

Coaching a Star Performer: What's Different?

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This paper summarizes the essentials of what I do when I coach high performing executives – Stars, as I call them here. It's based, of course, on what I do when I coach other clients, so I'll try to isolate what it is that's different about coaching Stars.

Who am I talking about?

The people I have in mind are in positions such as President, Executive Director, COO, or C-suite jobs. They tend to be late 30's to about 50; about 60% are men. They are in small or medium sized companies or agencies, or units of larger ones. At earlier times they were called High Potentials, and probably were star-caliber performers then too. They are doing some things extremely well, but not necessarily equally well across the scope of their responsibilities.

So, just in these few words I've touched on several points about coaching Stars:

- Although these folks are very talented, their primary talents may not be in Leadership.
- The organization very much values what they contribute, and doesn't want to risk losing it; in fact, it wants more of it.
- The pressures of a senior executive role can highlight the inevitable tradeoffs in the Star's overall performance.

Describing the Stars

The overall picture of Star performers is the one we are all trying to achieve with our executive selection, development and coaching efforts. The picture begins with High Achievement, of course, and goes on to include many desirable behaviors and competencies.

I picked up some nice descriptions of Stars at talks by Bob Hogan and Peter Saville. Bob mentioned some behaviors that a Star's colleagues want to see:

- Straight talking, fair, decisive, knowledgeable about the business.

Note: This paper is based on a presentation the author made at the annual meeting of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychologists [SIOP], New Orleans, April, 2009. © Robert J. Lee

Peter's observations of Stars included:

- They adapt well, are flexible, and are good at dealing with change
- They are effective with many kinds of people
- They have really good, quick minds; they can accept inherent conflicting views of reality

I can add some of my observations

- Stars have trained themselves to be high achievers through impressive self-discipline
- They have a strong bias toward taking action and an abiding concern with getting results
- Stars have biographies full of entrepreneurial adventures, leadership roles and competitive challenges. Importantly, they've generally been successful.
- When they're at their best, they are well-centered people, comfortable with their power and able to take a stand on controversial positions.

I read in *The New York Times* a wonderful description of just such a person: Peter Orszag, the White House Budget Director, and the youngest person, at age 40, who holds cabinet rank in President Obama's team. No one has called me to be his coach, nor do I know that he wants one or needs one, but his stellar rise surely qualifies him to be a Star performer.

What was particularly interesting about the article is the description of what's on the desk of this PhD in economics:

"Now he keeps two books on his desk: the teachings of Epictetus, a Greek Stoic philosopher who espoused dispassion and self-discipline, and The Strenuous Life by Theodore Roosevelt, an ode to pushing oneself as hard as possible."

New York Times, March 28, 2009

What are the Star's challenges?

The ideal picture just described may fit some CEOs and Stars – perhaps we each have a few favorite examples – but it doesn't actually appear all that frequently in unblemished form. Many are Stars in some areas but not in others. There are challenges to living in high-performing, senior roles that can be tricky or burdensome on the best of characters and skill sets. Getting to the top, and being really good all the time in these difficult times, has its costs and risks.

I've identified two general themes regarding the challenges of Stars¹. Within these themes I locate the reasons why a call is made to me as a coach.

A. Maintaining a Sharp Edge

High performers develop very good skills at pushing themselves into problems and opportunities. Two major ways in which this shows up are:

- Confidence and ego strength based on winning a lot more than losing in competitive or goal-oriented settings
- Focus, intensity, perseverance, a never-give-up attitude

There always is a great deal of both ingredients – in fact, It is hard to overstate the amounts of these that go into becoming a Star! The Star will see these as strengths. And of course these *are* areas of strength, especially if there is also a good measure of Humility as a balance. Note how these strengths relate to the two books on Peter Orszag's desk.

¹ These themes roughly correlate with the Alpha and Beta groupings of the Big 5 personality dimensions. Alpha factors are Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to New Experience; Beta factors are Agreeableness and Emotional Stability.

The Star's strengths will have been highly rewarded, and may have increased to inappropriately high levels. If so, the initial conversation with me as a coach may be about:

- Confidence becomes over-confidence, or the kind of excessive ego that allows someone to feel better than regular Earth people.
- The intense focus appears to be an obsession. Perhaps this is what drove Ted Williams to become the world's greatest batter, or Fred Astaire to be such a great dancer, but it is likely to be a mixed blessing.
- Excessively high intensity may show up as a work/life balance issue, as a health issue, or an absence of support from colleagues at work.
- Occasionally there is an irrational fear of failing, of being an imposter, or just of underperforming. Stars are not much experienced with handling failure and can be quite frightened by the prospect of it. There may be difficulty in hearing criticism in a constructive way, or a fear of exposing an area of vulnerability.

