Assessment and Feedback in Coaching:
Putting the Pieces Together

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Assessment and Feedback in Coaching: Putting the Pieces Together

William P. Brittain

Excellence in coaching depends on a firm understanding of various assessment strategies combined with feedback that is cogent, valid and straightforward. This article addresses some of the issues that help assessment strategies effectively lay the foundation for defining direction in coaching while providing a framework within which both the coach and client can understand how and where change can occur. The assessment choices that a coach elects will define the direction that the coaching assignment will take as well as the degree to which the client will be able to hear and accept the feedback and coaching offered. The author also addresses the need to go “beyond the numbers” and apply experience and understanding in interpreting the assessment data in a manner that is useful in context and provides guidance for desired change.

Eventually it happens. You might be an HR professional, a line manager, an executive, a consultant or just a colleague, but at some point in your career you will find yourself in a position to give advice, counsel or coach someone for some reason in the workplace. In general, most people are reasonably comfortable with advice and counsel – there’s no firm commitment, they are usually happy to do it and it is part of the social contract. But coaching is a very different animal and while there may be a variety of reasons for entering into a coaching relationship, each coaching engagement has one thing in common…there are always expected outcomes. For this reason (among others) coaching at any level takes on a somewhat formal and planned format that should identify targeted behaviors, performance goals or other desired outcomes that can be measured or directly observed and modified in some way. The relationship between an individual and his or her coach is, by default, more formal and contractual. When an individual enters into a coaching relationship with a coach they essentially form a partnership aimed at achieving some behavioral or performance change or improvement. It is the coach’s responsibility to help identify and define the desired change, guide the client through the development process and hold the client accountable for his/her own improvement.

DEVELOPMENT AND REMEDIATION

In my experience, the most common reasons for offering coaching to employees tend to fall into two categories: professional development and remediation of counterproductive behavior. As an external executive coach it seems all too often the case that “saving” executives and managers from their own derailing dysfunction is the order of the day. And, frequently, by the time the engagement is undertaken,
the task is fraught with excess baggage that complicates the process. It is not unusual for the client to enter into the relationship with a mixture of fear and resentment as well as denial. If for no other reason than this, having some hard evaluation data to back up the coaching process is invaluable.

In organizations with performance management programs in place, coaching for performance enhancement at the middle management level as well as in the executive suite is more prevalent. Talent management programs, performance management processes, career counseling/development may all present opportunities for individual coaching. In most cases individuals who participate in coaching engagements that spring from developmental programs come to the process with a more positive attitude and an awareness of the potential for productive change than is seen in the previous example of dysfunctional correction. While it might appear that these two coaching situations are quite different they are, in fact, very similar. Both require a coach with skill in facilitating behavior change, strong evaluative technique, the ability to establish close trusting relationships and a firm grasp of the needs of the organization as well as those of the individual client partner. In these developmental engagements, the outcomes may have a less dramatic effect but the potential for long-term benefits to the individual as well as the organization are no less important.

Regardless of the particular type of assignment, all coaches enter into the process of coaching with a bias, preference or belief about the underpinnings of behavior change. Certainly we all believe that behavior change is not only possible but probable. Otherwise, what’s the point? We also have beliefs (professional or otherwise) regarding how behavior change is achieved. These personal and professional biases direct our approaches to the coaching task in subtle and not so subtle ways by putting boundaries around our expectations, guiding the scope of our coaching contracts with the client, defining the things we measure and establishing our relationship with the client among other things. These professional biases are based on education and experience which dictate the starting point for any engagement and specifies how we will approach the problem and with what tools.

