

A Time to Coach, a Time to Sever

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Recently, I was brought in by another consultant to offer a fresh perspective on a long-term employee who seemed to be struggling in her relationships with her team and her new manager. She and the manager had been peers that were often at odds, and then that peer had become her new boss.

In speaking with Human Resources, it became clear that this individual was very highly respected for her technical problem-solving skills, but frequently lacked interpersonal finesse. She had been managed by a couple of different leaders during her tenure and neither of them were good role models for interpersonal skills.

We decided to administer a couple of personality tests and our online FULLVIEW 360-degree feedback inventory. The ratings and comments from 15 colleagues and her manager indicated that they also recognized her technical expertise, as well as her drive to achieve timely, high-quality results and to consider creative and strategic implications in her solutions. They marked her lowest in the areas of seeking and reflecting on feedback from others, taking comments personally, creating an inspired, energized work environment, and listening deeply to others.

With a summary of these 360-degree feedback results in hand, I then met with the HR leader and the manager of this individual. Based on my experience, my perspective was that these interpersonal issues were usually amenable to coaching, so I was prepared to make that recommendation. However, a few other issues emerged in this conversation that ultimately scuttled the idea of coaching this individual to be more effective in her current role. Instead, the meeting quickly moved toward severing the relationship with her and providing outplacement support.

What happened? The decision to sever the relationship with this employee was based on several factors that were not well reflected in the personality tests and 360-degree feedback. When I analyzed the whole picture of this situation, several other contributing factors were identified. In the decision to coach or to sever, then, these are the five factors that have the most impact:

Amount of 'baggage'. This individual had been with the organization more than 20 years and had been promoted primarily because of her technical and problem-solving skills. The 360-degree feedback showed large deficiencies in her interpersonal skills, with others describing her as someone who played favorites, held grudges, pushed her ideas without fully listening to theirs, and often felt that others were out to get her. These behaviors over time piled up into an insurmountable amount of baggage to overcome.

Relationship with the manager. In her case, her new manager was a terrible choice, in that he did not respect her, felt threatened by her technical problem-solving ability, and had often disagreed with her about how to approach problems in the past. Their relationship was distrustful and antagonistic—not a great way to start a boss-subordinate relationship. Not surprisingly, her manager had rated her 2-3 points lower than most of her peers and direct reports rated her on a 5-point scale.

Distrust of team members. In my conversation with the HR leader and the manager, they had indicated that some of the people who had been asked to rate her on the 360-degree

instrument were afraid of reprisals from her. They reportedly were worried that she would somehow figure out who rated her lower and made the most negative comments. Consequently, they did not participate in the online review. Her manager's opinion was that, if these folks had completed their ratings, his low scores would not have seemed so out of step with the rest of the raters.

Previous efforts to change the behaviors. In this situation, there were no previous efforts to change the problematic behaviors of this individual. In other circumstances where I've been called in to coach a leader, there have been previous unsuccessful efforts to coach or train new behaviors. I've learned over the years that minimal or no lasting results from previous leadership development attempts are usually a sign that further coaching is not the most viable option. In these cases, severing is often the best option.

The motivation, capacity of the individual. This individual was highly energized about learning and adapting new approaches in her leadership. She was a bit defensive at first about being identified as 'the problem' that needed to be fixed, but she quickly came around. Smart and a quick learner, it was clear to her that she became too easily frustrated with certain individuals on her team, as well as with her manager, and she was motivated enough to try new approaches that might be more successful. She possessed both a high level of motivation and the intellectual capacity to learn and apply new skills and perspectives.

All five of these factors should play a part in an organization's decision to either coach an individual, or to sever their employment. Probably the most important factor, and the one most difficult to impact through coaching, is the individual's motivation and capacity for change. I've tried to work with a low level of these in the past, usually with poor coaching results. If the person has a high level of motivation and capacity for change, however, it is possible to move the needle on the other four factors—sometimes dramatically. But in this case, the combined weight of her past baggage, poor relationship with manager, and distrust by certain key team members scuttled any real chance of success in a coaching engagement. Ultimately, the decision was made to sever her employment.