The Business Coaching Process:
Helping A Client Analyze and Solve Problems

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The business coaching process is centered on the task of identifying, analyzing and solving problems—not uni-
dimensional puzzles or profound, life-altering mysteries. As a business coach, I make extensive use of a three-
dimensional model of problem analysis. It can be of great value in addressing the complexities of a client’s problem. This essay concerns the nature of this three-dimensional model and the ways in which it can be used by a business coach in understanding the nature of problems that a client is likely to experience. This essay also provides a conceptual base for making sense of the many other strategies of executive coaching—and other forms of organizational coaching—that we will be identifying in this series of articles for WABC. This three-dimensional model suggests differing ways in which coaching clients are likely to approach the identification and solving of problems (and therefore different strategies that might be used by a coach in addressing the problems of their client).

The model I propose is particularly helpful if one is trying to make practical use of an appreciative approach to coaching. An appreciative approach to problem solving focuses in particular on the generation of information about current resources and strengths and on the clarification of inspiring intentions. Proposals regarding the solution to problems in an appreciative context tend to focus on ways the client and her organization have already successfully solved the problem (a refocusing on information) and thus on ways in which to replicate this past success. An appreciative approach in a business coaching setting also refocuses on intentions, with primary consideration being given to the identification of goals that are reachable, yet challenging—rather than being either unrealistically high or mundane. I will be saying more about appreciative coaching in future WABC essays.

Identifying and Solving A Problem
Each of us confronts problems every day. Try as we might, we simply can not avoid problems. When we do confront problems, however, we generally attempt to come up with immediate action steps. Sometimes we succeed. Sometimes, however, what appears to be a good solution soon proves either inadequate or unacceptable. Sometimes we may find that in the long run our “solution” has just created more problems than it has solved.
In essence, a problem exists anytime there is a gap between the current situation in which we find ourselves and some desired state or target to which we wish to aspire. Sometimes this gap is very small and we choose to ignore it or discount it as trivial. At other times, the gap is quite large and we are faced with a condition that we can't avoid calling a “problem.” In order to solve this problem we must gain greater understanding of our current situation and greater clarity regarding our desired target, as well as generating appropriate solutions. The precipitous implementation of generated potential solutions to problems is often inappropriate. One of the primary purposes of executive coaching is to slow down the process—to encourage the client to make a thoughtful, informed decision, rather than rushing to judgement.

Sometimes solutions are inappropriate because they are not geared to the basic intentions of the organization. Problems are often not fully understood or resolved because they have not been stated in terms of goals. Without these guidelines, a coaching client may have neither a direction for solution nor a basis for evaluating his actions. However, while the specification of goals and objectives is essential for effective problem solving, our client must also have a clear picture of the current state in which the problem exists. An effective executive coach is in the business of helping her client identify appropriate information that will help him accurately comprehend the current situation and all of its many implications. Any goal or objective a client might establish runs the risk of being unrealistic or of eventually generating further problems. It is difficult, however, to establish a realistic goal or objective without first understanding the current situation. Objectives identified without adequate knowledge of existing conditions may look good on paper, but become useless or even destructive when achieved. Once we have determined the key characteristics of both current and desired conditions we can move towards a solution—taking action to change the current conditions into the desired alternative.

What we know about problem solving can thus be divided into the following interrelated dimensions:

- **Situation**: information about the essential features of the current state.

- **Target**: the desired state; what we intend to accomplish; how the world will look when we’re done.

- **Proposal**: specific ideas and subsequent actions taken to change the current state into the desired state.

Following are some common expressions and terms that are associated with these three dimensions:

- **Situation**: starting point, facts, opinions, explanations about the current state, predictions about change, the environment as perceived by the planners, what other people expect of us.
**Target**: terminating point, goals, aims, ends, purposes, objectives, desired outcomes, results, conditions of satisfaction.

**Proposal**: path from the situation to the target, means, plans, strategies, tactics, implementation procedures, possible actions, critical promised actions.

### The Domains of Information, Intentions and Ideas

Situation, Target and Proposal not only define the three elements of effective problem-solving, they also define the three domains in which effective executive coaching take place: the domains of information, intentions and ideas.

