

From the coach's bench: Presentations

In the first of our 10 case studies on coaching for senior executives, coach Charlie Lang describes an experience he had with a recently promoted senior executive

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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The human resources director of a United States-based multinational hired me to coach Tim, a senior business development manager in charge of the firm's multimillion-dollar deals, and to help him make more positive and convincing presentations.

Before our coaching sessions, Tim was requested to complete a personality assessment. When I looked at the report I found an untypical pattern in business development managers. He scored low on "optimistic" and "risk-taking" but high on "analysing pitfalls". This suggested that Tim had a tendency to be skeptical and cautious.

This was not immediately apparent when I met him in our first coaching session, where he appeared to be friendly and happy.

However, his cautiousness and skepticism started to make sense as we talked about his career history.

Before assuming his present position about a year ago, Tim had been working for more than 16 years in finance and control. He got promoted to his present position because of his deep understanding of finance, an important asset when analysing and evaluating big deals. Cautiousness and skepticism were useful traits for his success in his past positions. When we talked about the presentations he frequently had to give to senior management, he said he preferred to underpromise and overdeliver.

Tim: I want to be different from my peers who seem to have no problem lying and promising deal volumes they almost never achieve. I prefer to be cautious and then consistently exceed my forecast figures.

CL: What was your mission in your previous jobs?

Tim: To protect my company.

CL: And what is your mission now?

Tim: To help my company grow.

CL: May I make a provocative statement?

Tim: Sure.

CL: Tim, you said that your peers often lie, but are you aware that you are lying too when you make these understatements?

I highlighted that his habit of providing figures that were lower than his actual estimates was as much a misrepresentation of facts as his colleagues quoting deal figures that were higher. Tim looked stunned. I believed at that point he realised that the way of thinking he adopted in his past role as financial controller was now a handicap for his success.

CL: Your present role is not primarily to protect the company, but to focus on growth, isn't it? What do you think you need to change in your presentations?

Tim: I guess I need to be a bit more optimistic and present figures that I truly believe are most likely to be achieved. I may include best and worst case scenarios to complete the picture.

This case highlighted three things I experience when coaching executives:

- The original reason for hiring a professional coach is rarely the underlying issue. In this case, I was hired to help Tim be more positive and convincing. But we realised as a result of coaching that this perceived lack of positive countenance was not the result of a personality trait, but because his new job demanded something different from the last one.
- Traits that made someone successful in the past may become obstacles in the future.
- Coaching is different from training or consulting - the solution for the necessary change is ultimately mostly discovered by the person being coached rather than the coach. As a result, those on the receiving end of coaching tend to be considerably more committed to the changes they discover.

----- ***End of Article as published in SCMP*** -----

From the coach's bench:

Learn to manage feelings better

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Coaching Articles – Published in SCMP in 2008

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When I first met Ellie, a 45-year-old chief operating officer of a European electronics group, I was puzzled. She spoke dynamically and with great energy, but her eyes looked tired.

Ellie said she hired me to provide support in formulating strategy on people issues during the major restructuring that the company was undertaking.

When senior managers decide to hire an executive coach, they usually state business-related objectives for the coach to work on with them.

However, in most cases, the manager is actually experiencing some kind of difficulty on a deeply-troubling and related, or underlying issue which they want to be able to deal with better in order to feel better about themselves.

This was also the case with Ellie. During our second session, she revealed that she was deeply troubled by the politics fostered by some directors and the lack of moral support from her chief executive.

As a result, she was having problems with sleeping, which was affecting her ability to keep up the high pace she normally prefers.

While it was important to address and work on the issues that Ellie articulated when she hired me, I found it more urgent to help Ellie improve her emotional state. She said it not only affected her sleep but also her relationship with her family.

To help her deal better with her emotions, I told her this story:

CL Imagine, someone writes a nasty letter to you, insults you and calls you names, then puts the letter into an envelope, seals it and mails it to you. How would you feel about this letter?

E I would probably be angry and upset.

CL Now imagine that you never open the envelope. How would you feel then?

