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THE ISOLATED EXECUTIVE

How Executive Coaching Can Help

G A E W A L T E R S

*It is strange to be known so universally
and yet to be so lonely.*

—Albert Einstein

Mark and Paul,¹ recently promoted to senior executive positions, sit alone in their respective offices a continent apart, similarly troubled, frustrated, and isolated. Both produced impressive results for their organizations and were promoted to lead major divisions with significantly broader spans of control and increased fiscal responsibilities. However, they—like countless other executives—are struggling with a growing sense of isolation that seems to parallel their upward movement in the organization. To these isolated executives, people appear more reluctant to share information, staff members seem less forthcoming about emerging issues, department heads don't engage as openly in dialogue, and colleagues have distanced themselves.

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During my seven years as vice president of organizational development for an international luxury hotel company, I was asked by executives all over the world to explain this shared experience of executive isolation. These executives reported that it really *is* lonely at the top, and they often struggled to make sense of their loneliness. Because our hotel company, as the recipient of the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige Quality award, was often used as a benchmark organization, I was frequently asked to share our approach to executive development with other leading organizations throughout the world. With these different executives in different companies, I again found that isolation was a common problem. As a leadership development trainer and executive coach, I have worked with hundreds of executives over the past sixteen years in both large and small organizations (including aerospace, entertainment, law, medicine, banking, fashion, engineering, telecommunications, and information technology). In this chapter, I describe the insights and strategies that have been particularly useful in my work with these isolated executives.

Executive Isolation

The goals of this chapter are to

- Examine the dilemma of the isolated executive and present examples of two executives who became isolated
- Identify a key individual difference—Extraversion or Introversion—that influences the nature of the isolation executives are likely to face
- Describe how *extraverted* executives become isolated and how executive coaching can help overcome this isolation
- Describe how *introverted* executives become isolated and how executive coaching can help overcome this isolation
- Discuss the role of organizational character in understanding executive isolation

Acting Alone versus Becoming Isolated

Leaders must occasionally act alone for good and justifiable reasons. There are times when a decision must be made, and consulting others might be

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problematic. Effective leaders know when to include others and, more important, when not to include them. There is, most certainly, a time for independent action. Heifetz (1994) outlined three situations in which leaders must act decisively and alone. The first is when the task at hand is so great that it may overwhelm the group and there is no prevailing norm of teamwork with which to tackle the problem. The second occurs when a participative process might further intensify friction among competing factions. And the third is when a crisis situation does not allow the time to engage in a more participative process.

Executives who rise from the ranks of collaborative, team-based organizations quickly discover that one of the hallmarks of this new senior level of leadership is the increased requirement for solitary decision making. In such situations, information may be collected from many people and sources, strategies may be explored and discussed with staff, ideas may be generated in brainstorming sessions, and consultants may be brought in to contribute their particular expertise; however, the senior executive must finally pull away from others, close the door, and decide alone.

The solitary decision making discussed above is situational in nature and is acknowledged and accepted by the organization. However, there are other circumstances that lead to executive isolation. Those working in the field of executive development must first differentiate between the necessary solitary decision making that is a part of senior leadership and the isolation that becomes a source of difficulty for both the leader and the organization.

Two Isolated Executives

The two case examples presented below illustrate how executives can become isolated.

Case Example 1: Mark

Mark, the executive vice president of operations for a worldwide luxury hotel company, was well known throughout the organization for his multi-tasking ability and action orientation. He began this morning in his customary way, in his home gym with his personal trainer. He had invited two members of his senior staff to join him in the gym so he could combine the

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workout with a strategy session. When Mark completed both tasks, he drove to the office, making a series of phone calls as he went. He arrived in time to launch a brainstorming session exploring potential international hotel sites. He took several phone calls during this meeting, since he was simultaneously negotiating with the city planner from a Colorado resort community who was balking at an expansion project that was to be announced the following week. Key staff members knew that it was OK to pop in to ask a quick question, and at least three did. As soon as the meeting ended, Mark left the office and drove to the hangar where the corporate jet was waiting. Colleagues who were accompanying him on the trip came prepared to discuss and recommend candidates for the general manager position at the Barcelona property. Mark made his selection, and the announcement was drafted on board and sent electronically. During the trip, Mark enjoyed his time in the various hotels and didn't limit his interactions to his executive colleagues. He always made it a practice to spend time visiting the hotels and restaurants, engaging employees in conversation, and greeting many by name.

