

Leaders Coaching Across Borders

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Abstract

Leaders are increasingly relying on developmental coaching to equip their people to sustain competitive advantage and stay abreast of change. While coaching across cultural borders poses many challenges that leaders need to consider, a core of practical coaching strategies offers them the greatest leverage for change in any circumstance. These strategies, based on enduring principles of human learning, can accelerate development and can be deployed independent of culture.

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Leaders who wish to establish an enduring competitive edge in business need to straddle cultures and adapt to multiple, often conflicting, norms and expectations. These demands are further confounded by a world beset with constant change and increasing complexity. Workforces are more diverse, competition is more intense, and technological revolutions are outpacing even the most progressive innovators. Against this backdrop, leaders who foster versatility and continuous growth in their people are most likely to sustain successful and resilient organizations.

To meet these challenges, many leaders are boosting their coaching skills. Unlike executive coaches, who provide personal, accelerated learning experiences from an objective, outside perspective (Otazo, 1998; Peterson, 1996), leader-coaches are insiders (Peterson & Hicks, 1996). Leaders in companies such as PepsiCo, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, and General Electric resolutely foster the development of the people on their teams and may even deploy people-development as a core strategy in pursuit of their business objectives (Tichy & Cohen, 1997).

This discussion outlines practical coaching strategies that are based on enduring principles of human learning--principles that are relevant in any coaching relationship. These principles draw on psychological research and practice (Highlen & Hill, 1984; Kanfer & Goldstein, 1991; Mahoney, 1991) that address the dynamics of people's motivation to change, the critical elements of a helping relationship, and the methods in which habits are broken and new skills acquired. Because the findings from this research illuminate the underlying mechanisms of how people change, coaches can use the strategies to anticipate and overcome the coaching challenges they will encounter. The strategies of coaching as presented here do not address the specifics of what people value or how they learn in a particular culture, but the strategies do capture the active ingredients in any learning venture, independent of culture. In fact, as coaches have adapted them across multiple cultural lines, the principles have proved to be quite robust.

Any discussion of this length could only begin to address the wide-ranging factors that are pertinent in working across particular cultures. Therefore, instead of offering culture-specific advice, we present a framework for understanding common coaching issues. This framework guides coaches to devise tailored approaches for any person they may coach. Coaches can customize the strategies to fit culture-specific relationship norms, learning methods, communication styles, and assumptions about leadership.¹

¹ Despite the broad applicability of the coaching strategies, our own values and assumptions about development are reflected here, as we are admittedly products of our cultural environment. Our cultural and intellectual backgrounds include valuing personal effort and individual achievement, and the expectation of direct but respectful candor in communications at work. To the extent that the reader shares such assumptions, the suggestions in this chapter might ring even more true. In any case, a leader who wants to better enhance and build the capabilities of others should find something here to simulate thinking as well as action.

What is Coaching Across Borders?

Coaching is often defined and taught as a collection of activities--write development plans, deliver feedback, teach a skill, offer advice (Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1996, 1998). Such a definition leads coaches to ask the wrong questions, such as "How do I give feedback in this culture?" In contrast, we define coaching as the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective (Peterson & Hicks, 1996). The objective of coaching is to enhance people's work effectiveness and boost their ability to contribute as new challenges and opportunities arise. This definition, which focuses on the outcomes and not on the coach's activities, leads to broader questions, such as, "How can I help this person increase his or her insight?" Feedback from the coach may not provide the best vehicle to accomplish this goal.

Because coaching is a process, it extends beyond one-time events, such as preparing a development plan or conducting a performance discussion. It is integrated into people's work activities and goals. Coaching is collaborative as well. The coach helps to create the necessary conditions for learning, while the learner commits to meaningful objectives and takes responsibility for acquiring and applying new learning. Definitions of coaching and development that emphasize one player in the equation at the expense of the other, suboptimize the learning process. Coaching is not something delivered by a leader, it is a reciprocal relationship in which both parties actively participate. Further, a development philosophy that puts the onus for growth and continued employability solely on the shoulders of the individual waives the vital responsibility of leaders and organizations to provide developmental direction, resources, and accountability.

This process requires interpersonal perceptiveness, sensitivity, and a keen sense of timing. Within a single culture, these requirements place significant demands on the coach. Across cultures, the coach's challenge is magnified. Although some cross-cultural hurdles are obvious--such as language differences--other variables, such as different values and different interpretations of common behaviors, pose subtler pitfalls.

In anticipation of these challenges, coaches should bear in mind three general guidelines:

1. Search for hidden layers. People from different cultures look at the world through different lenses. These lenses tint their values, assumptions, perceptions, and relationships in ways that range from strikingly dramatic to understated. Because of these differences, coaches should assume the presence of important cultural variables that they may not understand or appreciate. Coaches need to pursue these hidden layers and bring them to the surface, both in themselves and in the people they coach.