Just as you would not want your mechanic to start fixing your car or your physician to begin surgery without first assessing what’s working and what’s not, coaching always requires some type of assessment as a part of the process. I generally refer to this process as a “needs analysis” …it just sounds less intrusive. You have to have a solid knowledge base about your client, the organizational context, client expectations, desired outcomes, etc. before you can even

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1For purposes of this discussion pure business coaching and life coaching have not been addressed. The focus is on behavioral change and performance coaching. While the coaching principles are essentially the same for all types of coaching, the assessment techniques may differ and are not within the scope of the current conversation.
begin to determine a course of action. In most instances, whether it is for remedial reasons or for professional development, you will be privy to a variety of reasons for the advisability of coaching for a particular person. These reasons will be offered up (usually by a superior of the client) as descriptions of how the client is mitigating his or her own performance. This is, however, only a starting point. In my experience, the observations or criticisms offered by the client’s superior may be spot on but the causes are more often than not unclear. The coach who steps into the coaching engagement armed only with anecdotal information does so at his or her own peril. Coaching success will depend on a number of things, not the least of which is a firm foundation of solid data that will guide the coaching process, help define the issues to be addressed, and prepare the client to accept the coach’s conclusions and become a full partner in the process of personal development.

OBJECTIVE TESTING AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE
For most of the 20th century and probably for millennia before, the principal evaluation technique was the interview. It’s very likely that as the volcanic ash started to fall on Pompeii someone was interviewing for a job. Employers basically looked for something they would recognize when they saw it…hard to define but recognizable. Past experience, coupled with a record of success, was presumed to be the best predictor of future success. To some degree, this remains the case in spite of the considerable advances in testing and evaluation technology.

The advent of psychological testing propelled by the military during the Second World War was added to the evaluation mix in the late 1940’s but wasn’t common to the management evaluation process until sometime in the 1960’s in the United States. Since then the application of psychologically-based evaluation techniques has been the topic of a huge professional and paraprofessional effort to codify the critical behavioral elements that will predict success at all levels across all kinds of businesses. In the current discussion the focus will be on the use of objective evaluation in coaching rather than interviewing. My favored approach to evaluation leans heavily on several complementary theoretical models of behavior that combine to paint a comprehensive portrait of my client.

Social learning theory, as developed by Bandura (1977) and others, is a behavioral model that has found its way into the lexicon of industrial/organizational psychology and is in many ways the descriptive language of organizational change and managerial development. While it does not provide for a clean methodology for assessment, the language that this and similar models uses to describe behavior can be very useful. Social learning theory assumes behavior is learned in a context and, by extension, behavior that is learned can be unlearned (or changed). If you are a social learning coach then you will require time to observe your client’s behavior in context. Joyce and Robert Hogan (Jeanneret & Silzer, 1998)
argue that since any behavior can be rewarded (and thus shaped and maintained) then there must be an infinite number of ways for people to differ and behave. In reality, people and social systems reward only a limited number of acceptable behaviors and so our general social behavior patterns fall into a reasonably predictable number of dimensions (depending on the context). The old die-hard behaviorist in me finds comfort in the malleability of human behavior and this model provides a mechanism and methodology by which to make effective behavior change in a coaching engagement. Without it we could all go home and look for other work! On the other hand, social learning theory doesn’t specifically identify which behaviors to look for or make any significant contribution towards defining managerial or executive success. For that we will have to look elsewhere.

When most people think of taking a psychological test, they are most likely envisioning a survey of personal or interpersonal traits or hard-wired temperamental characteristics that underlie and control overt behavior. If you happen to be a confirmed trait theorist then you would hold to the notion that behavior is mostly the result of the way you are put together neurologically, hormonally or biochemically (McCrae & Costa, 1996; Hogan & Hogan, 1998). For the most part traits are names given to behavioral categories or variables that can be defined and described in common language and measured with an objective test. To the extent that these traits are measurable and recognizable as behavioral tendencies in people they can provide a common scale that will allow a comparison of behavioral probabilities across a selection of people. Theoretically we can compare one person to another, “apples to apples” as it were. Hard-core trait theorists also assume that these traits don’t vary much over the lifetime of an individual and are consequently thought of as relatively stable and statistically reliable measures over time. It is also assumed that circumstance has little to do with how a person might score on a trait-based survey. Therefore, a trait-based profile completed in situation “A” should look very much the same as that same person’s trait profile completed in situation “B” provided, of course, that the same instrument is used in both cases. Trait theory, per se, also fails to draw any conclusions regarding the source or origin of these traits in an individual and doesn’t provide an explicit explanation for their existence (Hogan & Hogan, 1998).

