

Running head: THE RELUCTANT PRESIDENT

The Reluctant President
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Leadership Development

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Abstract

Coaching CEO successor candidates is challenging and deeply nuanced in the best of circumstances. The stakes rise exponentially when the sitting CEO owns the company, resents having “anointed” an eventual successor, and has been phenomenally successful despite the bruising effects of his narcissism and toxic micromanagement. This case study describes how a data-driven, insight-oriented coaching methodology helped the CEO candidate accelerate his effectiveness, instill hope in the organization, and forge a more stable relationship with the CEO -- a sufficiently functional relationship for the future CEO to decide to remain with the company. Further, this work highlights the importance of clinical skills and three coaching “meta principles” (traction, trust, and truth-telling). Finally, this longer term coaching engagement illustrates the dynamic role shift from coach to *trusted advisor*. Through this deepened relationship, coaching gains were consolidated and an objective sounding board was retained for both the CEO and his eventual successor.

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The Reluctant President

The split between what is nourishing at work and what is agonizing is the very chasm from which our personal destiny emerges.

– David Whyte

Introduction

This engagement began as the grooming of a CEO successor candidate whose ambivalence about his new President role was at least matched by the ambivalence of the CEO/owner about the need to have a successor at all. It unfolded successfully with the President taking full command of his leadership challenges, and the CEO/owner becoming more resolved about his retirement transition as well as more trusting of his eventual successor. There was also secondary gain for the senior management team as it endorsed and embarked upon key organization development initiatives. What happened in between was a roller coaster ride during which my clinical training was as helpful as extensive experience I had had in business and coaching. Further, based on my experience with other *superkeepers* like Frank, a term coined by Berger (2003), this good outcome was influenced by three coaching process or meta principles – *traction, trust, and truth-telling*, as well as by four methodology factors – *a holistic approach, deep behavioral insight, the active involvement of top corporate executives, and sustained relationships*. These process and methodology considerations will be discussed below after presentation of the case.

The Facts – Client, Culture, Boss

The Client

Frank M. had been with Banyun, a privately held employee benefits consulting firm with annual revenue of approximately \$50 million, for nine years when at age 40 he was made President. This unexpected appointment was widely perceived as a major step toward his eventually becoming CEO. In our first meeting Frank summarized his situation:

I would have been content to just keep selling but we were growing fast, things inside were getting more and more chaotic, the CEO had started to worry about perpetuation of the company, and before I knew it, I was President. This ticked off a couple of the other guys – one in particular who really wanted it – but for me, it's a pain. It's next to impossible for me to produce more business, manage my current accounts, and deal with all the infrastructure and people issues crucial for our continued success. John (the CEO) just doesn't want to spend the necessary time on this; I don't think he sees how complex things have gotten on the management side. All he wants to do is produce business, and he keeps raising the bar. Somebody's got to get a hold of this thing. It looks like that somebody is me, and I'm taking a financial hit to do it.

Frank had been recruited to Banyun based on his outstanding sales success at IBM. The combination of his potential for ownership, interest in learning Banyun's business, and a move to the East Coast was enticing enough for him to accept the offer and relocate his wife and three children. Within a few years of his hiring, he had become one of the top two business producers at Banyun – along with the CEO. In the midst of a health scare and based on counsel from his legal advisor, the CEO made the impetuous decision to appoint a President. Since he valued sales

success above all else and had a relatively good relationship with Frank, he saw Frank as his best choice. While it was the right timing for appointing a President, John had little appreciation of what it would take to stabilize the firm through its rapid growth and to position it securely for the future. John's answer to any question about strategy was always the same: top-line growth.

The Culture

In this competitive, sales-driven culture, the business producers rapidly fell in and out of favor with the CEO based on their monthly results. This pattern of intermittent reinforcement had begun to create retention risks, another problem with which Frank would have to grapple. But good, bad, or ugly the culture was *strong*, and there was a lot about it that held appeal. Founded by the CEO's father, the company had long enjoyed a portfolio of prestigious corporate clients and had double-digit growth for several years running. It had a stellar reputation for quality service, customer focus, and integrity. Its employees were well-paid, loyal, and enjoyed the comfort of elegant surroundings. Appearances were paramount to the CEO, and the gestalt at Banyun was Brooks Brothers crisp. The company's success rested solidly on a foundation of excellent people, comprehensive technical training, an adherence to orthodoxy, and strong standards of accountability. For the most part employees were thriving in this atmosphere of innovation, competition, and an admixture of commitment to work-family integration and reward for beyond-the-beyond heroics.

