

# Coaching High Performing and High Potential Clients

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The two day meeting was devoted to the challenges posed for organizational coaches when they are sitting across from a client who has a record of high performance or has been designed as a high potential employee. As a first step in making sense of these challenges, we have identified five different kind of clients (two of which are high performers and high potentials) and suggested ways in which these five types pose both different and similar challenges. Perhaps most importantly, three of these types tend to be deficit-based while the high performer (HPER) and high potential (HPOT) clients are coming from a position of strength and accomplishment.

## From Deficit-Based to Strength Based Coaching

### Level One: Remediation: Available to Problematic Employees

Many organizations offer coaching at this first level and organizational coaching has acquired a very negative reputation in many organizations precisely because it is associated with “losers.” These problematic employees may have never lived up to their potential or have leveled off or declined in their performance. In some instances, these are employees who have recently made a series of mistakes or been disruptive in their work with other employees or customers (inside and outside the organization). Two issues of IJCO (reference) have featured case studies in which a problematic employee has received coaching. In both of these cases, the coaching was not successful—highlighting the exceptional challenge associated with coaching at this first level. Typically, the level one client is not motivated to either examine or change his behavior and often feels quite threatened by the entire coaching process.

### Level Two: Available to All Employees at a Certain Level

As professional coaching has become more widespread and acceptable in many countries it has in many instances simply become one of the standard offerings of the Human Resource Department—along with such activities as leadership development programs, software training sessions and career awareness days. While any employee at a certain level of the organization (usually at least at a managerial level) may be able to avail themselves of coaching services, it is usually provided under the assumption that

the coaching client is in need of some support—the coach provides an opportunity for reflection and dialogue on the part of the client (combining the role friend and counselor), for motivation and guidance regarding a specific performance issue (combining the role of coach and performance manager) or some knowledge or skills training (often blending the role of coach and educator). In each case the client is assumed to be lacking something that the coach can help provide (or can at least assist in helping the client find clarity regarding the deficit and identify resources that can be used to overcome this deficit).

### **Level Three: Developmental**

Increasingly, we are finding that organizational coaching is being linked to (even coupled with) other developmental initiatives that the impact of these initiatives can be strengthened and sustained. We find this to be particularly the case with leadership and management development program. There is substantial evidence suggesting a much great retention and use of the knowledge and skills offered in leadership and management development programs if each participant has a coach who is knowledgeable about the principles and competencies embedded in the developmental program.

While this third level is certainly framed as a positive step which enables a leader or manager to be more emotionally intelligent and do an even better job of influencing other people. It is still founded on the assumption that something is lacking in the manager or leader that the developmental program and coaching can address. In many instances, the deficit is nothing more than a lack of experience—the newly appointed manager or the woman or man who has just assumed a major leadership role is given an opportunity to accelerate their learning while assuming this increased responsibility. In other cases, the deficit may be framed as an overuse of existing strengths, the shifting of tactics or strategies in response to shifting technology or customer needs, or the movement into a new organizational culture.

### **Level Four: High Potential**

Obviously, there is not clear line to be drawn between these five levels. Certainly, a developmental approach to coaching can be blended with a level four focus on the high potential employee. The man or women who shows great promise will be often given the opportunity to participate in managerial or leadership development programs – this is a frequent component of most “fast-track” programs. There is something more, however, that operates at level four. This form of coaching focuses on the HPOT’s strengths and on the leveraging of these strengths for the benefit of the organization. The HPOT typically possesses some distinctive abilities that are not easily learned by or “trained into” the average manager or formal leader. The high potential is a race horse who should never be strapped to a plow. As we will note throughout this article, many of the strategies that can be effectively employed in level one, two and three coaching are also appropriate for level four coaching. There are some distinctive challenges, however, that require distinctive strategies or, at the very least, variants on the more traditional levels one, two and three strategies. We will identify some of these coaching strategies in this article and provide several case studies from our own organizations to illustrate and illuminate these strategies.