#### Domain of Information

The domain of information is entered whenever we attempt in a business coaching session to find out more about the current situation. In soliciting information, coaches and problem solving clients act as researchers, asking questions that can be answered by a systematic collection of information. For example, if the president of a college wants to know which of four academic programs is potentially most attractive to a particular group of prospective students, then she might request that a sample of these students be asked to indicate under what conditions they would be likely to enroll in each of these four programs. If the information obtained is valid—that is, if the students have been honest, if the right questions were asked and if the sample used was representative of the entire pool of potential students—then the college president should be able to state with some confidence which of the academic programs is most attractive to this population of potential students.

In understanding the current situation, however, problem solving coaching clients must not only seek information that is valid, they must also seek information that is useful. A business coach can help make this happen. A definition of the current situation must relate to the target the client problem solver wishes to reach. Thus, if the target concerns increased financial viability for a college, then a market survey will be of little use, even if the information obtained were valid, unless the costs associated with each of the four programs also can be determined, along with the acceptable tuition levels for this population of students regarding each of the four programs. It is surprising to see how often information is collected that relates only marginally to the problem faced by an organization. A business coach can be of great value in ensuring that her busy, easily-distracted and over-whelmed client obtains information that is directly related to the core problem.

Many problems can be solved through the systematic collection of valid and useful information. This lies at the heart of rational and linear problem-solving processes.\(^3\) In other instances, unfortunately, plans cannot exclusively be based on information about the current situation. Many organizational problems—particularly those involving people rather than machines—center, at least in part, on conflicting goals, objectives or desired outcomes.
Furthermore, executive coaching clients often are looking for assistance from their coach precisely in this second domain (intentions). Attention must shift from the domain of information to that of intentions. This domain is likely to be particularly important in today’s society, where conflict of intentions and (especially) values is so common.

**Domain of Intentions**

The domain of intentions is entered whenever we as executive coaches and problem-solving clients attempt to understand and clarify targets. While research prevails in the area of information, clarification prevails in the area of intentions. Unlike traditional approaches to intentions, which tend to emphasize enforcement or modeling, intentions clarification focuses on the process of determining what we value and want in our lives and organizations and the way these desires and values come into being. As we become clearer about our intentions, we will begin to produce solutions that are more and more consistent with these intentions. This process becomes richer and more profound as each of us moves toward greater maturity. An intention is freely chosen; it is not imposed (an imposed requirement is part of the situation). A clear intention is prized and affirmed; a clear intention is repeatedly acted on. As executive coaches, it is critical that we frequently ask our clients if the intentions they articulate are truly prized, affirmed—and acted upon.

**Domain of Ideas**

The domain of ideas is entered whenever an attempt is made by a business coach or problem-solving client to generate a proposal intended to move from the current to the desired state. Ideas are sometimes fragile, often misunderstood, and easily lost. While information exists everywhere, we often ignore or misinterpret it. But we can usually go back and retrieve information. Similarly, even though intentions may be ignored or distorted, they resist extinction. We are often frustrated by their resistance to change. Good ideas, on the other hand, are easy to lose and hard to recover.

Settings must be created in a coaching session in which ideas can readily be generated and retained. Two processes are essential in an effective coaching process. The first is divergence (moving inward). It involves the generation of creative ideas. Divergence requires a minimum censorship of ideas, minimal restriction of people expressing themselves and taking risks, and minimal adherence to prescribed rules or procedures for the generation of new ideas. The second process is convergence. It involves the movement toward resolution. Our coaching clients should be encouraged to move toward convergence by building on the ideas of people with whom they work. The effective executive coach can skillfully model this convergence by building on the ideas suggested by her coaching client. We should encourage our clients to identify similarities in the ideas being presented by co-workers and encourage our clients to work toward agreement in arriving at a shared course of action with co-workers. Convergence requires problem solvers to observe specific rules and procedures, to listen to ideas and to be constructively critical of other ideas. The domain of ideas often requires problem solvers to display a subtle and skillful interplay between convergence and divergence. A skillful coach can model and encourage this interplay.
Interaction among Situation, Target and Proposal

