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ORRECTIVE COACHING:

A Tool for Managing At-Risk Executive Behavior

AS your company's corporate counsel, you have just gotten a call from Laura, your senior HR partner in one of its largest divisions. There has been another incident with Tom, one of the division's most senior executives. Tom is one of the company's best revenue generators, but he also has a reputation for riding roughshod over people. Exit interviews have turned up reports of borderline abusive behavior and you know that if it weren't for the combination of Tom's stellar results, his close relationship with the division president, his group's rough and tumble reputation — and their outright fear of Tom — there would have been more complaints before. This time, though, Tom has crossed a line with his third assistant in the last two years. He reportedly stood over her in a threatening manner and berated her for a "dumb mistake." She left the office in tears and made a formal complaint the next day to human resources. You will play a key role in guiding HR and the business to a resolution.

After getting the facts as Laura knows them and some additional background information on Tom, you recommend an investigation led by outside counsel. After speaking to Laura, you have a few minutes to reflect on what you know so far, and you find it worrisome. You have worked with Laura to bring the division's culture into the 21st century, but it hasn't been easy. Behavior that was condoned when some of the division's senior managers started now puts the company at risk. And at Tom's level of the organization, the political, financial and ethical/legal crosscurrents are very strong and good solutions few.

You're fortunate to have worked with outside counsel who, in her employee trainings, conflict resolution and litigation efforts, has consistently helped you get to the right results. Her investigation indicates that Tom exhibited a pattern of abrasive and angry behavior, although it did not rise to the level of being a strong, actionable legal case. The complainant will probably be satisfied with transfer to another division of the company, though there is clearly an expectation that the firm take action vis a vis Tom's inappropriate behavior. To that end, outside counsel suggests you consider "corrective coaching" and gives a fuller description of the intervention.

The Formal Recommendation Is Made. Now What?

In spite of your lawyerly skepticism about most behavior change efforts, you believe that corrective coaching is the right tool for resolving the complaint and addressing Tom's problematic behavior. After making the formal recommendation for a corrective coaching program, your next step is to schedule a three-way meeting with Laura and Tom's manager, the president of the division. They will be the primary stakeholders for Tom's corrective coaching and must buy into the process in order for it to be successful. Before the meeting, you have a conversation with Laura to make sure she understands the distinctions between corrective coaching and the developmental coaching that is under the purview of her learning and development group. Qualifications to be a corrective coach are different from developmental coaching, where a psychological background is not as critical.

In your three-way meeting with Laura and Tom's manager, you walk him through the results of the investigation and the recommendation for corrective coaching. He confirms Laura's impression that Tom largely means well,



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wants to do right by the firm and though lacking in self-awareness, has shown an interest in improving his management skills. Tom's manager, like many enterprise leaders, shies away from having conversations with his direct reports and is afraid that a strong message will be de-motivating. You also work through his concerns that the coaching will be seen as a kind of punishment. At the end of the meeting, the division president agrees to give a clear message to Tom about the inappropriateness of his behavior and his need to change it through participation in the corrective coaching program. He agrees to meet with the coach periodically during the six-month program to insure alignment.

Any concerns about Tom's resisting the corrective coaching recommendation were not borne out. Like most senior executives, he knows how to put the best face on a bad situation, acknowledges that he made a major misstep and appreciates the opportunity to address the problem. While you think you may have heard an element of "yes, but..." in Tom's response and wonder if he was genuinely contrite, you decide to leave the probing of Tom's true feelings and motives to the coach.

(The rather small minority of executives

who actively oppose the corrective coaching program are sometimes signaling that they have something of a more personal nature to hide — e.g., drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness. Their opposition to coaching, whether at the very outset or after they have begun working with the coach, may indicate that your best option is to begin the process of managing them out of the company.)

What to Look for in a Corrective Coach

As soon as outside counsel proposed the corrective coaching option and recommended a potential coach, you began the vetting process. Your primary concerns were:

1. Is the coach business-savvy and experienced working with senior executives? Will s/he be credible to Tom and his boss?
2. Does the coach understand and accept the reporting and confidentiality issues? That is, does s/he understand that s/he will not be working with Tom in a vacuum, but has obligations to work closely with the major stakeholders?
3. Does the coach have a coherent project plan with clear goals, specific activities and deliverables, and a timeline?

