PERSONALITY-FOCUSED COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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The science of personality measurement in the workplace has developed a great deal in the past 2 decades, and the five-factor model (FFM) is generally recognized as the most notable taxonomy of "normal" personality. Meanwhile, coaching has become a well-established method of one-on-one leadership development in many organizations. Given the research investigating the relationship between the FFM and work-related behavior and performance, including leadership, the authors' aim is to advocate the profiling of personality against the FFM to provide a useful framework for behavioral change in executive coaching. Coaching typically deals with skill deficits, performance problems, change challenges, and issues raised by the executive himself or herself, and a research-based understanding of personality–behavior linkages can provide valuable insights for the coach and coachee and a path forward to a wide range of coaching challenges.

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A Case Example

Terry McConnell[1] is the 63-year-old CEO of a major telecommunications provider. After nearly 40 years with the company, Terry was looking forward to what he saw as a

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well-deserved retirement. However, before he could start polishing his golf clubs, he had to grapple with the development of his successor, Steven. As COO, Steven had an excellent reputation for his technical ability, steadfast attitude, and sheer intellectual smarts. Terry had put Steven up as his obvious replacement to his Board of Directors, which had initially been enthusiastic but wanted to see a more active CEO development-coaching program in place. Terry sought advice from a professional executive coach; then he embarked on systematic coaching with Steven. Terry started by addressing what he saw as Steven's rather narrow business focus. To overcome this, Terry coached Steven in strategic thinking—seeing more of the big picture of the industry sector and identifying "blue ocean strategies" where the company could move into new product areas where there was little competitive pressure and handsome margins.

Over a 6-month period, the coaching went very well, and Steven relished spending time with his boss shooting the breeze. However, when Terry reported progress to the Board of Directors, one of the independent directors indicated that he thought that Steven was a very good candidate but did not have "the X factor" that would make him an outstanding CEO. At the time, Terry felt quite frustrated by this view, but after the meeting, he was forced to admit that there was something in it. When he confronted Steven with the issue, he got a lot of push back. Steven drew up a list of technical, interpersonal, ethical, staff, and customer job competencies, and systematically illustrated his successful performance in each area. Terry had to agree Steven had a wealth of skills, knowledge, and abilities—but what was the missing X factor? Terry was stuck! With the help of a consulting psychologist, Terry organized some personality profiling for Steven. The results in summary indicated that Steven was

1. highly emotionally stable and well able to withstand the stresses of leadership, but not emotionally blunt or insensitive;
2. low on extraversion, with a preference for one-on-one meetings rather than talking to large groups, but he was certainly not socially awkward or withdrawn;
3. open to new experiences and willing to explore new areas and issues, but not overly artistic or creative;
4. average on agreeableness—pleasant, but not ingratiating; and
5. average on conscientiousness—he was moderately well organized and got things done, saw himself as competent but certainly was not highly driven to closure and getting the details right.

When Terry read the report, his reaction was, "So what!" The report presented an accurate summary of Steven's personality but did not help the coaching move forward. However, the coach explained that Steven's profile was not a good fit with what the personality–behavior research suggested was a desirable profile of a CEO. There were two areas where Steven's profile was different: He was much less extraverted and not as conscientiousness as was typical. The personality profile helped Terry to focus on several relevant personality traits and their associated behaviors. At last, he felt he was beginning to understand what the X factor was in this case. Steven had a wealth of technical skills, great stress resistance, and a willingness to embrace change. However, he found it difficult to enthusiastically communicate his vision for the business, partly because his underlying tendency was introversion and he had never learned effective influencing skills and behaviors. He often failed to get complete closure on issues, partly because he was only

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[1] Names in the case study have been changed to protect anonymity for all parties.

average in conscientiousness, and he had never learned the relevant behaviors to com-pensate for this. These insights really gave Terry the framework for the coaching that he wanted. He would never confuse the issue again by talking of the X factor; instead, he would use the neutral language of the personality profile to enable Steven to see these two critical issues. Over a period of time and with some specialist training input, Steven learned the simple techniques of persuasive public speaking, actively pushed himself into high-profile events in the company, and shaped a penetrating vision of the future of the firm. Terry spent time working with Steven to ensure that he gained more complete and systematic closure on critical elements of strategy implementation. By the time Terry was opening the champagne to celebrate his 65th birthday, the board had undertaken an external search for CEO candidates but had overcome its reservations about Steven and announced his promotion to lead the company.