E No feelings, because I don't know what's inside.

CL So what makes you potentially upset?

E The contents of the letter.

CL Really? The content is there, inside the letter.

E Oh, I see, it's me knowing the content then.

CL Yes, and especially, how you interpret it once you know it, because you could think in one of several ways. You could think that this is unfair, how can he write such a thing to me? Or you can think that if this person writes such nonsense to me, then I couldn't be bothered. Finally you might think that it's really a pity that he has this opinion about me. Let me see how I could help him to understand me better. In the first case, you would feel angry or upset. In the second, you would feel indifferent. And in the last case, you would feel compassionate.

These are three different emotions, depending on how you choose to think. It suddenly dawned on Ellie that if she wanted to feel better immediately and sleep more peacefully at night, she would need to start thinking differently about her current circumstances. Learning to detach herself emotionally from the situation also helped her deal better with the current problem.

She further understood that giving her best is the best she can do and if things do not turn out as desired, she would have the awareness that she at least gave her best in the process.

It turned out that Ellie could manage her feelings much better, and a welcome consequence of this was the increased respect of the directors for her.

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From the coach's bench:

Being nice and tough not impossible

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Shortly after Mary was appointed chief executive for Asia-Pacific in a European multinational, I was hired as her executive coach. Her human resources director, Shelly, asked Mary to be coached because she felt that Mary would urgently need to work on some areas to get sufficient credibility with the people she reported directly to, all of them being directors and vice-presidents. Shelly briefed me to pay attention to the following areas:

- **Stronger leadership**

Several directors gave feedback that Mary seemed a bit weak in this area.

- **Improved assertiveness with Europe headquarters**

Shelly learned from Mary's boss that Mary needed to be more assertive to be sufficiently respected in the European headquarters.

In many cases, when I hear these kinds of comments, it often has to do with insufficient self-esteem. This was especially common with relatively young managers in senior positions. Mary was a case in point. She was only 42 when she was appointed as regional chief executive. However, the personality assessment which I conduct with people I coach before an assignment did not show that Mary had low self-esteem.

The assessment revealed a few other traits that could explain Shelly's concerns. Mary seemed to be a person who cared deeply about others' needs and also had a high willingness to be empathetic about other people's feelings, thinking and related behaviour. This became a problem because, at times, people tended to take advantage of her helpfulness, while at other times her subordinates might not do what was agreed and she would not address it.

Naturally, other senior managers perceived Mary as weak because of this attitude. The same seemed to be true at headquarters. When I discussed these findings with Mary, I noticed that she was very open-minded and did not disagree in any way. In fact, she said something like: "Well, that's the way I am and I think it's okay. I really care about the people I work with and, over time, people will see that this is not a weakness but a strength."

The feedback I got from interviews with her direct reports and her immediate supervisor confirmed my concerns. They all agreed that Mary was a caring and nice person. Also, her technical capabilities were seen as outstanding. But they felt that she needed to be tougher in this role or people would take advantage of her niceness and corporate targets might not be met as a consequence.

It is quite frequent for people - not only managers - to believe that they can only be A or B, not realising that they can be A and B at the same time. For example, Mary believed that she could only be warm and empathic or tough and enforcing, not realising that she could be both.

More than 10 years ago, in my role as director of international sales, I was lucky to witness the surprising closeness between one of my peers and the people he directly reported to and other lower management people in the organisation.

I also noticed that whenever these people would not conform to prior agreements, he would act as tough with them as with anyone else he might not be as close with. To my surprise they did not seem to be upset and I did not notice any adverse effect on their relationship. Of course they were not happy at that point but they accepted the consequences of their failure and - as I later noticed even respected - his toughness.

What I learned from that experience was that one could be close with other people and be tough with them when necessary. The key to ensuring that those people will not get upset is to make sure that prior agreements and boundaries are clearly set.

This worked extremely well for me as a senior manager and I shared this approach with Mary, who saw how she could become more assertive with European headquarters and represent the Asia-Pacific region more effectively.

