

Action Coaching

How to Leverage Individual Performance for Company Success

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Chapter 1: Action Coaching: A Brief Introduction

Getting Started as an Action Coach

Each day you face the challenge of helping people adapt to ambitious new workplace requirements. Perhaps you're a manager attempting to encourage a direct report to become more open-minded and innovative. Or you might be a top executive struggling to convince a high-potential person to take more risks. No matter what your position or assignment might be, you're being asked to motivate people to change dramatically and to change fast.

But the challenge doesn't end there. You must lead individuals along organization-sanctioned paths; they have to develop competencies that the organization deems crucial or cease behaviors that were once accepted in the culture and now are counterproductive. If that isn't enough of a challenge, you're faced with people who may be aware that they should change but don't have the foggiest notion of how they can do so within a particular job or working for a particular person. Equally problematic, many of the men and women you're dealing with are confused by issues that go beyond job issues. They're searching for meaningful work and questioning whether their job (or any job in their field) can give it to them.

If you're like many of the people we've worked with, you've tried to deal with these complex issues in all sorts of ways. You've used internal training courses, outside executive development programs, and many other methods. You may even have brought in coaches to assist you. The odds are that you were dissatisfied with the results of all these approaches; none are flexible; none have either an action component or the ability to link individual and organizational goals.

Action Coaching is uniquely geared to the developmental challenges that managers, human resources professionals, and leaders face today. Whether you want to coach your peers, direct reports, or high-potentials, you can benefit from the process presented here. It's a process that you can master and use, not only to help your people meet ambitious and complex professional development goals but to help your organization achieve key business objectives.

That's promising a lot, and we'll back up that promise with some examples, definitions, and comparisons to other coaching methods a bit later in the chapter. But first, we'd like you to evaluate your own coaching needs. To get a sense of whether Action Coaching might help you and your company, answer the questions in Exhibit 1.1.

The more yes answers you have, the more likely it is that this unique approach to coaching will be helpful to you.

Action Coaching Defined

Our definition of Action Coaching is simple: Action Coaching is a process that fosters

self-awareness and that results in the motivation to change, as well as the guidance needed if change is to take place in ways that meet organizational needs.

This definition raises the how questions: How do you motivate someone to move beyond self-awareness and do something about it? How do you make sure that someone changes in ways that have a positive impact on business results rather than in ways that only foster individual career goals? Let's answer these questions by describing the four essential elements of Action Coaching and how they foster personal development in organizational directions.

First, self-awareness is linked with business results. During the first or second meeting between coach and client, goals are set that join how an individual perceives the need to change with the organization's perception of the need to change. These two perceptions must be discussed and reconciled. The client may think his only task is to stop being such a harsh critic of his direct reports, whereas the management mandate may be broader, suggesting that he must develop a wider range of people management skills. Because individual and organizational perceptions often clash, they need to be aired from the start and goals set that take both into consideration.

Second, an action plan is put in place. Action Coaching plans are clear and substantial; they ask people to accomplish specific workplace tasks or set milestones to determine whether they are making progress. Action Coaching requires clients to document and report progress in trying new behaviors and learning new skills. Coaches' recommendations can affect a client's future with the company, both positively and negatively. The coach makes this clear, and a client understands that she will be held accountable for taking certain agreed-upon actions.

Third, the level of achievement is set based on organizational need. Sometimes a person needs to be coached simply to help her be aware of a tendency to lose her temper with inexperienced employees. The organizational goal of decreasing turnover among this group can be achieved if the manager learns to be a bit more tolerant. Other times, nothing less than a complete transformation of attitudes and behaviors will suffice. For this reason, we set one of four goals for clients: self-awareness, performance improvement, performance breakthrough, or transformation. If a manager is to help her group achieve objectives that demand a performance breakthrough, she must work on developing in ways that go beyond incremental improvements.

