

# The smarter they are the harder they fail

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A common issue in leadership development is the high flyers who reach a position where their lack of "soft" skills hampers their performance and proves a barrier to their continued progression to higher levels of responsibility. Goleman (2000) identified these soft skills[] as:

- self-awareness;
- self-regulation;
- motivation;
- empathy; and
- social skill.

These are in contrast to the tough skills of:

- intelligence;
- analytical/technical;
- determination;
- rigor; and
- vision.

This paper sets out some observation and learning of my own and my colleagues, gained from our work in coaching and mentoring leaders, and incorporates the insights gained from an interactive workshop at the European Mentoring Conference in November 2001.

## **Smart people**

The first observation that we made is that many of the clients from whom we draw our learning in this case are exceptionally bright and excelled in the "tough" skills. They had high IQs, were often expert in a professional field, were articulate and very quick to grasp new ideas. They tended to be rational/logical in their thinking and adopted an analytical approach, believing in their ability to reduce and resolve any problem to one "right" and repeatable solution. They often discounted emotion or intuition, seeing them as "inappropriate" in the workplace, and had generally used fact-based argument in the past to convince others or override

opposition to their ideas. Above all they were committed to success, both their own and that of their organisation, and were driven to do a "good" job.

## **Resistance to feedback**

Despite their honest commitment to success and to improving their performance, these clients demonstrated a very well constructed resistance to the feedback or assessment that had highlighted their lack of soft skills. At the start of the coaching relationship, they often voiced a lack of concern with their own skills, but considerable anger and frustration with the feedback process. They frequently expressed a concern with the validity of the process - for example that the wrong people had been included in a 360° feedback or the wrong benchmarks used. They often felt that the process may have been politically motivated, and was not genuinely designed to create greater organisational or individual competence. When discussing this resistance in co-coaching sessions and at the AMED workshop, we came to the following conclusions:

- Part of the resistance can be attributed to the content of the feedback - soft skills. As our clients do not perceive the value of these skills, they reject the idea of being evaluated against them.
- The majority of the resistance has its roots in our clients' lack of familiarity with "failure" and learning from failure, their lack of ability in double-loop learning[2].

This last phenomenon, the inability of "smart" people to learn from negative feedback, was discussed in Argyris (1991). In this he highlights the tendency of smart professionals to act defensively when their

ability to change through single-loop learning is insufficient. Because they have rarely, if ever, previously failed in anything that mattered to them, they are not practised in using failure to learn. Their paradigms are more rigid than most because they have so rarely been challenged. In the session at EMC we used our collective empathy to put ourselves into their position, to walk a minute in their shoes, and it quickly became apparent to us how frightening it is, how helpless and exposed the client will feel, especially as they are often in very visible positions in their organisation.

This brings us to another point made by Argyris (1991) - the potential of the "doom zoom". He describes this as the "inappropriately high sense of despondency, or even despair when people don't achieve the high levels of performance they aspire to". He points out that smart professionals are "brittle" when faced with failure. Interestingly, Welch (2001), in his recent book, *Jack - What I've Learned Leading a Great Company and Great People* describes the GEC Vortex - which would seem to have a strong relationship to the doom zoom.

As coaches we aim to bring our clients to constructively examine the feedback they have been given, to lower their defences and use this as an opportunity to enter double-loop learning. At the same time we need always to watch for the "doom zoom", to support our clients in coming to see that they can make successful change.

In discussion with other coaches and from a mixture of coaching and brainstorming exercises at the EMC we culled the following top ten ideas on how safely to begin the learning process.