Because cultural differences can be quite distinct and vigorous, cultural norms help a coach generate hypotheses about the person being coached. Is this person likely to be better motivated by a collective goal than an individual one? Might this person prefer authoritative expertise and clear direction from a coach to a collegial, free-flowing discussion? Should the coach vault quickly into the task or spend a significant amount of time getting to know the person? Will the coach's preference for quick, linear decisions be suitable when working with this person?

Testing relevant hypotheses like these can often help leaders avoid obvious pitfalls.

Leaders might generate such hypotheses by studying the culture of the person being coached and how it differs from their own culture. They can identify the cultural heroes and why they are respected (it is often intriguing to discover who is represented on the local currency, for example); who the political leaders are and how they lead; and what is reinforced in the educational system and how key lessons are taught. Coaches are also advised to review resources that discuss broad dimensions of cultural differences and the specifics of social and professional discourse in particular cultures (e.g., Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Hofstede, 1991; Lewis, 1996).

However, merely studying and reading about the norms of other cultures will not be adequate. Because of their own cultural blinders, coaches cannot formulate all relevant hypotheses with regard to others. They perceive and interpret information about events and people in their own culturally influenced ways. Products of their own culture, they have a ready inventory of hunches regarding what people value, how people respond to feedback or new information, how people relate to each other, and what people will expect in a learning situation. When working across cultures they need to transcend their assumptions and habits, probing further to understand both themselves and others. Then, as they uncover cultural insights, they can adjust their coaching tactics and expectations to fit the situation at hand.

Conducting research on cultural differences and anticipating unseen differences could have smoothed the way for a French leader who took on a three-year engineering project in England. Upon commencement of the assignment, he was led to expect that few adjustments would be needed in his leadership approach. After all, his teams of French and English engineers shared a common profession and company culture. Soon after the project started, however, his team leaders began to clash. He was stunned to discover marked cultural differences with regard to the perceived role and status of engineers, and to the tactics the teams deployed to resolve problems with occupational safety. "If I had been told prior to the assignment that it would be hard," he claimed later, "I would have made fewer mistakes. Knowing it would be hard would have actually made it easier." Had he assumed the presence of unseen differences, he would have been braced for a challenge and alert to the cultural realities that he encountered.

Different presumptions about boss-subordinate roles nearly derailed an American manager's coaching with a new employee from Singapore. The manager suggested that they jointly identify development priorities and asked the employee to identify areas in which he would like to receive coaching. In some cultures this participatory approach would allow the employee precisely the kind of involvement that would optimize the chances for the coaching to succeed. In this case, however, the employee interpreted the manager's proposal as an abdication of legitimate authority. The manager's credibility was undermined. When the manager discovered this interpretation, he adjusted his approach. Instead of asking broad, open-ended questions, he began to define the process and explain, as an expert, what their roles would be and why. This modified behavior helped restore the manager in a culture-appropriate role.

2. Personalize the approach. Although cultural hypotheses help coaches anticipate differences, a person's perspective cannot be predicted from what might be distinctive about their culture.

There are vast differences among people that cannot be explained by differences between national cultures. Each person is a unique configuration of a variety of influences, including personal experiences, genetics, and sub-cultural forces that transcend national cultures. These factors combine to create the person's view of the world, way of thinking, and behavior.

It has also been noted that broad cultural distinctions are increasingly unreliable in the face of global communications and interactions. The expanding interconnectedness of people and the growing confluence of cultures leads to greater complexity and an erosion of traditional cultural distinctions (Hermans & Kempen, 1998).

Cultural norms are aggregates across people. They can educate coaches about potentially powerful influences on people but cannot fully capture the unique constellation of characteristics that make up a given individual.

Any one person from the United States, Germany, Brazil, or China might be methodical and punctual, impulsive and chronically late, bold, or timid. Knowledge of cultural differences with respect to time or leadership might help in understanding people from these countries in the composite, but it does not necessarily predict individual differences in behavior. When trying to understand a given individual, factors such as the person's life experiences, personality, education, age, gender, social status, and profession are often more instructive than is the national culture. While these factors and their meanings are culturally laden, they also contribute to understanding a person in ways that extend beyond culture. A coach who attends only to the cultural foundations of personal differences can miss other factors, which define what is unique about a person. This is what a French engineering executive discovered, somewhat to his surprise, when he saw that his values, preferences, and style were more aligned with non-engineering British executives than with younger French engineers. His life experiences, education, status, and age contributed more to his collegial similarity than did his nationality. A coach who understood him only as a Frenchman would possibly have applied a stereotype that was at best, inaccurate and at worst, offensive.