### **Level Five: High Performance**

What about the level five coaching client? This is a person who is already performing at a very high level. This is not only a race horse that shows great promise—this is a race horse that has already won many races in a specific class. The challenge is to help this “race horse” move up to an even higher class of performance and to win even higher class stakes for the organization that is fortunate to have this person in its “stable.” Once again, many of the level one, two, three (and four) strategies are applicable. We propose, however, that there are some coaching strategies that only make sense for these HPER employees. They face distinctive challenges in part because of their success. They can benefit from exceptional organizational coaching precisely because they are often placed in a class by themselves, and as a result feel isolated and even under-appreciated (or at least frequently mis-understood). As in the case of level four, we will suggest several distinctive coaching strategies for HPER employees and illustrate these strategies with coaching initiatives in our own organization.

Before moving to these descriptions and case studies, we will identify several of the key principles of effective coaching that underlie all five levels of coaching—but will then turn to ways in which these key principles get applied distinctively when working with HPOT and HPER clients.

## **Fundamental Coaching Perspectives**

As we specifically review the coaching strategies that should be engaged when working with high performance and high potential clients, it is important first to identify several of the fundamental perspectives that underlie effective coaching. In each case we will identify ways in which these perspectives are tailored for work with these two client populations.

### **Challenge and Support**

First, coaching will be effective if it balances off challenge and support. To the extent that the coach challenges her client—by offering penetrating questions, encouraging ambitious goals or confronting her client’s assumptions—then she must also offer support—by offering encouragement, identifying strengths and opportunities (an appreciative perspective), or suggesting resources that her client might engage that can be used to meet the challenge. Nevitt Sanford has suggested that all significant adult learning requires this balancing of challenge and support. Cziksentsimahali similarly suggested that high levels of motivation and performance (what he identifies as a “flow” experience) are inevitably associated with the threshold between anxiety (challenge without support) and boredom (support without challenge). We will propose later in this article that levels of both challenge and support are distinctive for high potential and high performance clients.

We propose that high performing and high potential clients are likely to bring their own challenge to the coaching session. They are likely to be perfectionists and work-aholics. The coach often helps the high performing and high potential clients find ways in which to build support that matches the challenge. This often means, encouraging these clients to establish better work-life balance, to recognize the potential for “burn out” and to recognize the need for more external support (doing more delegating, seeking out expert advice from other people, learning how to open up regarding their own personal

vulnerabilities). While the troubled employee/client is likely to avoid challenges (though must take on the challenge of developmental improvement), the high potential and high performance clients are likely to overlook the support that they need to sustain their exceptional or potentially exceptional work.

### **Information, Intentions and Ideas**

A second fundamental perspective concerns the domains in which coaching takes place. At times, the coach and client must focus on issues related to the domain of information. These are the moments when the coach and client become “realistic”—seeking to gain a clear understanding and appreciation of the current situation in which the client finds herself. At other times, the coach and client must operate in the domain of intentions. In this domain, the coach and client become “idealistic”—seeking to gain a clear understanding and appreciation of the situation in which the client would like to find herself. What are the outcomes, the aspirations, the purposes of the client’s work? The third domain is that of ideas—what actions should be taken to move from the current situation (“real” state) to the desired situation (“ideal” state)? An effective coaching engagement is one in which the coach and client move through all three of these domains: information (current situation), intentions (ideal situation) and ideas (moving from the current to the ideal). We will propose that high performing and high potential clients work in a somewhat different manner than other coaching clients with regard to these three domains.

Organizational coaches will often find that their high potential and high performance clients like to linger in the domains of intentions and ideas. They are often high-stake dreamers who readily translate these dreams (domain of intentions) into action (domain of ideas). Conversely, the troubled client is likely to be stuck in the domain of information. They are struggling to understand and appreciate the situation in which they now find themselves or to accept the reality of their troubling conditions. This, in turn, means that the coaching of high potential and high performance clients may require that the coach encourages her client to focus on the third domain—information. These clients are often not very realistic. They are workaholics in part because they ignore or seek to overcome the limitations inherent in their current situation. Conversely, the troubled employee must move beyond the domain of information by identifying their own personal aspirations and the action steps they must take to move out of their current situation. These troubled employees need a motivating vision and energizing action plan, whereas the high potential and high performing clients already have enough motivation and enough energy – they need to find a way in which this motivation and energy can be sustained – and this usually requires greater attention to the reality of their current situation.

