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# How Executive Coaching Can Fuel Professional —and Personal—Growth

By Kaveh Naficy  
and Lynn Isabella

*Based on his highly competent work and business ethic, Bill A. was recently promoted to chief financial officer (CFO) at a global chemical reprocessing company. His C-level peers (CEO, COO, CIO), looked to him to provide insights and solutions at meetings, but Bill contributed little to discussions. His modus operandi, keeping a low profile and speaking only when asked, was “just how he was.” In fact, throughout Bill’s progression in the company his quiet nature had not been of concern to most in the organization. Until now...*

Assisting executives like Bill and the organizations those executives lead become more effective is fundamental to the task of OD practitioners. Not all managers move easily into the executive suite; not all executives come equipped with all the skills and competencies to drive business strategy and not all executives necessarily see the link between their actions and their leadership. Bill didn’t. His quiet contemplation of information was described as normal for his field of expertise (auditing). He had been that way for a long time. Yet, now, as a member of the top management team, his silence started to be interpreted in different ways among the other executives, and few felt positively about it.

The CEO, intent on making key strategic changes, needed all her executive team members fully contributing and Bill was not. A decision was taken to hire an executive coach, Dan, to work with Bill.

Using Bill’s journey with his executive coach as the example, this article will

explore a model of executive coaching that can truly fuel personal and professional growth. In describing the coaching stages through which an executive proceeds as he or she becomes self aware and then changes, this article demonstrates that effective coaching is a process (not a result) and that the interactions between coach and executive must adapt and develop accordingly.

## What Exactly Is Executive Coaching?

At its best, executive coaching is a co-discovery and learning process through which the manager being coached achieves “ah-ha” moments as a result of the coach-client interactions. Well-timed and well-phrased questions with active listening help the manager see his or her behavior in ways that create connections and increase awareness. Meaningful learning occurs through experiences that result in behavior change that is sustainable and repeatable (Robbins, 2003).

Similar to process consultation (Schein, 1988) and collaborative consultation (Block, 1981) in organizational development, this process paves the way for self-discovery and ultimately, learning. By identifying distinctions and insights powerful enough to lead to self-discovery and behavioral change, coaching can create such a basis for meaningful learning. A change in thinking or feeling without change in behavior is not enough. The coach must support and reward actions that change behavior. In doing so, the individual can more easily incorporate

new behaviors and sustain them over time.

Drawing from various theories of how adults learn, we identify different stages in the meaningful learning process. These stages outline what the client experiences and highlight the different focus required by a coach. Coaching is much more systematic than simply chatting about a client's frustrations at work. It is a systematic set of interactions between coach and client as each changes over time.

### Coaching as Co-Learning and Discovery

Based on the model of Leadership Effectiveness Training (L.E.T) suggested by Thomas Gordon (2000), coaching interactions can be thought of as being dependent upon two dimensions: whether or not the client recognizes the behaviors that need to change (or aren't working) and the level of competence the client has in knowing what to do differently. Given the

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learning stage of the client, the coaching and coaching relationship require a different focus (see *Exhibit 1*).

To bring these 4 stages of the learning process to life, we return to CFO Bill.