To avoid cultural stereotypes that do not apply, a coach's ultimate objective is to understand the person as an individual and to personalize the coaching accordingly. The need to customize coaching at the individual level is supported by research from Europe and the United States, which indicates that the leading cause of people's dissatisfaction with coaching they have received is that it was impersonal (Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1996, 1998).

Cultural variables, while often legitimate factors for a coach to consider, can also become a cloak of avoidance. When the person being coached says, "That is not how we do things in my country" or "You don't understand me and you never will," he or she may be disguising their real objections or resisting change under any terms. A leader who personalizes a coaching experience reduces the odds that people will use cultural differences as an excuse for avoiding working together or changing. Relentless listening, questioning, and curiosity are the coach's best tactics for untangling relationship or cultural issues from an underlying reluctance to change.

An Italian manager who was having trouble gaining cooperation from his team vehemently

claimed that the new communication skills suggested by his American coach would never be acceptable in the Italian culture. Instead of persisting in advocating his approach, the coach probed into the manager's objections and acknowledged that the skills might in fact have a low probability of success in Italy. With few better alternatives readily apparent, and a low cost for trying the new approach, the coach suggested that the Italian manager try the new skills as an experiment. Under these terms, the Italian tried the skills and was surprised to discover that they worked smoothly. As this instance illustrates, coaches can be sensitive to cultural differences without allowing the differences to divert them from working on legitimate development issues.

3. Orchestrate change. Effective coaches don't try to do everything themselves. Instead, they facilitate and enable learning by orchestrating the resources and cultivating the conditions in which development can occur. In many cases, the coach is not necessarily the expert on what the person is learning and may not even prove to be the right person to help lead the learning activities. Instead, the coach orchestrates people and resources to make sure the person gets the information, opportunities, and support needed for continuous improvement. In this framework, the coach is freed from being the bearer of all feedback, advice, instruction, and expectations. Instead, the coach relies on others, including the person being coached, to ensure that change continues on course.

For cross-cultural coaching, the primary advantage of orchestrating the change process is that it affords the leader much greater flexibility. If the person being coached requires a better understanding of changing performance expectations and is not convinced by the coach's perspective, there are other sources of information, including colleagues, official organizational communications, and other leaders. If the leader is not available to provide information, advice, or instruction, other credible and respected people can be leveraged. When the person is not in the same location as the coach, the coach can ensure that people at the same site, or from the same cultural background, provide ongoing guidance and support. In cultures where direct feedback from a coach is not acceptable, indirect routes for sharing information about the person's experience can be sought.

The leader's ultimate task is to ensure that the person is learning and that his or her performance is enhanced. The question to keep in the forefront is not "What do I need to do to coach this person?" but "How do I help this person develop?" With this shift in objective, the coach can more easily navigate potential cultural barriers that might otherwise derail the coaching.

These three guidelines--search for hidden layers, personalize the approach, and orchestrate change--apply to all aspects of coaching. They give the leader latitude to adapt to individual and cultural differences, and to flexibly deploy the principles of how people change. These principles apply regardless of culture, and are captured in the coaching strategies that follow.

Coaching Strategies

The most versatile coaches develop a repertoire of approaches and tactics that allow them to deploy general strategies in flexible ways. The five coaching strategies described here are designed around the most critical challenges in helping others develop.

Strategy 1: Forge a Partnership. Build trust and understanding so that people want to work with you.

One of the most vexing problems voiced by coaches is “How do I overcome resistance?” When trying to help someone develop, many leaders tackle this problem by first explaining what they want the person to do differently, and why. The majority of people on the receiving end of such requests question, “Why should I take you seriously? Why should I trust you? Why should I care?” The solution to this problem begins with the coach’s adapting the challenge as “What can I do to make sure we want to work together?” If leaders establish mutual trust and understanding at the outset and give people reason to believe that coaching will be useful, people will want to work with them and resistance can be avoided.

Strategy 1 addresses two fundamental questions relevant to building a trusting relationship: Do the people being coached believe that the coach understands and respects their view of the world? Do they trust that the coach will take their agenda seriously and work on behalf of their best interests? When these questions can be answered affirmatively, people are much more likely to engage willingly in the development process. They are more likely to talk openly, take calculated risks to try new things, and sustain their efforts over time. Resistance, in short, becomes a non-issue. Throughout the course of development, any indication of resistance is a signal for the leader to return to the partnership strategy.

Forging a partnership is more affected by cross-cultural dynamics than any other coaching strategy. In any coaching relationship, people need to decide whether they can work constructively together. In cross-cultural settings, the potential for differences in worldviews is compounded, and the odds of failing to build sufficient trust are significantly greater. Leaders often expect affinity in expectations, style, and assumptions where little actually exists. For example, many task-oriented, outcome-driven Western leaders vault past relationship building or give it only cursory consideration (Peterson, Uranowitz, & Hicks, 1996, 1998). When working with people from the West, leaders from Eastern cultural traditions may harbor inaccurate presumptions about the power afforded to them because of their position.