Yet despite his outgoing behavior, when Mark devoted time to his own leadership development with his executive coach, he expressed concern about his growing sense of isolation. He wondered why people seemed to be withholding information and distancing themselves from him. He asked, "Why do the people who once came to me about practically everything now talk to me only about the decisions they have made and results they have obtained? They no longer pose questions or suggest ideas to explore." He became frustrated when people informed him of problems only after they were solved, especially when he believed he could have cut through the divisional gulfs that impeded progress and probably had created the problems in the first place. Upset by this turn of events, he asserted, "We've got to function as a team!" Mark's most recent promotion required much more travel. He observed that prior to his promotion, when he was based in the corporate office, he felt "intuitively in sync" with his team. Now, as the head of five regions, he said, "I don't feel a part of *anyone's* team. I'm never anywhere long enough to connect."

Mark's leadership style is fueled by a highly active and interactive approach to his work and his people. He is energized, inspired by, and achieves his greatest clarity of thinking when engaged with the external world. His ability to keep multiple tasks moving simultaneously enables

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him to initiate and accomplish an amazing array of projects. However, Mark has been described by others in the organization as overwhelming, inconsistent, and exhausting. One of Mark's staff members summed up his style: "When Mark gets excited about an idea, he's red hot . . . but *you* can get burned, and then you learn."

Case Example 2: Paul

Paul was selected to head a large design and development company created by the merger of two previously autonomous organizations. He was confident that his clear vision of what was needed to create a cohesive new organization, coupled with his broad base of experience in the field, made this new leadership role a good fit for him.

Soon after his selection, Paul invited four people to meet with him in a secluded off-site location to devise a plan for his first 100 days in office. He outlined his strategic vision, the challenges he foresaw, the factions that currently existed, and his ideas for reorganizing. Because Paul was an unknown quantity to one side of the newly merged organization (and was not naturally one to seek out people and introduce himself), part of the plan involved a series of brown-bag lunches during which Paul would outline his vision for the organization and answer questions about himself.

At the conclusion of the strategy session, Paul took the written plan with him, refined it, and decided who would fill the newly created positions. When he assumed the presidency, he announced the members of the executive team and began implementing his plan. He executed the steps flawlessly, tracked his performance against the plan, and made adjustments as needed. He met with key people one on one to ensure that they were clear about their responsibilities, goals, and objectives. After Paul's initial series of meet-and-greet sessions, he redirected his energy and time to battles on the corporate front, believing that his vision had been clearly articulated. He had confidence in his carefully selected executive team and didn't want to micromanage this talented group. His interactions with the staff, therefore, became less frequent as he attended to the larger corporate challenges.

People throughout the organization, especially those who had originally been skeptical of Paul and the merger, were impressed. The launch of the new company was extremely successful, and Paul's leadership created a sense of cohesion that was essential to the effectiveness of the merger.

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However, this honeymoon period lasted only a few months. The first signs of trouble came during a strategic planning retreat scheduled for Paul and his senior staff at midyear. Now that the organization was in place and project work was well under way, Paul wanted his executive staff to report on the progress of each of their divisions, establish subsequent steps, and design the framework for the year ahead.