Trait theory has led to a variety of venerable tests and measures such as Raymond Cattell’s sixteen personality factors (16PF) developed and first published by IPAT in 1949 which is in wide use today. The 16PF was perhaps the first instrument to make full use of a factor analytic approach for defining and measuring basic personality characteristics rather than abilities. Through the use of factor analysis it was possible to identify and define several (it turned out to be sixteen) primary personality variables that seem to be culturally universal and co-variant with consistently observable behaviors.

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(Cattell, Eber, & Katsuoka, 1970). Other popular instruments such as the California Personality Inventory provide similar personality factor information derived from a factor analytic technique (Gough, 1987). Even though these two instruments arrive at their primary personality factors from different starting points they both rely heavily on observable behavior and empirical validation of their respective trait measures. The data from either of these (or similar) inventories can be very useful in understanding why a person’s behavior looks the way it does regardless of context.

A common theme explicating the sources of behavioral preferences and motivation can be found in the writings of Jung (innate tendencies towards growth and wholeness), Maslow’s adaptation of Jung (innate tendencies towards growth and development…self actualization), George Kelly’s Psychology of Personal Constructs (Hogan & Hogan, 1998) and a host of others. In general, these various theoretical propositions have led to any number of measuring devices all aimed at identifying the way an individual either sees him or herself preferring to interact with the world or their view of how the social environment affects or views them. Among the most ubiquitous inventories in this category is the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) (Myers & McCaulley, 1985) which assigns one of sixteen behavioral types to an individual based on combinations of eight anchors in four scales. The MBTI has become one of the most popular measures of preferred behavioral style. In my opinion, the application of the MBTI typology is more broadly generalized than is warranted. As with other commercially available inventories or behavioral preference questionnaires that are aimed at explicating social interaction and communication strategies (such as the various forms of the DISC Profile) these type indicators or preference profiles can be very useful in developing an understanding for the client of how they prefer to interact with their immediate environment. However, these tools were designed to be context sensitive and therefore reflective of a specific set of circumstances that may or may not exist in other places or times. As a result, these instruments have varying degrees of reliability and validity and, in general, limited generalizability across disparate work settings. As long as you evaluate these data in context they can help to provide a frame of reference and be useful in providing guidance and understanding for the direction and specifics of useful behavioral change.

In 1990, Peter Salovey and J.D. Mayer published a paper entitled “Emotional Intelligence” in which they outlined the central tenets of what constitutes emotional intelligence. A few years later, Daniel Goleman of Harvard began to write about the elements of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and to tout these factors as the critical elements that differentiate successful executives from those who are not so successful. Generally, these emotional factors were seen by many as “soft” or “mushy” but, it is clear that these competencies are at the heart of executive success (and may be more challenging
to master than finance and operations). In my experience, coaching assignments always involve significant aspects of the emotional intellectual spectrum along with interpersonal relationship issues, communication faults and other social relationship behaviors that end up being the focal point of developmental activities. So, while we didn’t have a name for this constellation of personal and interpersonal factors, it would appear that executive coaches have been using them as a focal point for as long as there have been coaches and people to coach.

General intelligence has long been a staple in the tool kit for predicting and understanding managerial effectiveness. These skills have been shown repeatedly to correlate well with executive success. I have always found it useful to know something about the intellectual skills of my client and their preferences for dealing with data as well as their approach to problem-solving. In his 2005 book *Executive Intelligence*, Justin Menkes attempts to define the factor that sets top-performing executives apart from all others as being some kind of special logical ability that allows them to see things differently, analyze more quickly and generally exhibit more frequent flashes of brilliance than the typical executive. Menkes asserts that if we would only screen for this rare and elusive quality we would pick a winner every time (or nearly every time). He makes a compelling argument. However, if intellectual brilliance was the only necessary element for executive stardom then almost any brilliant alpha male or female should be capable of success in any setting. In my experience, however, these types are among the most frequent failures and this observation suggests that there must be more to the story. It is not unusual to find that these individuals have significant weaknesses in those skills and competencies closely aligned with the emotional intelligences as defined by Goleman, Salovey and others. An equally striking observation is the frequent disconnect between intellect and the ability to relate on an interpersonal level, exhibit empathy and to understand the underlying needs and motivations of others. Intellect is clearly necessary but does not appear to be sufficient for effective leadership.

