremely important. While in the hot seat some time is devoted to processing the feedback instruments. These are the *Global Executive Leadership Inventory*, a 360-degree feedback instrument that I have developed consisting of twelve dimensions that contribute to leadership effectiveness, and the *Personality Audit* containing feedback from family members and friends. However, the central focus remains the personal case history. As each executive narrates his or her life story, experiences and actions become organized. The presentation becomes a process of self-discovery and a way to help others (through vicarious listening and comparing their own stories) explore and understand issues that they face, be they in their public or private lives.

Eventually, the group forms an intense learning community whereby each participant gives the others constructive feedback whenever they fall back into the behavior patterns that they are trying to unlearn. The group becomes a self-analyzing organization. Executives—now a real team—often demonstrate a remarkable level of emotional intelligence, given the quality of their interventions. As mentioned, one or two follow-up sessions are recommended to assess the degree to which particular behavior patterns have been fully internalized.

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