Leaders frequently fail to adapt to the relationship-building requirements of the person’s culture. As a result, they lack the foundation they need to engage people in development. In some European countries, for example, the relationship is the context for any transaction between people, and thus is a prerequisite for coaching work to commence. In the United States, the relationship often follows from a constructive engagement, so moving directly into coaching with minimal relationship building might be acceptable.

Different assumptions regarding accepted processes initially blocked an American leader who had been coaching a German manager. The American raised the prospect of team building as a

way to enhance the manager's performance. Immediately, the manager stiffened and his face went blank. Sensing resistance, instead of trying to persuade the manager of the value of team building, the American asked, "What does 'team building' mean to you?" The manager replied with some vehemence, "You Americans do team building by starting to identify common assumptions and getting to a common understanding of the problem. Commonality is the whole goal. We start team building by putting the issue in the middle and everyone backing away and identifying our different perspectives and views. The whole principle is that we have different points of view. We don't even try to get to a common understanding." After they clarified these assumptions about the team-building process and objectives, they could work together on a process they could both accept. If they had proceeded without this clarification, the leader would have encountered persistent resistance.

Cultural stereotypes may also lure people into misconceptions about their coach. A French leader, upon moving to The Netherlands, varied his time of arrival at the office, sometimes arriving early and sometimes late. After a month, he discovered that his Dutch team was upset and assumed he was arrogant and cavalier with regard to his job. To the Dutch team, punctuality was very important, even if they did not begin work immediately upon arrival. To the leader, his attention to getting the job done was most important, not the precise hours he committed to the job. The Frenchman's inattention to the Dutch norm, and the Dutch team's presumption of arrogance in their leader, prevented them from establishing a partnership. What was potentially even more damaging to the partnership than the differences in punctuality was the lack of communication regarding the problem. One of a coach's worst invisible barriers is that the other person will stereotype or take offense, but won't communicate. In this case, the conclusion that "he's just an arrogant Frenchman" threatened to derail coaching before it began.

The goal for the coach is not "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" but rather to establish mutual cultural respect. Coaches do not exchange their view of the world for a new one. Instead, they assume "I am not Roman, but I can learn how things are done the Roman way." They initiate the building of cultural insights in themselves, and foster reciprocal understanding in the people they coach. They are vigilant with regard to the impression they make on people from other cultures and how culture influences the impressions others form of them (Giacalone & Beard, 1994; Crittenden & Bae, 1994; Shaw, 1990). Their cultural curiosity and frustrations are shared, and they are not afraid that differences will lead to a relationship failure. With differences understood and respected, and each party relating in a way that is genuine, they can engage in constructive discussions regarding their differences.

Cultural Curiosity. Partnerships can also be intensified if the coach becomes a good student of the culture. The simple act of demonstrating interest in learning about the person's culture conveys a desire to understand. Coaches can inquire directly into how things are done in another country and can enlist other people, including those they coach, as cultural mentors. Studying the history, heroes, arts, and other aspects of the culture that reflect its soul and passion, can reveal what is valued by people and how they experience and interpret the world.

The educational system offers particular insights about how a culture conducts and values learning. Is the educational system selective or open to all? Is advanced education fairly pragmatic or highly philosophical? Is learning viewed as a lifelong task or is it presumed that

learning has been attained upon completion of a particular degree or certification? Does higher education typically involve significant independent questioning and initiative from students, or is it characterized by rote learning and reliance on expert teachers? The answers to these kinds of questions help the coach adjust relationship-building and learning tactics so they are more congruent with what is familiar and expected.

To coach members of his team who hailed from different cultures, an American leader varied his tactics for relationship building. When working with people from the United States, the primary basis for securing credibility was his demonstration that he had something useful to offer. As a leader for Asian managers, he first established his seniority, as coaching from someone younger and less experienced may have been difficult for the Asian manager to accept. When working with a French executive who had an advanced degree from an elite European university, the American realized that his credibility as a source of counsel rested in part on the sophistication of his academic credentials. Not until the leader shared that he had earned a degree from the top program in his field in the United States, did the executive willingly engage in the coaching process. Without this information, the Frenchman was skeptical with regard to the leader's ability to contribute to his development.