Fourth, the process is structured and provides proven tools. Coaching has been rightly criticized for being a seat-of-the-pants methodology; it often lacks a formal strategy, tactics, or goals. Action Coaching unfolds in a logical, orderly manner. Not only is there a beginning, middle, and end to the process but a wide variety of tools and techniques are available to facilitate the process. This well-organized, highly resourced approach avoids the uncertainties and vague outcomes that plague other coaching approaches. It sets a path for both coach and client to keep moving toward the goal rather than becoming stuck and frustrated or going off in the wrong direction. (See Exhibit 1.2.)

Action Coaching Differentiated

Traditional coaching is typically derived from the model of a therapist-patient relationship. Although the style of traditional coaches may vary somewhat, the goal is usually self-awareness. The assumption is that because the individual is in business, he or she must be highly motivated. Traditional coaching is usually conducted through relatively unstructured interactions; it also lacks an action or organizational linkage component. This is not to say that traditional coaching is all bad. In fact, the goal of raising self-awareness is important in Action Coaching, and there are similarities to

traditional coaching in the way we go about doing that. If you can't help someone become aware of a behavior or attitude he needs to change or an area in which he needs to develop strength, you won't be able to motivate him to take any kind of meaningful action. That said, let's look at the differences as they are illustrated in Exhibit 1.3.

These differences emerged over time, and a brief history of how they emerged will help you understand their significance. In the last decade coaching has become if not ubiquitous then certainly commonplace. Organizations routinely bring in coaches—usually a hybrid of therapist and business consultant—to work with problematic executives. Typically, coaches help their clients become aware of negative behaviors and attitudes that affect their performance, sometimes linking these behaviors and attitudes to personal issues from their past. The theory is that this self-awareness begets changes in behaviors and attitudes, thereby eliminating the obstacle that is hurting their performance.

This type of coaching intervention is a relatively new phenomenon—part of a larger trend of "individualization." Individualized education is rapidly making its way into training and executive education. Intranets, computer simulations, and other electronic tools are facilitating customized learning for specific skill and developmental requirements. Training and development courses are becoming increasingly geared to smaller groups of people with specialized needs.

Coaching has gained favor as an extension of this trend. Rather than assuming that the development of managers and leaders occurs naturally, organizations are bringing in coaches to protect their investment. More than ever before, human assets are of critical importance to companies. As the playing field levels in areas such as technology and information, the competitive edge goes to the company with the highest-performing people.

Traditional coaching, however, is of limited effectiveness in this regard. Although it often does a great job of making people aware of their flaws and the issues holding them back, it doesn't help them take action. The issues are too complex today for a coaching intervention to do much more than help people learn more about themselves. This is a worthy goal in and of itself, but it doesn't give people a mechanism for dealing with the real-world ambiguities and paradoxes in their business environment, nor does it give them a strategy for putting their new self-knowledge to work to achieve individual performance and organizational goals.

To give you a sense of how Action Coaching operates differently, let's look at a common problem that mandates coaching. Assume that you have a direct report who tends to overreact under pressure, and this makes it difficult for people to work with him when deadlines or major projects are involved. You and your boss aren't as concerned with this individual's overreaction as with his inability to grow and nurture his people; this is what the company feels is a crucial competency for its future.

Certainly you would help this executive understand the roots of his overreacting behaviors, as any coach would. But you would also put this problem in a broader context, soliciting feedback from numerous sources so that you'd uncover the direction in which he really needs to develop (your assumptions about this direction may not be correct or may need some refining). You would then create a plan for this executive that would require a performance breakthrough; the improvement that seemed necessary at first glance would be insufficient. You would also look at organizational issues that might hamper the executive's efforts to achieve this breakthrough (such as a culture that doesn't support nurturing behaviors) and develop strategies for overcoming these obstacles.

The business and organizational context is critical in Action Coaching. We're sure you've seen managers emerge from coaching and attempt to work hard on their motivational skills, their relationships with bosses and subordinates, and their communication capabilities. But as dedicated as they may be to self-improvement, they're thwarted by factors outside of who they are: the lack of agreement on a business direction within their team, skill gaps among the people implementing programs for them, faulty systems that prevent people from obtaining needed knowledge or rewarding them for changes made, and a million other things. The Action Coaching process links who people are (their skills, their flaws, their tendencies) with their environmental realities and their organization's strategies and goals.