The retreat did not go well. Paul's carefully constructed agenda fell apart after the first hour. People brought up issues that were unknown to him and which they felt called for immediate attention. Taken by surprise, Paul said he needed some time to examine the issues before he could respond. He felt that to react immediately would be premature and that more study was needed before conducting any discussions, and certainly before taking action. The retreat continued, but interaction was low and tension remained high. When Paul got home from the retreat, he reassembled the team that had helped him design his original strategy and expressed his frustration and disappointment that what had started so well seemed to have derailed so seriously. He asked, "Why didn't anyone on my staff tell me that these issues were bubbling underneath the surface, ready to explode? We might have had time to design a plan of action." He felt he had been blindsided and knew that there were more important corporate issues on which he needed to focus his attention.

Paul's carefully orchestrated approach to leadership and organizational initiatives grows out of a style that is very different from Mark's. Paul derives energy and inspiration from the internal world of thought and reflection. He is known as a master planner and a visionary leader, extremely thorough and focused. He is seldom caught off-guard and is always ready with Plan B if Plan A meets with resistance. Paul's people, however, report feeling excluded and in the dark. They complain that it takes an inordinately long time to get an answer from Paul and sometimes wonder if opportunities are missed due to lack of action.

A Key Individual Difference: Extraversion versus Introversion

Mark and Paul are experiencing common, but not necessary or inevitable, forms of isolation. The remainder of this chapter describes a personality

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characteristic that influences why and how leaders become isolated and explains how executive coaches can help them overcome their isolation.

While all leaders share some basic responsibilities for making decisions and leading people, their styles and behavior can be very different in practice. One key way in which leaders differ is their orientation to the outside world. Some leaders, like Mark, find that decision making is easiest when it is based on wide-ranging discussions with a variety of people. To convince others about those decisions, such leaders seek opportunities for interaction, preferably face-to-face. Other leaders, like Paul, approach their leadership duties differently. For them, decision making is best done in solitude after a careful analysis of essential factors. If they devote sufficient thought, research, care, and consideration to making the decision, it will be right and therefore convincing to others. Either leadership style can be effective—or ineffective.

Carl Jung, in his book *Psychological Types* (1971), identified the two styles as Extraversion and Introversion and identified them as characteristic of a personality difference. Jung's work was expanded by Katharine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers, who created the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) instrument (see Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, and Hammer, 1998) to help people identify their natural personality preferences. Many executive coaches now use the MBTI personality inventory to provide executives with insight into their typical approaches to leadership challenges, the expected strengths of their approaches, and their possible blind spots. Recognizing and understanding the differences between Extraversion and Introversion are particularly useful when working with isolated executives because Extraverted and Introverted leaders tend to get isolated for different reasons and under different circumstances.² Use of the MBTI assessment tool can help executives understand and overcome their isolation.

Defining the Differences

The words *Extraversion* and *Introversion* are often understood as stereotypes and are therefore discounted. Many who hear such words think of the behaviors commonly associated with them (for example, that Extraverts are loud and Introverts are shy). According to Jung, *Extraversion* and *Introversion* really describe how people derive their energy in the world. This process is important because executives use their preferred sources of psychological energy (Extraversion or Introversion) to initiate and sustain

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information gathering and decision making. All executives collect pertinent data and apply experience, generate ideas and explore options, organize and prioritize the information collected, and make decisions. However, the source of the energy that stimulates and drives these functions of observation and decision making is found in one's preference for Extraversion or Introversion. Executive coaches who can explain Extraversion and Introversion accurately and use these differences appropriately find that they can help executives toward significant breakthroughs in their learning, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and behavior change.

In Jungian terms, Extraverts are people who draw their energy from action and interaction with the external world. They work best with people around them as they talk their way through to new ideas and decisions. They often prefer to learn about things through experience or interactions with others instead of reading about them in books or memos.

Introverts, on the other hand, draw their energy from reflection and contemplation within the internal world of thoughts and ideas. Ideas and clarity develop most readily when the Introvert is being quietly contemplative. Instead of thinking out loud in the external world of action and dialogue, the Introverted leader seeks some degree of solitude in which he or she can hear the quiet inner voice from which Introverts draw psychological strength and energy.

