



Cultivating Conscious Incompetence: Executive Coaching in Action

Employees succeed because they parlay their personality and skills into high performance. But as they rise to higher levels in an organization, many find that traits that served them well on the journey upward may not drive their success going forward. In fact, those accelerators may become roadblocks. As Marshall Goldsmith famously points out in his book of the same name: “What got you here won’t get you there.” But what to do about it – short of having a personality or style transplant? That’s where executive coaching can be beneficial. Coaches help leaders gain awareness of those components of their style and personality that are working well and those that might need some attention.

I think of it as moving people from unconscious competence – acting instinctively – to a state of “conscious incompetence” in which one begins to recognize “outdated” yet deeply-ingrained behaviors that need to be better managed in order to fulfill a new role.

Even the best of leaders are not naturally skilled at everything. One leader I worked with was frustrated by his inability to encourage his team to be more innovative and creative. But in every meeting I observed, the leader would begin the discussion by talking about his own ideas. The effect was predictably chilling. The team automatically deferred to what he said and no new ideas were forthcoming. Helping that leader understand the value of remaining quiet and letting others talk first seems like a no-brainer. But when you’ve always been the smartest guy in the room and rewarded by the organization for doing what comes naturally – confidently speaking up – it can come as a surprise to learn that behavior is now counter-productive.

For a high performer, it can be disorienting to have to stop and think consciously about what to do next. We all know that a speed bump in the road means that you need to slow down and proceed with caution. But if you don’t see the bump and go blazing over at 60

miles an hour, you'll damage your car. As an executive coach, it's my job to shine a

light on strategic "speed bumps" for the leader – thought processes and instinctual clues that correspond to trigger situations – and paint bright yellow stripes on them so they cannot be missed.

Observation and feedback can be a wonderful tool for leader development. The executive coaching process, through assessment, observation, feedback, and reflection can help a leader align intentions to

perceptions and ultimately drive attainment of goals by making what usually amounts to modest changes to how they lead.

When leaders are given the self-management tools to slow down, pay attention, and act deliberately – often counter-intuitively – in trigger situations, they are in a much better position to achieve desired outcomes. Becoming conscious of one's incompetence is not a sign of weakness. It is a hallmark of leadership and continual personal growth.

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