One manager, knowing that he can never comprehend what the world is like for someone from across the border, routinely acknowledges that his views and approaches are different from those of the people he coaches. He regularly makes cultural differences a topic of discussion and asks probing questions regarding the cultural aspects of what the other person is doing, such as "This is a chance for me to learn more about your culture. I would like to find an appropriate way to do that. What is the best way for us to talk about why you are doing things in certain ways?" One American manager working in Holland made a practice, whenever giving work to his secretary, of describing how such things are typically handled in the United States. He then asked her if the approach would work in her country or if she could suggest an alternative. Another coach routinely created opportunities for people to give him feedback about his cultural assumptions. For this coach, contrary to posing a block, the differences actually became an opportunity for building a stronger mutual understanding.

Attention to Language and Norms. Work across languages is rife with opportunities for misunderstanding. A French executive leading a team in the United Kingdom discovered, in the course of requesting a large box, that large means wide in French and big in English. If simple requests like this, using simple words, can be misinterpreted, the task of sustaining understanding in subtle and sometimes emotion-laden coaching situations is daunting. Even coaches who are remarkably proficient with a language other than their native tongue should not be lured by their fluency into assuming that they can correctly interpret subtleties. They need to be cautious of what one cross-cultural leader calls "unreliable friends," words that appear to be alike but have different semantic values.

Nonverbal communications also can have dramatically different meanings. As one Thai executive advised a manager who was about to move to Thailand, "There are three things to remember about how people here will react to you. When someone is smiling and nodding their head, it means they like you and agree with what you are saying. Also, when someone is smiling and nodding their head, it means they don't understand what you are saying. Finally, when

someone is smiling and nodding their head, it means they disagree with you and wish you would go away.”

In most cross-cultural coaching situations, the language of discourse needs to be negotiated. Often, one party is working in their native language, while the other is working in a second language. This may create a power imbalance in the relationship, because one person has to work harder to understand and be understood than does the other. Sometimes both parties may be working in second or third languages. In these situations, checking and rechecking for understanding needs to become a relentless habit. Language differences also impede the bonding that happens naturally when people can talk informally. Casual chats and discussions of common experiences are less likely to occur when communication requires extra effort.

Subtle cultural differences can even interfere with apparently obvious relationship-building tactics. One Northern European leader was advised that eating and drinking together was a prerequisite for building close relationships with his Italian team. He invited members of his team to “have a drink” after work. The team members assembled at a nearby bar, shared one drink, and went home within an hour. The leader’s vision of an evening of camaraderie was shattered. Later, he discovered that for Italians, sharing a meal, not just sharing a drink, was the foundation for the relationship. He subsequently invited the team to his home for dinner. They ate and drank heartily, lingered long into the evening, and began what proved to be a very satisfying working relationship.

Sometimes, despite coaches’ best efforts to build mutual trust, cultural barriers create obstacles that they cannot circumvent. A person may have strong reactions against working with a coach from a particular culture or with someone who does not speak their native language. Coaches who enlist the help of others who can work within the language and within the culture can avoid the inherent limitations imposed by such barriers and reactions. The ultimate goal of coaching, after all, is not that the coach provides all the answers or engages in all the coaching-related activities but that the performance of the person being coached actually improves.

Cultural variables are the most potent in the Forge a Partnership strategy. Frequently, language and culture differences are the domain where people test whether they can work productively together. If a coach can work through these differences and establish a trusting relationship, the cultural differences are often not impediments in other aspects of the coaching. Underlying any specific relationship-building tactics, the most powerful tool for forging a partnership is the desire of the coach to understand. This motive, consistently conveyed, transcends culture.

Strategy 2: Inspire Commitment. Build insight and motivation so people focus their energy on goals that matter.

Once a solid working relationship is established, the next coaching challenge is “How can I motivate someone to change?” To begin answering this question, a coach can reformulate it as “How can I tap into and mobilize the person’s natural motivation to develop?” The emphasis in this second question shifts from what the coach can do to what the coach can discover and then leverage. Building on Strategy 1, the coach’s intention is to understand what is most important to the person being coached. Then, the coach discovers links between the person’s desires and the

needs of the organization. This connection creates a commonality of purpose that ensures that people select goals with paybacks that both they and the organization desire.

Before they choose development priorities, people need to know where they stand relative to what is expected of them. They also require clarity regarding their own values and goals. Coaches can promote people’s insight into these areas by helping them to gather and discuss information in the four categories summarized in Table 1. The columns represent the most important categories of information that people need: where they are now and what matters most going forward. The rows indicate that pertinent information derives from two perspectives: what the person sees and what others see. Unless all cells are filled, critical information is missing.

