Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03RL5
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
JULY 06, 2017

ARTICLE
COACHING

Younger and Older Executives Need Different Things from Coaching

by Lois Tamir and Laura Finfer

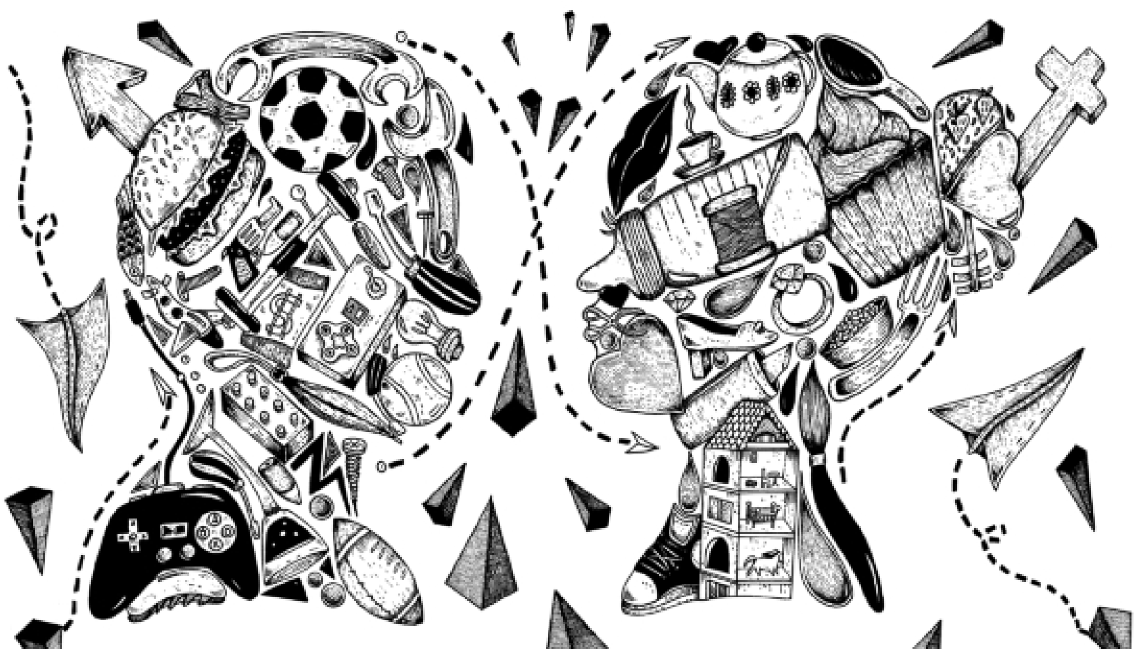
Harvard Business Review

COACHING

Younger and Older Executives Need Different Things from Coaching

by Lois Tamir and Laura Finfer

JULY 06, 2017



LAURA SCHNEIDER FOR HBR

Eric, 33, a high-potential vice president at a financial services firm, was elated to be selected by his supervisors to receive executive coaching. This meant he was being groomed for ascendance. His boss wanted him to be a more motivating leader to his team. In coaching, while Eric focused on learning ways to motivate the talent on his team, he didn't address deeper issues, like his perfectionism, that could hold him back in the long run.

Frances, an executive in her forties, entered coaching after being passed over for a promotion that went to her more vocal, visible male colleague. While her goal was to increase her political savvy, she also expressed interest in delving into the root of the issue, namely her proclivities to defer to authority and shy away from the spotlight. Through coaching, she learned to project a powerful demeanor that was genuine and compelling. Within a year, she achieved the promotion she sought.

In our work coaching hundreds of executives, we have suspected a difference in how 30-something executives and those in their forties and fifties approach coaching. The 30-somethings have tended to be more difficult engagements, often requiring more directness, cajoling, and nurturing.

Because organizations are increasingly focusing on early talent development to attract and retain young talent, it's important to understand the best way to accelerate their growth as leaders.

We examined data from 72 executive coaching engagements we conducted from 2008 to 2014. Our data included executives' scores on personality and emotional intelligence assessments, interviews with their managers and HR, and our case notes. The average coaching engagement lasted six to 12 months. The executives came from a wide array of industries, including financial services, pharmaceuticals, and media. We divided the sample into age decades: 18% were age 30–39; 61% were 40–49; and 21% were 50–59. The gender breakdown was 54% male and 46% female.

In each case, one of us served as the executive coach and worked with the executive to set their individual goals. These ranged from commanding greater influence to building a strategic vision, aligning their team, and refining their interpersonal and communication skills. Next, one-on-one coaching meetings focused on expanding their insight; learning and practicing skills; applying learnings to their work in real life; and reflecting on those actions and outcomes. Meetings averaged one to two sessions per month.

The goal of our research was to identify how executives in their thirties might differ from older executives when they receive the specialized attention of executive coaching. We also wanted to ascertain whether differences were due to age or generation. Our study was published in Consulting Psychology Journal in December 2016.

