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Cognitive Behavioral Executive Coaching
A Structure for Increasing Leader Flexibility

By Darren Good, Bauback Yeganeh, and Robin Yeganeh

Being flexible to a complex, fast-paced and ever changing environment is paramount to successful leadership. Leader flexibility is the capacity to interpret and practice a range of thoughts and behaviors according to the unique needs of a situation (Zaccaro, et. al., 1991). Many executives are turning to coaches to help them develop flexibility in the way they lead. This article shows how an adaptation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can be leveraged to effectively develop leader flexibility within an executive coaching context, by helping executives add thoughts and behaviors to their repertoires.

The Need for Leader Flexibility

Leader flexibility has been linked to effective leadership (Mumford & Connelly, 1991). Yet, people tend to develop rigid routines to manage complex environments. Executives in particular face more complexity than most, as their role-demands and information loads increase. It can be argued that leader flexibility is more difficult for high performing executives, partially because they attribute their success to existing interpretations and behaviors (Sztucinski, 2001). A common outcome goal in coaching is to increase one’s flexibility (Kilburg, 1996). Yet we still have a limited understanding of how to develop flexibility in our leaders.

The Need for CBT

In order to develop leader flexibility, one should highlight interventions that aim to establish ongoing thought and behavior variability. One of the primary aims of CBT is to oppose rigid cognitions with the purpose of creating increased flexibility through conscious intention (Beck, 1975; Ellis, 1962). CBT is driven largely by real life experiments that provide structured opportunities to test new thoughts and behaviors (Hayes et al., 1999).

By becoming aware of how thoughts create feelings, and eventually states of being, clients begin to learn the value of checking interpretations in context. As interpretations become less automatic or rigid, the client can exercise greater variation in new thoughts and behaviors, growing a more flexible repertoire of response. Through a strong collaborative relationship between practitioner and client, CBT presents a suitable method to improve leader flexibility.

Though it is arguably the most efficacious form of psychotherapy for helping individuals change (Butler et al., 2006), CBT is seldom specifically written about in executive coaching literature. While exceptions exist (see Ducharme, 2004), the relative absence of CBT is surprising given the unique overlaps shared by CBT and the needs of modern executives.

Leaders who are clients in coaching programs are interested in performance and substantive change. CBT has a long

1. In “Psych Info” and “Business Source Complete,” the average number of journal articles listed for the term “executive coaching” was 717 (as of March 2010), while that number is reduced to an average of 9 when the term “cognitive” is included in the search parameter.
track record of creating an actionable framework that facilitates the practice of desired thoughts and behaviors. Additionally, CBT has allowed us to scientifically measure and track performance. When executives see this tracked return on investment, it often leads to an increase in motivation (positive spirals of action). In addition CBT tends to be shorter in duration, solution oriented, and focused on the here and now, which fits the action-focused context of executives. CBT takes a stance of collaborative empiricism, in that it is a shared data-driven process that empowers the client to understand and influence the phenomena of study with the helper. In CBT the client is educated in cognitive and behavioral models, so she can eventually become a leader in her own change initiatives. Given the empowered role of executives and demands for time, the structure of CBT is a fitting approach to foster leader flexibility.

Below we will illustrate how the strengths of this approach can be leveraged effectively in an executive coaching process. We have named this process cognitive behavioral executive coaching (CBEC) as it combines traditional cognitive behavioral techniques with those commonly found in existing executive coaching processes. Other important factors in succeeding with this process include authenticity, active listening, empathy, and establishing trust. Regardless of the coaching process being used, the quality of relationship between client and coach is a vital factor for success.

Cognitive Behavioral Executive Coaching (CBEC)

While cognitive behavioral principals are applied in a variety of settings, this model is specifically designed for the benefit of organizational executives seeking develop-

2. Executive coaches can use the basic structure of CBT without doing therapy. Keeping in mind that as coaches we are not therapists, we neither diagnose nor treat psychological dysfunction, for a number of reasons. Instead, we are employed to support people toward increased work effectiveness. It is important to stay mindful of our contracted purpose in support of clients.
The components presented below focus on a general framework that can be followed for executive development of flexibility. They do not delve into the details of timelines, the specific structure of conversations within each session, or the structure of the relationship over time.

1. Orientation and Vision

Coaching starts with an orientation to the CBEC model and an explanation of its collaborative and empowering structure. Next, the coach helps the executive define an ideal future state as a leader. This can be accomplished through the use of visioning exercises, values assessments, and dialogue. Such assessments and the visioning exercise are standard practices among many well regarded executive coaching processes (i.e. the Goal portion of the GROW model, Whitmore, 2003; Ideal Self portion of Intentional Change Theory: Boyatzis, 2006). This is often done in order to articulate the larger context within which the client can ground the coaching work. We join Boyatzis’s work on Coaching with Compassion to suggest that ideal visioning can also be used to generate positive emotion in order to induce greater cognitive flexibility (Ison, 2002). An example of this step in the process comes from our coaching experience working with a president of a manufacturing division within a publicly traded multinational corporation.

Case Example: Mike entered into a coaching relationship hoping to move toward executive officer status within the larger holding company in the next 3–5 years. We began exploring this future vision through dialogic communication. He articulated how he imagines himself leading in this role in new flexible ways, and the type of impact he hopes to have on the organization and its members. This experience left Mike feeling excited and able to consider new ways of framing how he could move toward his vision.

