

TRICKY COACHING: DEALING WITH DIFFICULT CASES IN LEADERSHIP COACHING

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Part 1:

Describe the general situation.

My coachee "Dr. Martin" (pseudonym) was head of R&D in a software company. As many of his fellow leaders in this company, he used to be one of the best software engineers. He is very bright and well connected in his company. He took over that team one year ago. He had 6 direct reports and over 3000 employees in total in R&D in 5 different locations worldwide.

He had two major challenges:

1) His leadership team was a diverse group of five men and one woman. Two of them were in The USA, one in India and the rest in Europe. Most had software development background besides of one Finance/HR and one Marketing/connection to Sales person. Dr. Martin however has had no international experience so far and has never lived abroad. His leadership team and employees have been feeling sometimes "offended" by his lack of intercultural competence on the one side and employees outside Europe felt they were less valued than the ones closer to him geographically on the other side. This became clear after a 360-feedback process has been implemented.

2) The company was facing a big strategic transformation: From selling products to selling solutions. This change meant also a mindset change within R&D. For example a much stronger connection to their customers during development time as early as possible had to be fostered. Also a new mentality of co-creation with other departments rather than developing software and throwing it over the wall to the sales people was needed. My coachee had a vague feeling that this strategic transformation also meant a change in leading his direct reports. He did however not know how exactly.

Describe your role.

A university friend of him who I coached years ago recommended me to Dr. Martin. He was looking for a coach familiar with international work on one hand and with strategic shifts and developing leadership teams on the other. After a first two hours meeting, Dr. Martin decided he wanted to work with me as his Coach. It was his first executive coaching experience and he was open to any kind of coaching process and interventions. So the positive news was that I was free to propose what I thought was appropriate and was not bound to a classical approach they have been running within their company of two hours face to face coaching every four to six weeks – *I do not know until today why anyway this was the most used approach HR wanted from external coaches.*

My coaching role comprised the following parts:

1. A first phase of analysis: interviewing him and members of his leadership team one on one and taking part as an observer on two leadership team meetings and on one big employee meeting (that was anyway set up). After that I did evaluate my observations and so far gathered data and had a goal setting meeting with Dr. Martin.
2. Coaching process included several one on one sessions, shadowing him during leadership team gatherings and facilitating feedback sessions between him and his direct reports - one on one and as a group.
3. I had besides of my coaching role sometimes a consultant role. I had supported already other clients in this transformation process from product to solution provider and used this experience and knowledge to challenge my coachee from time to time.

What made it tricky or difficult to handle?

- **Coaching cannot substitute life experience**
Dr. Martin's lack of international experience and of intercultural competence was a huge challenge. He was

open to learn but many times his learning was more intellectual and did not reach - let's say - his emotions. The two of us were looking for ways how to give him the opportunity of immersion and experience of diversity in ways that reach the heart and soul – taking into account his time constraints. As a white male in his late 40's, he has almost never experienced discrimination. A topic that has been raised by some of his employees.

- **Why change if we are successful**

His knowledge of the product was profound and his internal network immense. His company and himself have always been successful. The strategic shift was a top down process and the sense of urgency among employees low. Most people did not see why they should deviate from what made their success in the past. My coachee himself was supporting this shift but struggled himself also to change his so far well trained and successful behavior and mindset.

- **No time to refuel the car, we are busy driving**

Their routine was all around releases. Before a new software release that happened three times a year, the whole team went crazy. It was difficult then to bring them to a reflection mode. It was also difficult to set up dates for a coaching process that were long term. Long term being anything more than three months.

Part 2:

How did you approach the challenge?