Over the past thirty years, I have come to appreciate the impact that personal values have on overt behaviors and I generally include some measure of basic values when engaged in any assessment process. Values have a way of changing subtly over time and with maturity but they have a great deal to say about what an individual will pay attention to and how they will allocate their personal resources in interacting with people and life in general.

**ASSESSMENTS AND COACHING**

It should be clear that the assessment process is critical to the overall success of the coaching engagement, regardless of the theoretical leaning that guides your individual coaching approach. A thorough assessment process that measures some *behavioral preferences* can tell you a great deal about how your client sees the world or the
immediate work environment as well as how he or she believes the situation expects him or her to behave and interact. The use of *trait measures* such as the 16PF or CPI can provide powerful insights into why your client interacts or responds to the environment in particular ways and can be a guide to what is or is not easily changed or modified. Measures of *critical thinking* can be useful in understanding how a person approaches problem-solving tasks (especially when combined with data that clarifies the level of comfort with abstract thinking and basic curiosity).

Obviously, some of the data gathering approaches that have been discussed won’t live up to the normal standards of reliability and validity generally accepted as required for executive assessment. Some will, of course, and you should make every effort to meet the requirements of validity. However, coaching is generally made available to relatively small numbers of employees within a company. Consequently, your data analysis will frequently have to be based on general population norms (or norms closely related to the position of the client) as local organizational norms will rarely be available. It is also important to remember that unlike testing for selection or promotion, the purpose of the evaluation process is not designed to predict success or best fit, rather it is to help diagnose relevant behavioral issues that can be enhanced or modified to improve performance for the client. While it is important to pay attention to testing constructs such as reliability and validity (Hogan & Hogan, 1998), you should not be limited by them if the data fits the observed behavior and is useful in designing and delivering an effective result. At the same time, you need to stay close to the data and not take the interpretation beyond the theoretical boundaries of the instruments and methods being used.

Regardless of the tools you use in your evaluation process it is human nature to lean most heavily on those you understand best, support your personal theoretical biases and connect most easily to the particular coaching assignment in which you are engaged. As useful as all this hard data is to you it is virtually useless to the client without the benefit of professional interpretation. In fact, the danger inherent in simply giving your client a copy of the computer-generated profile report (even though it looks user friendly and self-explanatory) is that without a full understanding of what the various factors mean and how they may relate (or not relate) to other measured factors can lead to confusion and misunderstandings; doing more harm than good (e.g., just what is the difference between *introversion/extroversion* on the 16PF and the same terminology on the MBTI? Why does it matter?). It is unlikely that your client will be capable of identifying the critical issues embedded in that apparent jumble of numbers and descriptions. The result can be a tendency to see only the good scores or conversely only the bad, or to believe that all high scores are good and low scores are bad. Worse, he or she may simply dismiss the whole exercise as a waste of time and in the realm of

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This is why it is extremely important for the coach to be not only fully versed in the interpretation of the tools being used but skilled in knowing how and when to present the results. Drawing appropriate and valid inferences from psychometric data takes thought and skill. You must be adept at connecting your interpretations to the organizational context and the needs of the client in a way that allows the implications of the data to be heard and accepted as useful.

I have observed assessment feedback sessions conducted by psychologists (who should know better) in which the procedure was simply to go through the individual test results, one by one, pointing out the various high and low scores with little or no explanation or interpretation. Without the benefit of drawing cogent inferences to connect the exercise to the behavioral change process that was to follow, the client was left with a void of meaningful understanding. Mercifully, I haven’t been witness to many of these but anecdotal evidence suggests that feedback sessions in business such as that one are more common than one might hope. A more effective strategy for delivering complicated feedback and connecting the dots for the client is to weave together a coherent narrative that pulls all the pieces together into a kind of cognitive gestalt leading to an effective plan of action co-designed by the coach and client. At the same time it is important that the narrative and interpretations be true, accurate and focused on the appropriate issues. There’s nothing wrong with making the feedback process fun and positive but you should never lose sight of the fact that this process is not entertainment. It will always prove to be counterproductive if you soft peddle issues or behaviors that may be derailing the client or compromising their effectiveness. Shoot straight, don’t pull your punches and maintain trust at all cost.

