

## Why 'GOOD INTENTIONS' May Not Suffice Harnessing the Power of Versatility

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Consider John, a Senior VP responsible for Human Resources in XYZ company, a larger Asia based subsidiary of a European Multi-National Enterprise in the Health Equipment Industry. John has made it to this level through hard work and his biggest strength: getting the job done. He has joined XYZ about six months ago.

His two superiors, the local Managing Director as well as the General Manager Global HR recommended John to engage an executive coach as they got numerous complaints from both direct reports and peers about John's 'communication style'. They considered him impolite and unreasonable.

When I met John for our 'chemistry check session', I could immediately see that John was a very hands-on and smart executive. I found him to be a fast thinker with a certain degree of impatience that is very common among highly driven leaders.

Before the first coaching session, I arranged interviews with his two superiors, three peers and two direct reports to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions various stakeholders had of John. He also completed the Harrison Assessments (HA) questionnaire and we subsequently generated the HA Job Success Analysis and Paradox Report.

It was interesting to see that the statements made during the interview corroborated to a very large extent with the results from the Harrison Assessments report (c.f. figure 1).

A few examples:

- ① Most interviewees considered John's communication style as quite aggressive; his Paradox Report indicated clearly that John has a quite strong blunt tendency.
- ① Especially his direct reports found him often to be unreasonable when giving feedback about their performance. They felt that his judgment was frequently too tough and that he didn't make his performance expectations very clear. In his Paradox Report his 'Driving' tendency was clearly in the 'harsh' quadrant.
- ① All three interviewed peers found John to be on one hand quite helpful, but that he rarely involved them when he had to make decisions that affected them and their teams. As a result several conflicts emerged. Indeed, his Harrison Assessments report showed a high score in helpful and a rather low score in collaborative.

