Meta-programmes and Coaching

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Summary

Particular profiling tools are sometimes used as a prelude to coaching and training interventions. The rationale for this is that individuals may start to recognize and develop key understandings in advance of the coaching journey. Key understanding may include these:

- We are all different and these differences can be explained
- If I have inherent weaknesses or blind spots and know about them, I can manage these to ameliorate these weaknesses or may gain improved performance
- Understanding others can help me to communicate and motivate others better.

Many profiling systems, including Meyers-Briggs, place people in boxes or types, the descriptions of which are generalized and refer to 'preferences' rather than actual, meaningful competencies (or real motivations). This merging or greying of so-called 'typologies' means that each type is less pertinent to any one individual. Preferences do not necessarily describe actual behaviours and performance at work.

In contrast, in recent years a new profiling system that measures motivations has been designed; this is based upon meta-programmes. An added bonus of the methodology is that each individual has a unique profile reducing the generalized 'type-typing' that can be a turn-off to some people. This 'iWAM' system (Merlevede 2009)[1] is based upon 48 meta-programmes (Cameron-Bandler 1985) and provides a useful and accessible basis for both individual change and team development.

This article does not aim to explain thoroughly the whole system, or the many interpretive distinctions that arise, but rather to illustrate, using individual examples, how this profiling tool can be used both as a prelude, and as an aid to, coaching journeys.

Whenever a coaching relationship uses a profiling tool, the tool will throw up capability-gaps between where the coachee is and where the coachee wants to be. The iWAM approach, like other profiling tools, allows the coachee to choose areas for gap-management coaching.

The iWAM system has at least one key point of difference from other profiling systems - it brings highly individualised precision, in that it measures the individual according to his/her current work context. This distinction is 'specific to the individual' rather than a generic 'personality profile.' This means that if the individual's role or work context changes to any significant degree, the iWAM system of profiling can point to the likely effect of that change on the individual's patterns of thinking and their consequent performance/behaviours as a result. In other words, iWAM does not 'box' or 'type' individuals but provides highly individualized data to work with. Let's look at two illustrations.

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[1] See for example,

Veena

Veena has over 20 years of career commitment in manufacturing. In the last five years these roles have been in corporate projects as a team member. These teams have facilitated various new business start-ups, often with other partner organizations and other investors. Veena's abilities to see past the processes and procedural detail and to bring clarity and negotiating skills to a myriad of stakeholders (having widely different interests), have resulted in many millions of dollars saved. She was promoted to CEO of one of her most recent new business start-ups. She therefore moved from success in team roles (as a peak performing individual amongst high calibre peers who were willing and able to give their opinions and feedback) to one of leadership, having a team of direct reports. She acquired a mix of in-house and partner staff to create a new 12-person senior-executive team.

Although Veena's business sense remained exceptional, she had not stepped up to her new leadership role; she was regarding her reporting team as a peer group. She was failing to crystallize her ideas and turn them into clear focus and direction for others. This lack of applied leadership led many members of the team to have poor business vision, poorly designated roles, vaguely defined objectives and to be confused about policy and action. In summary, the members of her executive team felt they were lacking direction and guidance from her; mentally Veena hadn't yet shifted gears from her 'identity' in her previous more collegial work context. Delays had already cost about $150Million.

There are many coaching interventions that will help in this situation, with or without models or profiling to support them. In this case, we started with an iWAM profile. This provided Veena with detailed feedback on her management style and an explanation for her motivations and de-motivations. Knowing all this, the profile can be used to play to an individual's known strengths; the coach and coachee in partnership can thus use the stronger traits and knowledge to leverage the weaker areas into action. We will return to Veena in a moment.

Basics of the iWAM Meta-programme Motivation Profile

The 48 meta-programmes in the iWAM system fall into eight areas. These are, briefly:

Operational factors, including action and evaluation criteria

These include rankings regarding initiation, goal-focus, self-reflection, patience, problem-solving, internal motivation and motivation influenced by others.

