

The Coach as Personal Trainer – by David Allen

Re-Grooving Critical Behavior in Real Time

Knowing what to do and doing it as automatic behavior are two very different things. We can watch a video, read a book, and attend a seminar which can impart significantly useful information and perspectives. Much that is required of the new leadership style, however, is not about what we know, but about how we personally operate when the heat's on. And we often need professional help in real time to install new behaviors, and to get and keep us at the enhanced levels we want to function.

It's not about what we can spout at the next staff meeting ("oh god, did he take another seminar again?!") It's about consistently applied high-leverage responses and activities that happen on cruise control. It's about what we can be trusted to be doing, by others and (most importantly) by ourselves, when the pressure of the real world is at hand. To rapidly make those kinds of permanent changes and enhancements to our life- and work-styles, we need models, mentors, and most importantly, personal coaches, whom we spend real time with, getting us to do the real things we really need to be doing, from now on.

As leaders we truly want to work differently. And when we suddenly know better, we want it to happen yesterday (and why not, since we know it is the thing to do?) But self-propelling strategic conduct, if it does not exist at the desired level already, will seldom occur by itself, and certainly not quickly.

We can shift our behaviors with will power, but for a very limited time. If you are strong and especially strong-headed, I'll give you a few days. If you're on a retreat in the mountains, with no phone, fax, or computer...maybe even a week. After that, auto pilot shows up. The intense onslaught of all of your temporal engagements is back at your door. There are too many things in the world that you need to focus your conscious attention on, and you don't have the personal bandwidth to keep hold of the new direction. You know better, but you don't do better. (I doubt anyone reading this doesn't have at least a few of these little numbers in his/her internal dialogue.)

Why did I just eat three doughnuts?! Jeez, I lost my temper again! I just haven't been able to get to the gym this week... I just haven't had the time to update my directs on my thinking... I've forgotten to keep Susan in the loop on this project... I forgot to write it down... etc. etc. ad nauseum.

We all have our weak suits. And some of them may be moving into the area of mission- or values-critical. Not long ago my results-oriented personality was required to get us off the ground. But now it's limiting senior team initiative. Not long ago my tolerance of tons of incompletions was required to stay sane and focused on what we had to do. Now I'm up against the prices I've paid for un-kept agreements. Growth. Maturity. New demands for new situations in new worlds.

I'm sure this book about executive coaching came to be because there is a post-Maslowian world of sophisticated people for whom improving themselves does not mean admitting to failure or being broken. Excellence, quality, reach and impact are now open-ended golden chalices out in front of the best of us. So there are things we all need and want to learn, to give us the edge we want or to unlock the potential we strive to fulfill. One of the two greatest values of a coach has always been the consultant's role: to give us new and useful points of view.

Perspective is the slipperiest and most valuable commodity on this planet. No matter where you are, no matter how low you go, your viewing point about where you are and where you want to go and how you could get there will be a priceless commodity. We need to see “outside the box.” We need to hear non-invested opinions about what we’re doing and how we’re doing it. This is, and always will be, the value of consultants.

But if we want it to happen now, and we want it to stick, we need to put ourselves in the hands of a trainer, who coaxes and coaches us through the new behaviors in real time, in the real world. We need and want someone or some thing to be the stake in the ground we can hang on to, to get us past the unconscious deep grooves of our habits. We need a tether to tie ourselves to that will hold us steady and that will be a grounding rod against the hurricanes of past conditioning and the demands of our lives that distract us from consciously controlled new behavior.

Anyone who has ever worked with a personal physical exercise trainer knows exactly what I mean. When I have really dedicated myself to changing my physiology and physical regimen, the most effective times have always been when I committed the time and money to engage someone I trusted to take me to levels of consistency and performance that my own comfort zones would not facilitate.

We need to groove new grooves in our patterns. The fastest way is to commit to a coach, whose job and contract is to hold a focus and a format that helps us retreat. The new pattern needs to be cut, and the channel needs to be deepened. It could be a new way to think, a new way to feel, and/or a new way to act and respond. But if it’s a “new way” at all, it’s unfamiliar territory to the unconscious part of us, and it needs to be made much more friendly to our basic nervous system. We want to become “unconsciously competent.” We don’t want to be burdened or beholden to another person to keep us in line, forever. We know that ultimately we need to be just doing it ourselves as a way of life and work. But we have to acknowledge that the path to that freedom is not free.

I have found it useful with my clients to remind them of an old behavioral model, that identifies four stages of moving to permanently changed conduct:

(1) Unconscious incompetence

“I don’t even know that I don’t know what I don’t know.” Many people just wander around in the miasma of not realizing what they don’t realize is a problem. They’re just in it, and basically numb. Pain/aspiration (and therefore change) factor = zero.

(2) Conscious incompetence

“I now know where I ought to be and what I ought to be doing, but I don’t know how to get myself there, or get myself to do it.” This is the first “aha!” that we have, and now we know that things could and should be different than they are, but boy it beats me how to actually go about it! I now know that I ought to have a “collaborative culture” but I don’t actually know how or if I can do it. I know that we should be “leading edge”, in the “eye of the tornado” or facilitate “innovation”, but what do I do this afternoon? Pain/aspiration factor = variable, depending on the commitment to the new standard. This is the stage people often find themselves in after a great book, seminar, or other initial educational and eye-opening experience.