The Nature of Modern Personality Measurement

This vignette highlights the usefulness that personality profiling can have within a coaching relationship. Typically, executive coaching is focused on (a) developing the individual's skills on the basis of a gap analysis between the competency requirements for a position and the actual ability level of the individual; (b) dealing with a specific and readily identifiable performance problem, such as interpersonal conflict with team mem-bers; (c) assisting the individual to deal with change and better dealing with new challenges; and (d) coaching to address the specific issues on the executive's agenda, such as rejuvenation of a career or better work–life balance (Witherspoon & White, 1997). However, executive coaches often find that the above framework does not always hit the target. The issues they must deal with are not always about skill shortages, performance problems, change challenges, and are certainly not raised by the executive being coached. Personality-focused coaching can provide valuable insights and a path forward for behavioral change in a wide range of coaching situations. To understand personality-focused coaching, it is important to explore the nature of modern personality measurement and the research on both the impact of personality–behavior linkages on career success and on leadership. Finally, we explore the personality-focused coaching paradigm.

In the past 20 years or so, there have been major advances in the area of personality assessment and theory in the workplace (e.g., Burch & Anderson, 2008; R. Hogan, 2005; Schneider, 2007). These advances have been reflected in Burch and Anderson's (2008) recent generic causal model of work-related behavior and performance, which highlights the role of personality in workplace behavior and performance. According to Burch and Anderson's model, personality has an important role in determining work-related behav-ior, although this relationship is complex, being moderated by intelligence, social–cultural variables, and situational/contextual factors, and mediated by situation perception and cognitive–affective mediating processes. The five-factor model (FFM, or "Big Five") is generally accepted as the predominant taxonomy for examining the relationship between trait personality and occupational criteria (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Barrick & Mount, 2005; Gill & Hodgkinson, 2007), although it should be noted that the FFM is not without its critics (see Hough & Ones, 2001).

The FFM places an emphasis on individual personality traits and is based on half a century of research (Digman, 2002), with the five primary personality factors being (a) neuroticism (or inversely referred to in the research as "emotional stability"), (b) extra-version (or interpersonal patterns), (c) openness to experience, (d) agreeableness, and (f)

conscientiousness (or work ethic), descriptions of which are shown in Table 1, along with description of the Big Five facets, that is, traits subordinate within each of the five factors (from Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Personality as Predictor

There is now a large amount of evidence that the five factors are seen across cultures and are heritable and stable over time (McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & John, 1992). There is even a growing literature describing the benefits and costs associated with the Big Five traits within an evolutionary perspective; for example, Nettle (2006, p. 628) highlighted how the benefits of high levels of conscientiousness can include "desirable social qualities," whereas the associated costs could include "rigidity." This growing literature in relation to the FFM not only relates to the general population but also to occupational and organizational settings. Over the past 2 decades, the FFM has received considerable attention in the industrial/organizational psychology literature, particularly given the evidence that the FFM has a valid role in the prediction of work-related behavior and performance, with the generally consistent finding that conscientiousness and the narrower facets of conscientiousness are the strongest predictors of effectiveness across all job roles (e.g., Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001; Dudley, Orvis, Lebiecki, & Cortina, 2006; J. Hogan & Holland, 2003; Mount & Barrick, 1995; Salgado, 1997). In addition, researchers have found emotional stability to be a positive predictor of effective work-related performance (e.g., Barrick et al., 2001; J. Hogan & Holland, 2003), although note should be taken of recent evidence that trait anxiety (a facet of neuroticism) may actually positively predict effective performance in "cognitively able individuals," that is, those scoring high in cognitive ability (Perkins & Corr, 2005), and neuroticism may positively predict effective performance when effort intensity is high (Smillie Yeo, Furnham, & Jackson, 2006), thereby highlighting the complexity of the nature of these personality–performance relationships. There is also evidence that conscientiousness and emotional stability are positive predictors of citizenship performance (i.e., work behavior that goes beyond the normal call of duty; e.g., Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001) and performance motivation (e.g., Judge & Ilies, 2002), whereas neuroticism has been shown to be a positive predictor of both interpersonal and organizational deviance and both agreeableness and conscientiousness to be negative predictors of both interpersonal and organizational deviance (Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007).