There was also a darker side to Banyun's culture, manifested by an atmosphere of anxiety among the administrative staff and overt expressions of exasperation from professional and management employees. This was due primarily to the CEO's relentless micromanagement, crude attacks on people, impulsive firings, and obstinacy. For years he had waited to succeed his father, and when he did, his recrudescing narcissism (Levinson, 2003) washed over the company in undulating waves of need, self-aggrandizement, and inappropriate displays of power and dominance.

At the same time the firm's folklore abounded in stories about the CEO's incredible generosity and empathy for employees especially during times of family illness or death. In summary, a moat of eggshells lay between the splendor of his office and the staff beyond. As one senior manager described it, "As good as this place is to work, you can feel really whip-lashed, too." From the mail room to the board room, the firm's atmosphere tilted on the axis of the CEO's labile mood.

The Boss

Beneath the surface of this seemingly impeccable gentleman was the wounded heart of an abused and emotionally impoverished child born to privilege but denied the psychological sustenance to thrive as a secure adult. Maintaining control was his leit motif and since his locus of control was completely external, those around him were conditioned to provide frequent ego feedings, and to avoid hitting the hot buttons of his massive insecurity.

The CEO frequently told employees about childhood traumas he suffered at the hands of his sadistic father. These stories were perceived as manipulative attempts to rationalize his bad behavior; horrifying as they were, they had long ago lost their potential to heal the wounds he inflicted. As Frank put it, "At some point, you have to get over it and move on."

Clearly, the CEO was a formidable challenge in this coaching engagement, a challenge that had to be met lest progress with Frank be sabotaged by John's narcissistic rage, especially as Frank became increasingly effective in his Presidential role. I would have to orchestrate a sequence of

steps that produced an alliance with John, helped soothe his replacement fears, and reinforced his sense of trust with Frank.

The Prelude

The prospect of executive coaching for Frank was the Human Resource Director's idea; he had grown weary of the CEO's tendency to complain about Frank and question – in earshot of others -- whether he had done the right thing in appointing Frank President. While the HR Director knew the job was a stretch for Frank, he believed Frank was well-equipped to meet the demands of the job, and he knew how well-respected he was throughout the firm. The HR Director was also psychologically sophisticated enough to recognize that John's baseless complaints were a defense against his retirement fears.

With the CEO's agreement, the HR Director went on a round of initial screening interviews with prospective coaches. Toward the end of my meeting with him, the urgency and poignancy of the situation tumbled out when he said, "I'm concerned that if Frank and John don't get their relationship right, Frank will leave and that will be a major blow to the company. And as far as working with a coach, Frank's a tough street fighter kind of a guy. He's pragmatic and wants to stay focused on results. He's not into a lot of psychology, and I don't know how he'll do with a female coach." To which I replied, "Let's see what he decides."

The initial meeting with Frank was memorable. Fit, polished, and direct, he got right down to business. He had already met with two other coaches, and I discerned quickly that he wasn't impressed with what he'd heard so far. In his words, "There are some things I need to learn about doing this job, but I don't think I'm going to learn much from people who haven't led anything or who don't understand the world I operate in. How do people like you do what you do?" In those opening minutes, I gave him a quick summary of my own business background, leadership experiences, companies I had consulted to, and an overview of my coaching model. Then I sat back and listened as he answered my question about what he needed to learn. Frank focused most on staffing, operational issues, and the challenge of managing the CEO. At the end of this two-hour meeting, he asked me for references. Having anticipated his request, I gave him names of both coached clients and company contacts. A few days later, Frank called to say he was ready to start the coaching. Of note in the phone call was his comment, "I don't want to contemplate my navel, but I think there's probably a connection between things that have happened in my life and what's going on for me at Banyun; so I'm assuming you'll take a good look at everything, right?" Right. In the midst of what adult development theorist Levinson (1978, p. 60) described as the BOOM effect, i.e. "becoming one's own man," Frank was ripe for learning...and change.