Need for change

Together, three factors in the model describe a person's appetite for change: sameness, evolution and difference, where evolution describes the need for gradual change or 'different yet similar' development.

Distribution of Energy

Three factors help describe an individual's approach to work. These include 'use' which is about actions /doing physical things; 'concept' describes the degree of thinking and analysis that must take place before any action takes place; 'structure' provides a measure of a person's need to fully create a plan for all elements in the task/project before commencing action.

Time Orientation

Past, present and future factors describe the levels of influence in gathering information in order to understand and to perform any task.

McClelland motivation types

These provide a measure of motivation for power, affiliation (where being 'liked' is important) and achievement (success and being noticed for their achievement).

Rule structure

These four meta-programmes relate to a person's responses to the cultural norms of behaviours within teams. They four are: assertive rules, indifference, compliance and tolerance where high compliance may assist an individual to work as a team-player.

Convincer patterns

The convincer patterns fall into two groups. The first four concern the needs for particular channels of information and are: seeing, hearing, reading and doing, where this last describes the need to experiment practically. The next four convincers describe the way in which an individual may massage the information to be convinced. These four are: 'number of examples', 'automatically', 'consistency' and, 'over a period if time'. A high-scoring individual for 'over a period of time' will tend to believe that all they need to do in order to achieve a task, is to gather information for a certain period of time. They may therefore be good at many things.

Focus of attention/interest

To feel successful and to actually succeed in tasks, an individual's work environment must allow them to work with or influence certain things. These are described as focus on: people (including their feelings), tools (software, communication channels etc that allow the work to be done effectively), systems (needs for process), information (facts, data, knowledge), money (budgets, finance), place (location, whether geographic or social position), time (schedules, deadlines etc) and activity (what needs to be done, tasks and actions, though not necessarily prioritising them).

Profiles

To illustrate the application of the iWAM profile, the authors will highlight specific patterns and their rated preference for two individuals measured against the cultural norm. The meta-programme are given in square brackets, with accompanying brief descriptors and notes. The norm scores are available for executives working in different geographical areas and help individuals to understand how others in a team (with typically norm profiles) are likely to perceive them.

Veena's Issues – Motivational preferences which influenced her collegial style of leadership

Regarding her senior executive team as a peer group:

- Very High [Convinced by hearing and seeing] – Decision-making influenced by talking and listening to others and engaging in face-to-face conversations
- High [Group environment] - Productivity enhanced by regular interaction with others

- High [External Reference] - Canvassing the input of peers as part of her decision making process
- Very Low [Individual Motives] - Having a low preference for making decisions from her own internal frame of reference

Poorly designated roles & vaguely defined objectives – 'vision without structure'
- High [Breadth orientation] - Thinks with a big picture bias
- Low [Future orientation] - Not having a future focus in time orientation
- Very Low [Structure] No clarity of structure and planning or organising of resources from a 'Top Down' approach
- Orientation towards a project approach [Use - Concept - Structure] (Note, a more logical order of approach would be [Concept - Structure-Use] where 'Use=action orientation').

Veena's motivational patterns supporting her change and development
These are the strengths available to help Veena leverage her weaker motivational preferences. When overtly shared and understood within the coaching journey, this allows the coachee to gap-manage their own process focussing on and using their strengths.

- Very high [Sole responsibility] - Willing to accept personal responsibility for her actions and results
- High [Goal orientation] - Focused on moving towards the goal/outcome that has been determined
- High [Achievement]- Eager to rise to the challenge
- High [Difference] - Ready to change and adapt
- High [Use] - Keen to commence action
- High [Alternatives] - Willing to consider other options or choices

It is interesting to note that in spite of Veena's big-picture strength, this did not translate into clear direction and actions for her reports. Her needs for decision-making are heavily based upon 'listening and engaging' and 'canvassing' with others. These needs highly influenced her performance as head of the team and contributed to the performance issues.