<p style="text-align: center;">Table 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GAPS Grid: Critical Information for Development</p>		
	Where the person is	Where the person is going
The person’s view	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>A</u>bilities</p> <p>What the person believes they can do.</p> <p>The person’s view of their capabilities, style, and performance, especially in relation to important Goals and Standards.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>G</u>oals and Values</p> <p>What matters to the person.</p> <p>This refers to the motivators that energize and drive the person’s behavior, including their interests, values, desires, work objectives, and career aspirations.</p>
Others’ views	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>P</u>erceptions</p> <p>How others see the person.</p> <p>How others perceive the person’s capabilities, performance, style, motives, priorities, and values.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>S</u>tandards</p> <p>What matters to others.</p> <p>Standards reflect the success factors for the person, as defined by their roles and responsibilities, cultural norms, and other peoples expectations.</p>

Relevant Information for Development: GAPS

Goals and values embody the core of that which a person cares about, including interests, desires, and values. This category refers to much more than career objectives. It designates what is important to a person and what they are willing to work toward. Abilities encompass the person’s view of what they can and cannot do. It includes a self-assessment of their skills, capabilities, and performance. Perceptions reflect others’ observations and opinions about the person’s capabilities, motivation, and performance. Standards define expectations and criteria for a successful performance. Some standards are relatively clear, such as job descriptions and

business objectives. Others are murky, such as group norms or unstated cultural values.

Identifying Important Information. To complete a GAPS grid, individuals, their leaders, and the organization need to be clear on where they stand and what is important relative to the person's performance. The discipline of analyzing and discussing these topics forces greater clarity and accuracy about development priorities. The GAPS grid is a template for seeking and sorting what is known and not known relative to the person's development. Since people and organizations are always changing, gathering GAPS information is an ongoing process. When people periodically review their GAPS, they update their assumptions about where they stand and recommit their development energies to areas that can make the greatest impact.

To complete the Perceptions cell in the grid, coaches often rely on feedback, a process that is easily tangled in cultural assumptions and expectations. In the United States, the direct sharing of behavioral observations and perceptions might be assumed to be appropriate. In Latin cultures, a more precise context for the feedback often needs to be established. Its purpose, who is delivering it, and how it is and isn't helpful, all may need to be explored before a feedback conversation occurs. In some European cultures, feedback is considered not merely a description of behavior but a personal evaluation. Because of its deeper implications, the feedback conversation must begin with discussion of the person's intentions, and possibly of his or her values as well. Only within this context of personal meaning can coaches constructively discuss perceptions of behavior, its impact, and how it might change.

To help people access perceptions from others, the coach can allow the person being coached to decide how to gather the information. What information do they want? How do they want it collected? What are their preferred sources for the information? One coach also offers options for how he will provide feedback. "Some people like feedback delivered directly all at once, others like it in small doses. How do you want to discuss my observations?" He then provides ongoing openings for input on how his approach is working through comments such as "I don't intend to offend. Let me know if I have ever done so."

Uncertainty about culturally acceptable behaviors might also prevent a coach from expressing legitimate expectations and feedback. An Italian leader observed a member of his Dutch team driving recklessly around a sprawling manufacturing plant. Unsure as to whether this behavior was appropriate in Dutch culture, he did nothing to intervene, and the problem persisted. With a clear communication strategy around cultural differences, he could have said, "If I were in Italy this behavior would be totally unacceptable. You need to explain to me if this is acceptable here or not."

Creating Positive Pull. Much coaching, and the feedback which is an important element, traditionally focuses on addressing performance problems or improving skill deficits. This framework for coaching has many drawbacks under any circumstances, but it is even more problematic in cross-cultural coaching. In some cultures, negative feedback is associated with personal failure, personal skill deficits are not readily admitted, and direct discussions of performance problems are deemed rude at best.

The prevalent emphasis on selecting weaknesses as development objectives is reinforced if the

coach looks only at the Perceptions cell of the GAPS grid. Information that outlines where the person is strong and weak naturally leads to the selection of development objectives designed to shore up the weaknesses.

Weaknesses in themselves, however, are rarely the most important or motivating subjects for development. Strategy 2 shifts coaching away from fixing weaknesses and toward effectively achieving positive goals. These sources of positive pull for development are discovered through investigation of the Goals and Standards cells, which define the desired state for the person. Positively driven development helps the person obtain more of the things which they and the organization care about. Because this approach does not exclusively focus on people's problems, the potential stigma associated with coaching is reduced. Also, because this approach melds personal objectives with organizational expectations, mutual incentives and benefits are ensured.

The goal of finding positive incentives for change also makes coaching and development applicable to everyone, regardless of performance or position. In the ideal coaching environment, everyone is learning and being coached, including the top performers and the leader. Problem performance is not exclusively singled out for development attention. Instead, development becomes synonymous with continuous improvement in business performance and is a means to achieving challenging work goals.