### **Puzzles, Problems and Mysteries**

A third fundamental perspective concerns the nature of the issues being addressed. In some instances, the coaching engagement focuses on issues that can be labeled “puzzles.” These issues are uni-dimensional, with clear outcomes. The client will typically discover that he has considerable control over the context in which the issue exists (an internal locus of control) and the primary role of his coach is to assist in building a tactical solution to this puzzle. There is a second kind of issue that can be labeled a

“problem.” These coaching issues are “messy.” They are multi-dimensional and embrace outcomes that may be contradictory. “Mysteries” comprise a third kind of coaching issue. Coaching issues that are filled with mystery will inevitably be profound and encompass many large, elusive and unmeasurable challenges. A coaching mystery is usually outside the control of the client (external locus of control). The coach can be helpful to his client by helping her recognize that the issue is a mystery (and not either a puzzle or problem) and that it is to be appreciated but not necessarily addressed in any direct manner.

As in the case of the other two fundamental perspectives, the high performing and high potential client is likely to differ in some important ways from the troubled employee/client. First, the high potential and high performance client is likely to frame coaching issues as puzzles and assume that they ultimately have control of the issue being addressed ( a strong internal locus of control). The coach plays an important role when they help their client recognize that many of the issues that they are facing are problems (or even mysteries) not puzzles. These second and third type of issues are not readily solved – therefore requiring patience (which is not always found among high potential and high performing clients). Furthermore, it is not even clear when the issue has been successfully addressed if it is a problem or mystery. High performing and high potential clients like to know that they have been successful—that is part of the reason they work so hard. As a result, they are readily frustrated when facing issues that have no simple solutions or readily measurable results. Furthermore, these clients must acknowledge that many of the issues they are bringing to the coaching session require the assistance of other people. They can’t solve these problems and mysteries by working harder, smarter or with more commitment. Collaboration and trade-offs are often required if the coaching issue is a problem; acceptance and patience may be required if the coaching issue is a mystery. A supportive coach can serve an invaluable role in helping the high performance and high potential client face the major personal challenges of collaboration, trade-off, acceptance and patience.

Most importantly, problems often involve dilemmas, paradox and polarities. By being highly successful in resolving one aspect of a problem, the high potential and high performing client may be unsuccessful in resolving another aspect or may actually create a new problem as a result of their success. Other employees, for instance, may grow too dependent on the high performing client—hence making the high performer “indispensable” and the organization more vulnerable. Similarly, high potential clients might create conditions in which unrealistic expectations are made about their ability to perform a specific task—thus leading to failure and a future under-estimation of the high potential’s abilities (or motivation). There are often polarities with regard to control when a client is faced with a problem (rather than a puzzle). The client typically has control over part of the context but not all of it (a combination of internal and external locus of control). The coach can help his client discern the areas in which she does and does not have control, and helps his client build a strategic solution to the problem.

## **Distinctive Strategies When Coaching High Performers or High Potentials**

While these fundamental strategies must be applied when working with any coaching client—and are particularly important when working with high performing and high potential clients—there are several

specific strategies that we believe to be distinctively important when working with these two kinds of clients. These specific strategies have to do with flexibility, results, alignment and experimentation.