In addition to the research on the predictive validity of the FFM in relation to job-related performance, many other studies have been carried out investigating personality as a predictor of other factors and important life outcomes. For example, there is some evidence that job burnout may be predicted by high neuroticism and low conscientiousness (Piedmont, 1993). Even outcomes of psychotherapy are predicted by the levels of neuroticism, extraversion, and conscientiousness (Miller, 1991), and coronary heart disease is linked to low agreeableness (Dembroski & Costa, 1987). There is also evidence demonstrating that overall risk propensity in recreation, health, career, finance, safety, and social dimensions is related to high extraversion, high openness, low neuroticism, low agreeableness, and low conscientiousness (see, for example, Nicholson, Soane, Fenton-O'Creevy, & Willman, 2005). Seibert and Kraimer (2001) reported evidence that extraverts have higher salary levels, are promoted more frequently, and are more satisfied with their careers, whereas the emotionally less stable are not as satisfied with their careers. Those open to experience are more likely to be paid less, and those who are more

Table 1

*The Big Five Factors of Personality and Respective Facets, Along With Low Scale
Score and High Scale Score Interpretations From the Revised NEO Personality
Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992)*

Facets	Low scale scores	High scale scores
Neuroticism (emotional stability)—characterized by anxiety, irritability, sadness, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and an inability to cope with stressful situations		
Anxiety	Relaxed and calm	Worrying and uneasy
Anger/hostility	Composed and slow to anger	Quick to anger
Depression	Not easily discouraged	Easily discouraged
Self-consciousness	Hard to embarrass	Easy to embarrass
Impulsiveness	Resists urges easily	Easily tempted, acts on impulse
Vulnerability	Resilient, handles stress easily	Has difficulty coping
Extraversion (interpersonal patterns)—characterized by warmth, sociability, assertiveness, energy, excitement, and optimism		
Warmth	Reserved, formal, distant	Affectionate, friendly, intimate
Gregariousness	Seldom seeks company	Prefers company, enjoys being with others
Assertiveness	Stays in background	Speaks up, leads (dominates)
Activity	Leisurely pace	Vigorous pace
Excitement seeking	Low need for thrills	Craves excitement
Positive emotions	Less exuberant	Cheerful, optimistic
Openness—characterized by a vivid imagination; an appreciation of art and beauty; mood swings; wanting to try out new activities; intellectual curiosity; and an openness to political, social, and religious beliefs		
Fantasy	Focuses on the here and now, logical	Imaginative, daydreams
Aesthetics	Uninterested in art	Appreciates art and beauty
Feelings	Ignores and discounts feelings	Values all emotions
Actions	Prefers the familiar	Prefers variety, tries new things
Ideas	Narrower intellectual focus	Broad intellectual focus and curiosity
Values	Dogmatic, conservative	Open to reexamining clues
Agreeableness—characterized by a belief that others are well intentioned, frankness and sincerity, a willingness to help others, a preparedness to forgive and forget, modesty, and tender-mindedness		
Trust	Cynical, skeptical	Sees others as honest and well intentioned (naïve)
Straightforwardness	Guarded, manages information, political	Straightforward, frank, sincere
Altruism	Reluctant to get involved	Willing to help others
Compliance	Aggressive, competitive	Yields under conflict, defers
Modesty	Feels superior to others	Self-effacing, humble
Tender-mindedness	Hard-headed, tough-minded, rational	Tender-minded, easily moved, sympathetic
Conscientiousness (work ethic)—characterized by a sense of capability, good organization, self-government by conscience, a drive to achieve, self-discipline, and deliberation		
Competence	Often feels unprepared	Feels capable and effective
Order	Unorganized, unmethodical	Well-organized, neat, tidy
Dutifulness	Causal about obligations	Governed by conscience, reliable
Achievement striving	Low need for achievement	Driven to achieve success and results
Self-discipline	Procrastinates, distracted	Focuses on completing tasks
Deliberation	Spontaneous, hasty	Thinks carefully before acting

agreeable and are in people-related occupations are paid less than the tougher minded. There is no such relationship in occupations not involving a strong people focus.