Coaching in Context: An Example

We'd like to give you a sense of the type of people we coach and the context in which we coach them. Their behavioral problems and development issues are complex, to say the least. Coaching, to be effective, needs to deal with the complexities-with the psychological factors, the organizational roadblocks, the personal career goals, and the overriding group (team, department, organization) objectives.

Typically, your impetus to coach someone comes from one of three sources: (1) you want to develop a high-potential person, (2) you want to help someone adapt to a new or changing environment, or (3) you want to raise an individual's performance level to meet expectations. (See Exhibit 1.4.)

The issues you'll grapple with vary, depending on the catalyst for your coaching. If you're trying to develop a high-potential, you may be coaching someone who is performing well and has no behavioral problems; you're searching for a way to help him see the big picture or to change his attitude about his job. If you're helping someone adapt to a new environment, you may be coaching your client to think globally or to stop behaving in a way that is inappropriate to a new culture. Raising performance levels can involve anything from dealing with psychological obstacles to evaluating relationships with bosses, direct reports, and customers.

All this makes coaching a complex business. To give you a sense of how Action Coaching handles the complexities, we'd like to tell you about a dynamic executive who was having trouble meeting her boss's expectations.

Case Example: Vivian

Vivian was a senior executive for a fashionable clothing store chain. Overweight, middle-aged, and highly demanding, she was the head of merchandising and buying. Although Vivian demanded perfection from her mostly GenX buyers, she demanded it with flair. She insisted that reports be stapled in a certain way and that meetings start at a ridiculously early hour. That was a bit off-putting, but she had earned the respect of her buyers and her boss.

For eight years Vivian had worked for the same woman, and their relationship was strong and synergistic. Then Vivian's boss left, and a young, male hot-shot was recruited from another company to take her place. He acted as if Vivian had just immigrated from another planet. He asked, "Why can't she be more flexible? Why is she so stuck in her approach that during brainstorming sessions I know exactly what she's going to say? Given that we're a highly fashion-conscious company, how can she present herself so poorly? Why can't she get some new clothes, lose some weight, and be more outgoing at fashion events?"

This was a combustible mix of questions. Not only was there man-woman tension but

there were generational tensions, too. On top of that, the major clash in leadership styles, the entrenched loyalty of Vivian's subordinates, and the strong political support from different camps that Vivian had cultivated and that her new boss enjoyed resulted in, overnight, Vivian's change from high-performer to low-performer in serious trouble. Defusing the tension required an expert in emotional explosives.

Vivian was struggling to adapt to a new boss's expectations. When her organization called us in, they didn't want us to encourage Vivian to cave in and do what her new boss required. The last thing they wanted was for Vivian to feel like they were holding a gun to her head or that she had to become someone she was not.

It was clear that the goal was for Vivian to improve her relationship with her new boss. The organization had ambitious strategies that they were counting on Vivian and her boss to help execute. To do so, they needed to enjoy the same synergistic relationship as the one between Vivian and her former boss.

Part of our coaching work was designed to let Vivian explore why she was having so much trouble with her new boss's requirements. It turned out that she was at a life stage where she had begun questioning her career commitment. She wanted to do so many other things-write, paint, have children-that she was feeling trapped. It wasn't simply that her old boss was gone. Her performance might have deteriorated no matter who was in charge.

At the same time, her new boss was exacerbating her problems. Vivian still liked many things about her job and the company, and she had amazing talent. We opened the lines of communication between Vivian and her boss. We facilitated dialogues between them that moved the personal invective off to the side and focused on the real business issues. Gradually, Vivian began to understand that her midlife crisis was responsible for some of her negative behaviors and that her boss was right to call her on them. Her boss also began to understand that Vivian commanded unusual loyalty and respect among her peers and coworkers and possessed skills that were invaluable to the organization and that he himself lacked.