### **Flexibility**

While organizational coaches must always be flexible in their work with colleagues, the challenge of flexibility is particularly important when working with high potential and high performing clients. As we noted above, these two kinds of coaching clients are inclined to assume an internal locus of control. They tend to “take charge” – even when interacting with their coach. This means that the coach must move with the client. The client sets the agenda and shifts from session to session with respect to the issues they want to address and the way in which they want to work with their coach. This also means that a coach must often encourage their client to find her own solution to the issue that is being addressed. While all coaching should focus on client-generated solutions, this orientation is particularly important when working with the high potential and high performing client. The coach must therefore be flexible and responsive with regard not only to the setting of agendas and to a client’s identification of and definition of coaching issues, but also to solutions that are being generated by the client in response to these coaching issues.

This flexibility and responsiveness comes with a caveat. On occasion, a coach must take a firm stance or at least a persuasive attitude with regard to their client’s issues and ways of working in the coaching relationship. As we noted, high performing and high potential clients are inclined to frame their coaching issues as puzzles rather than either problems or mysteries. They want to believe in their own ability to resolve the issue using their own expertise and energy. The coach must, at times, challenge their client to recognize the complexity of the issue they face—it will only be successfully addressed with the assistance and support of other people. An external locus of control must be adopted (along with an internal locus) if this coaching problem or mysteries is to be confronted in a realistic manner. This may, in turn, mean that the coach encourages her client to move into the domain of information (realism) when seeking to more fully understand and appreciate the nature of the problem or mystery they are facing. Thus, flexibility on the part of the coach must at times be tempered with a dose of coaching persistence and confrontation.

### **Results**

We have mentioned that high potential and high performing clients often dwell in the domain of intentions as well as the domain of ideas. This often translates into a focus on results. They want to know that they are doing a good job and want to be able to measure or at least observe tangible evidence of their productivity. The high performing clients are accustomed to delivering results and to being rewarded (tangibly and intangibly). They are also inclined to savor successful performance for a very short period of time. They soon say “what’s next?” An organizational coach might wish to slow down this process and encourage their client to reflect on the reasons for their success (the domains of information and ideas), as well as the reason why their performance is being identified as a success by them and their organization (the domain of intentions). Often it is particularly challenging when a high performance client is encouraged to stop for a minute to reflect on what has just occurred. They would

rather push forward than look backwards. Under these conditions, the challenge offered by the coach must be matched by support. The coach needs to reassure her client that this reflection will benefit future performance and help the client avoid future burn-out.

The high potentials are probably already performing above expectations and are ready to excel in their current job or in a new job. An organizational coach who works with high potential clients must be prepared to focus frequently on the domains of intention and ideas and on the ways in which intentions are realized through the translation of ideas into actions. As in the case of the high performance clients, the high potential clients might be encouraged by their coach to pause for a moment to reflect on the reasons why they are being considered to be above-expectation performers. This challenge must be balanced with support from the coach. High potential employees are often worried that they can not meet the expectations—they might be “found out” and be a disappointment to people they wish to impress. The coach can be supportive by being empathetic and by assuring their client that it is common for high potential employees to be concerned about their future performance.

Some time, an organizational coach must be ready to assist in the identification or definition of results. Their client can benefit greatly from articulate statements from the coach regarding what successful results look like in a specific organizational context. Results are congruent with the culture of the organization and with the tactical or strategic plans of the organization. At other times, the organizational coach asks the provocative question that challenges their client to be more thoughtful about the results they wish to achieve or are already achieving: “how will you know that you have been successful?” “How will other members of this organization interpret the outcomes of your work?” “What are the short term and the long term implications of your successful performance in this organization?” These provocative questions often lead the client and coach into the domain of information: “What exactly are the expectations of this organization regarding your performance?” For the high performing client the more specific question might be: “Why do you think you have been identified as a high performing employee?” There is a similar question to be asked of the high potential client: “Why do you think you have been identified as a high potential employee?” In both cases, the answer to this question may say something about the values of the organization and about the alignment between these organizational values and those held by the client.