Aligning Goals and Standards. The challenge of finding an intersection between individual aspirations and values (Goals), and organizational expectations regarding contributions and capabilities (Standards) is often accentuated in cross-cultural settings. Preferred leadership styles, for example, vary widely from one culture to another (Hofstede, 1991), creating divergent visions of the ideal leader. A Japanese worker might believe that direct challenges of a superior's opinions are disrespectful and inappropriate, while his American boss might believe that confident assertions from a subordinate are evidence of persuasiveness and leadership potential.

Leaders, particularly when they attempt to import their corporate culture to a new country, risk asking for culturally incompatible behaviors and attitudes from the people they coach. Faced with such expectations, an individual is compelled to choose between personal values and culturally reinforced behaviors on one hand, and behaviors that will be rewarded and valued by the coach and organization on the other. Left unexplored, this clash of expectations can hamstring development efforts and overall performance, because the individual cannot simultaneously satisfy corporate and cultural forces that are pulling in different directions. That which one side reinforces, the other resists.

To avoid conflict or deadlock, style and values differences need to be discussed in the course of negotiating development objectives. One possible goal for such negotiations is to generate a viable hybrid objective that is compatible with different values and perspectives. Coaches and the people they coach can select aspects of the other party's expectations that are consistent with their values and priorities. The coach, for example, may relent on the expectation that a Japanese manager speak up forcefully in meetings in exchange for more candid discussions in private. The Japanese manager may agree to raise objections and propose new ideas when the boss specifically asks for input and provides a setting where open discussion feels safe. With this objective, each party's values regarding leadership and communication are accommodated, and

the individual can embrace the development goal without cultural compromise or conflict.

Once the coach has accomplished the objectives of the first two strategies--establishing trust and choosing aligned objectives--the most critical cross-cultural issues have been addressed. If resistance or flagging motivation arise later in the course of the person's development, the coach returns to these two strategies to reestablish partnership and commitment. While misunderstandings and cultural sensitivities can certainly arise at any point in the coaching and development process, good communication, persistent listening, and mutual respect are the keys to resolving them. The first two strategies establish the foundation for resolving differences that derive from culture. With the need for trust and alignment met, coaches can then deploy the following strategies in nearly any situation.

Strategy 3. Grow Skills. Build new competencies to ensure that people know how to do what is required.

Once people understand what they need to work on and are committed to doing so, this strategy helps them to acquire new capabilities. Coaches use this strategy to prevent people from stalling at their current level of proficiency or continuing to repeat old mistakes. Various familiar methods support skill acquisition, including training courses, individual instruction, reading, special assignments that stretch people in new directions, and on-the-job training. Coaches need to be aware that training methods often reflect cultural approaches to learning. Certain cultures have histories of verbal instruction and direct advice, whereas others teach by analogy, observation, and illustrative stories and parables. Hofstede (1991) points out that most structured, formal training methods have been developed in individualist countries, primarily North America and Western Europe. Such methods may not readily export to other cultures.

Any learning activity will yield the greatest change if it engages the learner in meaningful challenges. Learning activities are imbued with challenge when they stretch people to the edge of their comfort zone, and they are meaningful when the skill is directly applicable to personally relevant objectives. Coaches need to explore different options to learning, recognizing that there are both cultural and individual preferences for which activities provide the most beneficial challenges.

Coaches help people discover and participate in meaningful skill-building activities through several routes, including:

Brokering resources. Help people find relevant skill-building tools and link people with others who have the work-relevant expertise that they need. This might be the tactic of choice where language or distance prove significant barriers.

Demonstrating relevance. Guide people to identify exactly what they need to learn. Help them pare broad objectives into accessible segments and focus their efforts on learning one lesson at a time.

Reflecting on experience. Encourage people to extract the lesson from each learning experience by asking what they have learned, how it has worked, and what they intend to do similarly or

differently the next time.

Coaches often must make cultural adjustments in the pace and type of skill-building experiences they create. An American coach, eager to improve decision making among Japanese managers, encountered the Japanese process neimawashi. Literally meaning “wrapping around the tree,” this approach enlists the support of numerous people to make a decision. While the support yielded by the process is desirable, the approach is cumbersome and can dilute accountability. The coach needed to increase her patience toward the slow pace of this process and to decrease her desire for speedy, linear decisions. At the same time, she showed others how to build support without unduly jeopardizing efficiency. To accomplish this, she asked the managers to list those whom they wanted to involve in particular decisions and then coached the managers to eliminate those who were not truly necessary for the task. When someone was eliminated from the list, the managers personally explained why that person was not consulted in this instance and requested his or her help on an upcoming decision.

Strategy 4: Promote Persistence. Build stamina and discipline to ensure that learning lasts on the job.

While Strategy 3 tackles the acquisition of skills through a variety of means, Strategy 4 deals with the application of the new skills where they are needed. Old habits and fear of failure are the two primary obstacles to the adoption of newly acquired capabilities.