B. Leading With and Through Others

The recent economic troubles have led to a lot of talk about "Personal Accountability" among top executives. This brings into focus the pivotal role of the top person, or top few people, in an organization. Some observers these days actually sound like they are endorsing a Great Man theory of leadership, as if organizational success depends entirely on the character and will of the Star performer.

There is some truth to this perspective, but we shouldn't take it too far. We also know that the top person or people have to get things done through and with a lot of others.

As Ruth Wageman, Dick Hackman and their colleagues point out in their great new book on *Senior Leadership Teams*:

The demands on those who occupy the top roles of contemporary organizations are rapidly outdistancing the capabilities of any single person, no matter how talented.

Thus we have a kind of paradox: as opposed to other kinds of excellent performers, the continued Stardom of organizational executives is determined by

the performance of other people. In this sense, the Star is more like a Conductor than a Musician. The Star has to find a balance between the interpersonal realities of organizational life, and the Romantic myths of Individualism and celebrity.

When the issues have to do with finding this balance, the initial conversation may be about things such as:

- **Sharing but also not sharing leadership.** Leadership is an individual performance, and it's not. This can be a confusing paradox for people new to leadership, or who have recently expanded the scope of their role. The confusion may be even greater in less hierarchal, faster changing, higher stress organizations.
- **Closeness and Distance.** Stars may struggle with finding the right degree of distance between themselves and the people around them. There are issues here of politics, competitiveness, honesty, and even feelings of betrayal as the leader makes decisions which inevitably are unpopular with some of his or her people.

A pattern in difficult times is to swing either away from or toward the people around you. Some find comfort in gathering support from their work friends, perhaps getting too close for their own good. Others detach, finding comfort in the distance from the emotions of it all.

- **Stars may not be good at "taking care" of others.** Stars have a major impact on the people who work for them, often inadvertently, both for good and for not so good. Sometimes this is referred to as "collateral damage", and a coach is called in to try to do damage control.

At its worst, this may show up as a "behavior" problem on the job – anger management, condescension, bullying – which may have been tolerated in exchange for the Star's contributions.

- **Stars may not personally believe in coaching and development as much as they do in selection.** They may be good at developing a few of the Future Stars who work for them, but not necessarily the other 95% of the people. This concern may show up as a need to leverage the talents of team members and other co-workers.
- **A phone call comes to me perhaps because the Star and his/her management are looking forward to the next move up*, or because a recent promotion has caused the Star to stretch into new kinds of leadership**

tasks [global, virtual, alliances] or there are heavy self-management challenges [loss of usual support systems, need for more symbolic leadership], or some of the Star's old tradeoffs are now getting more public attention and finally need to be dealt with [triggers, vulnerabilities, anxiety about decisions, patterns like over-talking or micromanaging].

How Coaching Differs when it's with a Star

1. The first step in a simplified description of executive coaching is Contracting and setting up the Rules of Engagement. I find there are a number of differences here between coaching Stars and others.
 - Everything begins with making the coach-client connection, agreeing to work together. The emphasis is on good chemistry and on experience working at the Star level. The message is pretty clear: if we don't connect as people, and if you don't know my world as a senior executive, I'm not sure this will be helpful. I don't find there is high concern expressed by Stars for the coach to have specific industry background, or with the particulars of how the coaching will proceed.
 - Trust. There always is testing as to whether the coach can be trusted, especially by Stars. Everybody seems to want something from a Star, even if it is only to hang around him or do some name dropping. There may be questions about ulterior motives, or about who within or outside of the company is being told things about the coaching. Understandably, Stars can be skeptical.
 - Visibility needs to be carefully contracted. The coaching must be viewed within the organization as a positive event, not as fixing a fault. The involvement of others, especially the boss and HR person, is an important, sensitive element in the contracting – and it may be that they are not much involved. Should that happen, what we'll have is more like Personal Coaching for the Star.
 - The general form of the coaching contract often differs from that of other clients. There is likely to be a blurring of the traditional "types" of coaching as outlined in the text books: transition, remedial, developmental. It may well be a combination of them all. The coaching may resemble Witherspoon & White's Type 4 – the Executive's Own Agenda.