## **Alignment**

While a high performing or high potential client may dwell and want to work extensively in the domains of intentions and ideas, they are not necessarily skillful or successful in addressing all of the issues that reside in these domains. The challenges of work/life balance and work-aholism are often wrapped up in the client’s inability or unwillingness to identify all of the intentions (values, vision, purposes) that are operating in their life. To what extent are the intentions embedded in their work life aligned with the intentions embedded in their personal life? When they spend that extra four hours at the office or bring two hours of work home with them every night, are they damaging their family life? What about devoting time to their own restoration. As Roger Rosenblatt has noted, the appointment we are most likely to cancel is the appointment we have made with ourselves (healthy exercise, an unhurried lunch, an evening spent with a novel).

There are also the alignment issues associated with ethics and organizational values. Are there times during the coaching session when the coach and client should explore the extent to which the client's exceptional or potential performance are misaligned with specific organizational values or with fundamental ethics? Do the ends always justify the means? Are the client's personal values aligned with formal organizational values or with the unacknowledged values that "really" operate in the organization? Being very busy and very successful (or potentially very successful), has the coaching client spent sufficient time reflecting on these deeper levels of the intentional domain? Is it appropriate for the organizational coach to challenge her client regarding these alignment issues? While employees who are "in trouble" may try to deflect the challenges they face by focusing on the misalignment between their own values and aspirations and those of the organization, the high performing and high potential clients are more likely to ignore this misalignment, having focuses their attention and energy on getting the work done rather than focusing on the fundamental reasons why their work is of value to them and their organization.

### **Experimentation**

Both high performing and high potential employees are often risk-takers. They like to leap over the cliff and are confident about their own ability to fly when leaping over the cliff. They set the challenges high and find "flow" by moving the bar up to a very high level. This also means that these clients sometime take the wrong risk and not only crash, but also bring other employees with them. Alternatively, they expect their co-workers to be risk-takers or make great demands on other employees so that they might accomplish unrealistic goals. As we already mentioned, the high performers and high potentials often do not pay sufficient attention to the domain of information and leap off the cliff without knowing how far they will fall or the size of the parachute they have strapped to their back (or even if they are carrying a parachute!!).

Under these conditions, the coach can be very helpful when encouraging and guiding their client in the identification of and planning for a responsible and reasonable risk. This often means that the coach helps his client set up one or more "experiments"—pilot testing a new idea, running demonstration projects, creating a safe place (sanctuary) in which new ideas can be moved to action in manner that allows for "safe risks" and encourages organizational learning (Senge, Argyris and Schon). The coach might ask: "Where can you safely test out this idea?" or "What are ways in which you can learn much more about the feasibility/practicality of this program idea?" Sometimes this is labeled "thought experiments" and the work of the client and coach all occurs through conversations rather than actual actions or through computer simulations.

### **Conclusions: The Authentic Engagement**

In our ongoing conversations about the art and science of providing coaching services to high performance and high potential clients, we frequently returned to the essential character of the coaching engagement. The term "authentic" kept appearing during these conversations. It seems that the high performing and high potential client is also likely to be very bright with regard to interpersonal relationships. These clients can readily pick out inauthentic behavior and expect the people with whom

they work to be honest and straight-forward in their interactions with the client. This also usually means that the authenticity has to be exhibited while both parties to the interaction are “on the move.” This requires an authenticity that is spontaneous—a sense of being “present” in the moment.

Clearly, there is no readily available formula regarding how to be “authentic” or “present” in relationship with one’s client. Any preplanning or formulaic response would, by definition, be inauthentic. Our own sense is that the risk-taking exhibited by high performers and high potentials should also be embraced by the coach. More than is the case with other coaching clients, the work with these two challenging client groups requires the application of new approaches to coaching and an open and ongoing dialogue with a client regarding the nature and purpose of the coaching engagement (what is often called the “meta-conversation” that occurs in effective organizational coaching). The high potential and high performing client will appreciate the willingness of their coach to be candid about the challenges being faced in their mutual engagement and are likely, in turn, to be candid themselves in talking about their hopes and concerns. In such a setting, the high potential of the coaching engagement is likely to evolve into high performance for both the coach and client.