Once Veena accepted her iWAM profile and the insights it gave her, coaching provided action-plans and led to consistent behavioural/performance results. She was highly motivated to both change and develop, as her motivational patterns for change and development (above) indicate.

Jack
Jack works in an R&D establishment in a senior role with responsibility for staff and budgets as well as hands-on applied research & development. He recently missed out on a promotion, the job having gone to another person of limited research standing but well-regarded as a manager. Jack had not met management's expectations for generating new funding. He was seen as 'one of the team and not as a leader'. Jack was feeling unhappy. He was failing to take any new action internally, or to move jobs.

Jack's Issue: Traits which helped his understanding & motivation

Missed out on a promotion – due to being perceived as 'one of the team-not a leader'
- High [Convinced by Doing] - Learns and understands by jumping in and 'doing it' himself
- High [External Reference] - Makes decisions based on the input of others
- Very Low [Power/Authority] - Not comfortable with exercising authority
- High [Shared responsibility] - Prefers to share responsibility with all members of the team
- High [Depth orientation] - Prefers to drill down into the detail rather than take the overview
- Very Low [Breadth orientation] - Corresponding low preference compared to 'High Depth' above
- Very High [Evolution & Sameness] - Preference for things to remain the same and for any change to be gradual over time
- Very Low [Difference] - Corresponding to 'Very High Sameness and Evolution' above. Not comfortable with any rapid change
- High [Focus on Tools] - High preference for working in and with the 'tools of his trade'
- Low [past orientation/evidence] Atypical for hands-on 'research people' which Jack still is
- Low [Assertiveness to Rules] - Not likely to ensure that others work to the agreed rules and protocols

Not met expectations for generating new funding
- Low [Focus on Money] - No strong preference for working with money and budgets
- High [Shared responsibility] - Preferring a more collegiate style of decision making and responsibility
- Low [Initiation & Use] - Not wishing to be an initiator or early responder for action
- Low [Alternatives] - Not likely to be looking at other options or alternatives

Failing to take any new action internally or to move jobs
- Very low [Convinced Automatically] - Not in the habit of making fast decisions
- Low [Initiation & Use] - Not wishing to be an initiator or early responder to action
- Very high [Convinced after a period of time] - Will not be rushed into a decision
- High [Reflecting and Patience] - Will reflect first before taking any action

Jack's Strengths for change
- Very high [Goal orientation] and above the norm for the standard group
- Very high [Evolutionary change] - Shows a reference for personal development
- Very high [Structure/planning/organising] - Willing to work on a strategy and a plan that makes sense
- High [External reference] - Willing to take feedback from a coach and work on it personally
- High [Future orientation] - Has a focus on the future in the work he does

As we saw with Veena's profile, the strong drivers for change in Jack's profile would help ameliorate the poorer aspects of his profile.

In both cases, it was also useful to look at other elements of the profile that may get in the way of appropriate motivation, action and learning. For example, Jack's convincer pattern is quite strongly oriented towards a period of time. Unless he had set out plans over an adequate time-frame and

made assessments of his progress, he may not have had evidence (over time) to keep him focussed and apply his strategies for change successfully. Knowledge of his strengths enabled him to manage his weaknesses effectively.

Thus, using the strengths to overtly gap-manage the weaknesses offers a logical process to personal development and change. It also lends itself nicely to measurement of these changes. Where the coaching is overt and structured to suit the needs of an individual, the iWAM system provides a tangible mechanism for matching the cultural performance ethic of productive work.

Conclusion

A coaching journey can be facilitated superbly without the need of any profiling instrument. If one chooses to use the iWAM system, then there are advantages, including absolutely unique profiles (or 'motivational fingerprints') for each person - no boxes, or labels. Rather than being based upon generalized preferences, the meta-programme system provides measures of actual motivation and so may more closely align to what may be expected in both behaviours and performance at work. The iWAM system is also used effectively within whole teams; to act as a tool for improved understanding, communication and in hiring new talent (to address team weaknesses).

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