(3) Conscious competence

“I know now how to make it happen, and I know I can do it, (but I have to keep reminding myself to do it, and I fall off the wagon regularly.)” Pain/aspiration factor = variable, depending on commitment to the new standard and the delta between current reality and that standard. This is the really tricky ground. We’ve been to the seminar, we’ve actually tried and tested some things to do ourselves, we’ve really gotten enthused because we know that we can do it and how to get there. But, damn! I don’t seem to be able to stay there! We set up the new system, my secretary and I agreed to some new policies about how we’d work together, we had a couple of staff meetings that broke ground for a new level of communication and openness, but golly, things seem to be back to business as usual, and I’m afraid we may have wasted all our money on the consultant! I know now how to drive the car, but I have to keep reminding

myself to keep the hands on the wheel, and to stay conscious of the car and how I'm driving it. Too often I'm getting distracted by the scenery and my habitual thinking, and I forget to focus on the new and controlled behavior I need to maintain.

(4) Unconscious competence

"I just do it. I only think about it when I don't do it, and I then have to go do it." This is real motivation, when the word "motivation" never occurs to you. You just do it. It's brushing teeth, taking a shower. I'd just feel awkward and uncomfortable and out of sorts if I didn't do it. Of course I empty my voicemail and get my in-basket to "empty" every day. If I didn't, the "scuzz factor" would be too high. Of course my staff is happy and eager to come to work. If they weren't, it would feel too weird...we just don't let that happen.

The unconscious competence level should be the aim. Get the behavior onto cruise control. Set the internal standard, the "set point", so grooved into the nervous system, that you can't stand things to be different from that. I do not have to motivate myself to purge my thinking, capture my commitments, make the required action decisions about them, and review the whole thing regularly. Why? I can't stand the discomfort of not doing that.

Coaching is a high-leveraged way to get from stage (2) or (3) to stage (4).

I train executives in critical personal behaviors that are required in the new world of knowledge work-how to collect, process, and organize all the inputs, ideas, information and commitments that are potentially relevant to their life and work. I teach how to make action decisions when things show up, instead of when they blow up. And I give people a model of how to keep their head clear and keep everything in their life on track, with minimal effort.

It's good to know what to do in this regard. I give seminars and write frequently to many audiences about an understandable and highly functional model for personal organization and productivity. But if the executives who recognize the potential value of implementing that in their life really want to make it happen, I have to spend real time with them, dealing with the real things in their real world.

In coaching people about dealing with workflow and personal organization, I have to have at least two contiguous days with them privately at their desk, with no outside interruptions. I have to ensure that my client applies the personal workflow model I've developed to the hundreds of emails, voicemails, pieces of paper, and internal thoughts ("oh yeah I need to..."s) lying around, which they have allowed over the transom into their psychological "ten acres." And then I need to keep following up with them, in some way, to keep the new behaviors reinforced.

They can take my seminar about that model, which is very much like watching a video about playing tennis. They'll get totally enthused that there is a game called tennis, and what it could look and feel like playing it with excellence and ease. And they'll get to hold a tennis racket in their hand and hit a couple of balls, to let them know that there is a connection between where they are and where they could be.

But if they really want to start to live and work in a way that has nothing on their mind and things are getting done with productive efficiency and effectiveness, then we need to get onto the court for many hours, and actually have them hit thousands of balls coming at them in a multitude of ways. We need to practice going through emails, voicemails, pieces of paper on the desk, one at a time-What is it? What does this mean to you? What are you going to do with this? What's the next action? And we need to set up the working system that will hold the results of that process, in real time, for those real things, in a way that the person may actually use.

They may love the idea that their head could be rid of distracting thoughts and stress about what they should/could be doing, but they can not actually have that experience until they are willing to actually do the things they need to do, to make that happen.

In twenty years of teaching, consulting, and coaching hundreds of executives about and with this process, I have never seen one exception to this rule. You must be led by the hand into this experience with a coach...or it will not happen, permanently, to the level you would like it to.

The challenge is to frame and address the more subtle behaviors, the ones that limit or expand our effectiveness in the world. We need to do this in the same way many of us have identified physical exercise as a strategic behavior to install in our lives, for which we have found the coach we needed and wanted to have, to make it happen at a new cruising level.

So what are they? How would I operate differently if I were to really step up to the plate of matching my vision of how good and effective I could be? What are the things that I need to be doing more of, more consistently, that I think would get me where I want to go? And then find the person or people who have models and formats designed to keep you on the straight and narrow, to keep you re-grooving the patterns of thinking and acting that you know would serve you and the people you serve.

The really great leaders are the ones who keep the people around them whom they trust will hold their feet to the fire, and whom they give the time and permission to keep them constantly focused on the prize.

To commit to a hands-on, real time coach is not a sign of weakness. It is rather the indication of a sophisticated awareness of the effectiveness of leveraging the best tools to restructure our automatic response systems in ways that create ever greater opportunities.

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