Personality and Leadership

Along with the literature described above, there is a growing body of research looking at the relationship between the FFM and leadership behavior and performance. Judge, Bono, Ilies, and Gerhardt (2002) suggested that the trait approach to leadership emergence and effectiveness is strongly supported when personality traits are categorized under the Big Five taxonomy. In their meta-analysis of the leadership and personality research, Judge et al. found leadership (as measured by others' rankings, ratings, or nominations) to be positively related to extraversion, openness, and conscientiousness, and negatively related to neuroticism. Other analyses have also been conducted investigating the relationship between the FFM and transformational leadership, which has been described by Avolio and Bass (2004) as encouraging other people to perform and develop beyond what is normally expected of them. For example, Judge and Bono (2000) found that both extraversion and agreeableness correlated with transformational leadership, and Bono and Judge (2004) found extraversion to be the most significant and consistent correlate with transformational leadership. In a study of the personalities of leaders in the United Kingdom's most successful independent companies, Nicholson (1998) found that leaders were more extraverted and conscientious and less neurotic and agreeable that the general population, and that the same leaders were found to be more conscientious than "managers." The relationship between the FFM and leadership effectiveness has also been researched within the cross-cultural context. For example, Silverthorne (2001) found that more effective leaders described themselves as being extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious, and less neurotic than less effective leaders in U.S., Chinese, and Thai cultures. In relation to openness, Silverthorne found that, whereas U.S. leaders described themselves as being more open to experience, Chinese and Thai leaders did not.

As can be seen from the literature described above, there do appear to be some consistent findings in the personality and leadership research, that is, that leaders report being more extraverted, conscientious, and emotionally stable. The findings in relation to agreeableness are less clear and may reflect a need for balance on this factor. For example, Burch and Anderson (in press) have suggested that "low agreeableness scores may reflect traits that facilitate individuals' rise into leadership positions, but are not necessarily an indicator of subsequent leadership success." Overall, the findings from the research confirm that personality has an important role to play in leadership. Indeed, Kaiser and Hogan (in press) have stated that "personality matters—who leaders are determines how they lead, for better or worse" (p. 2). Kaiser and Hogan go on to suggest that personality is the most important factor in explaining the individual differences between leaders, pointing out that the validity of personality as a predictor of leadership is greater than that for cognitive ability (e.g., Illies, Gerhardt, and Le, 2004). Gerhardt and Le (2004) have also suggested that personality is a stronger predictor of leader emergence than intelligence, and R. Hogan, Hogan, and Barrett (in press) have suggested that managerial judgment is a function of intelligence and personality.

Given the importance of personality in work-related performance and leadership, it is necessary to identify ways in which potential leaders can be developed to ensure that they reach their full potential and how an understanding of individual personality traits will help bring about appropriate behavior change.

Personality-Focused Coaching

The Growing Importance of Coaching

The emerging knowledge economy with its constant demands for ever more sophisticated innovation places great strain on both organizations and individuals. The only solution to this is continuous professional development so that organizational competencies in innovation can flourish. Organizations increasingly are moving away from traditional classroom training with standard one-size-fits-all programs to more flexible development solutions. Executive coaching with its rapid, tailor-made, person-centered development focus is clearly the choice of many organizations and forms a part of leadership development programs in many of the world's leading companies (for a historical and conceptual review of executive coaching, see Kilburg, 2007). Executive coaching has become very popular, and it has been estimated that $1 billion is spent each year in the United States on coaching (Sherman & Freas, 2004).