Generally, the leader who functions in the Extraverted attitude tends to trust and be energized by input from the outer world. Mark, the hotel executive, clearly utilizes an Extraverted approach to his work. He is fueled and stimulated by action and interaction. The external world is a source of inspiration. Paul's leadership style illustrates the opposite preference, Introversion. He processes and distills information more efficiently when he can pull away from the world and concentrate on an issue without interruption. He says, "The quieter the setting, the better I think."

How Extraverted and Introverted Executives Become Isolated

Time-pressured executives will naturally seek the most efficient and accessible energy source available in order to drive the high level of activity demanded of them. Executives who understand how their preferences for

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Extraversion or Introversion affect their work can become more effective in maintaining their focus and using their energy well. They can anticipate the potential pitfalls inherent in each approach and learn to balance their preferences with alternative behaviors. Those who are unaware of their natural styles and/or fail to balance their inclinations by incorporating other behaviors can experience the interpersonal alienation that leads to isolation.

Leaders become isolated in two ways: through externally created conditions and self-imposed ones. Both Extraverts and Introverts may move toward isolation because their colleagues and staff are pulling away from them or as a result of their own desire to remove themselves from the interactive field. Because of the differences in the natural approaches of Extraverted and Introverted executives, their paths to isolation—whether externally or internally created—can appear quite different.

Extraverted Executives

An executive like Mark, whose psychological preference is for Extraversion, is most likely to find his or her energy heightened or enhanced when acting in or interacting with the external world. Dialogue and discussion with others stimulate and enhance the Extravert's thought processes. New ideas spring forth and grow in an environment that provides immediate feedback, both verbal and visual. The give-and-take of conversation clarifies ideas. Simply being in the presence of others often creates a surge of energy that enlivens and rejuvenates an Extraverted leader.

Extraverted leaders are drawn to interact with the external world for these reasons. They are likely to bring people together to bounce ideas around, to get topics and issues out on the table, and to think out loud. A naval officer compared his preference for Extraversion to a sonar system and explained, "To determine another vessel's position, sonar signals are sent out. As they bounce off objects and return, the vessel's position can be noted and a response formulated. I send out signals to my people, and the feedback I receive helps me determine my course of action." Extraverted leaders send out signals and may recalibrate their actions based on feedback received from the external environment.

Executives with a preference for Extraversion report that not being able to interact with others for long periods of time leaves them feeling listless, irritable, and out of sync.

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Externally Created Isolation in Extraverted Executives

Mark discovered that his associates were increasingly reluctant to come to him to explore issues because of his tendency to spring into action immediately. For example, when Janet, a member of Mark's staff, expressed concern about the approach taken by a colleague, Hal, she was hoping to receive guidance from Mark. Mark, however, immediately called Hal and demanded an explanation. Instead of being helped by Mark's input, Janet felt exposed and embarrassed, and soon she and others on Mark's staff learned not to mention interpersonal concerns that they wanted to work out privately. Similarly, when Stephanie shared a preliminary outline of an idea, Mark liked the idea and wanted to run with it on the spot. He pushed for immediate implementation before Stephanie had taken care of all the necessary logistics. As a result, the project failed, and she was held responsible. After observing such incidents, people came to Mark less often with new ideas and instead waited until they had worked out the details themselves.

Extraverted executives have a natural propensity for action. They tend to make quick decisions, proactively seek out information from a wide variety of sources, stimulate exploratory dialogue, and serve as catalysts for energetic discussions. These attributes are generally recognized by the organization as leadership strengths. However, the Extraverted executive may also overwhelm and intimidate people, push staff members and ideas prematurely, unintentionally reveal confidences, and probe inappropriately. It is therefore valuable for Extraverted leaders to be aware of how and when their strengths may become liabilities and why people may begin to distance themselves.