“Corrective coaching goes deeper than typical training interventions to identify and address the roots of inappropriate executive behavior.”

Dan, the recommended coach, had a website that described extensive experience with executives and a well-articulated approach to coaching. In your phone conversation, he seemed to have the gravitas to deal with senior executives and was responsive to your request for a project proposal. His six-month corrective coaching program was priced within your cost parameters. Some excerpts from his proposal add to the description of the corrective coaching approach:

Corrective coaching goes deeper than typical training interventions to identify and address the roots of inappropriate executive behavior. It is more than a ‘check the boxes’ intervention and requires meaningful, ongoing participation on the part of the senior executive and organizational sponsors.

Inappropriate executive behavior in the workplace has roots in a compromised ability to handle the stress of the executive role. Corrective coaching is based on a multi-factor model of stress. At the outset of the engagement, the coach evaluates stressors and coping patterns in the following domains:

- Life stressors — marital, family, health and life-stage related stress;
- Personality factors — rigid, perfectionistic, impulsive and other personality types;
- Organizational stressors — changes in reporting structure, roles and responsibilities, business challenges, etc.; and
- Managerial factors — deficits in key managerial skills, such as communicating expectations, delegating, giving feedback or resolving conflicts.

Corrective coaching proceeds by identifying stressors in different spheres of the executive’s life and assessing personality and managerial factors that either amplify or buffer the stress.

Tools used by the coach at the assessment stage include:

- Career development interview and self-assessment;
- Tests of executive style and needs; and
- 360 survey of the executives’ colleagues (manager, peers and subordinates).

What is Corrective Coaching?

Corrective coaching is a hybrid counseling and coaching intervention that moves beyond one-shot training to foster positive behavioral change in cases of ‘executives behaving badly.’ A corrective coaching program, typically three to six months in duration, comes into play when the company does not want to dismiss the executive. As such, it is an investment in the remediation of inappropriate behavior and the development of managerial effectiveness. It is separate and distinct from any disciplinary process. Corrective coaching can be used in a range of cases of inappropriate behavior — improper advances, incipient harassment and angry, abusive behavior.

The twin goals of corrective coaching are to limit the company’s liability and bring about substantive behavioral change. Because the intervention is tailored to the needs of the individual, corrective coaching provides more leverage for real change than traditional training programs. Corrective coaching is carried out by someone who is skilled in psychological evaluation, behavior change techniques and managerial skill development.

Corrective coaching is a flexible intervention, providing the executive with better tools for managing his/her own feelings

and behavior and dealing with challenging situations with employees. The coach can make a confidential assessment of psychological and/or substance abuse problems, and if these are primary causal factors, referral should be made to an outside specialist and coaching discontinued (at least for the time being). The intervention itself, though, is workplace-based and focuses on the executive’s behavior, using stress and anger management techniques as needed. Although the content of the coach’s discussions with the executive are confidential, he or she outlines the elements of the program and their timeline, and is accountable to the company’s management for successful implementation of the program. Open communication between the coach and the organizational stakeholders or sponsors facilitates real-time feedback on the executive’s behavior and role functioning.

Coaches have typically not been drawn into a litigation process, although this is a possibility. Client/counselor privilege as it exists in therapy does not apply, and there are risks and benefits to the company to the coach’s involvement in legal proceedings. This is something you should discuss with a potential coach — especially if you feel that litigation is likely.

The **coaching plan** itself will **specify** the **activities** that will be at **the heart** of the **corrective** coaching

The 360 interviews need to be distinguished from the investigation interviews that were conducted by outside counsel. Stakeholders will need to weigh the advantages of at least a limited 360 survey — a clear message to employees that the problem is being addressed through more detailed analysis of problematic behavior and a broader network to support positive change — against the disadvantage of reduced privacy for the executive and the organization. The decision may depend largely on the organization’s culture and amount of experience with coaching and the 360 process.

A thorough assessment leads to a report and coaching plan, which will specify the activities that will be at the heart of the corrective coaching and will include the organizational support needed, the skills that will be acquired and the time frame in which these will occur.

