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COACHING CASE STUDY

Ex-McKinsey consultant transitioning into operational executive roles, FTSE 100 multinational group

Background

Our client was a high performing McKinsey consultant who had joined his new employer after a successful strategic consulting project for them. After a few years supporting the core corporate team on strategy and M&A activities, he was given a choice. He could remain at the corporate centre, or take on a challenging operational role running a significant technology innovation and procurement business with a large multinational team of both commercial/marketing, and scientific/engineering employees.

Gap Analysis

Our client's career thus far had been built almost exclusively on his mastery of correct data and correct analysis. At the corporate centre, this posed no major problems. However, he wanted to challenge himself to step outside his comfort zone. While his clinical approach would have carried him quite far with some of the scientists and engineers, it became clear that he needed to broaden his impact if he wanted to create confidence in his leadership across the entire team, including commercial and marketing professionals.

The gap was one of emotional intelligence, connection, and human energy.

Coaching Programme

The coaching programme addressed a central dilemma: how to both 'soften the edges' of this formidable analytical individual, at the same time as retaining -and in fact increasing- the sense of positive energy and dynamism he conveyed.

We focused strongly on listening skills and on how to apply a light touch to data. We worked on the value of storytelling as a way to represent data and analysis without the need for spreadsheets.

We explored the need to frame every interaction around two types of outcome: a relationship outcome as well as an immediate transactional outcome.

Finally, we worked on the physical/body language dimension of how to transmit a sense of warm, human energy to those around you.

Result

Our client succeeded so well in his line leadership role that he was rapidly appointed as a country CEO within the business, first to a small market and subsequently to one of the business's biggest markets. At every stage we continued to provide refresher coaching support, check-ins against new challenges with new stakeholders, and coaching preparation for important set piece communications.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

Senior corporate lawyer recruited as the first female Chief Legal Officer of a major global corporation

Background

Our client was a superbly accomplished corporate lawyer renowned for her intellect and integrity, and for her sensitive handling of complex issues. She rapidly found, to her dismay, that several of her new Executive Committee peers were making an assumption that her appointment had been made on the basis of 'ticking the gender box' rather than on talent. She felt in danger of being both patronized and marginalized.

Gap Analysis

Coming from a collaborative and collegiate culture, our client felt alienated by the (proudly) self-confessed 'Alpha Male' environment in which she now found herself.

The gap to close was a perception that our client was 'all velvet glove, no iron fist'.

Coaching Programme

As often, at heart the coaching programme addressed a dilemma: in this case, how to retain the authentic and formidable qualities of our client, at the same time as ensuring she established herself in an environment which undervalued those qualities.

The emphasis of the coaching was an exploration of how to simultaneously charm and show strength. We spent considerable time role playing different scenarios where our client's best response would be a firm No, backed with indisputable fact (rather than disputable judgment), and delivered with a warm smile.

Result

Alternating coaching sessions with the opportunity for our client to apply the coaching in practice, her credibility steadily rose to the point at which she found herself being listened to and deferred to for her authentic skills. She had shown her colleagues an iron fist beneath the velvet glove, and ultimately this gave her license to play to her authentic strengths.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

Group Financial Controller, FTSE 100 multinational group

Background

Our client was in many ways a typical financial controller: obsessed with detail, driving for results, impatient with uncertainty. She was extremely good at all the technical aspects of her very demanding role. When identified in succession planning as a potential member of the group Executive Committee, questions about the breadth and style of her impact were raised. Similar questions, it turned out, had already been raised in relation to aspects of her leadership of her functional team.

Gap Analysis

Our client was being held back on several fronts by a number of unhelpful perceptions. She was seen as reactive and even defensive by her peers and the level above her, jumping to answer every point with minute detail based on her deep factual knowledge rather than standing back and giving a sense of context and the bigger picture. By her own team she was seen as a hard and uninspiring boss, engaging with them only to issue rapid-fire instructions or to criticize their work.

The gap was, on the one hand, a perceived 'strategic deficit', and, on the other hand, an 'emotional intelligence deficit'.

Coaching Programme:

We worked with our client to close this gap by focusing primarily on how to stand back, breathe deep, and approach situations from a perspective of positive and open questioning rather than always having to control the answers. This was challenging as our client, while recognizing the value of opening up this new approach, felt that in doing so she was in danger of losing track of her authentic personality and strengths. We found the best way to overcome this natural concern was to encourage our client to think of herself as helping others excel, rather than putting the pressure on herself to always be perfect

Result

Given that the internal succession path was a medium term horizon, we encouraged and supported our client in requesting and managing stand-alone projects with a more strategic and leadership-based dimension alongside her financial controller 'day job', and supported her in finding and establishing herself in her first external NED role. These opportunities created real stretch for her, and she was able to put the coaching programme to good use in these new contexts. She is now viewed as a fully deserving candidate for the top tier of the business.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

UK CEO, FTSE 100 finance-sector multinational

Background

The UK CEO, an instinctive innovator and entrepreneur within a slow moving established institution, had developed a new strategy and spent considerable effort communicating it to his leadership team. 6 months later, the kinds of conversations he found himself having with that team suggested to him that they had no clear shared understanding of the strategy.