Self-Imposed Isolation in Extraverted Executives

Extraverted executives may also deliberately distance themselves from others. This choice, while uncomfortable, often occurs when the executive discovers that supposedly confidential information has been shared without permission, resulting in feelings of betrayal. If the breach of confidentiality has negative consequences, the Extraverted leader may reevaluate the wisdom of thinking out loud, become increasingly wary, and limit the people to whom he or she expresses ideas and opinions. When such gradual limiting of contacts still fails to stop the flow of information, the Extraverted leader may withdraw altogether and become isolated.

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In natural modes of functioning, Extraverted leaders generally believe that the external world provides the most fertile soil for the growth of ideas. Therefore, when an idea is in its early stages, Extraverts will often share and explore their thinking through discussions with others, confident that doing so will be beneficial. Extraverted executives may assume that everyone who participates in this kind of meeting understands its exploratory nature. However, newly appointed leaders may not yet have learned how powerful their words can be. Without an expressly stated request for confidentiality, others may enjoy the bit of reflected power that comes from sharing the inner thinking of a senior executive. Staff members may also interpret ideas as directives and begin to implement them, especially when a person with a preference for Introversion concludes, based on his or her own approach to such a situation, that the boss must have thought the idea through before sharing it.

Extraverted leaders are particularly vulnerable to information leaks and broken confidences. Their preliminary thoughts, whether intentionally divulged or innocently shared, can be thrust prematurely into the larger organizational world. When this happens, the Extraverted leader may become angry and distrustful and may eventually conclude that open dialogue is dangerous.

Extraverted leaders who have been seriously and adversely affected by disclosures of this kind may find their worldviews shaken. What was once a safe place—the external world of open dialogue—no longer feels safe, and, as a result, the Extravert may stop sharing information. Unfortunately, this self-imposed isolation can be immensely difficult for Extraverted executives. They are likely to feel imprisoned and cut off from their source of inspiration, energy, and intellectual vitality.

Coaching the Isolated Extraverted Executive

It's not surprising that an executive at this stage of isolation may seek a safe listener, a person who can be trusted and who will serve as a sounding board. Increasingly, senior executives seek out executive coaches as safe listeners. If the coach understands how the Extraverted executive arrived in this difficult position and recognizes the debilitating effects of isolation, he or she can play an essential role. The coach may become a trustworthy confidant with whom the leader can safely explore strategies, decisions, thoughts, and reactions.

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There are three ways in which executive coaches can help Extraverted executives overcome their isolation and become more effective. Each is discussed below.

First, the coach can explain the concepts of Extraversion and Introversion and offer perspectives on the benefits and costs of the leader's natural style. When Extraverted executives are made aware of how their predisposition for action and interaction can lead to resistance from others, they often find the solutions strikingly simple. Because this is potentially powerful information and may help increase interpersonal understanding, it is also beneficial to facilitate a team meeting, with the leader present, to discuss the leadership implications of Extraversion/Introversion. Illustrating that project success rates increase when people are allowed to reflect and work out essential details prior to action is also persuasive.

Second, coaches can help Extraverted executives learn to make optimum use of their Extraversion by identifying specific skills and behaviors that could increase their effectiveness. It is important to remind the Extraverted executive that not all problems are equally urgent and to offer practice in prioritizing. Many executives find it helpful to create a series of questions that must be answered before they pick up the phone and place a call. Extraverted executives also need to learn to specifically express their wish that certain preliminary discussions remain confidential; along the same lines, they should make it clear when they are simply thinking out loud so that their random thoughts are not transmitted to their organizations as new policy directions.

And, third, executive coaches can help leaders develop their less-preferred Introverted side. It is helpful for Extraverted leaders to discuss and practice specific Introverted behaviors that they admire in Introverted leaders and/or that have produced good results for Introverted colleagues. Describing and acting out new behaviors are particularly important for Extraverted leaders when they are developing alternative approaches.