None of this would have been effective, however, without Vivian grasping what was at stake from a business perspective. Much of our coaching revolved around giving Vivian feedback about how people were depending on her-how the organization and her own group had a lot riding on her ability to work productively with her new boss. Vivian was motivated to improve her performance because she recognized the overarching organizational need for improvement and also because we had constructed a plan that would allow her to deal with her personal issues as well as meet performance goals. Taking the whole person into consideration-all the career and personal "stuff" combined with the business requirements-is what Action Coaching is all about.

Why Action Coaching Is Effective

To a certain extent, we said why Action Coaching is effective when we defined and differentiated our coaching approach. The process of linking individual self-awareness and organizational issues, the formal structure of the process, the focus on one of four goal achievement levels, and the development of an action plan-all enhance the efficacy of coaching.

But let's bring the discussion down to the trenches. Coaching people can often be like pulling teeth with a slippery pair of pliers-but not always. When you're working with someone and suddenly they "get it" and actually change before your eyes-and change in ways that benefit both the individual and the organization-you see how effective Action

Coaching is. Let's look at four crucial elements that are built into the process.

Eye-Opening Perception

Believing is seeing is an Action Coaching maxim. An individual believes something is true about himself or his workplace and then selectively perceives evidence to support this viewpoint. Action Coaching jars perceptions by confronting individuals about their beliefs, using multirater (360-degree) feedback, benchmarking, shadowing (the coach observes the client in work situations and confronts him about his behaviors), and many other techniques. Other forms of coaching may involve some confrontation and personal revelations, but Action Coaching goes further and opens people's eyes to the world around them. Epiphanies take many forms, and the cumulative effect is what pushes people to change and grow. To give you a sense of what we mean, we've created a list of different experiences our clients have had and that resulted in eye-opening perception:

Hearing not only your boss but your direct reports and customers tell you that what you believe to be your tolerant attitude is actually passive-aggressive behavior

Testing a new behavior in a work situation as part of an experiment and sharing your feelings about how others reacted to you with your coach

Visiting another company and talking to someone who had to deal with the same difficult workplace changes that you're now going through

Being confronted by your coach and told that the situation has reached the point where if you don't learn to develop in a certain way, you will no longer be on track for a leadership position

Receiving information from your coach about the CEO's vision for the company, revealing why certain policy changes have been made and the need for you to make dramatic changes in the way you manage

Emphasis on Doing

As much as people may learn about seeing things differently, they also need to act on that perception. People are not allowed to go through the process and merely articulate how they've changed; they need to show they've changed. Action Coaching relationships always involve a contract for behavioral change between the coach and the person being coached. Sometimes the action is relatively simple, and Action Coaching focuses on rehearsing that action: making a call to a difficult customer, practicing confronting a problematic employee, or establishing a new, more productive relationship with a peer. Even after the formal Action Coaching program is finished, follow-up steps are still in place to ensure accountability.

For harried and time-challenged managers today, this behavioral accountability makes all the difference in the world. We've all seen people go through outstanding executive education programs, resolve to make changes in keeping with what they've been taught, but fail to do so because the real world intervenes. Although they have the best of intentions, their resolve melts in the face of too many things to do and not enough time; they slip back into comfortable old behaviors without thinking. Action Coaching usually stops this from happening and calls people on it if it does.

Recognition of Complexity in the Business World The new business world is painted in shades of gray rather than the traditional black and white.

Professor Ron Heifetz of Harvard University has identified the difference between adaptive and technical leadership, and Action Coaching is designed to deal with the former.¹ Technical challenges have clear answers. For example, a technical problem might be solved by spending more money, or a new customer service requirement might be addressed by adding personnel. Certain technical requirements are important to every business, and they demand leaders who can come up with clear, direct responses.