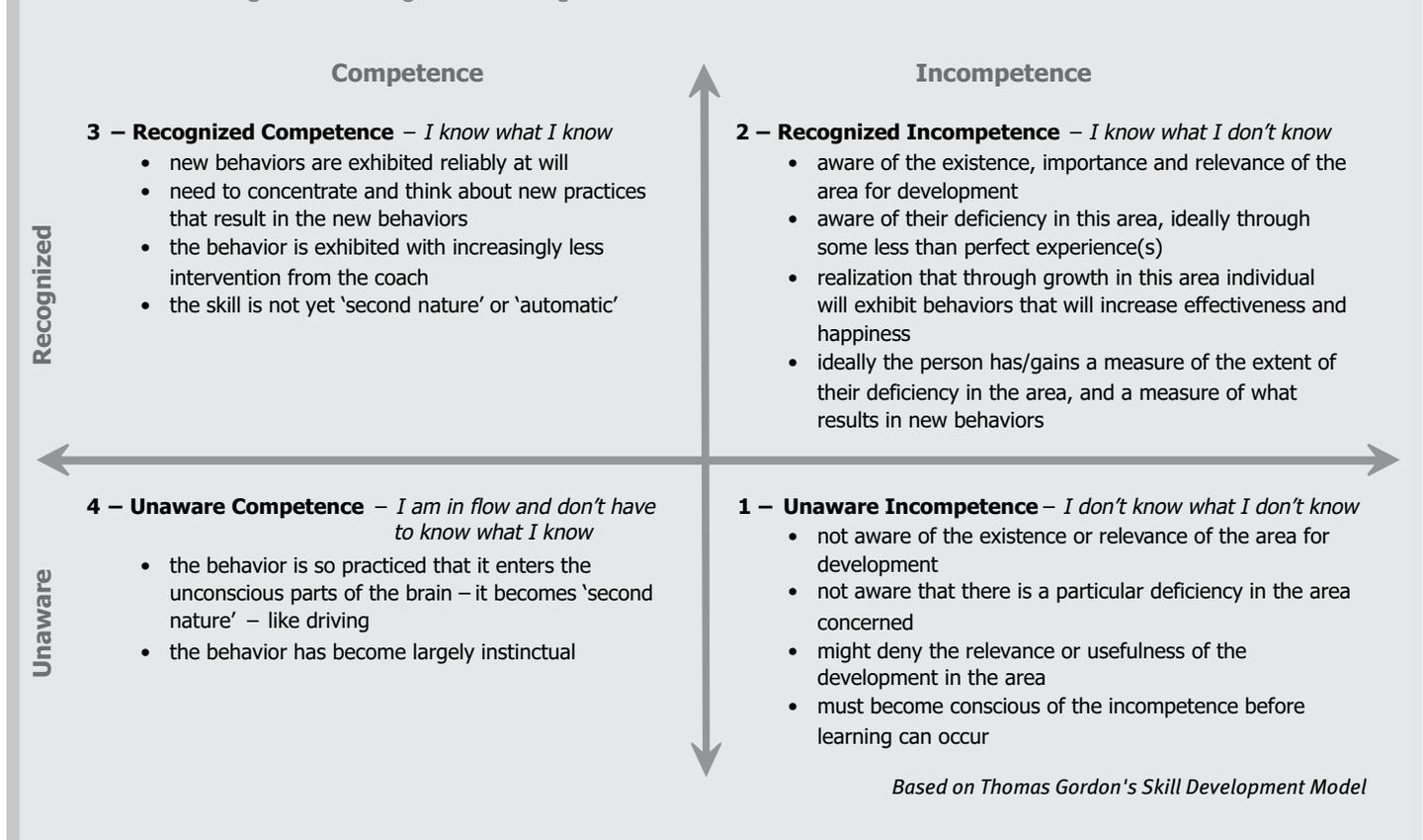
#### Stage 1: Unaware Incompetence (*I don't know what I don't know*)

Coach Dan interviewed the CEO, the head of HR, the SVP of Marketing, the previous CFO, and two of Bill's direct reports. Those initial data showed that Bill was a highly respected finance professional. They also confirmed perceptions that Bill was a loner.

Colleagues did not really know him, saying they felt uncomfortable at times asking him questions or providing feedback because he was perceived as *no nonsense*. Some said that they did not really trust Bill, as he held information close to the vest and only shared on an as-needed basis.

At their first coaching session, which was arranged by the head of HR, Dan asked, “How do you think your colleagues perceive you?” Bill had not thought much about this. In his own words, he was “normally too busy to be side-tracked by how others view me. If my colleagues are

Exhibit 1: The Stages of Learning and Coaching



anywhere near as busy as I am, I don't think they'd spend a lot of time thinking about me. I would guess that one of the reasons I'm being promoted to CFO is that they like me. Anyway, if any of them had issues with me, I'm sure they'd tell me."

**Dan is identifying thoughts, feelings, and any physical clues that point to areas for learning to increase Bill's performance. Bill is hopefully being honest and candid, allowing the coaching conversation to bring into consciousness Bill's potential blind spots. In order to break down long-standing defenses, Dan has to push back and challenge Bill's perception of himself.**

Bill is currently in the *unaware incompetence stage* of learning and coaching. As *Table 1* highlights Dan has started to explore how Bill is viewed by himself and by those around him. Dan is identifying thoughts, feelings, and any physical clues that point to areas for learning to increase Bill's performance. Bill is hopefully being honest and candid, allowing the coaching conversation to bring into consciousness Bill's potential blind spots. In order to break down long-standing defenses, Dan has to push back and challenge Bill's perception of himself.