Learning to be empathetic but strict in enforcing standards is useful for any manager who wants to reap the benefits of being close with others without the risk of losing their respect. Managers should remember that clear boundaries and agreements are vital.

Charlie Lang is an executive coach and trainer who founded Progress-U in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming first-class leaders.

----- End of Article as published in SCMP Classified Post -----

From the coach's bench On top of office politics

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Tom, a highly intelligent legal expert, is vice-president of corporate affairs of a multibillion-dollar company with its worldwide headquarters in Hong Kong. He had a problem dealing with office politics with his overseas colleagues. He felt that they would leave him in the dark by withholding important information, make decisions without him, and even blame him for problems which he was not responsible for.

As usual, we conducted a personality assessment before our first coaching session. It was obvious that Tom was cerebral – he is analytical and always tries to do what is right and what makes logical sense.

When I debriefed him on his assessment, he agreed. He also admitted that he thought that this might be the cause of some of the problems he was facing.

I asked Tom how he was handling it. He said that he tried different things, but none of them really worked. First, he tried to prove them wrong by stating the actual facts. When that did not work, he tried to ignore their malicious actions. As can be expected, this only worsened the situation. Finally, he tried to play the political games, but he was not good at it, so things only got worse.

He needed to understand why people acted the way they did. Their actions weren't out of spite, but served personal interests.

For example, one of his overseas colleagues who indirectly reported to him did not inform him about her upcoming visit to Hong Kong. She did this because she wanted to close a deal which he would have most likely opposed. So she went there hoping not to bump into him to conclude the business without his interference. This type of behaviour is unprofessional, but the important thing is to understand whether there are any underlying reasons to what was happening.

In Tom's case, he needed to develop a better understanding of his colleagues' motives, and to try to discover ways of aligning them with his own expectations.

Tom needed to:

- Put to rest his anger about past events
- Rebuild trust between his colleagues and himself
- Have an open conversation about his colleagues' objectives and discuss how they could be aligned with his own
- Make clear to his colleagues what is and what is not acceptable to him

At first, Tom was unwilling to work on this relationship with his colleagues. He said: "I understand that better relationships would be useful, but even without that, people should do the right thing."

I responded: "Yes Tom they should be doing the right things, but apparently they aren't. I understand you want to see positive change, but do you believe it's going to happen by insisting that they should do the right thing?"

Another difficulty Tom faced was letting go of the hurtful events of the past. But what happened cannot be undone or changed, and if he would not let go, it would be hard to build more trust with his colleagues.

I also encouraged him to not only forgive, but to take this next step with his colleagues by making an apology. At first, he was outraged at the idea. But I reminded him: "Did you do everything perfectly right?"

"Well, I would not say that my behaviour was perfect, but the main problem lies with them," he replied.

I explained: "Just apologise for your part, even if it's much smaller. You will see something magical happening."

Tom was still sceptical, but he was willing to give it a shot. The next time we met, I could tell from the look in his eyes that it had worked. He said it took quite an effort and he had to swallow his pride, but it really helped change the dynamics of his relationship with those he managed to talk to. The office politics did not disappear altogether, but he said he became their target less often.

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From the coach's bench

Cultural challenges

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Peter, an Italian national, was recently transferred to Hong Kong to become the information technology director of his Italy-based company's regional headquarters.

Since 2001, his employer has conducted 360-degree feedback for all middle and senior managers every two years. Peter had received feedback in Italy in 2003 and 2005 and recently, for the first time, in Hong Kong after working here for more than a year.

When I looked at the results of all three reports, I noticed excellent feedback in 2003 and 2005, but rather mediocre results in 2007. His subordinates in Hong Kong, in particular, gave him unusually lower ratings than the excellent marks he received in Italy.

Peter was stunned when he saw these results and wondered what was going wrong. He said he hadn't changed his leadership style and did not understand why the results were so much different than before.

Peter said he found it quite a challenge adapting to the systems, processes and work style in Hong Kong that were very different from those in the Italian office. Looking back, he realised that initially he resisted the established processes and followed them only half-heartedly. That explained why he rated rather low.