The Start-up

After the introductory conversation with Frank, I facilitated an agenda-setting meeting in the CEO's office. Frank and I joined John and the HR Director for a discussion of the coaching methodology, our respective roles, timeframe, the boundaries of confidentiality, objectives of the coaching, and how we'd assess progress. We concluded with the selection of a representative group of people – 14 in all -- for Frank's 360 data-gathering.

My initial observations of the CEO tracked with what I had heard from Frank and the HR Director. He was a man of enormous energy and passion for his business; accomplished and flawed; commanding and insecure. A tinderbox for whom shame could easily produce an

amygdala hijack (Goleman, 1995). A tormented person of dualities that could scuttle an orderly succession, endanger Banyun's future, and continue to erode the morale in the company. I also sensed his impatience with process so I was succinct:

- Methodology - I would use a four-phase model customized to the needs of this engagement: (1) data-gathering including a development history, a battery of psychometrics¹, and face-to-face 360 data-gathering; (2) feedback when all the data would be synthesized and used to specify coaching areas; (3) coaching during which an array of learning resources would be used; and (4) consolidation of coaching gains.
- Roles – The CEO and HR Director would be active *collaborators* with Frank and me, i.e. coaching would not be done in a vacuum. Both Frank and I would benefit from collateral information provided by them, and we wanted to make sure they felt in-the-loop.
- Timeframe – Approximately 12-15 months for the four phases. During the coaching phase, there would be two-hour monthly meetings plus email and phone consultation as needed.
- Confidentiality – I emphasized that most data would be kept in complete confidence and explained the importance of this for my establishing and maintaining a strong working alliance with Frank. At the same time, it would be critical for us to maintain open lines of communication. I would have at least monthly conversations with them in which we'd gauge progress, momentum, share new observations, etc.
- Objectives of coaching - Two areas emerged in this meeting: (1) Frank's forging a stronger, more trusting relationship with the CEO; and (2) his building relationships with others throughout the firm (not just his sales peers and the CEO).
- Assessing progress – I would have a private meeting with the CEO at the 6-month point, a 12-month joint meeting with the CEO and Frank, and quarterly conversations with the HR Director. In addition, as indicated above, I would be available to the CEO and HR Director on an ad hoc basis.
- Selection of 360 sample participants - This concrete task initiated our four-way collaboration. It also provided some surprises/clues for Frank in terms of whom the CEO viewed as key stakeholders.
- Communication strategy - Since this was the first time Banyun had used an executive coach, and since there was a residue of envy and resentment surrounding Frank's appointment as President, I scripted the CEO and HR Director. They needed to speak of the coaching as a business resource, an investment in both Banyun's future and in Frank's development as *an even more effective leader*. We also agreed that I would interview everyone on site, beginning each conversation with a question exploring what he/she understood about my work with Frank. This would give me the opportunity to clarify any misconceptions and amplify the developmental intent of the engagement.

The Work

Having grounded the coaching with the agenda-setting meeting, we moved on to complete the data-gathering phase. I took Frank's history in a three-hour face-to-face meeting and gave him

the packet of psychometrics to complete on his own. Frank's early years were a Brothers Grimm tale of meager surroundings and emotional deprivation given his self-absorbed mother, a distant father, and later, an equally distant stepfather. Frank's one emotional anchor during his formative years was his maternal grandmother who remained a constant source of nurturance and affirmation until she died when he was in college. An outstanding athlete from grade school through college, Frank embarked upon an NBA basketball career but a serious injury ended that pursuit. Through a serendipitous series of events, he wound up in sales eventually joining IBM where he surpassed quota after quota and was well-regarded by all who knew him. In his own words, "Sales was great for me from the beginning. You learn your products, know your goals, work harder than most, and you can measure your success. I'm a pragmatist who doesn't need a lot of love or stroking. I can take a lot, too."

