

## Learnings from Practice 17: Assessing Client Match and Motivation

How can you help create a coaching contract that sticks?

**The Request.** The Director of a State Department of Environmental Conservation had recently hired an expert seasoned staff from another state to be the Manager of the Hazardous Materials Division. The Manager was not fulfilling the role that the Director had envisioned. Her Deputy was directed to help the Manager improve his performance. The Deputy asked us to create a coaching relationship and through that, help the Manager more completely fulfill his responsibilities.

**Larger Context.** In this operations-focused state agency, the Director set the leadership culture as task oriented with quick and direct communication. The newly hired, Division Manager was not living up to three key expectations of the Department Director. The manager was caught in a bind: He was asked to deal with a direct report that was underperforming and so began a supervisory style of managing the report's every step. What was wanted was a way to deal with the report that would gain their commitment. Also, the Division Manager tended to be risk averse and step back from input during senior leadership meetings. It seemed like the Manager was ill-equipped to fit in to the leadership culture. Finally, he was having difficulty focusing on a strategic/policy level for the Division. The Manager felt, rightfully so, that his job was on the line and so was quite defensive about being asked to work with a coach.

**Consulting Intervention.** The client and the coach had several initial meetings to establish a working and trusting relationship. There was also a realization that the Coach needed to model an open assessment and think out-loud process with the prospective client about the coach's and the client's motivations, drivers, feelings and reservations. It seemed that both the client and the coach had to demonstrate vulnerability, inclusiveness and decisively clear communication with each other. Eventually, perhaps, the client would be able to use these skills of clear leadership in the workplace.(1)

In order to build a trusting relationship, the coach suggested a series of questions and criteria that might be used to focus the discussion towards a mutual decision about whether to continue the work together. The questions were closed-ended, yet provocative, as they served as a basis for discussion and understanding of what it might take to obtain satisfying results. For example, one of the questions that we used was: "Do you expect magic regarding your commitment level or natural disinclination?" The responses by both the coach and the client helped formed the basis for an effective learning relationship (2).

**Last Line.** Using a series of questions for both the coach and the client to respond to can help to develop a shared vulnerability and honesty in the coaching relationship that will form the basis for development.

**Commentary:** We have used this question set in various forms as potential discussion points during the contract phase of coaching. Thinking about the process now, we would still use the questions, but we would want to do more to solicit the client's criteria for moving forward with coaching.

(1) Gevase Bushe, *Clear Leadership*, 2001.

(2) Ronald Short, *Learning in Relationship*, 1998