Mark, the Extraverted leader in our case example, solves problems best through interaction and action, so he chose to call a meeting of his direct reports to share what he had learned about his Extraverted preferences. He recounted specific examples that illustrated how his Extraverted approach had created problems for people on his staff. He asked for their feedback and made good on his promise to consider a plan of action before instantaneously responding to an issue. He still invites people to his morning work-

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out sessions and continues to multitask throughout the day. But Mark has learned to lead in a more planned manner and not to react as hastily to external stimuli.

Introverted Executives

When Paul returned from his less than successful retreat, he reconvened his team of consultants and also spent time with the executive coach who had introduced him to the concept of psychological type. Paul explained what was happening in his new position and how frustrated he had become. He had completed the MBTI personality inventory several years ago, and he and his coach reviewed the implications of his Introversion preference and how that might be contributing to his current difficulties.

The road to isolation for Introverted leaders may be easier to understand than that for Extraverted leaders. When Introverts are deep in thought, the external world fades into the background while they attend to their rich inner dialogue. Therefore, Introverted leaders may not even hear the friendly “Good morning” offered by staff or colleagues and may not respond. Introverted leaders are sometimes perceived as cool, aloof, and distant—even arrogant. Introverted executives may not even notice this gradual distancing at first; they may believe that things are running smoothly with all their plans in place. Introverted executives are often shocked to discover that their teams are complaining about their lack of interest or involvement.

If the Extraverted leader’s information-gathering system is akin to sonar, the Introverted leader’s process of gathering information and deciding direction may be more aptly compared to the guidance system of a Cruise missile. Intelligence is gathered, the target is identified, navigational data are loaded, and the course is set. Once the missile is launched, it is not easily deflected.

Externally Created Isolation in Introverted Executives

Because organizational life is interactive and solitude is rare, Introverted executives typically develop a number of effective strategies for creating solitude even in the midst of a busy day. The resulting behaviors, however, often are misperceived and misunderstood and can lead colleagues and staff to move away from the Introverted executive—creating painful isolation.

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For example, Paul's staff noticed that he often broke eye contact and looked away from the person who was speaking. They did not realize that Paul was listening intently and that looking away enabled him to concentrate on the speaker's ideas without being distracted by external cues. In addition, Paul often paused before answering a question or responding to a statement. These pauses occasionally occurred in the middle of a sentence as he scanned his internal landscape for the best example, analogy, or metaphor. His behavior reflected a natural style for an Introvert but was confusing to staff members and led to discomfort and reluctance to initiate interactions on their part. Paul's staff soon learned that they were better served when they submitted information in written form rather than in face-to-face interactions. In such cases, Paul could study and reflect on the request in solitude and then proceed to craft and polish his answer in his internal world. While this was a helpful discovery for them, it had the effect of further distancing Paul from his colleagues.

Self-Imposed Isolation in Introverted Executives

There are a number of ways in which Introverted executives cut themselves off from others. As issues grow in complexity and the consequences of their decisions become more profound, Introverted leaders may be drawn ever more inward. After all, the inner world is the place where they find clarity and craft their decisions. If Introverted leaders don't have enough time and opportunity to access their inner worlds, their frustration and anxiety are likely to increase.

Another source of stress for Introverted executives is the demand for immediate reactions or answers when urgency is unwarranted or when they believe a more studied approach is needed. In describing the advantages of his more deliberate approach, the Introverted senior vice president of an environmental engineering firm explained, "I practically design the entire project in my head first, thereby seeing potential pitfalls and avoiding huge costs and delays before we ever go out into the field."

Introverted executives often experience the strongest demands for immediate responses while participating in meetings, especially those dominated by Extraverts. If no agenda was available beforehand, Introverted executives often learn of the meeting topics on their arrival and will have had no opportunity to research or formulate their thoughts—a situation that is likely to increase their discomfort about making quick decisions or espous-

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ing positions. When Extraverted executives begin a rapid-fire give-and-take, with several people speaking simultaneously, Introverted executives may feel relegated to the sidelines. An Introverted executive described her reaction to such a meeting as reminiscent of trying to take her turn in a fast game of jump rope on the elementary school playground: “You want to get in and start jumping, too, but you can’t seem to find an opening.”

