

DEBREFING AND EXECUTIVE COACHING

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For those of us who have been in leadership roles for many years, we've seen a sea change in leader development. In today's management environment, new forms and tools of development have emerged. Foremost among them is executive coaching. The number of executive coaches has more than doubled in the past decade and corporate leader development programs are utilizing their services more frequently.

Although I and my team at Afterburner Inc. have consulted with executives and management teams in Global 1000 companies all over the world, I thought that I knew very little about the practice of executive coaching. So, I decided to learn more about what executive coaching was and how it was done. I did some reading, spoke with leading academics in the field and even observed some executive coaches in action. When I stepped back and took in what I had learned, I realized that coaching was fundamentally a practice that I and my team have been teaching and facilitating in the corporate world for the past 16 years – debriefing.

In the U.S. Air Force, debriefing after every flight was an essential process in my training and development as an F-15 fighter pilot. My instructor pilot debriefed with me after every training flight. When I became an instructor pilot and squadron training officer, I did the same with my young pilots. Today, individual and team debriefing remains a successful practice in the U.S. Navy's famous Top Gun program and the U.S. Air Force's Fighter Weapons School. After leaving the Air Force, I used the basic tenets of the debriefing process I learned, adapted the process to a sales force I led in a civilian company, and further refined it over the next 16 years in my company Afterburner. The model we utilize is a simple repeatable process that can be used by individuals or teams. It's called the S.T.E.A.L.T.H. Debrief ModelSM.

What I realized as I learned more about executive coaching theory and practice is that all the elements of good executive coaching can be found in the seven-step debriefing process.

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Although both coaching and debriefing require complex discussions and deep analysis that resist oversimplification, their objective is the same. Executive coaches help their clients see themselves more accurately and establish actionable objectives for personal change. Likewise, debriefing helps individuals and teams see the work that they have done and its impact accurately in order to establish actionable lessons to continuously improve themselves and their organization. Where coaching focuses only upon the individual, proper debriefing is effective in both individual and team development. The principles are the same, but for debriefing the approach is more direct, objective, and simple.

What I've recognized as the significant difference between the S.T.E.A.L.T.H. Debriefing process and executive coaching practices is two-fold.

First, coaching practices struggle to get to the actionable objectives for change. That's where the highly subjective talent and skill of the coach come in to play. Second, coaching is less process-driven than proper debriefing. Successful coaching is dependent upon the individual style and skill of the coach and the character traits of their client. Successful debriefing, however, is driven by a repeatable, structured process.

Let's look at some of the elements of the S.T.E.A.L.T.H. Debriefing process for comparison with executive coaching practice. The first of those elements is what we call tone. For debriefing, setting the right tone is critical. The right tone is nameless and rankless. Such a tone puts everyone on an equal footing where retaliation as a response to criticism doesn't occur.

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Give the new lieutenant the power to criticize (respectfully) the general. Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, has labeled such a tone ‘psychologically safe.’ In executive coaching, a coach will take care to establish a trusting and psychologically safe tone much like a professional therapist or physician would for a patient. Such a tone is essential in order to achieve the honesty and truthfulness necessary to identify objectives for change. In debriefing, the proper tone is critical to uncovering mistakes and isolating successes.

With the right tone, debriefing and executive coaching can get to the truth. In executive coaching, getting to the truth of how others see or perceive the client can be a tough process – analysis of any complex issue usually is. It’s the same in debriefing.

Whether we’re debriefing a single person’s performance or a team’s, we have to be prepared to dig deep into the root causes of both successes and errors. In debriefing though, our approach takes an objective orientation. That is, we only debrief to clear and measurable objectives. I can’t debrief in any truly successful and meaningful way if I don’t have clear objectives. In most instances, debriefing occurs at the end of a project or plan with the objectives of that project or plan clearly identified. In executive coaching, there is often some objective behavior that has to be identified first, usually through formal 360 degree feedback processes, before the coach can help the client move forward.

