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Coaches Compromise Worker Effectiveness

By

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Executive and life coaches can damage performance, curb motivation and diminish enthusiasm, write Christopher Shen and Simon Moss.

When people start to reach the top of the corporate tree, training starts to become a bit of a problem. How do you get someone at the peak of their career to accept that they can learn from someone else?

Executive and life coaches have been embraced as a solution. They don't portray themselves as experts, nor do they impose their opinions or impart technical advice.

Instead, they help their clients identify, clarify, and pursue personal goals.

Crucially, they strive to empower their clients, fostering a sense of autonomy, while providing accountability and offering suggestions.

But here's the rub: this amalgam of autonomy and guidance has been shown to actually damage performance - curbing motivation and diminishing enthusiasm.

In a recent study at the University of Rochester in New York, participants were instructed to present a speech that conveys the merits and drawbacks of nuclear power.

Some of the participants were instructed to oppose this form of energy. Other participants were informed they could adopt any position they choose.

Finally, some of the participants were instructed they could espouse any stance, but were later informed, somewhat incidentally, that opposing nuclear energy might be preferable - this last approach being the kind of blend of autonomy and guidance offered in many coaching situations.

The findings were illuminating.

After presenting the speech, there was a sharp fall in the motivation and persistence of those who had received the mix of autonomy and guidance. Specifically, their capacity to perform a subsequent task (proofreading an article) fell dramatically.

Further studies clarified the cause of this decline. When people are given autonomy, but subtly encouraged to pursue a specific course of action, they often need to reconcile conflicting impulses. The need to regulate these impulses uses mental energy and leads to exhaustion, affecting their motivation.

Many executive, life, and sports coaches believe they help their clients to realise their goals and fulfil their targets, but some of their commonly used tactics have recently been debunked.

Here are some examples:

Visualisation:

Clients are encouraged to visualise the precise time and place in which they will do something, such as confront a colleague. However, this tactic can sometimes diminish the likelihood of people achieving their goals.

Petia Petrova, at the Tuck School of Business Administration at Dartmouth in the US, and her supervisor, author Robert Cialdini, unearthed some of the perils of this approach in 2005.

Sometimes the course of action that individuals plan to pursue cannot be imagined vividly. People might not be able to visualise something they have never before attempted or seen, and, consequently, become less likely to engage in the planned act.

Identify Goals:

This popular approach gets people to divide broad objectives into a series of concrete, circumscribed goals.

Broad, abstract objectives, such as "improve health", are partitioned into specific, bounded activities, such as "exercise every day" and "eat fruit every day".

However, three American academics (Ayelet Fishbach, Ravi Dhar, and Ying Zhang) found this can dent motivation.

In their 2006 study, some participants were told they exercised appreciably more often than average. But then, these people were more likely to crave unhealthy food.

After people feel they have satisfied one goal, such as exercise, they become less likely to pursue a related goal, such as to eat healthy food.

Recurrent reminders about the broader objective can temper this problem, but these observations underscore the potential hazards of specific goals and targets.

Challenge assumptions:

People often perform most effectively and assiduously when a neural circuit in the right hemisphere of the brain - extension memory - is activated. Extension memory is a region of the brain that stores unconscious values, needs, and personal experiences.

This circuit enhances the intuition, mood, and motivation of individuals. When it is activated, the intuitive decisions tend to be accurate and people seldom regret their decisions.

But when people question their assumptions and practices, extension memory is inhibited and these benefits dissipate.

This problem is amplified when coaches evaluate the progress of their clients, because accountability also inhibits these circuits.

Praise:

Recurring praise magnifies this issue. After people are praised, their momentary perception of themselves improves and memories of their past triumphs and failures remain dormant in the depths of their unconscious mind.

These unconscious memories do not align with their momentary perception of themselves and the disparity provokes defensive, hostile behaviour, such as an intense resistance to criticism and a profound sensitivity to disapproval.

Effective coaches might be able to circumvent many of these difficulties but many coaches display qualities that compromise their effectiveness.

Sports coaches, for example, have usually been top athletes, but during the 1980s and 1990s, Julius Kuhl of the University of Osnabruck in Germany and his collaborators showed people were more likely to succeed in sport when the extension memory circuit is activated.

However, extension memory also seems to impede many of the key qualities of coaches - such as the capacity of individuals to refine their plan and articulate these intentions. Even their sensitivity to the distress and concerns of other individuals dissipates. The most awesome sports person, therefore, is often the most awful coach.

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