**Stage 2: Recognized Incompetence**  
(*I know what I don't know*)

The initial meeting left Dan somewhat frustrated. Bill did not recognize any of the areas that he was hired to coach him on. Bill was an extreme introvert and highly analytical with a tendency to rely on data more than feelings. Dan needed to make him aware of his colleagues' perceptions and the areas that were threatening to derail him in his new post.

At the next session, Dan asked if Bill was interested in reviewing the feedback that Dan had collected from colleagues. "It's not going to be anything that I don't know," Bill said, "but go ahead." Dan had to be careful about how he delivered his message. On one hand, Bill needed to know his blind spots, but on the other hand, he did not want to overwhelm Bill and have him lose interest in the process. A good coach must at all times maintain

a balance between delivering authentic feedback and sensing the readiness of his client to hear the feedback.

Dan started by telling Bill how much his colleagues respected his technical knowledge and expertise. "Your colleagues

think that you hold yourself, your work, and others to the highest standards of ethics."

Visibly pleased, Bill said, "It's great to be recognized, especially in areas that are important to me. I've gotten similar feedback in my 360-degree performance evaluations."

When prodded about specific improvement areas that were highlighted in the 360 performance reviews, Bill hesitatingly responded, "There were some

vague comments about improving my ability to communicate and influence others. Also some stuff about being more of a team player and reaching out to people and not waiting until they come to me."

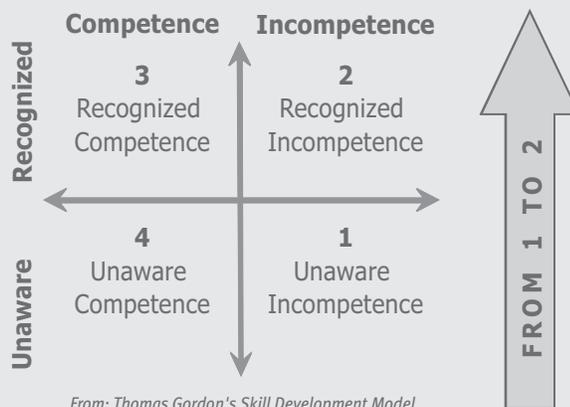
How did Bill react to those suggestions? "You know, sometimes I think some people want somebody to be holding their hands all the time. They're not competent to work on their own, so they hide behind all this mumbo jumbo to get somebody to do their work for them. Especially the loud, squeaky wheels who want all the glory and do as little work as possible."

Dan took a deep breath knowing that the moment of truth had arrived. He had to judiciously "hold up the mirror" so that Bill would recognize his colleagues' perceptions and the consequences of his behavior. "Bill," he said, "I just told you the positive aspects of what your colleagues said about you. I think you should know the full picture."

"Okay coach, let it fly," Bill said. "I'm a big boy and can take it."

Dan started, "Well, many of your colleagues, especially at the C level, are wondering if it was a mistake to promote

Table 1: Unaware Incompetence to Recognized Incompetence



From: Thomas Gordon's Skill Development Model

Involves exploration in order to identify thoughts, feelings and physical clues that point to areas for learning and increased performance. The coachee must exhibit complete honesty and openness. A contract is drawn. Both must build a level of trust that allows the coaching conversation to bring into consciousness undefined and perhaps repressed areas. At times the coach must push back and challenge in order to breakdown long-standing walls.

you.” Dan observed the startled look on Bill’s face and continued, “For some time your colleagues tried to minimize their interactions with you. One of them said, ‘It’s like gulping down foul-tasting medicine. On the one hand, you know you need it; on the other hand you try to finish as soon as you can.’

“When you were the VP of Audit, your colleagues tolerated it because they thought of you as a functional expert—so they would get what they needed and then go on their way. Now that you’re in a leadership role, many of them are concerned about the message your management style sends to the organization and the difficulty they’re going to have in developing common corporate visions, strategies, and goals with you.”

Silence. Dan held the silence until Bill responded. He wanted to base any further conversation on his client’s response. Finally, Bill said, “It’s hard for me to believe that. Why would they promote me if they felt this way?”