In a follow-up phone conversation, Dan added some more details drawn from his corrective coaching experience. He described typical stressors in the personal lives of executives (e.g., chronic, sometimes disabling health concerns, medication side effects, marital discord and worries about adolescent children), as well as in their organizational roles (division restructuring, being “layered,” a chronic lack of resources and other organizational support). He explained that certain personality disorders (narcissistic, psychopathic) predispose an executive to inappropriate behavior. An additional observation resonated with your experience: while these “executives behaving badly” are in one sense outliers, in other respects they aren’t that different from any sample of high-performing executives — driven, results-oriented people who don’t suffer fools gladly.

Dan further emphasized that the multi-factor stress model does not diminish the importance of anger as a critical issue in and of itself. Many executives behaving badly have histories of angry outbursts that have been tolerated by the organization and even seen as the inevitable price paid for getting outstanding results. While Dan noted the importance of organization-wide efforts



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to promote the right values and behavioral norms, he focuses on the personal responsibility for managing angry feelings and behavior. His approach to anger management involves a detailed inventory of precipitating events and trigger thoughts. He then teaches a combination of relaxation techniques, more adaptive

thinking and coping strategies that might include specific managerial skills.

Tips for When and How to Use Corrective Coaching

You should consider using corrective coaching when:

- A complaint about an executive's behavior puts your organization at risk.
- The executive is at a senior level — he or she adds value to your organization and would be difficult and costly to replace.
- The executive is "educable" — capable of change. The executive does not have a history of being unreachable and so damaging that no organizational goodwill remains.
- The behavior is workplace-focused and within your organization's purview, not a purely personal issue that should be addressed in therapy.

When engaging a corrective coach:

- Make sure the coach has organizational experience.
- Consider a coach's qualifications to deal with difficult personalities and behaviors (e.g., psychological background).
- Make sure the coach sets up the program not as therapy but as an organizational intervention. The coach should understand
 - o Patient-therapist privilege does not hold.
 - o He or she is accountable to the organization for deliverables and ongoing communication.
 - o He or she is potentially a witness if legal proceedings occur.

Be aware of the benefits (and risks) of corrective coaching:

- The program can increase the effectiveness of a valued executive.
- The program can have a positive impact on organizational morale, especially those who have been on the receiving end of inappropriate behavior.
- Corrective coaching, if linked to the appropriate progressive disciplinary procedure, can help protect from future liability.
- If litigation goes forward, corrective coaching can provide a context for settlement (e.g., "this guy is an equal opportunity harasser/abuser and we've taken steps to address it"), though it may also constitute an acknowledgement of guilt.

Developing the Plan for Your Employee

After being vetted, Dan met Laura and Tom's boss, who both found him to be a credible and qualified consultant. At this point, he met Tom and began the corrective coaching by setting the goals and parameters of the program. This initial expectation setting included the frequency, location and duration of one-on-one meetings with Tom, the frequency and content of meetings with Laura and Tom's boss, the nature of the confidentiality to be observed and factors that could lead to the suspension of the program. Dan articulated some provisional goals (e.g., "zero tolerance" for angry outbursts) while noting that he would be helping Tom develop other management skills that would enable him to better cope with stress, conflict and frustration. Dan made sure that all three parties understood that they would devise a means of measuring Tom's progress at the end of the six-month period and would also appoint someone internally (probably Laura) to monitor Tom's ongoing work on the coaching plan after Dan's involvement ended.

Your daily participation ceases at this point — it is up to Laura and Tom's boss to manage the process.

Your subsequent check-in with Laura mid-way through the six-month program indicated that there had been an immediate improvement in Tom's behavior. Not only were there no further outbursts, but unsolicited comments from people in Tom's division described a softening of some of his rough edges in day-to-day interactions. Laura agreed that this improvement might have had less to do with the coaching itself (which was still in its early stages) than with the alignment of Tom's boss, HR, legal and the coach in giving a strong but non-punitive message to Tom.

Tom and the stakeholders had agreed to a limited 360 survey of his colleagues. Survey interviews not only helped the coach identify the triggers for Tom's outbursts — they helped key colleagues feel that their concerns would be taken seriously and they would have input into his change efforts. The coach had explained to all the stakeholders that while the onus was on Tom to better manage himself, his colleagues could play a critical role in helping him change his behavior and learn new skills.