True to the early signal Frank sent about a probable "connection" between his past and the present at Banyun, the synthesis of his history and the psychometric data was pivotal. It revealed a psychological insight that had important implications for both his personal life and leadership of Banyun. This insight was about his sado-masochistic pattern in significant relationships – including his spouse and the CEO. We moved quickly from history to immediate applicability of the insight: his tolerance for others' dysfunctional behavior kept him trapped in draining, toxic relationships that afforded him minimal appreciation, love, or acknowledgement of his accomplishments. Yes, he could "take a lot" but that also meant he had little psychic energy left to invest in his own personal growth and well-being. Moreover, given the leadership demands of his role, he had no time for the larger strategic and operational issues. Knowing I was trained clinically, Frank joked about "getting two for the price of one." I responded by explaining the need to maintain the boundaries of our work, and by also indicating my willingness to refer him to a therapist, if he was interested. At a later point in the coaching, Frank did ask for referral to a marital therapist, an intervention that proved helpful. With Frank's permission, I shared relevant information with that clinician.

Based on the feedback, we finalized the coaching agenda. This agenda targeted three strengths to leverage – *business development ability*, *leadership potential*, *relationship with the CEO*. We also agreed on two areas for development – *internal relationship building* and *people management*. These areas fundamentally tracked with what was discussed in the agenda-setting meeting, and Frank saw how they were inextricably linked to each other. Progress in any one area would likely have a positive effect on other coaching objectives. Of note was the fact that most people believed that Frank managed the CEO better than anyone else at Banyun.

To anchor the coaching phase, Frank and I collaborated on the creation of a preliminary action plan, i.e., the specific action steps he would take to make headway in the areas identified. The CEO and HR Director received copies of Frank's plan, and I urged them to give Frank positive reinforcement whenever they saw him "working" the plan well and to take advantage of their observations to give him constructive criticism when he wasn't working it well. During the initial months I interacted most with the HR Director, who proved to be a remarkably effective collaborator and who forged a strategic partnership with Frank. Regarding the CEO, once he realized the benefits of Frank's coaching for *himself*, he became more involved. He acknowledged Frank's progress (to Frank and others), and of greater significance he was better able to express his annoyance and/or concerns directly to Frank – a behavior that had a positive effect on their relationship. The presence of the CEO's sadistic father and the healing effect of the shift in the John-Frank dynamic enveloped the CEO's comment, "I realize I don't have to worry about Frank blowing up at me when I'm not happy with something he's done."

The coaching was also anchored by the use of a technique I created some years ago – the *visual metaphor* (see Figure 1). This pictorial representation of Frank’s current, transitional, and future leadership states – as described by him – was a handy way for us to assess where we were in the coaching. We often referred to it at the outset of a coaching meeting. Frank’s metaphor amplified the over-arching importance of his managing the relationship with the CEO. In frame 1 (current state), Frank was in the midst of a major storm. Frame 2 (transitional state) indicated progress. And in frame 3 (future state), Frank saw himself working collaboratively with the CEO, staying focused on issues critical to the company’s future. After a year of coaching, Frank had moved into frame 2, and by the end of the second year, he was in frame 3 and working on solidifying that progress. Since he enjoyed movies, I used them as a resource especially during the consolidation phase (e.g. *Gladiator*, *Hoosiers*, *Mr. Holland’s Opus*, *The Big Kahuna*, and *Elizabeth*).

Areas for development

Regarding *internal relationship building*, Frank learned, primarily from the 360 data, that his results-oriented, no-nonsense approach was fundamentally a strength, though a double-edged one. People wanted more from him as President of the company. He came to appreciate that employees at all levels needed more access to him and to feel they could interact on a broader array of issues, i.e., not just client-related problems or opportunities. Using emotional intelligence as a major learning vehicle (Goleman 1995 and 1998), Frank made enormous gains in this area. The coaching helped him generalize his emotional self, a self he had mostly suppressed defensively, across a broader array of situations. Frank’s major actions included his: (1) displaying greater empathy regarding personnel issues; (2) conveying appreciation for the good work of sales support functions; (3) increasing casual interactions and being more visible throughout the firm; and (4) being more attuned to employees’ personal events and acknowledging them with voice or e-mails.

To make headway on the *people management* development area, we used a Results/Attitude Grid (see Figure 2). This helped Frank see where his direct reports stood and more importantly, what he needed to do developmentally with each of them. This led to key people decisions about which the CEO was especially pleased, for he was harboring unspoken resentment about “bad hires” Frank had made.

