

Assessing Coachability – Is that Change Agent Ready to Change?

By Karen Steadman, PhD

“What isn’t working?” I ask the CEO.

“Max is bright, driven, results-oriented and has excellent ideas so I naturally thought he was ready for the next step. Unfortunately, I’m finding out he is also intense, very critical of others and, frankly, a pain to work with if he isn’t onboard with an idea. The feedback from his new peers is horrible and I am worried he won’t be able to affect the change I need going forward. Can you coach him? What is the likelihood he will change?”

My answer – “hmmm.....that depends”. Before moving forward my task is to conduct an assessment of whether Max is a lost cause in his current situation or merely a diamond with a few rough spots. Then, and only then, will I be able to answer these coaching questions. Max is expensive if he fails, yet has succeeded in the past and may have the raw materials to succeed here with some coaching. A potentially worthy coaching cause but also someone who has a reputation for being difficult to work with if he isn’t onboard.

My follow-up answer - “I can assess him, and then I will recommend next steps”.

Assessing Coachability

My motto is to always assess well rather than coach poorly. The following are the experiences that someone must pass through before I will deem them as fully “coachable”. Note that I am merely discussing issues of willingness to be coached in this article....issues such as integrity issues are not addressed. If someone is deemed worthy of intervention by the company than these tests can help make sure I recommend the right intervention. The tests are in order and each one requires time. A person as driven as Max is likely to begin changing from the very beginning.

Test 1 – Level of Engagement

In stage 1, everything that factors into assessing engagement level applies. Does the person return calls, are they eager to meet you, do they have a lot of questions (a good thing), or are you obviously being treated as a “have-to”. If someone is skeptical about coaching but actively participating they can score high on engagement level. However, if the only reason someone meets with me is because their boss said so, they score very low on level of engagement.

Test 2 – Level of Awareness

In stage 2 I take a deeper look at the feedback someone has received. How can someone like Max have received such mixed feedback? My answer is that strengths in one setting easily become strengths overplayed in a different context. If left unchecked, the leader who is bold suddenly appears “too blunt”, others who are nice are perceived as “not edgy enough”. For Max, he has perception gaps to address including:

- Too critical - though excellent at sifting through data and making difficult decisions, he is apparently unable to leave his critical thinking behind even when he should.
- Too intense – Max is driven but lacks savvy to stop fighting the wrong battles.
- Too competitive – his results-orientation has crossed over into being competitive to the point of excluding others.

I often review a lot of assessment data in this stage in addition to conducting formal assessments as the majority of people want to make sure I see that they have had good feedback in the past. To pass the Awareness test, Max needs to acknowledge that there might be opportunities in which he is not currently using his strengths in the right way even though he has been successful with these same strengths in the past.

Test 3 – Willingness to try New Things

In stage 3 (which may still be in the first meeting) I ask someone to identify one thing that they believe they should change. This item does not have to be directly from the feedback but should instead be something they really want to change. I ask them to identify the item, why it is important, and where they will try new behaviors starting immediately. The goal is twofold: first, most people like to gain traction immediately, but it also provides me a wealth of information on their willingness to try new things. Did they choose something important? Did they choose something from the feedback? Did they choose something and then not do anything about it? This is a real-time test of someone’s willingness and ability to change.

To pass the New Things test, Max would need to identify and act on something within a 2 week to 30 day timeframe.

Test 4 – Willingness to ask for help from Stakeholders (THE TURNING POINT)

In stage 4, time has passed to gather assessment data and also gather field data on trying the 1 new behavior. By this time, it is typically a turning point in which people like Max will decide whether to act on their own items or to ask for help with stakeholders. IMPORTANT: if a leader does not want to ask for help from stakeholders, they may appear “coachable”, but likely the boss can be that coach. I will support them for a

maximum of 90 days as coaching with an external coach becomes a poor investment in this scenario. However, if they pass the Stakeholders test, they are typically considered “coachable” for a retained process.

To truly pass the Stakeholders test, Max would have to be willing to set up feedback mechanisms with stakeholders and ask for ongoing feedback. For some people, it is too much and we part ways.

Test 5 - Willingness to commit to an Action Plan

For those leaders that have passed through the first 4 stages, the one last test helps me determine if they will be able to sustain their changes for the long term. I help them gather feedback AND they commit to willingly seek opportunities to solicit ongoing feedback from those that can observe them. We create an action plan that they sign because it seems so obvious now how to achieve results the right way. If they pass the Action Plan test that includes feedback mechanisms, I know that there is a very strong chance they will be able to achieve results through coaching. If they don't, follow-up meetings are merely accountability meetings and not worthy of a coaching investment. It would only be going through the motions.

Recommendation to the CEO

My prediction is that Max is a diamond. He will be a perfect candidate for coaching if he is able to go through the assessment phase and start using his strengths in a different way. Assess well rather than coach poorly. I can help if you or someone on your team is a diamond who is:

- *Too opinionated*
- *Too critical of others*
- *A poor listener*
- *Too blunt and too bold*
- *Too intense*
- *Too “me” focused*
- *Too difficult*
- *Too nice*
- *Not “edgy” enough*
- *Too attached to the details*
- *Too slow to make decisions*
- *Too easy on performance issues*