After about two months, a coaching plan was developed that was discussed with both Tom's boss and Laura. In discussing the plan, they agreed to give Tom periodic feedback on his efforts to better manage himself and learn new interpersonal behaviors. Laura also instituted periodic HR check-ins with Tom's new assistant, and guidance to Tom on how to best teach her and bring her up to speed. Dan began working on the

anger management protocol with Tom, actively managing shifts in the program's focus from anger issues to critical management dilemmas.

As per the ground rules on confidentiality, the written coaching plan did not specify any personal stressors that had contributed to Tom's outbursts. But it did articulate managerial skill-building that would help buffer stress and frustration in addition to the anger management component of the program. Tom and his coach would work on improving listening skills, seek input for key decisions and develop a wider range of influencing skills to handle disagreement. The coaching plan also highlighted the work Tom needed to do to empower his direct report team in order to lessen the stress of managing the day-to-day details of the business.

Follow Up with a Debrief

Three months later, as the corrective coaching program was winding down, you schedule debrief meetings with Tom and his boss. You also speak with Dan to get his perspective.

Both Tom and his boss note that the program was successful because of improved communication between them — an action item that had not even been on the coaching plan. Tom offered his perspective on what made the coaching relationship effective. He admitted that his initial expectation was that Dan would be a cross

between an undertaker and a scold. He was relieved that Dan took a matter-of-fact approach to the incidents that had occurred. He found Dan to be direct, but very supportive in helping him not only keep his job but become better at it. Tom also recalled a critical incident in which he "almost fell off the wagon," during the coaching, but Dan's immediate phone availability and expert guidance enabled him to diffuse the situation. This built trust between them and gave Tom the confidence that he could better handle his frustration and anger.

Tom felt that he had made gains in identifying triggers for his anger and responding more adaptively to stressful situations. Both he and the division president felt that he was beginning to demonstrate growth in listening skills, in the constructive use of difference and disagreement, and in more effective influencing at the peer level. With these gains, Tom felt that he had a good roadmap for his continuing development as a senior executive.

Tom pointed with pride to a brief 360 follow-up survey that Dan had done near the end of the six-month assignment. The results indicated that Tom's colleagues had observed a marked decrease in behaviors associated with frustration and anger, and were beginning to see signs of a more inclusive and influence-based approach to management. Tom also mentioned that he had come to see

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Laura as an ally in the coaching and could turn to her as needed if he “got into trouble,” as well as meeting with her periodically to review his progress on the key points of the coaching plan.

In his debrief meeting, Dan made a few general observations:

“First, in my experience, many of these ‘executives behaving badly’ feel isolated in their roles. The improved communication noted by both Tom and his boss is not unusual. A stronger relationship with his manager, along with a developing trust in his coach, help the executive feel less isolated and provide a buffer against stress. This ‘sets the table’ for the executive to learn specific skills in self-management and in handling the stressful dimensions of his managerial role.”

Second, Dan noted, “it’s only fair to mention that not all my assignments are as successful as this one was in terms of controlling inappropriate behavior and improved executive effectiveness. I want to remind you that there are sometimes assignments in which I will stop working with an executive because of a lack of cooperation, motivation and ability to make changes. But beyond that, there is another group of executives who complete the intervention but are ultimately unsuccessful in their roles. Sometimes

these are executives who were in over their heads and the resulting stress contributed to their outbursts. In fact, it is only when the more egregious behavioral problems are addressed that the executives’ deficits in technical, strategic or execution areas become evident. I’m suggesting that in some cases, the corrective coaching program itself serves a kind of triage function, helping the organization and sometimes the executive himself acknowledge the lack of fit and move toward ending the relationship.”

“One more thing,” Dan added. “Sometimes, an executive and their organization elect to continue working with me beyond the initial six-month contract. That’s fine, because I can continue adding value at the interface of self-management and management skills. But if that *doesn’t* happen, I strongly recommend two things:

- First, that the coach hand off the support and monitoring aspects of the coaching to someone internally, usually the HR partner.
- Second, that the coach follow up within six months of the end of the program and then again for a more intensive refresher within a year of the end of the program.”

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