But Peter was also rated lower when his Hong Kong colleagues were asked if he was clear in communicating, and whether people thought he acted genuinely and in a proper manner.

While his peers and superior gave him a good rating in these areas, his subordinates gave him much lower scores.

When he tried to understand this, he realised that his peers and superior were mostly expatriates, and mainly Italian. His subordinates, on the other hand, were locals. Since all his subordinates were proficient in English it seemed this was not so much a language barrier, but a cultural one.

Peter recalled one incident as an example. One of his subordinates, Jim, was in charge of implementing a major upgrade of a customer relationship management system. Peter discussed the schedule with Jim and focused on a few major milestones and the going-live date. When the first two milestones were delayed by more than two weeks each, and he was not warned in advance, Peter was upset.

Peter learned that his predecessor always walked Jim through a detailed planning process, giving Jim little ownership of the project. His former boss would more or less tell him what to do.

Rather than being like his predecessor, Peter realised that it was better to support Jim who could then learn how to perform the detail planning process. This way, Jim would grow as a project manager and soon would not need Peter's close guidance.

Peter also noticed that he was not yet able to build sufficiently close and trusting relationships with his subordinates. For example, Peter was puzzled with their lack of appreciation when he praised their good performance.

I shared with him the feedback from a couple of his subordinates. One of them said: "When Peter gives me positive feedback, I always suspect it is just given to soften me so that I will more easily accept any of his subsequent complaints."

Based on my experience, this challenge can be dealt with in an active or a passive way. The passive approach is to keep giving positive feedback without subsequent criticism. Over time, his subordinates will feel increasingly safe and he will take the assessment more in the way it was meant. The active approach is to say that he simply wants to acknowledge their good work and that he has no other hidden agenda.

To conclude, being transferred into a new cultural environment brings various challenges for both manager and subordinates.

If certain practices that were successful in the country of origin do not seem to work in the new environment, don't be too quick to discard them, but first understand the situation, make careful modifications and take appropriate action.

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**From the coach's bench:
Communication is a key to success**

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Entrepreneur Michael founded his semiconductor brokerage firm eight years ago.

He represents the stereotypical entrepreneur, full of ideas and energy, and his restlessness is most apparent in his pace. After a difficult start, the company has enjoyed explosive growth in the past two years. Michael had to double his workforce from about 100 to 200 and then to 400 to sustain this growth. Unfortunately, this development also led to a high turnover of staff, reaching more than 25 per cent in the past 12 months.

In the beginning, Michael thought this was normal, as not everybody is suitable for this highly dynamic environment.

But then he employed a new human resources director who introduced post-exit interviews (exit interviews carried out about two to three weeks after the last working day as opposed to the more standard practice of conducting them on the last day of employment). The results surprised Michael because the top three reasons had nothing to do with his assumption. They were:

- Unpleasant atmosphere, no supportive culture
- Lack of recognition for work done
- Fuzzy perspective on further career development opportunities

Michael sensed that something more fundamental was needed to change if his company was to continue achieving growth. After he shared these findings with me, I acknowledged his openness and willingness to change. My first question was what he saw as his main responsibilities as founder and president of his company.

"I think I'm responsible for the healthy growth of this company, making sure that we have a clear direction, a conducive workplace environment, attracting the required talent, good succession and ensuring that we keep making new deals that sustain the growth."

Then I asked him: "How do you usually spend your time in a typical working day? How much time do you spend on each activity?"

I realised he had never thought about that, so he jotted down several activities and then tried to put numbers to them. The result was:

- Reading and answering e-mails: two hours
- Prospects and customers (phone/meetings): three hours
- Suppliers and other business partners (phone/meetings): two hours
- Meetings with people reporting to him directly: 1½ hours
- Checking accounts, organising day and daily tasks: one hour

I asked him: "What about thinking of the company's direction, communicating it to your people and spending time on developing a successful corporate culture?" His response: "I do that on the weekends or in the evenings. Fine-tuning and communication happens through our meetings with the management."