2. Current Thoughts & Behaviors

The next step in the coaching process is to determine the client’s current thoughts and behaviors. The coach and client work collaboratively to assess current belief systems, gain awareness of the connections between situations, feeling states, and automatic thoughts and behaviors. Automatic thoughts represent the discourse of unintentional self-talk we all have in response to ongoing life events. Automatic behaviors represent the unintentional corresponding actions. In other words an aim of this process is to increase the client’s awareness of his inner narrator, and the resulting behaviors. The client and coach generate an improvement list that grounds the work and allows for data gathering as well as eventual outcome evaluation.

Specifically, coaches train clients to catch automatic thoughts and behaviors using various monitoring methods, such as a thought record form (Figure 2). The client can then begin assignments, which include periodically listing the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors accompanying specific leadership events. Additionally, clients are trained to classify unhelpful thoughts according to cognitive distortion types (Table 1. Cognitive Distortion List). Finally, clients try to assess the general outcomes that are associated by the use of their current thoughts and behaviors.

This understanding of current thoughts and behaviors is ultimately compared to where the client stated he wanted to be in the vision. This is essentially a side-by-side comparison between the stated future ideal and current reality, again similar to other change models (e.g. Reality in the GROW model, Whitmore, 2003; Real Self in Intentional Change Theory, Boyatzis, 2006). Unlike other change models that focus on skills needed to bridge this gap however, CBEC is more directly focused on the client’s understanding of the relationship over time.
support of his coach began to notice the connection between current thought, behavior, interpretation and outcome.

3. Vision Oriented Thoughts and Behaviors

This sub-process encourages executives to revisit the vision and collaboratively craft what they deem to be cognitions and behaviors that could accompany how they would think and act as if the ideal vision were achieved. From this, a set of vision oriented cognitions and behaviors are established to provide guidelines for a more flexible way of thinking and behaving. Next, working hypotheses are collaboratively generated regarding the desired vision oriented behaviors.

4. It is important to note that these future-oriented cognitions are anchored in the client’s context. Therefore building awareness of situational context helps the client to construct more appropriate future-oriented cognitions and behaviors.

Once the future oriented cognitions and behaviors have been identified, the executive has built up enough of a forward-looking orientation to effectively begin experimenting in the present. The main purpose here is to identify and experiment with more flexible thoughts and behaviors. Such experiments and their outcomes may require the development of additional skills in order to further practice the methods of cognitive behavioral based change.

**Case Example Continued:** Mike was asked, “Now thinking about your ideal future state, take a minute to envision the complexities of the environment you will be working in. What are the sensitivities you need to be aware of? Based on the vision that you have developed for yourself, what are some of the accompanying thoughts and behaviors that you will be utilizing in that particular environment? Are there any other solutions to your approach other than either managing their work, or allowing them to struggle?” Mike came to the conclusion that he was using “all or nothing thinking.” The coach helped Mike develop a mantra-like statement that could be used to anchor himself in his new vision. The mantra read: “When subordinates are not working up to my standards, it may mean that I have an opportunity to practice patient and systematic leadership development.” Mike agreed to respond to negative self-talk with this more
positive statement, in order to be a more effective leader. The hypothesis Mike decided to test was that practicing patience in meetings provides an opportunity for staff to develop, with no loss of work quality.

4. Experiment

Once the future oriented cognitions and behaviors have been identified, the executive has built up enough of a forward-looking orientation to effectively begin experimenting in the present. The main purpose here is to identify and experiment with more flexible thoughts and behaviors. Such experiments and their outcomes may require the development of additional skills in order to further practice the methods of cognitive behavioral based change. This phase extends the work that is started in the 2nd portion of the model (Current Thoughts and Behaviors). At this point the client has become adept at catching automatic thoughts and labeling common cognitive distortions in a thought record form. The client now begins to challenge cognitive distortions with more flexible thoughts and behaviors.

Case Example Continued: Mike was sitting in on a morning decision-making meeting with his direct reports, and he felt the project lead was losing focus. Rather than jumping in impulsively, Mike held back and reminded himself of his ideal vision and the accompanying vision oriented thoughts and behaviors. By reminding himself of these, he was better able to choose a flexible response. Mike allowed the project lead to struggle through the meeting for a short time and then asked him some open-ended questions to guide the conversation without taking over. This led to a more productive meeting than usual.

The data Mike gathered supported his hypothesis. He tracked this and other events in the ongoing thought/behavior form.

5. Transition

During the transition stage, clients move to independence when it is determined that the coaching intervention has had an impact or the duration of the contract is over. Impact assessment is accomplished through examination of the data from the initial assessment, the data gathered throughout the working relationship, and the end assessment related to the initial goals. This phase of the intervention mirrors treatment termination in CBT. Goals include reviewing feelings about the relationship, learning that took place, review of skills/education, and defining a self-check-in schedule in order to maintain work gains. Here it is important to establish any follow up plans in order to revisit areas that need continued work. An indicator that it is time for transition is when the client is leading the CBEC process.

Case Example Continued: At this point, after 7 weeks of coaching, Mike has noticed more flexible use of thoughts and resulting behaviors. The data collected reflects a significant shift regarding the number of times he encourages subordinates to remain in control of projects, the way he supports them, and the amount of time dedicated to strategic thinking. He has been focusing on a richer view of himself as a leader and continues to use CBEC techniques to develop his leadership flexibility.

Conclusion

CBEC is a way to create a structured and empowering approach to developing leader flexibility. We hope this will be helpful to others as it has been helpful to us in use with our clients. While this is in no way an exhaustive overview of how to integrate CBT with coaching, it provides some tools so that readers can begin to incorporate...
aspects of this methodology into their coaching practices. We look forward to collaborating with others in order to learn together and further test the efficacy of this methodology.

References


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