Leveraging Strengths

In some ways, Frank’s capitalizing on his strengths proved to be the more demanding part of his coaching agenda. Regarding *business development*, he persisted in a difficult dialogue with the CEO about the growing demands of the Presidential role, i.e., how it siphoned time away from his developing new business and how there needed to be a change in his compensation so that he was not so penalized financially for assuming the President role. The time spent on this issue in coaching meetings, as well as the coach’s private conversations with the CEO, eventually produced a resolution that was satisfactory to Frank financially and had a positive effect on his overall enthusiasm for the job. He also became more intentional about coaching others’ sales success.

It was gratifying for Frank to see *leadership potential* emerge as a strength from the 360 data gathering. There were a number of coordinated action steps that produced rapid gains in this area. These included his (1) assuming a more forceful role at company-wide events when business results and plans for the future were communicated, (2) creating other opportunities to convey strategic plans, and (3) being more involved in the recruitment and assimilation of key people into

Banyun. To support Frank's leadership impact further, I introduced him to respected resources in the areas of recruitment, organization development, and leadership development.

Of note, coaching meetings were influenced by my frequent challenge to Frank that "insight is cheap unless you use it." This resulted in his taking a number of courageous steps over the next couple of years. These included productive confrontations with chronic cynics at Banyun, the firing of non-performers, persistence regarding strategic discipline, and censoring people's reflexive tendencies to trash the CEO.

While Frank made enormous headway on his *relationship with the CEO*, this coaching area would require continued vigilance into the future. We identified four action steps that served him well immediately: (1) increased *daily* communication with the CEO, (2) having monthly dinner meetings with John, and (3) ensuring that they displayed a "united front" to employees on all key business matters.

On a deeper level, Frank learned about the pros and cons of working for a narcissistic boss. His reading and our subsequent discussions of Maccoby's Harvard Business Review article (2000) was especially helpful. He realized that through it all, there was much he respected in terms of John's risk-taking, public visibility, and uncanny "nose for the business" that had propelled the company's growth. Frank also came to better understand – and even anticipate – the CEO's (1) swings between grandiosity and despair, (2) irrational distrust of others, and (3) maddening preoccupation with himself. Moreover, he became attuned to the subtleties and nuances of both his private and public interactions with the CEO. In his words, "I'm a lot clearer about what I'm dealing with and what I need to do to avoid setting him off, and to influence a positive atmosphere." Frank's deepened attunement led to actions he would intensify and sustain over time. These included his (1) creating opportunities for the CEO to be more visible both inside and outside the company, (2) working thorny business issues behind-the-scenes more thereby avoiding open dissent in the management committee, (3) reinforcing the CEO's better ideas and distracting him from bad ones, and (4) finding ways to give John frank feedback but without threatening the CEO's inflated self-image.

In tandem with Frank's efforts to manage the CEO, I continued to pursue my own agenda with John. Trust was built primarily through my empathy for his concerns. I also made considerable progress on his ability to see Frank as someone who deserved his trust, who was completely committed to the company, and who would be a superb successor *when John chose to retire*. As time unfolded, I made the most of opportunities to minimize the CEO's worst fears about retirement. I introduced him to the concept of *legacy* and facilitated his ability to verbalize what this would be for Banyun by the time he retired ("\$100 million in revenue"). Further, I heightened his interest in exploring the arts, serving altruistic causes, and the possibility of using his wealth to fund "naming" opportunities at academic and other organizations. This effort ignited his awareness of the *glittering image* he could sustain, even after his time at Banyun.

Discussion

Many coaching tools were used to help Frank meet the challenges of the President's job. There were obvious tools such as a clear coaching agenda, the developmental history, a battery of psychometrics, the customized 360 data-gathering, selected readings, the frequency of coaching meetings, a cascade of valuable action steps, and the coaching relationship. There were more creative tools, too like the visual metaphor, the Results/Attitude grid for assessing direct reports, and the use of movie scenes to reinforce learning about leadership. But in the end, the success of

this work was influenced most by its grounding in the three coaching process (meta principles) and four methodology factors to which I referred in the Introduction of this article. This approach reflects the integration of my experience in business, clinical training, research, consulting and assuredly by what hundreds of executive clients have said about what helped them most. This is an approach that can lead to *sustained* results – with clients who want to learn, have the courage to change, and who perceive the need for change as one of life’s continuous gifts.