“I assure you that I am not making anything up,” Dan said. “I’m sharing near-unanimous feedback. Generally, the comments fall into the following areas:

- » General lack of emotional intelligence—most of your colleagues reported you are so focused on the right answer, and getting the work done,

**“I know that some people have tried to give me advice on how to manage my direct reports. But I’ve always seen these talks as distractions and dismissed them. I now realize that I’m not going to succeed as CFO unless I change my thinking. I have to get the work done through people, and my peers will not support me unless they like me. So I’m willing to do what’s necessary to make this work.”**

that you have little awareness of other peoples’ points of views, and ways to get the work done through others. Once you form an idea and get on your horse, you take no prisoners. One of them told me that you publicly embarrass your colleagues by proving them wrong.

- » You are seen as a ‘lone ranger’ or in your own bubble. In meetings colleagues feel you have information that could move a discussion along or lead to better decisions but that you’re reluctant to share your thoughts.
- » Your subordinates don’t think that you’re interested in their career development. During their weekly status reviews, you seldom ask them anything about their career aspirations or concerns. They think your concern is to get the work done.
- » Your colleagues don’t understand what your vision is for the organization and

how you see yourself in that picture.

They know you’re very concerned about detail and accuracy but have seldom heard you talk about the bigger picture.

Dan thought he would test Bill’s reactions again, suggesting this was a good time for him to ask questions. “This is a lot of information,” Bill said. “I need some time to process it.”

Bill has learned a lot in this short, yet difficult, conversation as he moved from Stage 1, Unaware Incompetence to Recognized Incompetence (Table 1). Dan’s disciplined presentation of the facts was critical in helping Bill see his behavior. He offered support to lessen the blow yet also reinforced the message being sent. He also gave Bill time to reflect before moving forward.

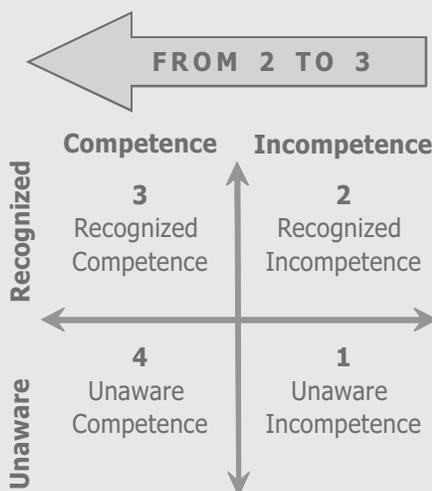
### Stage 3: Recognized Competence (I know what I know)

At their next session, Bill intimated: “I did a lot of soul searching, read over my personality report, and talked to my wife. I’d been so focused on the task at hand that I’ve been blind to a lot of cues. I know that some people have tried to give me advice on how to manage my direct reports. But I’ve always seen these talks as distractions and dismissed them. I now realize that I’m not going to succeed as CFO unless I change my thinking. I have to get the work done through people, and my peers will not support me unless they like me. So I’m willing to do what’s necessary to make this work.”

Dan was taken aback by the change in his client. “Bill, that’s a long way from where you were a couple of weeks ago. What caused your thinking to shift?”

“Actually,” Bill replied, “the biggest

Table 2: Recognized Incompetence to Recognized Competence



The key in this journey is practice. The coach and the coachee agree on practices to address targeted issues and to reinforce new learning. Disciplined execution on the part of the coachee and vigorous yet supportive reinforcement by the coach is critical. Specific examples and stories of progress is highly effective. Excellent stage for effectiveness feedback from coachee to coach.

From: Thomas Gordon's Skill Development Model

factor was my wife. After I shared the feedback, Rachel really let me have it and helped open my eyes. She sees these patterns all the time, but I ignore her when she wants to talk to me about them, or I refute it. She admitted that for some time now, she decided it was fruitless to bring them up.

“Wow, what was your reaction to all of this?” Dan asked.

“It was like a light bulb went on in my head. I’ve always drawn a curtain between my personal and professional lives and thought that the two were disconnected. Rachel told me that many times when my kids are talking to me I’m not really listening. The kids feel hurt by my lack of attention to their interests and concerns. Other times, she’s tried to take me to beautiful places and then feels like I’m not paying attention to her and am in another place the whole time.”

Over the next few months, Bill and Dan met every week for approximately one hour. In the beginning, Dan “bottom-lined” each conversation to focus on one or two issues and to put in place corrective practices that Bill agreed to follow. For example, regarding his impersonal communication style with direct reports, they decided that Bill would have regular meetings with each member of his team. During these meetings, Bill would discuss business issues, plus some of the team member’s personal and career interests and concerns. Dan told Bill to start each initial meeting by setting the context. He needed to admit to each of his reports that he felt he hadn’t done a good enough job of listening to them. He would hold meetings with them regularly and devote sufficient time.

As this was a big step for Bill, he would be highly sensitive to early setbacks. So they rehearsed, with Dan playing the role of each of Bill’s direct reports and then giving feedback. Dan was honest even if at times it meant that Bill became disappointed. One of Dan’s concerns was the level of genuine care that Bill would exhibit in the actual meetings. He suggested that Bill try to tap into not only his intellect but also his feelings. At the same time, Dan was highly supportive

by congratulating Bill on his progress. Dan coached Bill on the importance of inquiry in order to understand his people and to come across as someone genuinely invested in their success. He shared techniques to improve listening skills, and encouraged practicing at home with his family.

After four weeks, Bill was ready to conduct the first real meeting with one of his direct reports. Dan recommended starting with the person he felt most comfortable with and would be most supportive, to minimize risk of any early disaster. Bill chose Christine, a warm person with a high level of emotional intelligence. In addition, Christine respected Bill’s technical skills and valued learning from someone of his caliber.

On the morning he was to meet with Christine, Bill did something, per advice from Dan, to help him relax and be fully focused at the meeting. Before work, he stopped at his favorite bookstore and wandered among the stacks. He loved books as they gave him tremendous comfort and energy.

For Bill, the Stage 3 Recognized Competence phase demands the vigor of

practice and reinforcement (Table 3). If all goes well with Christine, Bill should continue this strategy to get where he (and his company) want to be. Through repeated behavior, Bill should show increased confidence and ease in demonstrating what he has learned.

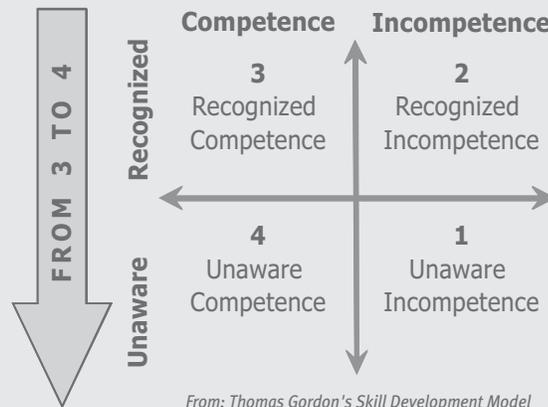
**Stage 4: Unaware Competence (I am in flow and don’t have to know what I know)**

Over the next months, Bill made significant breakthroughs as he channeled high levels of energy into improving his relationships with colleagues. His first meeting with Christine went better than expected. Through his sessions with Dan, he had become fluent in the dialogue that he needed to have, and he set the context of the meeting in advance. Once he started talking to Christine, he became genuinely interested in her as a person.

He began their meeting with some informal conversation. His explanation of his past failings, dedication to a new way, and request for help came across as genuine. For her part, being intuitive, Christine was supportive.

Once other meetings started, the other direct reports noted the real effort that

Table 3: Recognized Competence to Unaware Competence



The vigor of practice and reinforcement is continued. The coachee exhibits increasing confidence and ease in demonstrating the new learning through repeated behavior. There is less need for follow-up and reinforcement. The coach checks periodically to ensure that the new behaviors are still in place or refined as necessary. New coaching areas are identified or the relationship is terminated.

Bill put forth and made it easier on him by approaching him informally at lunch or making small talk with him during the day. For the first time, Bill felt connected at work, and subsequent meetings with his team were easier.

In the meantime, Bill continued his coaching sessions with Dan. Bill was experiencing new thoughts and emotions and felt that he lacked the ability to adequately express them. In addition, he was not sure if these feelings were imagined and temporary or real and long-lasting, but with time Bill felt increasingly confident. Gradually, Dan took on the role of interested listener and supporter. He made Bill reflect on his progress and what his next steps might be.

Dan encouraged Bill to examine ways that he could integrate his breakthroughs into his personal life. He also encouraged him to start a new dialogue with his peers and with the CEO. Often, these conversations would be over lunch or in more relaxed settings where Bill thanked his colleagues for their past support. He continued describing the areas that he needed to work on and asked their advice. For the most part, his colleagues welcomed Bill's readiness to change.

In this stage, Unaware Competence, Bill continues to demonstrate what he has learned through repeated behavior. Now there is less need for follow-up and reinforcement. The coach periodically checks to ensure new behaviors are still in place and helps refine behavior when necessary. New coaching areas may be identified or the relationship may be terminated.

### What Coaching Is Not

Coaching has become big business. There are numerous individuals, outside companies, and programs within companies designed to increase an executive's effectiveness through pairing with an individual whose role is to assist in the executive's development. Yet not all of these activities are technically "coaching," a term often used interchangeably with other development processes. *Coaching*, *mentoring* and *evaluating* are critically

distinct. The difference is grounded in whether the interactions are based on listening to another's point of view as opposed to selling someone else on your point of view.

To use Peter Senge's (1990) lexicon, the foundation for *coaching* is "inquiry," whereas mentoring and directing are primarily based on "advocacy." In coaching,

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the coach is the catalyst through which the client discovers what inherently resides in him or her. This requires the coach to be in the service of the client and not play the role of guru or evaluator. The coach must be present and "in the moment" through active listening. Coaching requires the ability not only to listen in a nonbiased manner but also to assess the feelings and emotions behind the words and at the highest level to decipher the context and the environment that surrounds the coaching dialogue.

By contrast, *mentoring* is usually based on the principle that "success breeds success." Successful executives are paired with high-potential employees, based on various criteria. The mentor takes the employee under her wing and guides her through the corporate maze. Whereas the key skills in coaching are inquiry and facilitation, mentoring relies on role modeling and offering advice.

*Evaluating* relates to targeted performance against pre-established organizational goals. A manager takes on the role of an evaluator and weighs all available information to assess the employee's performance. The employee generally complies with the evaluation in order to meet with the organizational standards for recognition, advancement, and compensation.

Because coaching, mentoring, and evaluation are different processes, they are not necessarily suited for the same situations. In fact, each process is effective under different circumstances.

Coaching is most useful when the client is open to self-discovery and participates in identifying areas for growth. It is best suited for those issues that are

not necessarily quick fixes but require exploration and reflection that result in solutions fitting the unique circumstances of the client. Coaching should never be a one-size-fits-all, mass-customized intervention.

Business mentoring is best-suited for situations that require rapid solutions within well-defined parameters and with measurable goals. For example, large pharmaceutical sales organizations traditionally follow a hierarchical structure of decision-making and execution. Speed to market is everything. Consequently, shadowing and modeling the behavior of a successful salesperson on physician visits is highly effective. The mentee assumes a passive learning role in which the sales call is scripted and well-rehearsed. The mentee observes the delivery and relationship-management skills of the experienced mentor. The mentor is expected to check in with his or her protégé, answer questions, and generally determine the extent to which the protégé has picked up the desired competencies. The behavior of the more experienced colleague becomes the benchmark. The leveraging of individual perspectives and differences is not rewarded.

*Evaluating* is another term that is sometimes interchanged with coaching. Evaluating is especially useful in

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situations where a premium is placed on measurement of performance and allocation of rewards. Effective evaluation must be based on specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals. For example, in the airline industry, on-time departure is a key measure of success. The employee's contribution to this goal is carefully measured, and evaluation is provided regarding ways in which the employee excels or needs to improve. Since on-time departure is consistently rated as a very important indicator of customer satisfaction, evaluation about it is vital to the success of the airline. By design, evaluating in this sense is not meant to encourage self-discovery. Instead, it is meant to reinforce targeted behaviors that management determines to be critical to corporate success.

### Conclusion

At the heart of effective coaching is co-discovery and learning. Not every self-described executive coach is going to provide the meaningful results that Bill and his organization experienced. Quite simply, some coaches and approaches are better than others. Credible executive coaches are not only experienced in business but have invested in learning the art of coaching from accredited coaching programs and are experienced practitioners. They develop an authentic coaching philosophy, approach and style that they communicate openly to their clients to ensure a proper fit. Excellent coaches insist on being evaluated based on results on a regular basis and encourage on-going feedback from their clients. They personify the "growth mindset" (Dweck 2006).

Equally, there are employees who may be uncoachable. Some exhibit fixed mindsets versus the growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Others feel that coaching has been forced on them by their management and it is really performance management in disguise. Still others do not have a trusting and open relationship with their coach. A number of other factors can also lead to an individual not being open to coaching. Yet, tying co-discovery and learning with these four stages of learning and coaching have, for the most part in our experience, provided a successful model. When everything works well, executive coaching can help managers increase their performance to become better employees and, as in Bill's case, happier overall.

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