An additional element of the coaching contract that is likely to be different may be the need to maintain an open-ended, long-term relationship, in contrast to the time-limited contracts used with other clients.

2. **Generating Insights.** Insights and hypotheses are generated jointly, based on all the available data. The insights are used to bind the client's motivation to the task at hand, establish the ownership of the effort, and refine the initial needs into workable coaching goals
 - **Becoming a journey partner.** One of the roles I play is reminding the client of what they've said earlier, connecting dots in their narrative, being their escort through a discovery and learning process. Just being there seems to make a difference for someone who is usually out on his or her own.
 - **Stories** are a primary coaching method for me. I ask the client to relate the ones they tell themselves, and the ones they tell others. Stars have a continuing conversation going in their heads about who I am, what I'm doing, what I need, etc. We all have some of this, but we don't all invent ourselves as well as Stars do, nor in some cases do we impose ourselves onto the world as effectively. So, my task is to enter that mental monologue and make it into a dialogue so I can help them with their inventions.

Here is where the Star's "lessons of experience" become important. What were those lessons? How does the Star remember them and use them? Getting the Star's story articulated and shared is a way to move material from the "hidden" window into the "open" window, to use the Johari Window example.

Two specific elements of Stories I focus on:

- i. Is the story compelling? Leaders need compelling stories if others are to follow.
- ii. Clarifying authorship. Is the Star writing the story as an active author, or just sort of remembering it?

There's some risk here of reaching over the border between coaching and personal counseling. With Stars, or those who are likely to become one, this is a risk worth taking. Their life stories are what brought them to this point, not just their formal training. Bruce Avolio puts it very succinctly:

Life is the training program in which leadership development is embedded.... [it is] a framework for us to discuss events that accumulate to shape an individual to emerge as a leader.

- **Providing my own observations**, based on what I've heard from the client and his or her colleagues. This is the "use of self" form of data collection. It includes reasonably objective information and patterns, as well as my emotional, intuitive and personal reactions. At times this is seen as the most valuable data by the client, who may be buffered from getting honest data from most of the people around him or her.
 - **Labeling their anxieties** – not catering to them, but also not just heightening them. I try to channel their anxieties into productive directions. Anxiety increases Focus even more than was already the case, and decreases Peripheral Vision.

Robert Rosen has addressed this very nicely:

"Leadership used to be about creating certainty. Now it is about leading through uncertainty. Anxiety has become a constant companion."

- **Pushing on assumptions**. Great insight can come from just pointing out assumptions the client is making about why he or she thinks others are behaving as they do, or why he or she is deciding things in certain ways.
3. **Experiments** This refers to suggesting or finding specific experiments the client can try which may lead to more preferred outcomes.
- Everything is done in real time – no artificial experiments. We have to work with what's on the Star's mind and desk at the moment.
 - Changing behavior is much more challenging in the face of a lifetime of reward, and in an organizational context that continues to expect what it has always received from this Star.

4. **Personal Learning** as a Competence.

- Longer term, experimenting is an important skill itself: the ability to design experiments and get feedback from others. The ultimate goal, which is quite elusive, is learning to extract insight from experience in real time.
- The coaching conversations become a model for the client's Personal Learning. He or she learns to have a different kind of internal monologue, the former one replaced in part by the dialogue he or she has with me. This may be more or less 'conscious' since Stars aren't necessarily reflective people.

By whatever methods, an overarching goal is to increase the client's self-awareness. Karol Wasylyshyn [2003] has written on this point in regard to what she called Superkeepers. When we're on the trail of greater self-awareness, then it's a lot easier to do the other steps in the coaching in process. If the client doesn't feel we're on that trail, it's not likely the coaching will have a lasting positive effect.

Differences in the Coaching Process for Me as a Coach

- Being careful of the Star's sharp edges – not so much that they'll cut, but rather that I have to help the client maintain them. Sharp edges come at a cost, of course, but they don't want to lose the edges – just reduce the cost.
- Truth telling, yes – but watch out for “Death to the Messenger”. As Sophocles said, *“No one likes the man who brings bad news.”*
- Traction can be difficult to achieve – many things are competing for the Star's attention. I try to keep the coaching focused on what's top-of-mind for the client.
- Boundary management. It's easy to slip into being their friend rather than their coach.

In some ways coaching Stars is easier: they probably are good at reaching for help, and there's absolutely no risk of me getting caught up in their business issues. Whether easier or hard, it's always more exciting!

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