I said: "If you look at the meetings with your management, how much time on average do you spend on these kinds of topics." He responded: "I'm embarrassed to say the average is five to 10 minutes."

He realised he did not spend enough time on his top priorities, with the exception of making deals.

As a company grows it becomes crucial that the founder focuses more on the roles of a leader and delegates the deal making. He needs to let go of time-consuming activities and spend more time developing a sound direction and corporate culture with his management team.

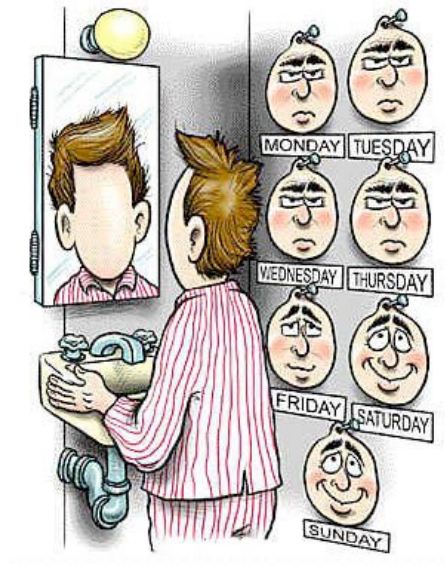
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From the coach's bench:

Answers to problems lie within you

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Andrea, Asia-Pacific's regional sales director of a United States-based technology company, was coached before when she was stationed in the US. Having seen the advantages, she decided to commission me when she encountered difficulty in her job.

To make a long story short, although as the head of sales she was able to achieve her top-line turnover targets, margins were on the decline. Subsequently, bottom-line profit targets fell short and she received feedback from her boss, the regional CEO, that her performance was unsatisfactory.

The focus of my coaching assignment was to help her find out why margins were on the decline and to fix this.

When I asked her why she thought margins were going down, she was quick to point out that her salespeople in the region were not tough enough as negotiators, and sealed deals at prices that were too low.

She also said that competition in certain countries was extremely tough, and price dumping was not unheard of.

Having been a sales director and vice-president of sales myself for several years, it would have been easy for me to jump into "consulting mode" and give her advice on what she could do to improve the situation. However, as a coach, it is not my job to give advice but to help my clients achieve higher levels of self-awareness and understanding so that they can make the best possible choices.

Also, in this case, I noticed that Andrea had the mindset of a victim. Unless I could make her take responsibility for the situation, it would be difficult for her to

reflect inwardly and come up with good ideas on how to improve the margins.

As a coach, I usually use a three-step process.

- Appreciate or acknowledge my client's way of thinking. Opposing it, usually, only makes the person defensive.
- Make her imagine what the ideal situation would look like. This focuses her mind on the optimal outcome and creates positive energy.
- Ask her to define the gap between the ideal and real situations in detail, and what she can do to help bridge this gap.

Andrea started to realise that she was part of the problem because she pushed hard to achieve the sales targets, which gave the frontline salespeople the wrong message - "sales volume before margin".

Also, Andrea noticed that she needed to provide more support to frontline staff for them to better understand her company's value proposition and why customers should pay a higher price than what their competitors were charging.

She finally took responsibility for the situation and more importantly, for shaping the future of her region's sales development.

As a consultant, my advice would have been similar to the ideas she came up with. Also, the process of determining what needs to be done would have been considerably shorter.

So is coaching a waste of time in such situations? I don't believe so.

Andrea now has full ownership over her ideas, making her much more passionate about implementing them than if the same ideas came from my advice.

Had I used the consulting approach, Andrea would most probably still have been stuck in a victim mindset and, as a result, might not really drive for change.

Andrea's ideas are tailored exactly to her situation, while my ideas, although similar, would have been more generic and less specifically suited.

The secret of high-impact coaching lies in this principle of ownership by a party being coached.

In contrast, in training or teaching, ownership lies with the trainer or teacher instead of the trainee or student.

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From the coach's bench

Growing to C-level

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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I had been coaching Tom for six months, mostly on developing his leadership skills. At the time, Tom was the head of finance for Greater China of an international logistics company.