Here’s how these process and methodology considerations played out in the coaching of Frank, who in the end was no longer the “Reluctant President.”

Three Meta Principles

#1 Traction

What I mean by traction in coaching is akin to the interaction between car tires and roads – a gripping of the surface while moving, but without slipping. This need to keep moving without slipping is fundamental to effective coaching. The work will falter, drift, or even fail without it.

There were many factors involved in attaining and maintaining traction in Frank’s coaching beginning with my assessment of the “rightness” of the coaching referral. Had this been a certain derailment and/or no-win scenario, I would have passed or referred it to a colleague with appropriate warnings because I don’t think companies should waste money on such coaching agendas (Wasylyshyn 2003). While I had some reservation about Frank’s trust in the value of coaching, and the climate of the coaching referral, I was swayed by his appetite to learn, willingness to invest sufficient time, and the potential for us to form a strong working alliance. In retrospect, his involvement in the choice of his coach was a key factor in our forming a rapid and strong working alliance.

Finally, due to the size of Frank’s 360 sample – 14 including the CEO and HR Director – his feedback was given in two sessions to help sustain traction. History and psychometric data were discussed in one three-hour meeting, and the 360 feedback was given in a second three-hour session that concluded with our final agreement on targeted areas for coaching. Both meetings were held in my office and were audio taped for his future reference.

#2 Trust

This meta principle connotes a *reciprocal trusting* not just between the coach and coachee but with the two internal collaborators as well – in this case the CEO/ boss and the human resources partner. As I got to know the CEO, his trust in me and the value of the coaching grew through the consistency of our conversations and, curiously, through my refusal to take on additional engagements at Banyun. Both Frank and he had invited my participation in other initiatives (e.g., company survey and leadership development program), and they were eager for me to coach other members of the management committee. My instinct to hold a strong boundary and not extend service beyond the initial coaching engagement paid off. Midway in the coaching, the HR Director said, “John respects your not getting enmeshed with us like other consultants have. This has helped your trust with him because he doesn’t see you as more interested in getting business than in helping Banyun.”

Overall, the HR Director served as an objective “translator” of events in the company and as such, he was an invaluable source of collateral information. The CEO got increasingly better at expressing his true opinions, venting frustrations, and revealing his concerns about the future, so

much so that I had to manage the boundary of our relationship carefully and in a way that was not narcissistically wounding to him.

In addition to my fostering these collaborative working relationships, there were two other key factors that influenced the building of trust: *confidentiality* and *emotional competence*. Always central to the issue of confidentiality is the question: *Who's the client?* While coaches vary in their perspectives on this question, I've not wavered from mine: the coachee is always the client, and the bill-paying corporate sponsor is just that, the sponsor. Wasylyshyn (2003) wrote:

In terms of forming strong connections with clients, coaches who work from a perspective of the *executive as client* (versus the organization as client) are likely to form faster and more trusting coaching relationships. Seasoned coaches discover how to work from this perspective – satisfying both the coached executive and the sponsoring organization.

Having discussed the boundaries of confidentiality openly in the agenda-setting meeting, I was not compromised later by inappropriate questions regarding information that was off-limits such as history, psychometric or 360 feedback data, and specific content of coaching meetings. However, to foster the CEO's and HR partner's functioning fully in their roles as collaborators, I remained in frequent contact with them, capitalized on my private time with the CEO, and conveyed thematic material from the 360 data gathering – particularly as it related to Banyun's culture. I also provided my general assessment of how the coaching was progressing, and what each of them could do to gain most mileage from this investment.

Managing the meta principle of *trust* in coaching relationships also requires the coach to possess a high degree of *emotional competence* which is defined as the awareness of and ability to manage one's emotions. I had to censor strong negative feelings about the CEO, as well as strong positive feelings about Frank. Obviously, maintaining objectivity was critical. Throughout the coaching I wanted what I taught and modeled in terms of key dimensions of emotional competence – self awareness, discipline, empathy, and attunement to others – to help accelerate Frank's evolution as a leader.