When a meeting appears to be spinning out of control, an Introverted executive may act out of frustration and annoyance by disengaging. At the end of the meeting, Extraverted executives may be heard to remark on how productive the meeting was, while Introverted executives are thinking that it was a waste of time. And the Introvert’s disengagement may be noticed by others, who might conclude that the Introverted executive was uninterested or had nothing to offer. These assumptions may lead to further isolation from colleagues who will begin to think the Introvert is not a team player. The Introverted executive is often unaware of these reactions and is usually surprised to discover this perception through feedback.

Coaching the Isolated Introverted Executive

Introverted executives are at first puzzled and then increasingly frustrated to find that their natural style is so often misinterpreted. Since Introverts are not as likely to attend to feedback from the external world, they are frequently surprised (and sometimes hurt) to discover that they are seen as aloof, unapproachable, distant, and even unfriendly. The executive coach must understand Introversion and be free of stereotypical thinking about the preference in order to successfully coach the Introverted executive.

Executive coaches can help Introverted executives overcome their isolation and increase their effectiveness in three ways. Each is discussed below.

First, because Extraversion is often considered preferable by those who do not understand personality types, the coach can make a big difference for the Introverted executive by simply introducing the Jungian concept of Introversion as a positive attribute. When Introverted executives discover this dynamic, many experience a significant sense of relief. However, Introverted executives need to learn that while certain Introverted behaviors can enhance their ability to concentrate, these tendencies can lead to increased isolation and reduced flow of information from colleagues and subordinates. The same behaviors could also create interpersonal discomfort for colleagues and subordinates.

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Second, coaches can help Introverted executives balance between their needs with the needs of their colleagues and subordinates. Facilitated discussions on communication strategies, with other team members participating, are sometimes helpful in contrasting the processes of Introversion and Extraversion. Instant recognition, new understanding, and tolerance often result when normal Introverted and Extraverted behaviors are contrasted (e.g., the preference for thinking things through versus talking things out [Brock, 1994] or for pausing versus responding rapidly). Introverted executives might suggest that subordinates provide brief, written overviews prior to their meetings because this will enable the executives to respond more quickly to requests or problems. In addition, it may be helpful for Introverted executives to recognize situations in which updates or progress reports alone represent satisfactory responses. This practice may help reverse the perception of indecisiveness that sometimes arises when Introverted leaders respond to requests for decisions only after they have completed thorough research and determined a comprehensive solution.

Third, keep in mind that “Introverts like to understand things before they try them” (Barr and Barr, 1994, p. 139). Therefore, to be successful, developmental activities must allow for observation and analysis. Introverted leaders may find it valuable to first observe and analyze the behaviors of Extraverted leaders whom they respect and admire. The Introverted executive might want to pay particular attention to the Extravert’s body language, facial expressions, allotment of space, intonation, rate and volume of speech, and speed of response. After observing several Extraverted leaders, Introverted leaders should be encouraged to organize these observations into categories and take time to study the data. An important next step would involve mental visualization and rehearsal: Introverted leaders could envision themselves acting in specific ways and, most important, could visualize positive outcomes resulting from these new behaviors. Practicing the new behaviors privately or with their executive coaches can be beneficial. Afterward, the executives can use these Extraverted behaviors in the external world, observe the reactions, and adjust. This final step is likely to require extra effort: Introverted executives occasionally become stuck in analysis and should make a point of practicing their new behaviors externally. With the assistance and encouragement of the executive coach—and the positive reactions of staff and colleagues—this process can lead to a whole new range of behaviors for the Introverted leader.