Dr. Martin and I have developed together a one-year learning journey for him and his leadership team. Here are the main interventions:

1. Leadership team - new meeting routine
2. Leadership team - group coaching
3. Shadowing, observation and feedback of Dr. Martin's behavior
4. One on one coaching sessions
5. Decision diary

Here I'd like to share more details about some of these interventions:

The leadership team had a routine of a videoconference meeting of 4 hours every second week. Most of them found it difficult to interact on strategic or behavioral topics during that meeting. Also a new member from India had the need to see his colleagues more often face to face, he felt her did not manage to get his main messages about what was going on in India through to them. We agreed with the team that they are going to make the following "experiment" for one year. They will have besides of the biweekly videoconferences five two days team gatherings, one in each location and I would be with them shadowing, observing and coaching Dr. Martin during breaks and after the workshops. Counting vacation times etc. it was basically a workshop every 8 weeks that has been perceived as quite intense. At the end of the year, it has become clear that this was the best intervention of all. The following intended and not intended consequences/changes happened:

- Talking about the strategy and business transformation in India was definitely different than talking about it during a videoconference or in Europe. The leadership team members including Dr. Martin used the opportunity of being there anyway, to schedule meetings with employees and managers onsite. Some of them visited the lab there for the first time and were impressed that India was not anymore just a low cost location to outsource boring programming. It has indeed developed to be a center of competence for sophisticated software development. They met employees with high education and motivation. Fluctuation was very high because these employees were seeking for more responsibility and did not want to be treated as a cheap workforce. Even if the leadership team member from India has been trying to say so for the last year, his description stayed abstract for most of his colleagues. Dr. Martin himself was years ago the last time in India and he reported to me that he was positively shocked about the tremendous changes that happened. Now for the first time after they had this see and feel experience, the team did make major decisions to "upgrade" this location and retain their best people. The same happened at all 4 locations outside Western Europe. It was for example amazing to enter a full employee meeting in Eastern Europe and see an age average of 28 compared to 48 in Western Europe – that took on that strategic shift to offer solutions rather than products much easier. They had to be flexible all their life and find creative solutions in times of scarcity.
- I was shadowing these team gatherings and was able to coach Dr. Martin during breaks, evenings and during longer sessions after each workshop. It was very helpful for him to be able to try new things directly on the spot and get immediate feedback. Also the fact that he did introduce me as his coach showed his openness

for such a learning process. Over time more members came to me to ask for feedback. So we finally agreed that I would coach the group. But we set a border, that if any member wants individual coaching; they will have to ask for another coach.

I asked Dr. Martin to write a diary about his decisions. I believed that it is helpful for him to reflect his decisions if they match his main goals: dealing with the diversity issue and implementing the strategic shift. We would then reflect this together during regular one on one session, mainly walking around in parks. We went through personnel decisions, investment decisions etc.

What could you deal/cope with?

- His openness to learn
- Increasing his self-awareness through group-coaching and intense feedback
- Being supportive and understanding during tough times
- Being able to implement the “innovative” coaching approach during the whole year

What couldn't you deal/cope with?

- Dr. Martin had made during that year many intercultural faux pas. One situation happened in the Middle East. One of the leadership team members had a break down; he collapsed during one of these gatherings. Dr. Martin was really involved, took care of him and drove with him to hospital. The next day the team was supposed to leave the country. I urged Dr. Martin to stay one day longer with his ill mate because I felt this was important for his employees there in the lab. True, nor Dr. Martin felt it was needed, neither his sick colleague. He was fine that everybody else left and was confident to be ok after two days of rest. But here there were also other stakeholders, the employees of the Lab. After it became clear to everybody that Dr. Martin and the team had left, a small revolution happened. Almost all employees felt this was a scandal, how could their boss leave his direct report in the hospital and go, they had a big trust crisis. The wave was so strong that my coachee needed to travel back and to talk to the employees. I believe he underestimated the symbolic meaning of his behavior. Three other incidents happened, each time I had given him an advice he decided not to follow. I was frustrated and maybe could not cope with the fact that he hired me explicitly with an international background and decided not to use it. Also the reflection of these incidents was not always fruitful. I was judgmental sometimes.
- The split between my coaching and my consulting role (change management) became over time more and more difficult.
- Shadowing, observing and intense feedback during group coaching sessions was successful, however some team members tried to exploit me to get messages or decisions through to Dr. Martin. I am not sure if I was able to discover that behavior on time.
- I worked alone and took regular supervision. I did however sometimes feel need of support during the team gatherings that happened all around the world.