Gap Analysis

We found that the strategy had been communicated in great depth, with a large and data-heavy powerpoint deck backed up by volumes (literally) of supporting analysis. The CEO's judgment had been that in order to get buy in from a conservative leadership team, he needed to dot all the i's and cross all the t's. In the event, he had only succeeded in creating an even bigger gap between his trajectory and theirs: the strategy had been communicated with such complexity that it simply hadn't stuck in their minds. Their own sense of distance from the CEO grew. Their shamefaced awareness that they hadn't grasped the strategy only made them more determined to keep their heads down in their comfortable grooves.

Coaching Programme

The coaching solution was to help our client be true to his instincts and trust himself to communicate in much simpler and more direct headlines, repeating the same simple message loudly and often, to the point where it was impossible to ignore or forget. As one part of that, the original 80 slide Strategy deck, plus its two supporting volumes of analysis, was reduced to a four word mantra which became the catalyst for change.

Result

The room for misunderstanding or failure to recall and apply strategy was minimised to zero, creating a radical sense of alignment within the team. The UK business went on to outperform other markets, and our client became Group CEO.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

Divisional HR Director preparing candidacy for Group HR Director role, FTSE 100 multinational industrial group

Background

Renowned as a brilliant fixer of tough employee and union issues, this client's talents had been tested and proved through a series of complex M&A activities followed by challenging restructuring and rationalization programmes. His success in ensuring good feelings and minimum disruption to business had been held up as exemplary even by the former owners of the acquired businesses.

Gap Analysis

As so often, the perceived strengths of an individual were also, viewed from another angle, weaknesses. Our client's hands-on immersion in the multiple cultures and contexts of the business were widely applauded and seen as key to his success; those same qualities raised questions in some minds about his ability to delegate, to achieve results by indirect influence, to be more a strategic leader and less a street fighter.

Coaching Programme

Key to developing this client was the creation of a high-level personal narrative / 'elevator pitch' based on his fundamental, and transferrable, strengths and insights. This enabled him to begin to create a perception of himself as holding a consistent and strategic position rather than moving rapidly between reactive situational positions. This, in turn, helped create the confidence in which he felt better able to delegate and influence: once his basic 'personal compass' was better articulated and understood, he felt able to trust others to navigate in sympathy with it.

At the same time, the coaching programme emphasized new dimensions of personal impact: gravitas, slowing down his interventions, working on breathing and posture, introducing a level of control over how he came across in everyday interactions.

Result

Somewhat to his surprise, our client found that the coaching programme had enabled him to free up his time and considerably reduce his travel diary, leading to a better work/life balance which he hadn't expected and hadn't even realized he needed. Within the workplace, he achieved a notable shift from being seen as a fixer, to being seen as a wise counselor, without losing the credibility that comes from being known as a man with his ear to the ground. Narrowly losing out on the Group HR role on grounds of age/experience, he instead transferred to head the function in the biggest and most strategic division of the business.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

Group CEO, implementing a major direction change in a FTSE 250 multinational b2b

Background

This client was parachuted in to a long established business which was perceived to have lost its way. An outsider, with a background in consulting followed by VC-style executive experience, and from outside the standard cultural 'anglosphere', our client had to turn the ship around.

Gap Analysis

Our client was a man in a hurry, with a clear diagnostic of the problem and an equally clear plan to fix it and, beyond that, a vision for growth. The city responded extremely positively: the man, and his plan, were at the highest level of credibility, and the sheer force of his energy and intellect ensured total buy-in from the board and his senior leadership team.

The gap was around the engagement of the business as a whole and globally; second, third and fourth tiers of managers and workers who in many cases felt a deep emotional connection with the history and former trajectory of the business, and who were left feeling bewildered and sidelined in the incoming CEO's brave new world.

Coaching Programme

Our coaching programme began by helping the CEO understand the depth of emotional connection to 'the old'. From this, we were able to help him see that unless he matched and supplanted this with a powerful emotional connection to 'the new', the operational transformation of the business would remain frozen.

We developed extensive role play interactions for our client, in every case moving him from his default position of seeking only a transactional result from an encounter (typically, compliance with a directive and acceptance of a target/timetable), to seeking in parallel a relationship result based on emotional connection at both a personal level, and at the level of connection to his programme for the future.

We also challenged our client to stretch his own cultural comfort zone and engage on sympathetic terms with the very different cultures he encountered in a global workforce predominantly based in Europe and the Americas.

At the same time, we worked with our client's HR team to get him to face up to some difficult choices on the need for turnaround or replacement of several senior leaders who were seen as change blockers.

Result

Employees felt respected, and began to see themselves as co-developers of the future rather than as embattled defenders of the past. The turn around, at first faltering in its delivery (triggering a profit warning), finally began to build internal momentum. We continue to support the CEO and his renewed top leadership team for significant internal and external interventions, ranging from leadership conferences to Capital Market Days.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

CFO preparing for transition to CEO role, FTSE 100 manufacturing business

Background

With an acute strategic mind and a firm grasp of finance, our client was clearly identified as the preferred, but not assured, internal succession candidate to the current CEO. What personal development did he need to explore in order to cement his position?