It is imperative that you, as the interpreter, clearly understand what kind of data is being combined and compared…some will be hard (stable and reliable), some will be clearly context-dependent and not easily generalized to new situations. Other data will be observational and some will turn out to be off base and potentially confusing. Your job, as the coach, is to sort through this pile and find the pony that must be in there somewhere! If you use an eclectic battery of cognitive and non-cognitive tools that generate disparate types of information, then you must learn to conduct a kind of macro/meta-analysis that pulls all the information together for the client in an understandable way. This takes practice and experience as well as familiarity with the organizational context in which you are working. The coach is, after all, in the business of education and development. As long as you remember this and stick to the facts you will be consistently on target with your client and true to your calling.

**A CASE STUDY: SAM**

There are two intertwined yet different ways of looking at evaluation data. The obvious one is to provide insights for your client as

*psycho-babble.* If intellectual brilliance was the only necessary element for executive stardom then almost any brilliant alpha male or female should be capable of success in any setting.

In my experience, however, these types are among the most frequent failures…
previously suggested. The second is to help the coach understand how the client thinks and to determine how best to approach issues and the developmental process. The graphic information presented in Figure 1 is a representative sample of a behavioral chart constructed for a client (let’s call him Sam) based on data from the 16PF, Gordon Personal Profile and Inventory, Gordon Personal Profile, Gordon Interpersonal Profile and Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal. In this example, all scores have been converted to percentiles for ease of comparison. It is useful to remind yourself that there is nothing inherently good or bad about a particular percentile score, high or low. Percentiles simply provide a way to compare things head to head. In most cases we would prefer to see behavioral trait scores that fall close to the middle of the range with a few exceptions that help define the individual. Sam is a good example; most of his trait and values scores fall in the mid-range. This doesn’t make them irrelevant; it just means that he looks similar to many other people in the normative data base…no surprises. The logical approach is to examine those scores that fall outside the mid-range to see how they might interact with other elements of his profile.

![Figure 1. Executive evaluation. A chart of mixed data from the 16PF, Gordon Personal Profile and Inventory, Gordon Personal Values, Gordon Interpersonal Values and Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal](image-url)

*All scores are presented as percentiles for visual presentation and grouped together by relationships for ease of feedback. The solid bars represent trait measures, the striped bars are values and the dotted bar is a skill measure.*
From a coaching perspective Sam appears to be a curious and analytical client who will probably question everything and challenge conclusions and activities that can’t be supported by logic or don’t obviously lead to a practical outcome (relatively high analytical and critical thinking skills combined with natural curiosity). His high energy, high assertiveness and low caution scores are indications of impatience and a competitive nature. In general these scores are typical of many successful executives and managers. Clearly these same elements will impact the way in which he interacts with subordinates, colleagues and superiors. If you were to examine the sub-scale response patterns on the Critical Thinking Appraisal (data not shown) you would see that Sam is relatively uncomfortable when making decisions and taking action in the absence of complete information. As a consequence, you will need to present your recommendations and deliver his evaluation results in an organized manner and be prepared to back up your assertions with clear and unambiguous data. Sam will also demand this from the people with whom he works. So, one of the things you will probably want to work on is helping him to be clear about his expectations of others and develop a strategy for clarifying his communications. You will also want to explore the degree to which he may have a tendency to micromanage, or be perceived to micromanage, others by asking for more detail than they believe to be necessary.

The next three factors in Figure 1 begin to define the way in which Sam is likely to interact with others, one-on-one (extraversion, empathy and benevolence). Clearly, he is fairly introverted and probably unassuming in his interpersonal style. He is emotionally stable and well-suited to effective functioning in high-pressure situations. Sam’s overt emotionality is moderately strong so, while he will be fairly open with his feelings in most cases, he can also be somewhat difficult to read and has the potential to be seen as aloof or distant. The benefit of this temperamental style is that he is likely to be seen as a stabilizing influence under pressure. However, human behavior is rarely neat. If you look at his caution score you will see that he is generally very impatient (caution score below the 15th percentile). The result could be that he presents himself as unperturbed but internally agitated, a combination that can lead to unexpected outbursts of emotion with potentially negative effects. As the coach, you would want to explore this potential behavior and likely make it a focus of the behavioral coaching process.

