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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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When Learning Makes Things Worse ▶ 08/07/08

Roland made no bones about the fact that he hated our coaching. He introduced me to people on his staff as his torturer, his devil, The Grand Pest, and Annoyer Extraordinaire. But he never canceled an appointment or showed up one minute late. Like an accident survivor committed to painful physical therapy, Roland endured me like a dose of foul medicine.

Roland's attitude didn't surprise me. A rising superstar in his organization, he wasn't used to feeling incompetent, but the work we were doing together was making him feel just that. However I also noticed that Roland often left our workouts exhilarated.

The cause of all the fuss was Roland's habit of beginning every thought, every comment, every answer, with a hearty, "Well!" Barry, his boss, told me his staff made it an openly secret sport to count the number of times Roland said the word during meetings. "He's never going to hit his potential if he can't stop this," Barry told me.

To eliminate this verbal tic, Roland was going to go through the same process that other clients go through to eliminate explosive emotional behaviors. Or an inability to listen. Or extreme introversion. The process, discussed in the Tip, [How Behaviors Change](#), incorporates awareness first, then acknowledgement of incremental success.

I told Roland that in order to build his awareness I would snap my fingers every time he said "Well!" Nothing else; I would simply snap. In short order, this instantaneous feedback made him so self-conscious his speech began to unravel. Being a well-spoken Brit, he found this short-circuiting in his brain distressing. "This simply won't do!" he declared in alarm. "If eliminating my 'Well!' means I'm going to turn into a stammering idiot, I'll keep the 'Well!' and suffer the consequences."

I empathized with Roland. His brain simply couldn't do all the things he was asking it to do. He had reached his capacity: his performance was actually declining. Even though I knew this stage was temporary I understood his frustration.

I asked him if he had ever performed in plays when he was in school. He seemed puzzled by the question and told me that, no, he hadn't. I told him I'd been a professional performer for more than



twenty years and that this process of decreased excellence that was so frustrating to him was extremely familiar to me.

Plays are rehearsed in stages. In the beginning, actors are “on book,” meaning they carry their scripts as they walk through their movements. In a while, they gain competence and can move through entire scenes with barely a glance at their script. But the instant they actually put the script down, everything falls apart. Lines they knew by rote suddenly vanish from memory. Movements they’ve done repeatedly without effort suddenly become paralyzing.

“We forget,” I told him, “how very difficult it is to integrate new learning.”

“That’s all well and good,” he said, “but you and your fellows got to fall apart in the privacy of your rehearsals. I don’t have that luxury.”

“That’s true. You don’t,” I said. “Which is why I encourage you to try out this new behavior selectively. Choose low-risk settings. Pick times when you know your content really well. Or when you’re completely comfortable with your audience. That way your brain will have extra capacity so it can focus on eliminating ‘Well!’ It’s really important to try this when there’s not a lot at stake.”

“I should think so!” he said ruefully.

“Besides,” I said, “if you tried doing it in a high-stress situation, your brain would be so busy you wouldn’t be able to focus on it anyway. The point here is that you can choose when you are going to focus on integrating that new behavior. And you should expect your performance to take a dip. That’s how learning happens.”

“Well!” he said.

I snapped.

“Oh, damn you!” He smiled. “What I was going to say is that if that’s how learning happens, then I may have been a bit harsh with some of my newer staff members.”

He paused. I watched him formulate a thought. He was about to speak but stopped. He grinned. “I was going to say ‘Well!’ but I didn’t.” I could tell he was proud of himself. Then, thoughtfully, he added, “To be honest, I don’t know when my brain has gotten such a workout.”



That very day, I heard Uma Thurman, the star of *Kill Bill, Parts 1 & 2*, interviewed on “Fresh Air” with Terry Gross. Thurman described having to learn martial arts for her role and how her masters pushed her limits, not just physically but mentally. She said:

When you have to learn something from the very beginning, it’s humbling because you have to go into that place where you struggle, where you can’t do [it], where you’re hurting and humiliated. In this case of *Kill Bill*, every time I could do one thing, they gave me another thing to do, so it was just a constant process of struggle and learning...and you know, it really...it just changes your brain. I think they made my brain younger for a while because my brain just had to become razor sharp again.

Roland pushed himself past the dip in his performance. He began to gain conscious competence over his “Well!” not only in our private sessions but also in certain low-risk situations.

No matter what behaviors you’re striving to gain mastery over, expect to go through what Roland (and Thurman) went through. You will take a dip, but you’ll come out of it more confident. Perhaps even younger! That’s the only path that leads to *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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