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Values-based Coaching

Building synergy in a complex world

The 360° feedback showed that my client's stakeholders expected him to be more affirmative, more direct and more of a risk-taker. During the triad meeting between my coaching client, the corporate sponsor and myself, the subdued nature of my client was overwhelming. Immediately following the meeting, questions like "where would you like to start?" and "what goals do you want to focus on as a priority?" were racing through my mind as we headed to his office for our third out of ten coaching sessions contracted by the U.S.-based headquarters.

As we sat down, I simply asked, "how do you feel?" It was then that I saw confusion spread across his face. More than confusion, there was an internal conflict of values surfacing from deep within. "I get along with everybody," he said, "I just don't seem to understand how I can focus on these goals set by my stakeholders. There's just so much going around here ever since the acquisition."

"How can we develop synergy by understanding the values that drive our behaviors?"

As the project team leader, my client, whom we'll call Emmanuel, thought he had learned all there was to know about developing key leadership competencies such as influencing, inspiring and empowering others. Little had he realized what he would encounter when integrating a virtual team found not only across different time zones, but across cultural and linguistic divides.

What Are Values?

Politicians exalt them, companies engrave them, parents transmit them, and our environment shapes them



... but what exactly are values? How do we portray our values? How do they influence our beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors? And above all, how can we develop synergy by understanding the values that drive our behaviors?

In today's flattened world, there appears to be an added importance to the exploration of values – and their cultural influences. Let's start by looking at the complexity of where our values come from.

Personal values are influenced by gender, social class, religion, rituals, and traditions. National values are influenced by politics, regionalism, and local customs. Today, many companies searching to motivate and align teams around the world define core values based on their mission statements and headquarters' corporate culture which, when communicated to the company's overseas divisions, take on characteristics of their own. What happens when these culturally-biased values are shipped offshore or to overseas sites?

More and more companies going through the globalization process are adopting generic core values, often with an Anglo-Saxon bias, and expecting the foreign entities to abide by them. Needless to say, confusion, tension and misunderstandings are often the result.

Universal Values and Cultural Values

There are universal values and then there are specific values that are linked to cultural environments. Universal values can be regrouped under the heading of four Rs: Respect, Recognition, Reward and Relationships.



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corporate leadership

Every human being seeks out and values these concepts. Then, over the years, our caretakers, and our educational, social, and professional environments, shape and mold these universal values into more specific beliefs (right and wrong attitudes) – that form our cultural values. These cultural values lead us to assumptions and teach us the acceptable behaviors that demonstrate the integrity or congruence of our universal values.

Back to my first meeting with the U.S.-based sponsors of my European coaching contracts, where I heard one executive say: “It’s easy. They (those across the Atlantic) just have to strengthen their muscles, take those risks, make those hard decisions. They are just not committed

might his coworkers choose as personal priorities and how might these values influence their behaviors? What tensions may arise as a result of these different cultural values?

Emmanuel

Back to Emmanuel, and his conflict of values.

During that third coaching session, Emmanuel chose four values from a list which were important to him, and eliminated two. His choice of relationships, modesty, cooperation and reputation enabled us to shed a different light on how he was feeling. Especially when he came to the conclusion that his stakeholders would most likely have chosen values similar to what they identified in their responses on the 360° feedback:

“Step back, listen to and observe just how deep your cultural assumptions and expectations influence your every day.”

to taking the initiatives needed to win in today’s competitive market.”

I interrupted him: “What muscles? How would you feel if you knew that they never had those muscles? The company you acquired has been run as a tip top ship with a strong vertical hierarchy, based on ascribed status (who knows who, not who does what), long-term relationships, and reputations that don’t disappear overnight.”

In the mind of this U.S.-based executive, his values of initiative, competition, risk-taking and accountability are most likely a part of his personal expectations – his cultural values.

Where is the probable disconnect between him and those working on the other side of the Atlantic? What

initiative, openness/directness, and risk-taking. By the end of our session, Emmanuel defined the behaviors he would associate with the values he had chosen. We reviewed his take-away which had him feeling much more confident as to how he was planning to put the stakeholder feedback into action. Our next session was in three weeks’ time.

As coaches, what do we need to know about culture – ours and that of our clients? The feeling of culture is similar to the feeling of swimming in a calm, cool pool. The only way you can see how deep the water is, is to climb out of the pool and look back down into its depth. Do that with yourself: step back, listen to

“We need to empower our clients to reach out to their colleagues from around the world in a quest for synergy.”

and observe just how deep your cultural assumptions and expectations influence your every day.

We have learned not to be judgmental. Still, we do not always understand, especially in a crisis, what makes us revert back to experiencing such strong feelings of right vs. wrong.

The good news is that this reaction is physiologically normal. Recent research in the field of neuroscience has proven that our brain scans our environment in search of what is familiar. Our brains are “social-beings” looking for compatibility and cohesion; the physiological meaning of resonance. Our brains have become hard-wired through our life experiences and develop a sense of expectations as a means of survival. When what we encounter does not fit into our norm, the initial reaction is one of rejection (e.g., “that is not how it is done back home, so it must be wrong.”).

Getting Past the Hard-wiring

My fourth session with Emmanuel found him once again stretching his comfort zone, but not in ways I had imagined. He was pleased to announce that he had become much more affirmative, had been tracking specific actions he had taken and would even be able to include these new behaviors in his upcoming IDP (Individual Development Plan, an annual behavioral review). Then the confusion appeared once again with

him saying: “I don’t think the guys on the team really appreciate my new attitude.”

So having looked at the cultural values and issues arising from contextual situations, we now needed to look at the linguistic divides. What does it mean to be more affirmative? More of a risk-taker? More direct, especially in a culture that tends to value rapport, relationships, and modesty, i.e., don’t rock the boat social interactions with protocol and formality esteemed.

Through our coaching sessions, Emmanuel discovered a deeper meaning to what being an authentic leader is all about. He was able to develop a totally new perspective on how he could be true to his values while finding culturally acceptable behaviors that enabled him to reach his and his stakeholders’ goals. He learned to be affirmative while preserving relationships. He is now a calculated risk-taker by understanding the importance of the lessons learned process. His communication style is direct while integrating the need for formality and protocol. By surfacing awareness and shifting his perspective on value-driven behaviors, the successful project launch and an improved bottom-line proved he can find coherence in conflict.

On the Road to Synergy

In our role as coaches in organizations, we need to empower our clients to reach out to their col-

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leagues from around the world in a quest for synergy. The goal is to go beyond the cultural differences that initially seem to jump out at us.

Mind you, it's not the obvious differences or traditional behaviors that strike us as insurmountable. It's the little things. We can all learn

ing of learned, culturally-enforced values of formality and hierarchy that dictates that behavior?

By stepping out of our hard-wired expectations and climbing out of our comfort zones, we can enable ourselves and our coaching clients to grow into truly global citizens of the world. Values drive our behaviors and why we do things; they are the triggers to how we feel about something – the impression of right vs. wrong. Values-based coaching enlightens us and increases our capacity to develop both cultural and emotional intelligence which together lead to Cultural Synergetic Intelligence. •

“Values drive our behaviors and why we do things; they are the triggers to how we feel about something – the impression of right vs. wrong.”

National borders have come down as we fly east to west, country to country, accumulating frequent flyer miles and experiencing subtle differences that can translate into stressful encounters.

how to hand over a business card with two hands in Japan, but how can we get past learning the action of delivering the business card with two hands to understanding the respect that comes with the mean-

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