The low caution score may also combine with his very high energy, high need for achievement and strong assertiveness characteristics to produce a nexus of temperamental characteristics and values that will mitigate his otherwise positive interpersonal skills. Sam is likely to be impatient with others (though he may not show it most of the time), have unrealistic expectations of the productivity potential of less driven individuals and may be seen by superiors as someone who needs more recognition and feedback than the typical executive (very high need for recognition value). The
coaching process should explore these possibilities and provide work-around solutions. It also suggests that Sam will need much more direct feedback from his coach than might be otherwise expected. A work environment that is isolating or a culture that doesn’t provide consistent feedback and recognition or one that is basically “sink or swim” in nature would each present a significant challenge to Sam.

So what’s the point? It should be clear that no one single piece of data, no single measurable score, no single value is of any particular use unless it can be seen in context and interpreted in a useful way that provides an on-ramp for practical solutions and viable behavior management. By themselves, the numbers are of little use. The purpose of feedback and behavioral coaching isn’t to change those evaluation numbers. Rather, it is to use them as a guide in support of the process of learning to better manage the strengths and weaknesses they represent, enabling more effective interpersonal and managerial interactions.

**CULTURE AND CONTEXT**

It is possible to overwhelm the client with too much information if you unload all your data at once sitting. Pay attention to the potential for data overload and be prepared to mete out evaluation information in digestible bites. Also recognize that most clients will need time to digest the information that is being provided before they will be able to accept and act on the information. At the same time, I have found that most middle managers, senior managers and executives are comfortable with data, graphs and charts. They tend to be visual in this regard. So, if you can present them with graphic or tabular data that is connected through your narrative discussion they will have an easier time of assimilating it, remembering the implications and will find it more difficult to refute the feedback they might not want to hear. There are certainly exceptions, but executives are also prone to using their left-brain skills rather than succumbing to the intuitive or emotional side of their temperament which is often the wall you have to breach in order to make progress. If you can use the data to help establish credibility and appeal to your client's managerial logic, then the door may be more easily opened to the softer side of the coaching process. The opposite scenario can also surface so be prepared to shift gears (if you look closely, your data should tell you which way to turn).

By now it should be apparent that attempting to find a model that will fit all cases makes defining the ideal executive archetype difficult because there may be no such thing. Every business has its own personality, its own culture and its own interpersonal dynamic and rhythm. While it is certainly true that any senior manager or executive will impart his or her own personality to an organization, there still needs to be a positive fit with the existing culture if success is to be realized. And, this “fit” is likely to be different from organization to organization. A pattern of skills, temperament and...
values that works well in one situation may, in fact, be the worst possible combination for another. By the same token, two very different profiles could work wonderfully in the same job depending on the other players in the game and the inherent flexibility of the organization. It is critical for the effective coach not only to understand as much as possible about the client but as much or more about the environment and culture within which the client has to function. Without this cultural underpinning, the coaching process will be hit-or-miss at best.

In an effort to establish a more solid observational basis for understanding both the client and the context, many coaches will use a 360° process, either through interviews or more formally with a 360° questionnaire, to gather behavioral observations from co-workers concerning their client. Such information can be very powerful when used to identify perceived strengths and weaknesses. The perceptions of others regarding the behaviors and/or effectiveness of the client may constitute some of the most powerful and important data you will gather. While this type of context dependent information can’t specify why the client is experienced by others in a particular way, it can aid in establishing coaching priorities. To quote an old professor of mine, “A situation perceived as real will be real in its consequences!” Judicious use of this process can be a significant help in understanding the context and culture issues discussed above.

CONCLUSIONS

All of the assessment methods in this discussion (with the possible exception of the 360° process) have the potential drawback of being self-reports of one kind or another (Hansen, 1991). As a result, there is always the chance that the assessment process can present a slightly pro-bias in favor of the client which minimizes weaknesses and exaggerates strengths (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). The title of the article says it all: “Unskilled and Unaware: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Leads to Inflated Self Assessments.” This article is worth reading if for no other reason than to lend some insights into why many coaching clients are resistant to changing their behavior or worldview. However, most validated psychometric tools have a distortion scale built in to alert you to that possibility in the data (these are generally called impression management scales). The very real possibility that your client could present a distorted picture of himself based on a positive bias (even if the distortion score is normal) is yet another reason to gather as much pre-coaching data as possible while conducting your evaluation activities. You will very likely need it to substantiate your recommendations for development.