Coaching and Personality

We have coached executives for more than 25 years, with thousands of coaching sessions between us, and have found that the starting point for coaching by managers (and even professional coaches) is often confused. However, given the knowledge we have about how personality may influence behavior and affect competence for the role (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Burch & Anderson, 2008; R. Hogan & Benson, in press; Robertson & Callinan, 1998), we suggest that a personality-based approach to coaching can have an important contribution in assessing and facilitating behavioral change. This is because personality provides an important indicator of one's propensity for certain behavior within particular situations (e.g., Burch & Anderson, 2008). Personality-focused coaching establishes the premise that an assessment of personality can be an excellent place to start coaching.

So, how can this understanding be used to help develop potential leaders? The paradigm is built around the general finding that leaders tend to score lower in neuroticism, higher in extraversion, and higher in conscientiousness. It is the associated patterns of behavior that coaching should be focused on building for management development and leadership succession. An analysis of personality is highly relevant in two main elements of the coaching process. First, the analysis can offer a useful starting point to coaching, providing an objective assessment of the individual's strengths and development needs; in discussion with the coachee, it can provide a useful understanding of any behavioral changes that may have occurred already, and it can serve as a form of coaching needs analysis. Second, it can then provide a framework for coaching action in which new behaviors can be identified, practiced, and implemented at work, for example, developing assertiveness behaviors may be highly relevant for an individual with lower extraversion (in particular, facet-level assertiveness) scores. The important point is that personality-focused coaching does not seek to "change" personality but rather uses an understanding of a coachee's personality traits to facilitate behavioral change in certain (leadership) situations and contexts. It is important for coaches to ask, "Given your personality, how do you think you can be most effective?"

We now consider examples of how personality-focused coaching can develop leaders with specific reference to the Big Five factors.

Coaching for Neuroticism

The key elements a coach should consider in this area are the levels of worry, anger, discouragement, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, and vulnerability. The aim of coaching for an individual who is high on neuroticism, and who shows behavioral signs of dysfunctional anxiety, should be to build a level of awareness and control over negative emotional states, using such techniques as cognitive–behavioral coaching. The coach can help executived to

1. remain relaxed and calm in emotional situations,
2. be composed and slow to anger in conflict,
3. not be easily discouraged in trying times,
4. not show embarrassment in testing social situations such as when being given compliments or having jokes told against them,
5. resist urges to express negative emotion in an impulsive or unhelpful manner,
6. be more resilient and handle stress effectively, and
7. manage their suspiciousness more constructively.

Coaching for Extraversion (Interpersonal Patterns)

Effective leaders tend to be friendly, warm, enjoy the company of others, are able to speak up and take a stand, set a vigorous pace, enjoy excitement, and are optimistic. For individuals with low extraversion scores and a poor range of interpersonal connection, the coach should encourage them to

1. remember people's names and show genuine warmth and concern for individuals;
2. learn conversation skills and be gregarious;
3. learn how to express their views assertively, without being overly dominant;
4. display high levels of energy and activity;
5. create excitement and enthusiasm with their teams; and
6. learn to be optimistic and experience positive emotions. (Seligman [1991] presents evidence that optimists achieve better than pessimists in almost every facet of life.)

Coaching for Openness to Experience

The key elements for leaders are openness to new ideas, actions, and feelings. For individuals with low openness scores and lack of breadth of awareness, the coach can encourage them to be read widely and build a broad intellectual awareness, to seek out variety and try new things in many areas of the business, and to value a wide range of emotions in themselves and others. Coaching can also be useful for those who have "flights of fantasy" and may be highly creative and eccentric. Burch (2006) has referred to these people as "creative-schizotypes," and described them as highly creative yet difficult to work with. Burch suggests that although this type of personality may be useful for strategic thinking, coaching should be directed toward helping these individuals contain any idiosyncratic behaviors, that is, those that may hinder their capability to lead effectively. The coach can help managers and leaders to

1. develop strategies for thinking outside of the box,
2. be open to exploring issues in more depth and considering other possibilities, and
3. embrace diversity.