Finally, as I had anticipated, coach gender was not an issue. It proved to be an asset manifested in numerous ways including Frank's (1) willingness to be vulnerable, (2) shedding of defenses, (3) exploration of emotions as a leadership asset, and (4) discussion of marital issues as they adversely affected his work-related relationships.

#3 Truth-telling

I think of the meta principle of *truth-telling* as a *double mirror*, i.e., helping both client and company to see essential truths in the looking glass. Surely I helped Frank see what he needed to see. Through my relationship with the HR Director, I helped Banyun see systemic issues that had implications for effective leadership. These findings, based on 360 data, signaled concerns about micromanagement, insufficient strategic planning, lack of managerial bench strength, and the need to develop the next generation of effective leaders. This information influenced two constructive organization development initiatives: a company culture survey and a leadership development program for mid and senior level managers.

Four Methodological Factors

#1 Holistic Approach

Coaching executives from a holistic perspective means the coach has the inclination to get to know his/her client fully – not just through the myopic lens of work. It means the coach has the skill to weave a fuller, more luminous tapestry of the client’s life making the connections that will matter most in the coaching. Working holistically means the coach will have the courage to address critical intersections between work and personal priorities. I refer to this as *work-family integration* – NOT *work-family balance* the more common term but a flawed semantic in that it raises an expectation on which it is virtually impossible for most senior executives to deliver.

While I maintained an appropriate boundary between the coaching agenda and issues of significant concern in Frank’s private life, my willingness to serve in a triage capacity was helpful and much appreciated by him. Having led him to a competent marital therapist, for example, had a palliative effect and minimized his distraction at work.

Finally, coaches working holistically with executives has implications for executive retention. True to the Human Resources Director’s worst fear, Frank’s exasperation – given the dual tensions of managing the CEO and Frank’s personal issues – produced thoughts about leaving Banyun. In the safety of the coaching relationship, Frank had a place to vent and to receive guidance that eased his frustration, helped him maintain perspective, and prevented a precipitous decision to resign.

#2 Deep Behavioral Insight

The rapid engagement of senior executives is often the initial challenge in coaching them. Bringing deep insight about behavior to the surface, especially as it relates to leadership, can be especially effective in meeting this challenge. Psychologist coaches, in particular, can tap into a broad armamentarium of tools for this purpose. My “good look at everything” for Frank was accomplished with the taking of a developmental history and a battery of psychometrics. I used the 360 data-gathering to surface relevant information about Frank’s leadership, and to learn more about Banyun’s culture. (See Figure 3, Customized Interview Protocol). And I accelerated rapid engagement by setting two feedback meetings and getting to the first one quickly, so we could mine the history and psychometric data for deeper insights.

Frank’s recognition of his pattern of sado-masochistic relationships had a lasting impact on him, as well as influencing much of what he learned and did throughout the coaching. Finally, his coaching was a carefully sequenced and nuanced process of delivering insight, supporting his courageous efforts to apply the insight(s), and then consolidating his behavioral gains.

#3 Involvement of Top Executives

Regardless of how secure they may or may not be, senior executives want to know where they stand with top management. And effective executive coaches will find ways to bring this information to their work – without it becoming the *raison d’être* of the engagement.

In the work with Frank, this methodology consideration was both easy and difficult. It was easy in the sense that the engagement was riveted on his relationship with the CEO. The spigot of information was wide open, and, if anything, I was constantly making choices about the intensity of the water pressure. It was difficult in the sense that coaching meetings could have easily been overwhelmed by the Frank-John relationship agenda – at the expense of Frank’s learning and attention to other dimensions of his leadership.

In this sense, the delineation of a full coaching agenda of strengths to leverage and development areas was most helpful. Further, the concrete preliminary action plan helped maintain

focus on the broader agenda. As I said to Frank in one coaching meeting, “We don’t want our work together to be a microcosm of what goes on at Banyun: total preoccupation with the CEO.”