Despite claims to the contrary, deciphering the puzzle that is the DNA of the successful manager or senior executive is far from an exact science. If executive evaluation were an exact science there would be a plethora of literature aimed at tweaking the model
to make it better but not so much debate over the model. To the contrary, a stroll through the business section of any good bookstore will yield an almost endless selection of tomes claiming to have the secret ingredient to executive success. More hit the shelves every day begging to be read...many of them will make the “best seller list.” Most of these books are filled with really good advice about leadership and management principles but no real testable model that provides a unified field theory of executive potential (Benton, 1998; Caruso & Salovey, 2004; Cooper & Sawaf, 1997; Giber, Carter, & Goldsmith, 2000; Hargrove, 1995; Morgan, Harkins, & Goldsmith, 2005; Weisinger, 1998).

From a practical point of view, those of us in the business of evaluating and developing executive potential believe that we have a pretty good notion of the important components of managerial and executive DNA but the mix and arrangement of critical executive chromosomes is difficult to pin down and far from exact. By the 1970’s most psychologists had begun to talk about executive evaluation in terms of several broad factors: intelligence, temperament and values. Defining each and finding ways to accurately measure them was (and remains) a highly individualized process that varies from professional to professional. This variability is based in large part on our professional bias about behavior as well as our comfort and expertise with specific tools and techniques. There are a number of tools from which to choose. Those tools you decide to utilize are in large measure a reflection of your theoretical bias because the theoretical model to which you subscribe will ultimately dictate what you will want to measure and how you will conduct the assessment.

Every coach has his or her own preference and style of delivering the goods. Like it or not every coach is a combination of behaviorist, humanist, socio-analytic, idealist and pragmatist. No coach wants to participate in a failed engagement. They want their charges to be more than successful and they want them to feel that they are partnering to reach a common goal. Every coach must believe, emotionally and intellectually, that people can and do change for the better, that behavior is not static and set in stone, and that helping others become better managers, executives and human beings is a worthwhile endeavor. Coaching is difficult and gratifying work. In my three decades of coaching and advising top executives, I have found a well rounded eclectic approach to the assessment process combined with a studied data-driven interpretive feedback to contribute significantly to the overall success of my engagements as well as those of my colleagues who have followed the same disciplined path.

We have come to understand that it is the integration of all these factors that is truly at the heart of turning emotional and intellectual brilliance into star quality performance. A close examination of the titles of most of the books in the business leadership section...
reveals that almost all are aimed at pointing out and explicating some aspect of this soft side of executive DNA. The fact that there are so many words, points of view, articles and books written about this aspect of the executive equation is a strong and compelling reflection of the complex nature of the task as well as the not so well hidden thirst that managers and executives have for help in this arena. Ironically, those super bright alphas who may be most in need of coaching are the least likely to be picking these books off the shelf in the interest of self-development. They simply do not recognize the importance of these ingredients. However, those who do, or are at least open to the need to hone their soft skills will find their return on investment to be exceptional. Those who come into the game with all those skills in place or take the time to hone them stand a significantly better chance of succeeding in the competitive swirl of high-stakes business than those who do not. That is why an evaluation process that covers all the potential critical bases is so important in the development of top managers and executives. The executive evaluation process may be an inexact science but, in the hands of an experienced professional, the picture that can be painted of the interplay of intellectual, emotional and temperamental characteristics within the context of the organization can spell the difference between success and failure for the client in the ongoing quest for success in the world of business.

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With more than thirty years experience as a human resource consultant in the public and private sectors, Bill is a recognized authority in the application of behavioral evaluation in management and career development. Many of his assignments include strategic consulting in developing effective senior management teams and the analysis and design of fully aligned business structures. As President and founder of Brittain Klein, Inc. and Senior Principal with The Apogee Group, Inc., his professional focus is on CEOs, their teams and their Board relations.
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