I can’t overemphasize the importance of having clear objectives in both executive coaching and debriefing. From clear objectives, the S.T.E.A.L.T.H. Debriefing model takes two procedural steps to get to the root causes.

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First, we take a look at how well we executed toward our stated objectives - did we do what we said we were going to do the way we said we were going to do it? Take a look at each of the tasks we had to perform to meet our objective. Were each of those steps effective? From this inquisitive process we create a short list of successes and errors that will form the basis of our next step, analyzing the execution. We analyze the execution by taking each of our results – the successes and errors – and subject each to a series of “why’s” until we get to the root cause. We continually ask why until we get to the fundamental root cause - why did that happen, what really failed, did we just get lucky, and so on. We can’t fix something, replicate a success, identify a near miss, or address a personal shortcoming until we know exactly what needs to change.

Once we know what that root cause is, we can get to the real point of debriefing and executive coaching – making our reflective activities actionable. To improve ourselves we need actionable feedback. To continuously improve our teams and organizations, we need the same. Research demonstrates that feedback that is not actionable can actually result in negative behaviors. The product of debriefing and executive coaching must focus upon what can be done to address the root causes. Without a specific course of action, reflective activities will be a waste of time at best and potentially trigger negative behaviors at worst. Most people have “positive illusions” about themselves. They tend to fail to view themselves accurately or have an accurate perception of how others view them. Exposing those illusions without setting forth some plan to make positive change can be damaging.

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We have an overwhelming propensity to see ourselves in either an overly positive or negative light. We rarely, if ever, see ourselves as others do. Until we identify the difference between how we view ourselves and how we are viewed by others, we cannot effectively make positive changes or adjust our behaviors. It's that misperception that limits our ability and effectiveness as leaders and acts as a barrier to making positive change. So, the task of an effective executive coach is to enable us to paint an accurate picture of ourselves. Debriefing must do the same – paint an accurate picture of team performance. Once that's done, we have to agree to do something about it.

The S.T.E.A.L.T.H. Debriefing process develops an actionable lesson learned that addresses each of the identified results – each success or error. A lesson learned is a set of steps intended to resolve the error or replicate the success of each of the root causes.

It is an objective and clear set of instructions or actions necessary to improve personal, team and organizational performance in the future. Furthermore, in the context of team debriefing, it assigns a single accountable individual to take that set of actions or to properly store the learning for future use. We call this “transferring the lessons learned.” For executive coaches, transferring the lesson means helping the client own and take appropriate action on what has been learned.

Such are the basic processes around debriefing and executive coaching. But there's one final secret to making them work. You have to perform these processes frequently and in small, achievable portions. The old joke about how one eats an elephant – one bite at a time – is relevant here. Successful executive coaches help their clients tackle personal goals a little at a time and meet with their clients to assess incremental progress relatively frequently - usually about every two weeks.

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We recommend debriefing plans, projects and similar events over the span of weeks or a month. Debriefing on a scale less frequent than once per month means you are likely to ‘choke on the elephant.’ It’s hard to change – to tackle too much at one time. Take it a little at a time. That’s the same philosophy behind successful change methodologies. The process of creating actionable lessons learned is similar to the Kaizen approach in some companies where many small corrections are made in small groups in order to achieve organization-wide improvements. Approach debriefing in the same way. Debrief frequently in small teams.

There is a deep and meaningful correlation between debriefing and executive coaching. James Hunt and Joseph Weintraub, Babson College Management professors, argue that executive coaching “is a vehicle for accessing the eyes, ears, and brains of your team members.”

They go on to argue that facilitated learning such as executive coaching is leveraged to extraordinary results through forms like the U.S. Army’s After Action Review (AAR) and the U.S. Air Force’s debriefing process. And that’s the heart of it. Executive coaching and debriefing are both forms of facilitated learning. In executive coaching a third party facilitates the learning in one member of an organization. But, in debriefing, the team facilitates learning for the individual team members and the organization as a whole.

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