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Paul, our hypothetical Introverted executive, drew up a plan of action that began with a retrospective analysis of leaders whom he admired who exhibited Extraverted behaviors. He focused internally (he described it as “watching videotapes of these individuals in my mind”) on the behaviors he felt were particularly effective but were not approaches he would have taken himself. He then practiced these behaviors with his coach and was persuaded to utilize some video feedback. In watching the videotape, he became aware of the importance of facial expression, vocal variety, and posture. He scheduled more “spontaneous” meetings with his staff and planned to spend one hour each day outside his office, seeking opportunities to interact with the general population of the organization. He developed a list of pertinent, open-ended questions to ask during these “impromptu” encounters. He practiced responding audibly and with a bit more animation as people answered these questions. Coincidentally, Paul had recently become a first-time father at the age of forty-seven, and he reported that many of these new ways of responding to people paralleled his way of interacting with his infant daughter. That model of behavior proved to be very helpful as an internal reference.

The Role of Organizational Character

In *The Character of Organizations: Using Jungian Type in Organizational Behavior*, William Bridges (1992) defined organizational character as “the personality of the individual organization” (p. 1). He used Jung’s theory of personality types to characterize global differences among organizations. Bridges’s work on organizational character can be very helpful in coaching isolated executives because it offers a way of looking at the organization’s preference for Extraversion or Introversion. Understanding organizational character is especially valuable when the executive’s preference for Extraversion or Introversion is different from the predominant style, or character, of the organization.

Bridges uses Jung’s concepts of Extraversion and Introversion to describe an organization’s orientation and the primary source of its energy. According to Bridges, Extraverted organizations

Can act quickly, sometimes even before they have taken the time to fully understand what they are up against. They can be impatient with efforts

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to get more information or to improve on the way it is interpreted. . . . Extraverted organizations depend heavily on conversations and meetings. . . . Written communications are considered unnecessary and tend to be mistrusted. (pp. 12–13)

When an Introverted executive is first immersed in a highly Extraverted organization, he or she can feel buffeted by the power and force of the Extraverted energy system, and if the executive tries to slow the pace to create some time for careful and quiet consideration, the organization is unlikely to understand or respond to the request.

Alternatively, according to Bridges, Introverted organizations

Usually try to avoid sudden actions . . . Their preference is to take in and interpret information carefully and to explore their options in detail before any action is taken . . . Introverted organizations usually rely heavily on written communication, even between people who often see each other face-to-face. Written communications permit more precision and give everyone time to think things over before a reply is made or an action taken. (pp. 12–13)

In an Introverted organization, the Extraverted executive might be viewed as acting too quickly, pushing too hard, and talking too much. If the Extraverted executive tries to prompt others to act or respond, the Introverted organization could become more resistant—and more distant. The Extravert may begin to feel like a stranger in a very strange land.

Both Introverted and Extraverted executives can find themselves isolated from their organizations when these character differences are not clearly understood or appreciated. As a result, introducing an executive to the insightful descriptions and analysis provided by Bridges can be helpful to the executive as well as to the organization.

Conclusion

Increasingly, executives are discovering a partner in the form of the executive coach. The coaching relationship may begin with skills acquisition or performance enhancement; however, if the coach consistently creates an environment in which the executive thinks more clearly, gains important insights into self and others, and explores creative alternatives, the coaching can address issues of greater subtlety and complexity. One such issue

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involves the degree of executive isolation. The executive coach can play an integral role in helping both Extraverted and Introverted executives avoid or overcome the isolation that can accompany leadership.

Notes

¹ Mark and Paul—not their real names—are senior executives with Fortune 500 companies. Both are considered highly effective, as are the organizations they lead. The situations described are compilations of events that have taken place throughout their careers.

² The MBTI personality inventory includes three other dichotomies: Sensing–Intuition, Thinking–Feeling, and Judging–Perceiving. Each of these dichotomies has a profound influence on a leader’s style, and each one (plus the interaction among all four MBTI dichotomies) is very productive in executive coaching work. This chapter focuses specifically on the Extraversion–Introversion dichotomy because it offers the most valuable context and contrast for understanding executive isolation; space did not allow for an elaboration on the influence of all four dichotomies.

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