

CAN THIS EXECUTIVE BE COACHED?

Your VP of sales is a star performer. But, his overbearing style is alienating his team. You don't want to lose him—or them—but this can't go on. What do you do?

How do you deal with the talented manager whose perfectionism paralyzes his or her direct reports? Or the high-performing expert who disdains teamwork under any circumstances? What about the sensitive manager who avoids confrontation of any kind? Do you ignore the problems?

Get rid of the managers? Or do you coach them? Coaching – helping to change the behaviors that threaten to derail a valued manager – is often the best way to help that manager succeed. BUT it is also expensive and time consuming and requires a real commitment to behavioral change. Is it worth your investment? How bad is the behavior really? And is your executive really capable of being coached and changing that behavior?

To answer that question, you have to first identify what's really going on.

It is critical to observe the dynamics between the manager in question and those around him. The focus, of course, is on the manager's behavior, but behavior never takes place in a vacuum. An important part of what you assess is the impact that problem behaviors have on the other members of the organization. A systematic way to understand a problem behavior in its context is to ask the same questions a journalist would ask when gathering information for a story: Who, what, when, where, how, and (if possible) why?

- What does the overbearing behavior consist of? (Yelling? Threats?)
- Whom does he try to dominate? (A specific person or group?)
- When and where does it happen? (When he's stressed? At meetings?)
- How does the behavior affect others? (They can't focus on work?)
- Why might he behave like this? (He's ill? Getting divorced?)

Consider, for example, the analytically brilliant but overbearing manager. Look for opportunities to see her in action, and pay attention to how she behaves under various circumstances. Whom does she attempt to dominate? Whom does she seem to respect? Is her behavior apparently influenced by the gender, status, or ethnic background of those around her? Does she have difficulties with one specific person? What exactly does she do that is overbearing? When does she act out that behavior? Always? Only during times of stress? When asked to perform outside her area of expertise? Does her behavior depend on where she is? Is she more or less overbearing outside her familiar territory? How does the behavior affect those around her and her ability to get her work done? Can you begin to understand why she behaves in an overbearing manner?

Once you have evaluated the situation, you must determine how bad the behavior is. The question you have to answer is, How entrenched is the habit? Stubbornly ingrained or something that can easily be changed? Truly expressive of the manager's character or a reflex without profound significance? Part of her substance or part of her style?

The answers to those questions have important implications. Consider the newly promoted vice president who is perceived as arrogant. Through his bluster, he may unwittingly be expressing a fear of failing in his new position. A good coach can help him identify his fears as normal and encourage him to behave more modestly. Alternatively, the manager may be deliberately acting arrogantly in the mistaken belief that arrogance is respected. A coach can help him dispose of that myth. The third possibility is that the manager is, in fact, incorrigible. A wise executive will recognize that the manager's behavior is not likely to change, because he is simply expressing his true character.

Three tests reveal whether or not a problem behavior is based in character.

First, the behavior is part of a pattern seen in different contexts.

For example, a person with low self-esteem may mask it by buying an expensive car, getting herself invited to the “right” parties, or sending her children to the “right” schools. She likely evaluates other people professionally and socially on the basis of status and generally avoids taking risks that might jeopardize her own standing.

Second, the problem behavior is generally observable over a long period.

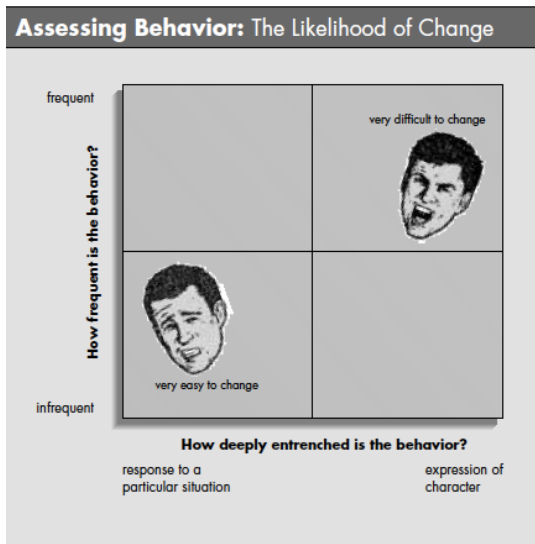
Has one manager always cheated on her income taxes or did she cheat just once when she was desperately short of cash? Has another always dodged responsibility or is he simply overwhelmed right now and temporarily unable to cope?

Third, character flaws tend to express themselves in a complex array of behaviors rather than in a single one.

Changing one or two of these behaviors will not make much of a difference because too many other negative behaviors will likely remain.

Imagine trying to coach the socially awkward technological wizard to prepare her for a senior sales management position. You may succeed in some superficial ways – for instance, by training her to stand farther away from others at cocktail parties or to dress a bit better – but you cannot hope to change the myriad other behaviors that express her core being and mark her as a techno-nerd. The manager will never be able to engage in small talk when she really wants to talk bits and bytes. And she will never suffer fools gladly simply to make a sale. Even if you could identify and work on the many behaviors that express the very core of her character, such efforts would demand constant attention. She would revert to old habits unless she relentlessly monitored them, just as a car straightens out of a turn without a steady hand on the wheel.

A manager can sometimes change character-driven behaviors, but only with constant effort and limits to success. Such behaviors are a lot like crabgrass: deeply rooted and difficult to weed out. And truthfully, the executive in question would likely be better suited to a different position or environment that allows him to leverage his strengths more while minimizing his behavioral weaknesses.



This simple conceptual framework can help you classify the type of the behavioral problem you are facing.

The framework allows you to map the manager’s behavior along two key dimensions: how frequently it occurs and how deeply rooted it is.

The key questions that the framework then helps answer are as follows:

Can the problem behavior be changed? In cases at the extreme right of the continuum, consider the behavior to be unchangeable.

If the behavior is unlikely to change...the question then becomes,

Can we live with that behavior?

The decision whether or not to keep a manager depends on how profound the negative effect is.

Does the behavior occur too frequently to be ignored?

Does the behavior occur infrequently but with such impact that the person cannot succeed in the organization?

A character trait such as dishonesty need express itself only rarely to derail a manager permanently.

Do the negatives of a set of behaviors clearly outweigh the positives of the individual's contributions to the organization? If the negative aspects are too great, the answer may be to suggest that the person move to a place where the character trait is not a liability but a potential asset. For example, the verbally aggressive manager on the genteel corporate staff might be encouraged to join a new venture that would welcome his energy and shrug off his edge.

If the behavior can be changed, is the person willing to try to change it? Behavioral change is possible only when it is voluntary, and willingness to change even a superficial behavior at the far left of our chart depends on the individual. Some people will go to great lengths to change any behavior that inhibits their effectiveness. Other people consider any suggestion to change an assault on their entire being. The best predictor of future flexibility is flexibility in the past.

Has the person previously been open to feedback and willing to change and grow? If so, you can expect him to do the same in the current situation. Even if the individual's history suggests an unwillingness to change behaviors that are in fact changeable, you should assume that change is possible.

One of management's most important jobs is to motivate, and inspiring a flawed but valuable player to accomplish something as difficult as significant behavioral change constitutes one mark of a fine executive.

You are, in effect, resurrecting a valuable human resource that your organization might otherwise lose. It's worth a try. And in those situations, coaching is definitely worth the investment for the individuals and the organization.



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