For the past two sessions, I sensed a declining level of engagement in Tom and wondered what was going on. "You know, I have been in this position now for more than four years and I think I did a really good job. I understand that both our COO [chief operating officer] and CEO may move back to the global headquarters in Europe, so I was hoping to take over either position after their departure. Now I hear through the grapevine that I may not be considered for any of these positions."

My first thought was: Would I promote him to any of these positions based on my knowledge of him as a person and manager? My immediate response was no, or rather, not yet. We'll get to my reasons later. First, I asked him:

"So what do you think about that?"

"Quite honestly, I'm disappointed. I feel that my hard work is not appreciated here," he replied.

Inquiring further, I asked: "Any ideas why the board may not consider promoting you to any of these positions?"

"Don't really know. Maybe they think I'm not up to the job, or it's because I'm Chinese even though I was born and grew up in London."

I could see that Tom was not only disappointed, but he also felt unappreciated for the work he had done. It also seemed that succession had not been handled professionally; hence the rumours.

At that point I felt it necessary to help him focus on what he could do to improve his chances for a potential promotion rather than to elaborate further on any outside factors that he had little power to influence.

A good point to start was with my own impression. To judge if someone is up to the job of a more senior position, I try to imagine the person being in that position and then see how it feels.

In Tom's case, I felt that although he was hard-working and intelligent, he did not think sufficiently like a C-level executive yet. He appeared to be a rather transactional person - in other words, he got the jobs done. This put him where he is today. But in order to be recognised as potential COO or CEO, he needed to grow beyond that.

So I continued: "What do you think are the key criteria for any board when selecting a new COO or CEO?"

"That the candidate has sufficient experience, intelligence, leadership skills, has delivered good results and perhaps has a vision for the company," Tom answered.

I responded: "Certainly all important criteria. How many people on your level would probably match these criteria?"

"Maybe half of them," he said, to which I inquired: "So why should they choose you over the others who also match these criteria?"

I noticed that this question made Tom think on a deeper level. He started to realise that he was possibly lacking something he was not aware of. I shared my observation and asked him for his opinion on the current COO and CEO. He particularly respected the COO to whom he was reporting. When asked if there was something he appreciated in particular, he said the COO acted very responsibly and seemed to handle the business as if it were his own.

It was then that Tom became aware that he still acted too much with an employee mindset, which occasionally led to bureaucratic responses towards his peers and a perceived lack of seniority among his superiors.

He understood that in order to be considered for a C-level position, doing an excellent job in his current position would not be sufficient. As head of finance, he needed to display a C-level attitude and resulting behaviour.

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**From the coach's bench:
Success means rethinking attitude**

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Martin, the regional HR director of a European multinational electronics company, is considered by his chief executive Jeffrey as one of his top performers in the Asia-Pacific region. Jeffrey told me he would like to make Martin his successor when he retired in a couple of years.

Recently, however, complaints about Martin's leadership style have been mounting from several HR managers who reported to him. They find Martin's style too pushy and as a result do not feel sufficiently respected.

I suggested to Jeffrey that it would be useful that I first talked to some HR managers to get a better understanding of what was going on before starting the coaching assignment with him.

What I learned from the feedback from Martin's direct reports was quite interesting. Some of the HR managers felt that Martin's communication style was very blunt and they often were not 100 per cent sure about Martin's expectations. Apparently there was also a language issue because some managers said Martin's English was often confusing. They were also unhappy with how Martin dealt with unmet expectations. Martin would resort to impolite language and frequently scream at them.

When I asked about what they appreciated in Martin, they responded that they liked his drive, honesty, commitment to the company and abundant energy.

When I met Martin he appeared to be a friendly and polite person. Also, I had no problems in communicating with him in English. I was not surprised about the contradiction between the reports from his subordinates and his behaviour towards me. It is quite common.

What it tells me is that Martin does not have a problem in communicating appropriately. It seemed to be more a question of his beliefs about what is useful when communicating with his direct reports.