Virtually everyone can relate to the frustration of changing old habits. Even people who are deeply resolved to change can find their motivation dampened by the frenetic pace and demands of their job, or the real obstacles to trying new things. They struggle to shift from a familiar, well-rehearsed approach to a new skill that is still inefficient and requires extra effort. In addition, those who try new behaviors at work may risk failure and embarrassment if their nascent efforts are visible to others. Because cultural norms and personal styles are significant influences on the size of the risk people are willing to take, coaches must always calibrate risk from the learner’s point of view. Coaches can foster new experiences at a manageable level of developmental stretch, and create opportunities for people to engage in intelligent risk-taking and experimentation at the edge of their comfort zone, wherever that edge happens to occur.

Promoting persistence is also necessary because, even though commitment to a desirable goal can be relatively quick and painless, the actual process of attaining the goal is often unpleasant and laborious. Consider the contrast between the allure of a goal to be physically fit and healthy with the sometimes painful reality of regular exercise and careful attention to diet. Similarly, a person’s commitment to meet an important development goal at work is often derailed by the repetitive practice and discipline required. Unless leaders address these barriers, people’s inspiration to change fades and new learning never takes hold. Leaders can sustain change efforts by helping people discover ways to embed new behaviors in daily activities so that development becomes part of the routine. They can provide attention, reminders, encouragement, and realistic expectations for the pace of change and the quality of the results yielded by early efforts to try something new. Only then will the benefits of newly learned skills be realized.

Strategy 5: Shape the Environment. Build organizational support to reward learning and remove

barriers.

Because context is a powerful determinant of people's behavior, leaders have a vital role in fostering a climate that is conducive to learning. Even people who are highly motivated to change are dissuaded by active and passive resistance from others and perplexed by mixed messages regarding the importance of development to the organization. When leaders ignore such contextual barriers to development, they give people easy excuses to neglect or postpone their development efforts.

Leaders have three primary avenues for cultivating an environment that minimizes barriers and sets expectations for continuous learning:

1. They can be development role models. When leaders make their own learning transparent to others, they send powerful messages that no one is exempt from learning and that personal risk-taking on behalf of development is not only acceptable but expected. Actions such as seeking feedback and coaching, sharing a learning plan, or trying a new skill in front of others can potentially contribute to an environment that heightens focus on development. Even if they are trying to change the development climate, coaches need to be careful to model behaviors that will be well suited to the culture.

2. Each leader, regardless of role or position, can influence the local learning climate. They can highlight the role of development when setting and tracking group goals and can integrate discussions of development into staff meetings, performance reviews, and project debriefings. They can also foster trust and openness so that developmental information and support are readily accessible.

3. Leaders can influence organizational policies and practices. Even leaders who have no formal responsibility for development and performance initiatives can make their opinions known about how organizational tools and practices--such as competency models, performance reviews, succession management, and reward systems--can be aligned for better support of development. They can also adapt these tools and processes to the norms and needs of people from different cultures.

Cultural beliefs define the appropriate behavior for leaders, guide expectations about the potential of individuals to change, and even determine the value of individual change and improvement. As coaches discover norms and beliefs that support or impede continuous learning, their tactics for shaping the environment for learning have to adapt, sometimes dramatically. Insistence on open discussions about development would be foolhardy in a culture that values personal privacy and that traditionally employs more indirect or allegorical communications to convey personal information. In certain cultures, a coach who admits to self-development efforts could be construed as weak and ineffectual, not as a model to be emulated. In establishing an environment for development, a coach also needs to gauge the levels of developmental stretch and risk-taking which are deemed appropriate and tolerated. As with each strategy, coaches need to apply relentless vigilance and questioning to find the approaches that will work best for the circumstance.

Conclusion

Culture adds a layer of complexity to the necessity to cultivate the talents of others. Leaders who keep this imperative in the forefront are not deterred or intimidated by the ambiguities and unexpected barriers of cross-cultural coaching. By paying attention to three things, they remain solidly grounded and prepared for the challenges of coaching.

First, leaders know themselves and what they bring to the development process. They are willing to question and expand their own assumptions, capabilities, and methods.

Second, leaders pay attention to the process of coaching. They search for the critical ingredients that will help them connect with others to accelerate learning in meaningful ways.

Third, leaders are attuned to the person they are coaching, and respect individual goals and values in the cultural context. Even when trying to create radical change, leaders accommodate to the person's starting point and build on the person's unique identity and capabilities.

Drawing on these three sources, a leader can be vigilant, creative, and adaptable in sustaining the coaching relationship and process. Ultimately, when coaching succeeds, stronger personal and organizational performance build self-sustaining development momentum regardless of culture.

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