## Appendix: Flipchart Recordings

### Group One

Troubled Employees vs. Personal Potential

Cultural Differences

Coaching plus mentoring plus orienting plus internal promotion

Targets: awareness, support, strong action vs. awareness of current ideal, act differently

Performance Level/Awareness	High	Low
High	High Performers	Potential Stars
Low	Willing Problematic Performers	Resisters

### Group Two

#### A) Overall Strategies

Coach Flexibility  
Holistic Approach

Client

Coach

Corporation

Alignment Strategy  
Consulting Responsibility

#### B) Areas of Attention

Business Results

Team Interaction

Interpersonal Behavior

## Group Three

High performers: deliver results

High potentials: perform above expectations/ready to excel/ positive assessment results

Criteria is set by the company (human resources)

### High Performers/Potentials

Perfectionism

Burn-out

Life/work balance

“What’s next” focus

### Troubled Employee/Anyone

Trust-building

Safety

Strength-based approach

Intention-Building

### Common

Transparency of contract

Exploring “what is”

Create awareness

Choice

360/Assessing results

Vision

Group Four

	High Performers	Troubled Employees
Agenda	Own/Internal	External
Strategy	Challenge	Support

Climate and Launch

Willingness

Safe Boundaries

Sell/awareness

HR Role

Management Role

More similarities than differences between coaching to high performers/potential and coaching to troubled employees

Above 5 criteria differentiate among coaching strategies more than type of coaching client being served

Group Five

High Potentials and		Employees being
High Performers	[In Between]	in trouble
1-----8-9-19		1-----10

Strategy

Challenge 1-----8-9-

Support Support 1-----10

Domains

## Nature of Coaching Problem

### High Performers

Most Likely: Puzzles

Next Most Likely: Mysteries

Least Most Likely: Problems

Transparency

### Employee who are in trouble

Most Likely: Problems

Next Most Likely: Mysteries

## Group Six

- Bigger Picture
- Empathy (\*)
- Active Listening (\*)
- Different perspective
- System level awareness(\*)
- Holding Accountable
- Recognition/Honoring (\*)
- Being Supportive
- Asking powerful questions
- Challenging (\*)
- Awareness
- Present in the Moment
- Presence (\*) [We/Turkey/Culture awareness
- Metaphor
- Reflective
- Slowing down (\*)
- Experiment (\*)
- Focusing on body
- Use of self

## Group Seven

- Use of self
- Being natural and authentic
- Managing the paradox of flowing with story and paying attention to process
- Clear coaching contract and its impact
- Working with polarities
- Using experiments (role-playing)

## Group Eight

- Spontaneity/creativity/playful spirit
- Intuition
- Courage/daring/risk+
- Deep listening and acknowledgement/appreciation
- Creating/building the relationship (it's the relationship that heals!)
- Trust-building
- Being present
- Patience
- Powerful observation and feedback
- Staying in the unknown
- Staying curious

## Group Nine

One has to focus on himself to enhance his/her project success

Result oriented is a must (desperate search for answers, suspicious!) (“what’s in it for me?”)

Coaching should acknowledge the aim of the coachee!

Feel free to move out of the boundaries – both coach and coachee

Requisite variety: different hats for the coach (both the context and deep brain)

Client is the expert – so to self-awareness is crucial

High performers (too business oriented) barrier

## Group Ten

You should respect and honor: enhance/start the voyage

Respect *Time* urgency

## Group Eleven

- Building bridge
- Interactive influence between personal system and multi-dimension of the organization
- How important is combination of coaching and consulting
- Responding with understanding of the level of customer-“what XXX wants”

## Insights

- Strong presence/owning presence
- Supporting client for their own solution
- Believing in human potential
- How do I manage myself and presence? How do I support myself?
- Observing and adapting to client
- Balancing support and challenge
- How client’s issues are coming alive in the moment
- Accepting our differences in the service of our client
- Honoring the shadow
- Naming and using the polarity
- Limits in us (glass barriers)
- Who’s work is it?
- Keeping client’s agenda
- Having the fun part!!