This assumption was confirmed when I asked him about whether he felt that his communication style with his direct reports worked. He responded: "You know, I need to get the job done and I expect my direct reports to do their job at a high-quality level and within the given timelines. If they don't do that, they have to accept a rather rough response from me. It teaches them a lesson to be more careful next time. I understand that this doesn't make them happy, but my job is not to make them happy but to make sure we get results. If they can't take that, they are not ready for this kind of job."

It was obvious that Martin thought he did the right thing, and that his style of communication was one of the reasons for his success.

Martin's communication style and the fact that he is successful is a mere correlation, but Martin believes that his communication style leads to good results. It is not unusual that successful people mix up correlation with causality.

To address this, Martin first needed to understand what really made him successful. Eventually he realised that the main reasons for his success were his determination, his hard work and his high energy level. He understood that his communication style led to a limitation in his success because there was a high turnover rate in his team.

When Martin became aware of these dynamics, he was ready to rethink his attitude towards his direct reports and develop more empathy and respect towards them. He was also ready to improve the clarity of his communication by asking more often if his expectations were clearly understood.

Martin actually had all the skills to communicate more successfully with his direct reports. Once his beliefs shifted, he started to develop a more appropriate attitude towards his team members.

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**From the coach's bench:
Apply your strengths correctly**

By Charlie Lang, Executive Coach & Trainer @ Progress-U Limited

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Diane, a 35-year-old American-born Chinese, is considered by her boss Andrew, the regional CEO of a US-based investment bank, to be an employee with top potential.

An ivy-leaguer from Harvard, she has risen quickly through the investment banking ranks and was recently appointed vice-president of mergers and acquisitions for North Asia.

Now, for the first time in her career, Diane is having considerable performance issues after a number of deals she was in charge of bringing to maturity fell through, even before the due diligence stage.

Andrew was well aware that Diane worked really hard on them and could not quite understand why, in spite of this, Diane's deals were falling through. That was when I was brought in.

When I met her, I sensed her deep frustration and disappointment with the recent results. When asked about how she saw this situation, she responded: "When the first two deals didn't work out, I still thought, 'okay, that can happen', even though it's not good, of course. But when the third one also fell through, I started wondering if something was wrong with me. Hence, I was actually glad when Andrew suggested coaching."

I decided to begin with a more positive and forward-oriented approach. Instead of analysing what was wrong with her, I asked her to share some of her successes in her past position.

She appreciated that she had an inherently dynamic personality and a knack for analysing situations. These qualities served her very well in her past roles.

When asked how she could leverage on these strengths in her new role, she realised that her dynamic approach might be considered too pushy in the initial stages and that it would be more important to first begin establishing good relationships and at least a basic level of trust among all concerned parties.

Diane lamented: "It's clear now that I need to focus more on building a more trustful atmosphere in the initial stages of the deal. But how do I do that?"

I asked her: "If you were one of the other parties involved, what would be your main objective?" Diane paused for a while and I noticed that she tried her best to put herself into the other parties' shoes.

Then she said: "If I were one of the other parties, I'd like to get a good feeling that this is something that can be worked out and will benefit me ultimately."

I continued to prod her. "What does that mean for you as a facilitator of such deals?"

She replied: "I need to focus first more on creating a good atmosphere, make sure that all concerns are taken care of so that people feel ready to open up."

I said: "Do you see now how this is different from what you said earlier about your objective?"

Leveraging on Diane's sharp analytical skills, I merely used questions to help her realise her own situation. Hence, the ideas and resolutions were met with more acceptance.

She now knows that her strengths are still useful in her new role, but she needs to apply them in different ways and at different times.

Moreover, she realises that a change in her attitude and skills is in order.

Attitude-wise, Diane knows she needs to shift her focus from her own needs to her business partners' needs in order to ultimately close a deal. Taking care of her business partners' concerns will serve her own needs much better than focusing on her own outcomes as a first priority.

----- **End of Article as published in SCMP** -----



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in developing a corporate coaching culture for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, coaching, change management and innovative sales.

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