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Name:

Roni Holcomb

Title:

Coaching Good People to Excellence

The Results:

Sometimes, being brilliant is not enough. As many companies are finding out, preparing executives for senior leadership roles requires more than verifying their intelligence and experience. If a person has the talent and drive to be a great leader, but lacks the skills to manage people, the move is doomed.

However, one-on-one coaching might help salvage the situation. Many organizations have embraced this option by turning to Veronica J. Holcomb, of VJ Holcomb Associates, who offers executive coaching to promising individuals. A large company recently asked Holcomb to work with one of its best performers and develop her into an effective leader.

The executive was smart, well educated, and supremely talented. She also completed her assignments and hit every goal placed before her. So what was the problem with this dream manager?

“She treated her subordinates very badly,” Holcomb says. “She had an unapproachable demeanor and threw a number of temper tantrums.”

In addition to the mistreatment of her employees, the executive had a disorganized approach to work and often leaped to solutions with little explanation or foresight. She did not value those who made “lesser” contributions, and she blatantly played favorites with her subordinates.

“Her department was definitely not a meritocracy,” Holcomb says. “She just did not recognize her responsibility to develop her employees.”

The company did not want to replace the executive, despite her many interpersonal problems. Senior management believed that coaching her would be a sound investment.

“They knew that replacing her would be difficult due to her unusual combination of talent and skills,” Holcomb says. “And it would cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

So the company asked Holcomb to help the executive recognize her role as a leader in the organization. They also wanted the executive to develop an appreciation for others’ contributions and to be consistent in the treatment of her colleagues. And of course, they wanted their rising star to improve her organizing skills and be more patient.

Holcomb set out to discover the reasons for her client’s difficulties with people. To accomplish this, she interviewed the executive’s past and present bosses, colleagues, customers, and followers. It was a huge undertaking, but it revealed several possible causes for the problems.

The fact that the executive had little experience managing was a clear root cause, as was the poor mentoring she had received for the role. However, an even more important factor was that the executive had no knowledge of her own behavioral style. In addition, she also had made no effort to understand her subordinates and was guilty of intellectual arrogance.



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“She didn’t respect people unless they were her intellectual equal,” Holcomb says. “That led to a lot of her negative behavior.”

To get the executive thinking about the consequences of her actions, Holcomb assigned *DiSCã PPSS* to her as pre-work. When the two of them met for their first session, Holcomb and the executive talked about the instrument’s results, but only the portions they felt were relevant to the client’s needs. Holcomb did not feel it necessary to discuss everything in the report. It was part of her philosophy to keep the sessions flexible.

“The first time we met, it was mostly ‘just talking,’ ” Holcomb says. “The goal was to deal with issues and solutions steadily throughout the training, rather than forcing a lot of information upon her.”

Holcomb’s experience and her understanding of the client’s needs allowed for an intuitive process to form, where she could pick relevant instruments as the need arose. Holcomb stresses that to do this, she had to possess a thorough knowledge of many tools.

Among the instruments that Holcomb believed would benefit the executive was the *Dimensions of Leadership Profileã*. She administered the profile to the executive, but then Holcomb went a step farther by having the executive’s boss and the human resource director also respond to the instrument. Discussing the differences among the three individuals’ results was an eye-opening experience for her client.

“She saw that her leadership talents did not always correspond to other people’s preferences,” Holcomb says. “And she realized that just because her boss did something a certain way did not mean that she had to do the same.”

As the sessions continued, Holcomb focused her attention on the executive while keeping in mind instruments that could provide helpful insights. She listened for triggers that indicated an assessment would fit with the flow of the coaching sessions. Working on these multiple levels led Holcomb to suggest the *Time Mastery Profile®* to her client, who had talked about her high stress levels and difficulties prioritizing. After administering the profile, Holcomb discussed the results with the executive.

“She was thrilled,” Holcomb says. “The profile was very affirming and gave her a lot of great ideas for making her life easier. She had never had a reaction like that to any instrument.”

Next, Holcomb suggested that the executive take a look at *DiSC Indraã*. Once again, the idea came up because Holcomb listened to her client and thought about how best to serve her needs.

“We were talking about her need to control or adapt to situations,” Holcomb says. “It came up naturally.”

After responding to the instrument, the executive was eager to discuss *Indra’s* general insights into behavior. But her most enthusiastic response was to the dyad report. Holcomb had created a specific look at the executive’s troubled relationship with a subordinate. For the first time, the executive gained clues as to why she was having such problems with her employee. Holcomb says that *Indra’s* precise analysis was an ideal complement to the previous instruments’ lessons.

“No one single instrument measures everything,” Holcomb says. “Multiple viewpoints of behavior can be helpful if the respondent is not overwhelmed. It’s the coach’s responsibility to give the



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client time to take everything in.”

The executive made breakthroughs at her own pace, and the results of Holcomb’s sessions were striking. Learning about her own behavior and motivations helped the executive accept new skills as improvements, rather than as obstacles. She recognized that she did not have to alter her style to communicate better. She also realized that her style was not superior or inferior to others, which had been a source of tension.

“One of her bosses had focused on her negatives so much that it took her awhile to realize that her own methods might be valid,” Holcomb says. “She found out that bosses are not objective or perfect.”

A similar insight for the executive was that her subordinates might have equally good methods. She no longer felt that every question was an affront, and she resolved to be more flexible when dealing with different styles. Her determination to be more approachable was clear from her action plan, which detailed ways she could maintain or improve upon her new skills.

Among those new habits was a dedication to efficiency. Holcomb says the executive took the lessons of the *Time Mastery Profile* to heart by learning to prioritize better and to improve her work/life balance. She also embraced the DiSC model to address miscommunication before it turned into full conflict. Besides creating a happier and more productive executive, these changes had a positive effect on the organization.

“Before, people were streaming into the human resources office to complain about her,” Holcomb says. “Those complaints have dropped to zero. It makes all the difference when people learn about themselves.”