Adaptive challenges are messier. Clear answers are elusive, and people may have done nothing in their careers to prepare them to deal with the challenges. People in leadership positions, for instance, are used to dealing with technical issues from position power. Now they are being asked to handle adaptive matters and to do so through influence rather than position. Examples of adaptive issues include moving innovation around various global organizational offices, helping people redefine the customer service chain so they can do things differently, changing a company's culture, and helping people face and accept the reality of technology and its impact on their role.

To work with these issues effectively, people may need to do all sorts of unfamiliar things. Instead of making decisions themselves, they must involve others-toss them the ball and wait patiently for them to toss it back. They must move forward without a set-in-stone plan, managing as they go. They also must learn to work with people's frustration when there are no easy answers and subordinates feel like they're drowning in ambiguity and paradox.

Action Coaching functions as a form of support when individuals are struggling with adaptive issues. As part of the process, these people express how difficult it is working outside their comfort zone; they talk about their uncertainties and doubts about their own capabilities. Action Coaching helps them become more comfortable with new ways of leading and working; it provides the feedback, information, reflection, and experiences that give people the chance to explore how they lead, manage, and work and whether their style fits the new realities of their environment.

Tailor-Made for Transitions

Even though people face all sorts of transitions, one of the most troubling is job change among senior-level managers. People have always made this type of transition, but they have never faced the pressure to make it as quickly as they do today. Also, people are making bigger jumps. Years ago, business culture was relatively consistent. Today there can be enormous differences between companies, which may be exacerbated by mergers and acquisitions. We're working with many executives who are stuck in what William Bridges refers to in his book, *Transitions*, as "the neutral zone."² This is a place where someone has dis-identified with the old way of doing things but hasn't yet identified with the new way. It's a lonely place where people feel like they're failing to make transitions.

What's so difficult is that making the transition isn't simply a case of learning new skills. For instance, we often work with people who are moving from roles as individual contributors to ones in which they have significant management responsibility. Sometimes these people are unaware of the magnitude of this shift, or they may even be ambivalent about making the transition. In addition, they often struggle with shifts in value and philosophy. We work with professionals in the investment banking business, and many of them prefer to function autonomously. To expand their influence and compensation, however, they need to move into management roles. As part of our Action Coaching work with them, we help them focus on their mixed feelings about managing others and on how they feel about spending less time on what drew them to investment banking in the first place (having the freedom to work their own way, having their work judged based on how much money they made for the firm, and so forth).

To help people make transitions, Action Coaching provides individuals with a forum in which to express their concerns and ambivalence. Action Coaching is also a way people can receive feedback about how they may be stumbling as they take transitional steps, and it's an intervention that clearly lays out the tangible and emotional roadblocks to making a given change and showing what people need to do to get past them.

Integrating Action Coaching into Your Culture Anyone can benefit from the coaching lessons contained in this book. It doesn't matter whether your company is coaching-friendly or whether you want to coach peers, direct reports, or high-potentials. You don't need permission from your boss or formal approval from the head of HR to make this type of coaching work for you and your organization. Although certain qualities will make you a more effective Action Coach (qualities we'll delineate in a later chapter), you don't need any particular training or experience to implement this coaching process.

We write this, recognizing that you may work in an organization where there isn't a lot of internal coaching going on. Part of the problem is that coaching involves a substantial investment of time and energy in someone who may not respond to that coaching. Or someone may respond too well and be promoted out of the manager-coach's group. In addition, organizations don't always reward coaching-or at least they don't reward it in the way they reward other skills. The little coaching most managers do is on the fly. They offer good suggestions here and there, or they sit down once a year and offer a subordinate a detailed performance appraisal. What's missing is a consistent, formalized process.

About ten years ago at Honeywell, the company decided it wanted to encourage executive development on a managerial level; we recognized that development occurred through relationships that employees had with their managers. Honeywell set up awards for people who were superior developers of people, and they requested nominations for these awards. What is instructive is how everyone knew who these "developers" were. Everyone agreed that Don in marketing was terrific at coaching his people, that Mary in finance was brilliant at training her staff, and that Sam in human resources offered enormously insightful advice.