And for those high in openness, the coach can help them to

4. check and contain their behaviors and
5. work with other people to provide a "reality check" of their ideas.

Coaching for Agreeableness

Agreeableness involves trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness, and it appears to be the least relevant of the Big Five traits in predicting leadership (Judge et al., 2002). Although it is important for leaders to develop a balance of trust and straightforwardness, the traits of compliance, modesty, and tender-mindedness are clearly not related to leadership.

Coaching for Conscientiousness (Work Ethic)

As discussed earlier, there is a great deal of evidence that highlights the importance of conscientiousness as a helpful predictor of work-related behavior and performance, including for leadership. Coaches will rarely find that upcoming leaders are lazy, but there can easily be a pattern of executives being both low in conscientiousness and feeling unprepared for presentations or other important corporate events, being unorganized or unmethodical, procrastinating, or being easily distracted or too hasty in their work. Coaching can clearly encourage leaders to be well prepared and to work systematically with a clear focus. In addition, coaching can be effective for those who are very driven, yet seek to maintain some kind of work–life balance.

It can be seen from the above that the FFM has an important application in understanding leader behaviors, and that personality measurement can provide a useful foundation for behavioral change in executive coaching. However, in understanding the link between personality and behavior, coaches should take account of situational factors in developing coaching interventions.

Conclusion

The science of personality measurement in the workplace has developed a great deal in the past 2 decades, and there is a growing acceptance of the FFM as a taxonomy of personality and individual differences. Although there have been concerns expressed regarding the magnitude of the variance explaining the link between personality and performance (e.g., Morgeson et al., 2007; Murphy & Dzieweczynski, 2005), such proportions can still have a very pragmatic value to organizations (e.g., Ones, Dilchert, Viswesvaran, & Judge, 2007). Indeed, researchers are now calling for further research into "lower level" traits and composite traits of the FFM in order to increment this variance (e.g., Barrick et al., 2001; Burch & Anderson, 2008). Given the knowledge generated from the organizational research over the past 2 decades in relation to personality as a predictor of a range of work-related behaviors and performance, it would seem that personality-focused coaching has an important role to play when changes are required in employee and leader behaviors.

Although there are consulting psychologists who already use personality measurement as part of their coaching process, this is not always the case, and even when it is, the measures they use are often not those that link to the bulk of the personality-at-work research. Given the recognition of the role of personality in predicting work-related behaviors and performance, and the recent research demonstrating the link between the

FFM and leadership, it is necessary for the practice of executive coaching to align itself with the personality-at-work research. Having recognized the usefulness of personality measurement in executive coaching, we now advocate that consulting psychologists and other human resource and coaching practitioners should use tools in their coaching practice that are derived from a rigorous research base and that the models on which they are built tie back to the broader personality at work research (such as the FFM). Despite the widespread use of the FFM in personality research, concerns have been raised in the literature regarding the limited influence this has had in the "practice" of personality measurement, with very few of those measures employed in practice being directly based on the FFM (see Anderson, 2005; Burch & Anderson, in press; Salgado, Moscoso, & Lado, 2003). Although these concerns have been expressed more specifically regarding personality measurement in employee selection, the same concern applies to the use of personality measurement in executive coaching (and, indeed, coaching more widely) when personality measures provide a basis for coaching intervention. Given the wealth of knowledge regarding the relationship between the FFM and work-related behavior and performance, it would seem to be "prudent," if not professionally responsible, to use personality measures that demonstrate research-based predictive validity for a range of workplace behaviors and leadership, in other words, those based on the FFM. Therefore, if personality-focused coaching is to work effectively, it is important that consulting psychologists employ empirically valid personality measures in their practice, ensure that other human resource and coaching professionals understand the importance of using such measures in their practice as well, and have a thorough knowledge and understanding of the research describing personality–behavior–performance linkages.

Coaching has become a well-established and effective method of one-on-one management development in many organizations, and it is now routinely used in leadership development programs. Coaching can deal with skill shortages, performance problems, change challenges, and issues raised by the executive himself or herself, and can be assisted by personality assessment not only in these situations. It can also provide valuable insights in many situations.

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