Gap Analysis

The shadow cast by our client was one characterized by brilliance, dismissiveness and worry. His own evident brilliance was much on display, leading others to feel undermined and 'lesser' in his presence; paradoxically he also conveyed a sense of concern and worry, his active and unrelenting focus on problems translating transparently into a pre-occupied, internalized, frowning manner as he sat around the leadership table or walked the corridors of the business.

Gifted businessman though he undoubtedly was, his personal impact was lacking in some essential qualities: the ability to create positive energy, and to create a sense of confidence in others.

Coaching Programme

Frequently asked by clients about 'the charisma thing', we are extremely wary of 'charisma' as an attribute to be pursued by leaders. Charisma, in our experience, can lead to a kind of blind followership which infantilises a business, increasing risk and crippling succession planning. A central tenet of our coaching approach is to encourage leaders to understand that 'confidence' comes not from trying to be the tallest person in your encounters, in fact quite the reverse: real confidence starts as an act of generosity, a display of confidence in those around you, the ability to make others feel that they can walk tall. The very best leaders know how to combine this ability to empower and show confidence in others, with a proper sense of holding others accountable.

We worked with our client to help him understand, role play, and put into practice this sense of generosity plus accountability.

More superficially, we worked with him to help him see and take control of the negative sense of worry betrayed by his tone and body language.

Result

Our client is now seen as a far more rounded contender for the leadership of the business. We continue to work with him on critical meetings and messages as he prepares for the moment of succession.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

Bid Committee for the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games

Background

Following an unsuccessful bid to host the 2016 Games, which were won by a high energy, passionate and emotional bid from Rio, Tokyo decided to submit a follow-up bid for 2020. With a strong field of candidates, Tokyo needed to make a case for its candidacy which was both pragmatic and emotionally resonant.

Gap Analysis

Tokyo remains a compelling destination for major events. Its infrastructure, wealth, exceptional levels of personal safety and almost zero crime, together with its record for delivery and detail, are well understood around the world. Furthermore, in a world where doping scandals are rocking the credibility of sport, Japan has an exceptionally clean record.

All of this made Tokyo an extremely serious candidate, and therein lay the problem: was Tokyo too serious? The trains would run on time, but would it be the kind of popular explosion of enthusiasm, the truly global festival atmosphere, of a London 2012 or a Rio 2016?

Coaching Programme

The programme focused on detailed preparation and rehearsals for a grueling, 18 month campaign of presentations, briefings, press conferences, and informal diplomacy, across every continent, all ultimately aimed at securing the support of the approximately 100 voting members of the International Olympic Committee.

At the outset, we established with our client a core 'target attribute' for the bid: this was summed up in one word, 'shining'. With this 'attribute' signed off, we could then begin to work with the team as a whole, and with each individual team member, on helping them understand the gap between their current impact and a target impact that would truly 'shine'. Alongside respected senior politicians, we strongly encouraged putting young people forward as a fresher face of Japan. We constantly filmed, played back, and critiqued each rehearsal and interaction, encouraging the bid team to see and close the gap for themselves. We worked in minute detail on body language, gesture, vocal inflection, facial expression, and the use of camera angles.

Result

A strong global campaign culminated in a final pre-vote presentation to the IOC in Buenos Aires, where the sheer passion and emotional energy of the bid team was widely perceived to have played a central part in winning the day.

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COACHING CASE STUDY

Single site GM transitioning to multi-site role, engineering sector

Background

Our client was a high performing GM who had achieved outstanding results at his site. He had achieved these by relentlessly and personally driving performance, with total mastery of the detail and no compunction about openly and sometimes painfully calling his team to account. On the basis of his results he was now being entrusted with a portfolio of sites. His development plan clearly identified his robust, at times brutal approach as both the key to his success, and a question mark hovering over his promotion.

Gap Analysis

Our client stood at a typical moment of transition from management to leadership where the skills that had led to his promotion were in danger of undermining the effectiveness of his new role. He had been working to a 70/30 rule: 70% of his time and effort dedicated to hands on, detailed, command-and-control operations, 30% of his time dedicated to developing his team and thinking through medium/long term challenges. The coaching programme focused on bringing him to this recognition, and to an understanding that those proportions would have to be reversed in his new role.

Coaching Programme

We worked together on understanding the importance of influence vs. command, and on learning how to use it. We developed his ability to navigate towards relationship outcomes in his encounters as well as simply transactional outcomes. We worked to develop his ability to come across as a mentor and motivator, balancing his well established ability to hold teams and individuals strictly to account. We focused on listening skills.

We noticed that many of his known traits had a physical dimension: in almost every encounter he would seem to frown, hunker down, and lean in, ready for a fight. Working with him to create self-awareness of the impact of these signals, and to develop a more open and positive personal style, formed an important part of the coaching.

Result

Our client successfully made the transition to multi-site, and is now positioned as a strong candidate for a more senior regional leadership position.

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