By example, you can become a quiet advocate of coaching in your organization. It's possible that management recognizes coaching's value but has no idea how to inculcate this competency throughout the company. Coaching is a soft skill that's difficult to measure, and management may be reluctant to institutionalize something that seems so fuzzy from both conceptual and implementation standpoints. Better to leave coaching to professional coaches is the usual thinking.

As professional coaches, we certainly can fill roles that insiders can't. At the same time, however, outside coaches can only do so much. A much better alternative is a combination of outside and inside coaches. For that combination to work, however, a process is needed that will meet individual and organizational objectives. A formal process reassures a company's leaders and gives them confidence that coaching is as much science as it is art. In the next chapter, you'll learn about the Action Coaching process and see how a variety of organizations have used it successfully.

Exhibit 1.1. Are You Coaching-Challenged?

Yes or No?

1. Do you feel frustrated when you attempt to help others improve their performance? Do they seem to ignore any advice or ideas you offer and resent

- any sanctions you threaten them with or impose?
2. Does it seem that you can reach people intellectually and explain what they're doing wrong but you can't reach them at a deeper level where behavioral changes occur?
 3. Do you have a number of people who work for or with you who for one reason or another are performing significantly below their potential? Have you failed to help them fulfill that potential using incentives and other motivational tools?
 4. Do you find that some of your subordinates or team members have been very successful for years with a certain work style and refuse to change that style even though it's no longer as successful as it once was?
 5. Does it drive you crazy trying to get people to recognize that the rules of the game have changed? Do they resist new policies, procedures, and cultural shifts?
 6. Are there people in your group who say one thing but do another—who verbally assure you and others that they value diversity, global thinking, and teamwork and yet consistently contradict what they say with their actions?
 7. Do you manage or work with people who could use a figurative kick in the head—who are skilled but stubborn, clinging to beliefs and practices no matter what you or anyone else say or do?
 8. Does it seem impossible to get certain people to see the big picture or at least view a situation from a fresh perspective? Does it seem that if you could get them to
 9. see things differently, they might begin to act differently?
 10. Do people you work with or for you seem to view ambiguity, uncertainty, and paradox like they're a plague? Do they have trouble making decisions when the answers aren't crystal clear?
 11. Does your group or team struggle mightily with any type of transition? Do they have one foot in the old paradigm and the other foot in the new paradigm?
 12. Do you ever wish you could accelerate the process by which people change? Does it seem that it'll take forever for them to acquire new skills, attitudes, behaviors (and that you don't have forever)?
 13. Are coworkers, direct reports, and others willing to try new approaches and open to new ideas but, in doing so, go off in a million unproductive directions? Do they make changes in the way they work but not the changes you or management want?

Exhibit 1.3. From Traditional Coaching to Action Coaching.

From Traditional Coaching	To Action Coaching
Therapist-patient relationship	Business relationship
One-size-fits-all approach to development	Individualized approach, tailored to the person's needs
Self-awareness as an end	Uses self-awareness as a means to change behavior
Focused primarily on personal insights, not action	Focused on translating insights into action toward organizational results
Unstructured approach and interactions	Specific strategy and action planning leads to performance breakthroughs
Focus on individual only; little link to organizational realities and obstacles in changing behavior	Links individual and organizational issues; sets coaching in context of environmental goals and obstacles to change

Exhibit 1.4. Contexts for Coaching.

Develop High-Potentials	Adapt to New Environmental Realities	Raise Performance
<i>Helping the person</i>	<i>Helping the person</i>	<i>Helping the person</i>
Maximize his or her potential	Adapt to changing external demands	Raise his or her performance to meet expectations
Succeed in a developmental assignment	Adapt to changing business trends	Address a performance problem
Adjust to a new position	Transition to requirements of the organizational culture	Address a problematic situation

1. HEIFETZ, R. A., LEADERSHIP WITHOUT EASY ANSWERS (CAMBRIDGE, MASS.: BELKNAP PRESS, 1994).
2. BRIDGES, W., TRANSITIONS (READING, MASS.: ADDISON-WESLEY, 1980).