We gave each executive a low, medium, or high rating on the following four dimensions:

- Responsiveness: whether they demonstrated enthusiasm for the opportunity for coaching
- Self-reflection: how well they explored factors, such as personality style, motivation, and cultural background, to better understand their behaviors that work well and those that don't
- Nondefensiveness: whether they tended to accept personal responsibility for interactions or events that went awry
- Degree of change: how much they demonstrated noticeable change in their executive style, technique, and output during and at the end of the coaching engagement

To maximize objectivity and scientific rigor, we used research-based behavioral criteria to determine each rating. For instance, one of our criteria for evaluating responsiveness was whether the individual "makes reasonable calendar accommodations to schedule coaching sessions," which demonstrates their commitment to working on the content of the engagement. And for self-reflection, one thing we measured was whether the person "willingly examines personality issues (e.g., perfectionism, conflict avoidance) that interfere with effectiveness." We measured degree of change based on our observations and the input of the executive's boss and HR.

Each of us rated our own clients, making sure to cite behavioral examples to justify each rating. Of course, we recognize there is bias inherent in nonblind coding. Therefore we also scrutinized each other's data to ensure the examples supported the rating or to suggest a modified rating.

Two statistically significant outcomes emerged. Regardless of gender, executives in their thirties had lower ratings on self-reflection, and their level of change was less dramatic than that of executives in their forties and fifties. We also found that the younger executives tended to respond to concrete recommendations and specific rules or guidelines to follow, but they often did not show interest in understanding *why* they did the things they did. Older executives were more curious about the reasons for their behavior — they wanted insight, as opposed to rules, to drive behavior change.

We believe three factors could be behind such differences. First, being identified as a high potential at an early age may reinforce one's self-perception of being a winner who does things right. This could explain why younger executives treat coaching as a perk that can be beneficial, while older executives are more eager to learn more about themselves, expand their options, and welcome a confidante who challenges their thinking. In fact, classic lifespan literature indicates that adults become more open over time and less entrenched in their thinking.

Second, the younger executives in our sample tended to miss subtlety and nuance in human behavior. They were more likely to operate based on black-and-white ideals, such as, "There is one best idea that should prevail" or "I am running a pure meritocracy." For example, Carl, 38, believed that a lack of conflict with his team members indicated agreement. He would be surprised to find out later that his colleagues were working against his agenda. In coaching, we focused on helping him learn the subtle cues that indicate people do not agree, such as a lack of timely follow-through. On the other hand, older executives we coached were already more attuned to discrepancies between what others say and what they actually do.

Finally, younger executives more often believed that there is a "right" way to do things, whereas those in their forties and fifties were typically more willing to try out different approaches. For example, Andy, 37, believed in always speaking his mind and being authentic — but his bluntness cost him trusted relationships. While Andy remained adamant about the value of authenticity, coaching offered him concrete actions for how to communicate in an authentic *and* inoffensive manner. On the other hand, Beth, 51, preached the "carrot over stick" approach in motivating her team. Through coaching, she recognized the limitations of this singular concept and was easily able to adapt it without concrete templates for action.

Importantly, our statistical analysis found that executives' behavior in coaching differs by age, not generation. Ratings varied across, not within, each of the age decades we studied (30–39, 40–49, 50–59). This is consistent with classic lifespan literature that describes ongoing maturation during each decade of adulthood. The thirties are often characterized by intense activity to establish the foundation for a successful career; this involves mastering rules that win approval. In contrast, the forties often involve a turning point from novice to mentor, which may bring a deeper appreciation for life's paradoxes. The seasoning that comes with age includes expanding one's appreciation for subtlety, ambiguity, and imperfection.

In light of these findings, we recommend two approaches for those who manage, mentor, or coach younger executives to help them reach their full potential.

The first involves allowing them to experience a difficult "moment of truth," as opposed to shielding them from it for fear of demotivating them. It could include disappointment about a high-visibility project gone awry, a missed promotion that was believed to be a sure thing, or unexpectedly negative 360-degree feedback. The moment of truth can instill a greater readiness to change behavior.

The second entails framing coaching advice using concrete if-then scenarios and templates for behavior. For example, we might advise an executive who is working on building better relationships with coworkers: "If you relinquish this battle, then you are more likely to create an advantageous relationship," or "Here are the three things to say to a resistant stakeholder." Insights delivered this way feel like "rules" for executive success, which tend to resonate with rules-bound 30-somethings.

Lois Tamir, Ph.D., is the principal of Leadership Excellence Consulting, an executive-coaching and -assessment firm in New York City. Dr. Tamir is a licensed developmental psychologist.

Laura Finfer, Ph.D., is the principal of Leadership Excellence Consulting, an executive-coaching and -assessment firm in New York City. Dr. Finfer is a licensed industrial organizational psychologist.