#4 Sustained Relationships

In my view, the coaching of senior executives is a boundary-less process – not a contained program. The coach does whatever needs to be done and is not trapped in a lock-step, company-endorsed model with a ceiling on engagement length. The coaching of superkeepers like Frank is more *relational* than *transactional*. This means that the coaching relationship is likely to be sustained, i.e., it can hold value for the executive for a number of years. Specifically, after an initial body of work is completed and progress on goals is achieved, the executive may choose to retain the coach further. This is not a scenario of dependency. Rather, it’s the natural evolution of a valued business relationship to one in which the coach becomes a *trusted advisor*.

This is what occurred after 15 months of coaching Frank. We had accomplished our primary coaching objectives, and I would now, as trusted advisor, be an objective sounding board providing him a safe place to express concerns, test ideas, plan, and discuss people challenges – including the CEO. This relationship would also serve as an antidote to the isolation that often occurs for business people in senior leadership roles. Saporito (1996) writes: “The fact of the matter is, the higher an individual moves in an organization, the less feedback he or she is likely to receive. Senior executives tend to get isolated from real-time, unvarnished feedback about the impact of their individual leadership.”

Regarding other sustained interaction, we settled into a productive pattern of my having a June luncheon with the CEO, and the three of us sharing a Christmas luncheon at year-end. As enjoyable as these occasions were, they required careful planning in terms of the issues I needed to initiate, punctuate or illuminate with John. In the relaxed atmosphere of these settings, I made the most headway with the CEO regarding both his retirement fears and his relationship with Frank. In one hyperbolic burst he said, “I would trust Frank with my life.”

This shift from *coach* to *trusted advisor* warrants our attention because it holds enormous promise, especially for coaches working with top corporate executives. Sheth and Sobel (2002) wrote:

When you’ve reached the final and most rewarding stage (of a client relationship), you’ll become a trusted advisor who consistently develops collaborative relationships with your clients and provides insight rather than just information. At this stage you will have *breakthrough* relationships. Because of the broad, influential role you play and the unusual degree of trust that you develop, these relationships will be of a significantly higher order than the run-of-the-mill associations that so many professionals have with their clients (p. 14).

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how a timely executive coaching engagement helped accelerate the effectiveness and influence the retention of a company’s top CEO successor candidate. Using a data-driven and insight-oriented approach, the executive and his coach identified specific coaching objectives with implications for the company’s success, as well as for the executive’s development. The case also represents how coaching at the top can influence *organizational* development – even in a culture dominated by the needs and whims of a partially dysfunctional CEO.

Finally, this case exemplifies the value of a long term coaching model, a model that influenced the coach's role shift from coach to *trusted advisor*. But there are many coaching models for working effectively with senior executives. Rather than exploring or debating the differences among them, there are more compelling questions to consider: What's next for this strong application area within psychology? How will psychologists capitalize on trusted advisor relationships with powerful business leaders? How will we intensify the strategic use of psychology to not only aid business results – but to increase the *nourishing*, and decrease the *agonizing* effects of the workplace?

Figure 1

Visual Metaphor



Figure 2

RESULTS/ATTITUDE GRID	
1 + R + A	2 - R + A
3 + R - A	4 - R - A
<p>Key: Quadrant 1 -- High potentials – what needs to be done to keep them? Quadrant 2 – Results lacking – what needs to be done to get results on track? Quadrant 3 – Attitude problem – is attitude adjustment possible? If yes, what's the plan? If no, is this person more trouble than he/she is worth? Answer to last question determines course of action. Quadrant 4 – Results and attitude problem – is person in wrong job? If so and there is a better job fit in company, such people can move swiftly to quadrant 1. If not, separation from company is probably best.</p>	

Figure 3

Customized Interview Protocol for 360 Feedback	
1	Describe his strengths.
2	Give an example of when he used these strengths particularly well.
3	What could he improve so he would be even more effective?
4	Give an example of when these limitations were especially apparent.
5	Describe his management style.
6	How does he develop people?
7	How effective is he in getting the right people in the right jobs?
8	How does he relate to others specifically: Direct reports? Peers? His boss? Clients?
9	How would you describe Banyon's culture? What works? What doesn't?
10	Compare Frank's leadership style to John's.
11	How does Frank manage his work-family priorities?
12	If you were to offer him one piece of advice – advice that would help make him even more effective than he already is, what would you say?

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Footnote

¹Psychometric battery consisted of Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Life Styles Inventory, the NEO PI-R, and the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory.