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Balancing Development With Day-to-Day Task Demands: A Multiple-Goal Approach to Executive Coaching

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In the focal article, McKenna and Davis (2009) emphasize the unique value that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychologists bring to the practice of executive coaching, noting specifically our tools, which are steeped in theory and research. Although these authors make a case for our ''education and experience *as psychologists*'' (p. 245), they focus primarily on relating the practice of coaching to psychotherapy. Although we agree with this comparison, we also believe that the tools unique to the I–O psychologist's toolkit warrant more detailed exploration. In this response, we hope to demonstrate how research exploring the ways in which individuals respond to competing demands can be applied to the practice of executive coaching.

Developmental goals—those that address both short- and long-term personal and professional growth—are common elements of executive coaching relationships (Gregory, Levy, & Jeffers, 2008; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Peterson, 1996). In order for coaching to lead to successful behavior change, executive clients must pursue their developmental goals in tandem with regular task goals (e.g., balancing budgets, managing talent, and strategic planning). We suggest that one of the *active ingredients* of effective executive coaching is helping clients to pursue developmental goals in the face of competing demands. Generally, tasks that are perceived as the most urgent are likely to receive the most immediate attention (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003). As a result, developmental goals, which often lack the concrete outcomes of task goals, can easily fall by the wayside. By understanding how individuals make decisions about allocating their resources among competing tasks, executive coaches can help their clients manage multiple demands and devote the necessary resources toward personal and career development.

Applying Multiple-Goals Research to Executive Coaching

It has long been understood that individuals who are given difficult and specific goals perform better than individuals who are told to ''do their best'' (Locke & Latham, 2002). Furthermore, in order for goals to influence behavior, individuals must receive feedback about whether their goals have been

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attained (Taylor, Fisher, & Ilgen, 1984). Therefore, two primary roles for coaches are helping their clients to set developmental goals and giving feedback regarding progress toward these goals (Gregory et al., 2008). Although goals and feedback provide an important starting point for motivating developmental behavior, it is our belief that in order for coaches to help their clients develop their skills and abilities they must take a multiple-goal perspective. By understanding how individuals allocate limited resources toward competing demands, executive coaches will be better able to help their clients focus on developmental goals. Drawing on central ideas from multiple-goal research, we provide three specific ways in which executive coaches can utilize findings from the multiple-goal research. Specifically, we address the importance of setting specific developmental goals with high expectancies, providing feedback regarding progress toward developmental goals, and linking developmental goals to incentives.

Set developmental goals with high expectancies. One of the key findings from the multiple-goal literature is that individuals tend to allocate resources toward goals that have a reasonable chance of being achieved (Kernan & Lord, 1990; Louro, Pieters, & Zeelenberg, 2007; Schmidt & Dolis, 2009; Schmidt, Dolis, & Tolli, 2009; Schmidt, Northcraft, & Ashford, 2008). When the chances of achieving more than one goal within a given time frame are perceived to be low, resources are typically diverted from the task with the least chance of being achieved (i.e., the lower expectancy) and allocated toward the task with the greater chance of being achieved (Schmidt & Dolis, in press; Schmidt et al., in press). It is important for coaches to set developmental goals that are seen as achievable both *by themselves* and *along with the other goals*.

One way coaches can facilitate expectancy is to use a ''ramped'' approach to setting developmental goals; that is, set goals that are easily accomplished early in the coaching relationship. Research has shown that a ramped approach builds self-efficacy (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002) and thus should increase individuals' expectancy for achieving developmental goals in tandem with day-to-day job tasks. For instance, an appropriate starting goal for an executive client who is generally disorganized and reactive may be cleaning off and organizing his/her desk at the end of every workday. Subsequent goals for enhancing organization and reducing reactivity may include actively planning priorities for the week every Monday morning or scheduling an hour of ''catch up'' time twice a week to look ahead and plan for upcoming demands and challenges.

Provide feedback on developmental progress. Once developmental goals are set, individuals must receive specific feedback in order for behavioral change to occur (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Taylor et al., 1984). The feedback that individuals receive regarding their development is of critical importance because it serves as a signal of goal progress. In multiple-goal contexts, individuals tend to allocate the most resources toward the goal that is the farthest from being completed (Schmidt & DeShon, 2007; Schmidt & Dolis, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2009). Furthermore, goals that receive the most feedback are likely to be perceived as the most urgent and thus will receive the greatest amount of attention, time, and effort (Ashford & Northcraft, 2003; DeShon, Kozlowski, Schmidt, Milner, & Wiechmann, 2004; Schmidt et al., 2008). Therefore, coaches can use feedback to direct clients' attention toward their developmental goals.

The frequency with which feedback is delivered varies considerably across tasks, organizations, and individuals. For instance, although feedback regarding overall job performance may only come annually or semiannually in the form of a performance appraisal session, feedback may come directly from the task itself (making feedback nearly continuous). Coaches should be attuned to the organizational and

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individual norms for providing both formal and informal feedback, as well as identify ways in which they can contribute uniquely with their own feedback regarding developmental goals. Executive coaches can also focus on enhancing a client's feedback orientation (London & Smither, 2002), which is likely to positively impact his/her receptivity to feedback and inclination to actively seek feedback from others.

Identify incentives for development. Schmidt and DeShon (2007) found that individuals allocated more time to a task that had a monetary incentive associated with performance than a task that had no monetary incentive. The most obvious application of this finding to coaching is providing monetary incentives to individuals who meet their developmental goals. Although it may not be within the purview of the coach to provide such incentives, executive clients could be proactive in bringing attention to developmental progress and performance improvement during annual reviews. Schmidt and DeShon also found that individuals allocated more time to tasks with incentives that were framed as losses as opposed to tasks with incentives that were framed as gains. Thus, framing can be used to strengthen the effects of incentives. For instance, coaches could frame accomplishment of developmental goals as requisite for retaining the level of success already achieved rather than ''extra'' or ''bonus'' skills that are not actually required to perform one's job. In fact, this type of goal framing would be in line with recent work suggesting that continuous development is necessary for successful job performance (Silverman, Pogson, & Cober, 2005).

Coaches can also foster motivation to develop by helping individuals identify tangible incentives that are associated with development. Although the payoff associated with meeting a developmental goal may be greater than that associated with meeting a day-to-day goal, the benefits of developmental behaviors may not be immediately apparent. For example, meeting a developmental goal of improved communication with subordinates may have much larger implications than meeting the smaller goal of successfully negotiating a deal with a client, but the payoff for the former is less immediately apparent than the latter. Thus, although development may be valued by clients and their organizations, rewards are often attached to more proximal outcomes, making it less likely that individuals will engage in developmental activities (Kerr, 1975). By emphasizing future outcomes (e.g., a raise, better work–life balance, and improved relationships with colleagues) when setting developmental goals, coaches can increase the likelihood that a client will choose to engage in developmental behaviors when other goals compete for his/her time.

Concluding Remarks

McKenna and Davis suggest that the active ingredients of executive coaching have identifiable analogs in psychotherapy. Although we agree, we also believe that the basic I–O literature has much to offer. For instance, recent research in I–O psychology may guide executive coaches in helping their clients balance day-to-day demands with developmental efforts. More and more individuals are required to develop their skills in order to stay competitive in rapidly changing work environments (Silverman et al., 2005). Furthermore, developmental goals are not pursued in isolation but rather in concert with day-to-day goals that often seem more pressing. By understanding how individuals are likely to allocate resources like time, effort, and attention, executive coaches can more effectively help clients set and achieve developmental goals. It is our contention that this multiple-goal balancing act is one of the critical active ingredients of effective coaching.

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