Effective problem solving in a business coaching session will at times move systematically and in a linear fashion from target (clarification of intentions) to situation (collection of information) to proposal (generation of ideas). Because these three dimensions are not independent of each other, however, problem solving in a coaching session is best thought of not as a movement from one dimension to another, but rather as an interaction among all three. With regard to the relationship between situation and target, dissatisfaction with the current situation implies a particular target as a standard of comparison. Problem solving is impelled sometimes by lofty goals rather than by an inadequacy in the current organization. Conversely, any suggested goal implies by comparison what is unsatisfactory about the current situation or an anticipated future situation. With regard to the relationship between target and proposal, a target defines the results desired from any proposal. As noted in most problem solving models, one can not adequately review or evaluate various proposals without defining first the end to be reached by the proposal. On the other hand, any proposal embodies assumptions about the nature of the desired target—a problem solver can often clarify goals by generating and analyzing several different proposals.

Proposals and situational assessments frequently interact with one another in an effective executive coaching process. A proposal embodies assumptions about the causes of an unsatisfactory situation and implies resources and requirements for change, as well as the probable sources of resistance to the change. Conversely, information about the current situation places limits on the effectiveness and feasibility of specific proposals. Because these three dimensions of a problem are so clearly interrelated, it is helpful for the coach and client to think of them as a single interacting unit, rather than as three separate factors related to each other in a straight-line sequence. Furthermore, it is often effective for a business coach and client to work on all three dimensions at once rather than one at a time. Those who solve problems or help others to solve problems should be free to discuss the intentions inherent in the solutions being formulated. They should also be encouraged to collect and analyze information associated with those solutions and to generate ideas about how the organization can become better (intentions), given its current resources, needs and history (information). The form in which the intentions, information and ideas will be organized need not dictate the form of the coaching inquiry itself.

In the process of coach-based problem solving it is possible to translate statements about one dimension into statements about other dimensions, since each dimension is related to the other two. When information is generated about the situation, intentions can be clarified by such coaching questions as: “If you could change the present situation, what would you want to accomplish?” “What’s missing in the present situation that you want?” “What would be your goal in improving this situation?” Proposals can be generated from a situational statement by use of such coaching questions as: “What might be done to improve that?” “What kind of action does that seem to require?” “What plan would use that resource?”

When a target is identified, situational information can be elicited by such questions as: “In what ways does the present situation fall short of that goal?” “Why does the present situation fall short of that goal?” “What forces for
improvement are there for reaching that goal?” “What obstacles stand in the way of reaching that goal?” Propositions can be elicited from a target statement when the coach asks: “What might be a possible way to accomplish that?” “What steps might lead toward that goal?” In a similar manner, when a proposal presents itself, situational information can be elicited when a coach asks: “What might that improve in the present situation?” “What part of the plan do you see that dealing with?” “What resources are there for doing that?” Finally, targets can be elicited from the proposal by asking: “To accomplish what?” “In order to do what?” “What goals or objectives does that proposal aim at?”

Problem solving in a business coaching session often seems to wander aimlessly from topic to topic without ever actually coming to grips with a specific plan. By categorizing statements according to situation, target or proposal, and by using statements in one dimension to bring forth statements in other dimensions, a business coach and problem-solving client can move systematically toward formulation of a proposal without locking into a linear process.

**Reflection and Action**

An effective problem solving model not only blends information, intentions and ideas, but also balances phases of reflection and action. Frequently, problem solving clients will spend too much time in reflection and never move beyond untested ideas, or they will move precipitously toward action with insufficient attention to either information or intentions. Effective problem solving requires a balancing of the two—and an effective executive coach can help her client achieve this balance.

**The Activist**

The “activist” is to be found among many problem solvers. The activist dwells in a world of ideas and action. Things are to be done immediately: “Why put off till tomorrow what we can do today!” For the activist, cautious deliberations are frustrating and demoralizing: “let’s get on with it!” The activist tends to define the world in terms of leadership and risk-taking: “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” She often suspects that the real problem of those who urge more deliberation is an unwillingness to take risks. The activist believes that action must be taken even though not all the information is in and even though the proposed solution is not perfect—“something is better than nothing.”