- 1 Pay even more attention than usual to establishing the coaching meetings as a "clear space". Make your role and responsibilities clear; ensure that they have confidence that you will not be reporting back to their manager or HR behind their backs.
- 2 Notice and reflect the emotions and defensive reactions that you see. Bringing their emotions to the fore in a safe time and space allows the clients to articulate their anger, frustration, embarrassment and fear of failure. In many cases they may not have acknowledged their emotions openly previously. This helps to lower their emotional "defences" and makes them more open to learning.
- 3 Get the client to use story telling and metaphor to explore their current reality and how they feel about it. Allowing them to look in at their situation can help them to see it more clearly.
- 4 Raise the individual's self-awareness through feedback and tools such as psychometric tests so that they are more able to see themselves and appreciate the differences between themselves and others. This both increases their perception of their impact on others and gives them more understanding of their own motivation to make change. In addition, switching the focus from "their performance" to them as individuals reduces tension and defensiveness.
- 5 Use their cognitive strengths to help them. Part of their frustration is often a lack of understanding of the feedback they have been given. They are often unaware of ideas such as the Johari window or double-loop communication that would help them to understand why there is often a gap between their intentions and the impact they have on others. By using models to explain these concepts and others, I have seen that clients are then more able to start grappling with the feedback[3].
- 6 Increase their sensing skills; get them to notice the impact of their emotions and behaviour on others, and their reactions to others' behaviour. Getting clients to keep a journal, to describe important meetings, can be a useful approach.
- 7 Build on experiences of success ask about times when they have demonstrated key soft skills, whether at work or outside of it. Challenge their concept of negative feedback as "failure".
- 8 Connect the idea of change to the possibilities for increased intrinsic rewards from their work. If change is currently threatening, imposed from outside, the idea of balanced change which meets both the organisation's needs and their own can restore a sense of control, of power over their destiny.
- 9 Challenge their assumptions about the power of soft skills. Open questioning in coaching sessions can be used to get clients to see the power that these skills have in motivating and persuading others, in inspiring followership.
- 10 Give them some "quick wins". Once they begin to question their paradigms seek opportunities for them to see how powerful a change in their attitudes and behaviour can be.

## Tuning them in

Once a willingness to learn and a motivation to increase leadership skills is established, I have found that these "SMART" individuals to reach their goals most effectively is useful.

*Watch for "conceptual" closure. These clients are used to constantly questioning the worth and validity of any activity, and they will constantly question the worth of time spent with a coach. Interestingly, there is often a "crisis" once they have seen the new paradigm and decided what changes to make. At this point in the relationship their lack of practise with double-loop learning can lead them to assume that the hard work is done, and that their time would be better spent elsewhere. Focusing on "What will you do?", developing their commitment to real and relevant actions that can be taken before the next meeting, then reported on and discussed helps to prevent a sense of false closure at this point.*

Working as a coach or mentor with smart executives at this pivotal point in their development is demanding, and requires high degrees of professionalism and expertise. However, the impact that we can have is significant and exhilarating. Not only can we help individuals to find their way past what might otherwise prove to be a considerable career block, but also we can inspire them with enthusiasm for the power of change both for themselves and for their organisation. Their leadership positions and tough skill strengths make them potentially powerful change agents inside their organisation and enormously influential in improving the ways that their organisation approaches change. Their leadership can be key to increasing the potential for people working within their teams and organisations to experience positive change. There can be few more rewarding

assignments for any coach or mentor. The learning collated here is not intended to be an "answer" or a recipe by which we can work, but rather a sharing of experience.

## Notes

- 1 Goleman (1995) uses the concept of EI, emotional intelligence, as contrasted to IQ to distinguish this soft skills ability from tough skills in his book *Emotional Intelligence*.
- 2 Hargrove (1995) defines single-loop learning as learning that allows people to "embody new skills and capabilities through incremental learning". Double-loop learning in contrast is "fundamentally reshaping the underlying patterns of peoples' thinking and behaviour so that they are capable of doing different things". Hargrove also separates out triple-loop learning from double-loop - triple loop learning creates "a shift in peoples' context or point of view about themselves".
- 3 Examples of models that I have found useful are: Johari Window; The "Zuccini Connection"; The Circumplex Model; The Drama Triangle; Double-loop Communication; and The Ladder of Inference.

## References

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