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# Executive Coaching and Debriefing for Corporate Leadership Development Programs

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In today's management environment, new forms of and tools for corporate leadership development programs have emerged. One of the most popular development tools is executive coaching. The number of executive coaches has more than doubled in the past decade and corporate leadership development programs are utilizing their services more frequently. However, the fundamentals of executive coaching have actually been around for many years in the form of debriefing.

In the U.S. Air Force, debriefing after every flight was an essential process in my training and development as an F-15 fighter pilot. My instructor pilot debriefed with me after every training flight. Later, when I became an instructor pilot and squadron training officer, I did the same with my young pilots. After leaving the Air Force, I used the basic tenets of the debriefing process I had learned, adapted the process to a sales force I led in a civilian company, and further refined that process over the next 16 years.

I was recently reminded just how broadly applicable the debriefing framework is as an executive coaching tool when a professor approached me at the end of a lecture to a healthcare team, thanking me for explaining the process of debriefing to the team. She told me, "You've given me the means to have a difficult conversation with a student, allowing her see what, in herself, needs to change in order for her to be successful."

Corporate leadership development programs require both executive coaching and debriefing practices, processes that utilize complex discussions and deep analyses that resist oversimplification. Executive coaches help their clients to see themselves more accurately, allowing clients to establish actionable objectives for personal change. Likewise, debriefing helps individuals and teams more accurately analyze the work that they have done in order to make efforts to improve upon their past initiatives. While executive coaching focuses upon the individual, proper debriefing is effective in both individual and team development. The principles are the same, but for the debriefing process, the approach is more direct, objective, and simple.

## Differences Between Executive Coaching and Debriefing Practices

Although corporate leadership development programs draw from both executive coaching and debriefing practices, there is a significant difference between the two processes: First, executive coaching practices struggle to get to the actionable objectives for change. This is where the highly subjective talent and skill of the coach comes in to play. Second, coaching is less process-driven than proper debriefing. Successful executive coaching is dependent upon the individual style and skill of the coach and the character traits of their client. Successful debriefing, however, is driven by a repeatable, structured process.

Let us examine some of the elements of a good debriefing process and compare them to an executive coaching practice. The first of those elements is what we call "tone." In the debriefing practice, setting the right tone is critical. The right tone is nameless and rankless, which gives everyone an equal footing. Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, has labeled such a tone "psychologically safe." In executive coaching, a coach will take care to establish a trusting and psychologically safe tone much like a professional therapist or physician would for a patient. This tone is essential in order to achieve the honesty and truthfulness necessary to identify objectives for change. In debriefing, the proper tone is critical to uncovering mistakes and isolating successes.

Corporate leadership development programs also require the correct tone. With the right tone, debriefing and executive coaching practices can enable teams and individuals to find the truth. In the executive coaching practice, obtaining the truth of how others see or perceive the client can be a tough process, which is typical of the analysis of any complex issue. This is the same in the debriefing practice. Whether we're debriefing a team or an individual's performance, we have to be prepared to dig deep into the root causes of both successes and errors. In order to do this, we only use the debriefing practice for clear and measurable objectives. One cannot debrief in any truly successful and meaningful way without specific and quantifiable objectives.

Utilizing Clear and Measurable Objectives

In our corporate leadership development programs, we emphasize the importance of stating clear objectives in both executive coaching and debriefing practices. Clear objectives allow the debriefing process to take two procedural steps in order to discover the root causes. First, we take a look at how well we executed toward our stated objectives - did we do what we said we were going to do? Did we execute this process in the way that we said we were going to do it? Take a look at each of the tasks we had to perform in order to meet our objective(s). Was each of these steps effective? From this inquisitive process, we are able to create a short list of successes and errors that form the basis of our next step: analyzing the execution.

We analyze the execution by taking each of our results â€“ the successes and errors â€“ and subject each to a series of "why's" until we get to the root cause. We continually ask "why" until we get to the fundamental root cause: Why did that happen? What really failed? Did we just get lucky? We can't fix something, replicate a success, identify a near miss, or address a personal shortcoming until we know exactly what needs to change and why.

The Importance of Actionable Feedback

As soon as we know what that root cause is, we can get to the real point of debriefing and executive coaching - taking corrective action. We need actionable feedback in order to improve ourselves. Corporate leadership development programs help to continuously improve teams and organizations by requiring actionable feedback. Research demonstrates that feedback that is not actionable can actually result in negative behaviors. The product of debriefing and executive coaching must focus upon what can be done to address the root causes. Without a specific course of action, reflective activities will be a waste of time at best, and can potentially trigger negative behaviors at worst.

An effective debriefing process develops an actionable lesson learned that addresses each of the identified results - each success or error. A lesson learned is a set of steps intended to resolve the error or replicate the success of each of the root causes. It is an objective and clear set of instructions or actions necessary to improve personal, team and organizational performance in the future. Furthermore, in the context of team debriefing, it assigns a single accountable individual to take that set of actions or to properly store the learning for future use.

Such are the basic processes, utilized by corporate leadership development programs, for both debriefing and executive coaching. However, there is one final secret to successfully using these practices. In our corporate leadership development programs, we recommend performing these processes frequently and in small, achievable portions. Successful executive coaches help clients to tackle personal goals a little at a time, meeting with individuals to assess incremental progress relatively frequently, typically every two weeks. The debriefing frequency should also follow this timeline. If debriefing occurs less frequently than once per month, the individual or the team is likely to "choke on the elephant." It is hard to change, especially when you are attempting a great amount of change in a short period of time. Aim to change slowly, a little at a time. This is the same philosophy behind successful change methodologies.

Conclusion

There is a deep, meaningful correlation between the debriefing and executive coaching processes. James Hunt and Joseph Weintraub, Babson College of Management professors, argue that facilitated learning, such as executive coaching, is leveraged to extraordinary results through forms including the U.S. Army's After Action Review (AAR) and the U.S. Air Force's debriefing process. Both executive coaching and debriefing are forms of facilitated learning, and both are utilized in successful corporate leadership development programs. However, in executive coaching, a third party facilitates the learning for one member of an organization. But the debriefing process allows the team to facilitate learning for individual team members and the organization as a whole.

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James D. Murphy - About Author:
James D. Murphy, the founder and CEO of a Afterburner, Inc., has a unique, powerful mix of leadership skills in both the military and business worlds. After graduating from the University of Kentucky, Murphy joined the U.S. Air Force where he learned to fly the F-15. He has logged over 1,200 hours as an instructor pilot in the F-15 and has accumulated over 3,200 hours of flight time in other high-performance jet aircraft and has flown missions to Central America, Asia, Central Europe and the Middle East. As Afterburner's leadership keynote speaker, Murphy has helped top business leaders transform strategy into action. Realizing that the concepts of the Flawless Execution(SM) model could be applied to a strategic business planning, he engaged the proven model - Plan. Brief. Execute. Debrief. Through his leadership, Afterburner has landed on Inc. Magazine's Inc. 500 List twice. Murphy has been regularly featured in such publications as The Wall Street Journal, BusinessWeek, and Newsweek. For more information on Afterburner, Inc., please call 877-765-5607 or visit a www.afterburnerconsulting.com.

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