**The Realist**

By contrast, those people who tend to dwell more on reflection than action are oriented either toward “realism” or “idealism.” The “realist” prefers the domain of information and the “idealist” prefers the domain of intentions, whereas the “activist” likes to dwell in the domain of ideas. The activist views the idealist as hopelessly romantic—a person who would rather build castles in the air then build a durable bungalow on earth. Similarly, activists perceive the realist as an immobile, often obsessive person. The realist never lifts up his head long enough or far enough to see what is actually happening in the world.
Problem-solving clients are often pulled not only between reflection and action, but also between realism and idealism. The realist is careful and cautious, because of concern that problems may appear to be “solved” through wishful thinking (the failure of idealism) or without anticipating the consequences (the failure of activism). Too many people, according to the realist, go off half-cocked, with very little sense of the resources needed to solve a problem and without a clear understanding of the current situation to anticipate all of the consequences associated with a particular solution.

The Idealist
The idealist is someone who can pick out the flaw in any situation. Within minutes of arriving on a new job, entering a new relationship, purchasing a new home or formulating a new program, the idealist is imagining how things could be improved. She challenges the mundane reasoning of the realist and notes that new perspectives are needed on old problems if the activist is to be successful in generating proposals to solve these problems.

Like the realist, the idealist is cautious and reflective—but not for a lack of adequate information. The idealist is concerned about the confusion between means and ends—about losing the war while seeming to win individual battles through expedience. The idealist confronts the realist with his lack of courage: if bold vision is lacking then when will risks be taken and progress made? Without courage, vision and persistence, where is the capacity to endure against adversity?

The Pragmatist
Effective problem-solving processes require a balance between, or even an integration of, these different perspectives. “Pragmatism” requires that realism, idealism and activism be combined. Effective problem solving—especially when enhanced by skillful executive coaching—will shift between the domains of information, intentions and ideas. When confronted with a new, unpredictable situation, a pragmatic problem-solver will tend to become realistic by attempting to assimilate this new reality. When confronted with an old, unchanging environment, the pragmatic problem-solver will tend to become a daydreamer, creating images of how this environment might be transformed. When confronted with the press of time and events, the pragmatist will tend to mobilize her activism, creating proposals to meet these challenges.

The pragmatist is someone who will adapt to changing conditions by moving into all three domains. By contrast, the extreme realist will attempt to collect information even when the environment is unchanging and in this way he will contribute to the resistance of this environment to change. Similarly, the extreme idealist will daydream not only under conditions of relative stability but also under conditions of rapid change and instability, and in this way she will add to the instability of the environment and to its unpredictability. The idealist under stress retreats to another, safer world, when she should be confronting the current situation. The extreme activist will respond with hasty actions even when there is no press of time or events. She will even create crises where there are none in order to
justify precipitous action. The failure in the activist’s haste may, in turn, produce a new crisis that makes activism appear to be appropriate, thereby initiating a self-reinforcing crisis-management mentality.

Put quite simply, all three of the extreme problem-solving preferences tend to be ineffective in some settings and create more problems than they solve. Reflection must be balanced against action. Furthermore, the period of reflection in a business coaching session must provide opportunities for both the collection of new information and the clarification of intentions. An effective balancing and integration of reflection and action requires that action produce (and arise from) information, that action inform and clarify intentions. Reflection should lead to decision and action. The successful executive coaching process inevitably involves movement between the domains of information, intentions and ideas, and a balancing between reflection and action.

In future essays being specifically written for WABC, I will more fully explore specific executive coaching strategies that enhance work in each of these three domains and that encourages the appropriate balance and interplay between reflection and action in the complex, unpredictable and turbulent world of 21st century business.

3 This approach is best represented by the now-classic work that was done twenty years ago by Charles H. Kepner and Benjamin B. Tregoe, The New Rational Manager (Princeton, N.J.: Kepner-Tregoe, Inc., 1981) and by Lorne Plunkett and Guy Hale, The Proactive Manager (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1982).
5 Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin and Sidney B. Simon, Values and Teaching (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1966), pp. 28-29.