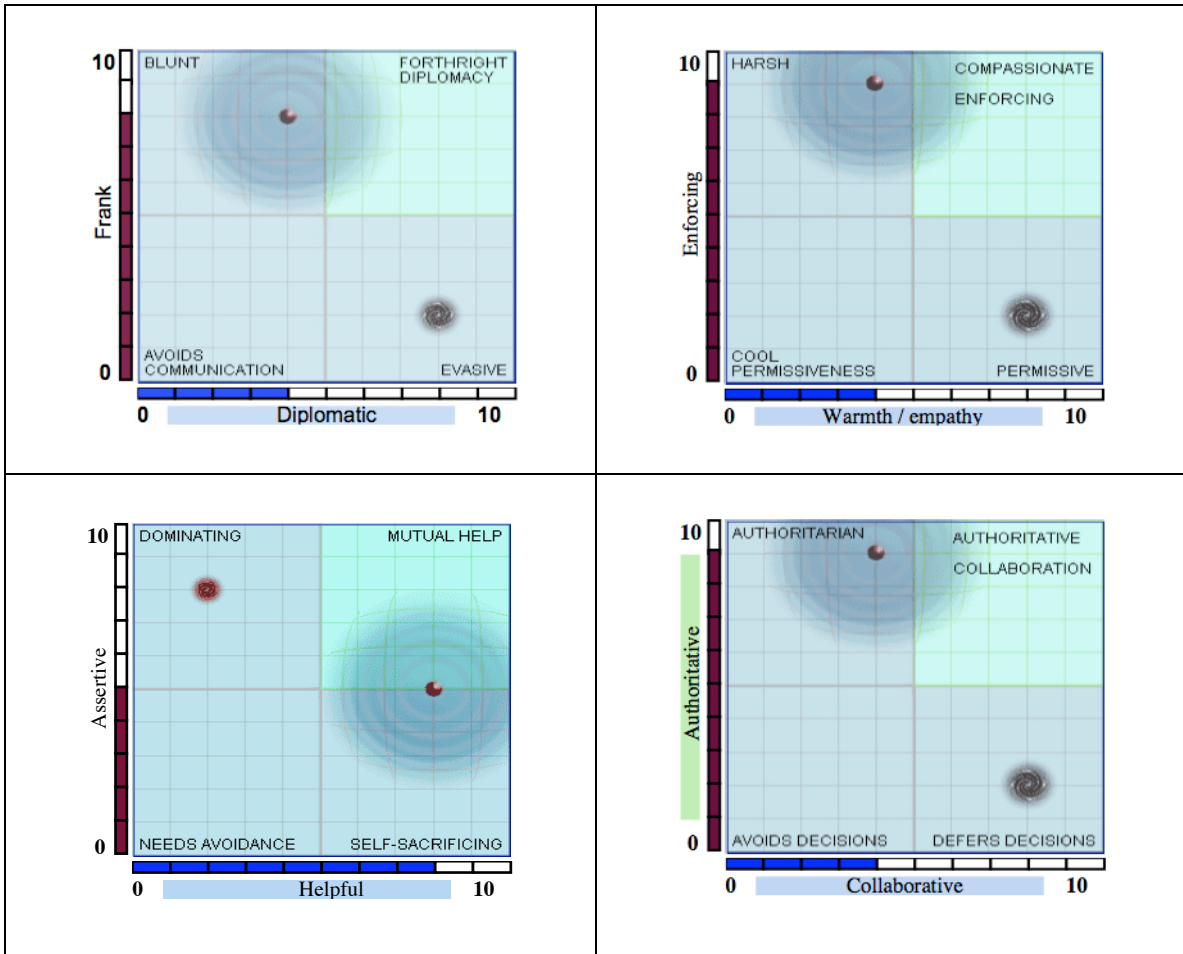


Fig 1: 4 selected paradox graphs for John

What is interesting when looking at behavioral patterns is to explore the motivations behind these behaviors. I've been doing this with a couple of hundred coachees over the past years and – so far – I could always discover positive motivations behind behaviors that are often considered by others as negative.

In the case of John, we discovered the following motivations:

Behavioral tendency	Positive Motivation	Negative Impact
Blunt Communication	Wants to be clear, honest and efficient	Perceived as aggressive, scary even
Harsh Driving for Results	Very success oriented, acting in the best interest of the company	Perceived as unreasonable, distant and not engaging, seems to follow only carrot & stick approach (little carrot though)
Slightly Self-Sacrificing Tendency	Wants to support others to get results, wants to do all it takes to get the job done	Perceived as giving little trust to others, often taking over tasks if they don't turn out as expected – creating a disempowered feeling
Authoritarian Approach to Decision Making	Wants to be efficient and make quick decisions, hates wasting time	Perceived as not taking the people 'with him', too directive, discourages ownership

If you pay attention to the above patterns – both in terms of motivation and in terms of impact, it is easy to see that

- U The positive motivation leads to the strong traits (frank / enforcing / helpful / authoritative)
- U The negative impact is created by the weaker traits (diplomatic / warmth/empathy / assertive / collaborative)

The beauty of the paradox is that we can maintain our motivation and reduce the negative impact by keeping the strong traits strong and developing the weaker paradoxical traits. This makes the willingness to change significantly easier because the executives can maintain what they want. In fact, by developing the paradoxical weaker trait, they often get even more of what they want, further bolstering the willingness to change.

If both paradoxical traits are strongly developed, we talk about 'balanced versatility'. What does versatility mean? I like this formula:

$$\text{Versatility} = \text{Flexibility} + \text{Capability}$$

Once executives have developed balanced versatility, for example in the 'Driving' paradox (warmth/empathy + enforcing), they will generally tend to display a compassionate enforcing behavior. Means, they will usually be quite close to their people while at the same time being insisting on delivery of results and respecting agreed boundaries.

Also, executives with that pattern will make conscious choices when to display some harshness or when to simply let it go based on conscious judgment of the situation.

Unlike people with a harsh or permissive tendency who default into their behavior, executives who have developed balanced versatility will choose such imbalanced behaviors only if they consciously believe that the compassionate enforcing approach has reached its limit.

After walking John through his own patterns, helping him discover the positive motivations and the negative impact they create, John was very keen to develop balanced versatility in these areas. It took a few months to improve the scores in the weaker areas and it took some courage to start to interact differently with the people around him. Being open about his willingness to change actually inspired especially his direct reports as he set a good example that learning doesn't stop - even for senior leaders.

Let's keep progressing with purpose!

Charlie Lang