

## ***How is working with top managers different from working with middle managers?***

Let me start out by saying that every person I meet is quite unique and their individual routes to top positions vary a lot. Although today's top managers are obviously yesterday's middle managers, the work environment in which they had to succeed to be promoted has changed dramatically. Many top managers are interesting people, who are broad-minded generalists with vision rather than specialists. But the people one or two levels below them are very different - and these are the people they need to get through to.



There is a line of argument that you find sometimes in the press which says that coaches are an overpaid crowd holding hands with overwrought but not-very-capable executives. I really don't know where these people are getting their data from (I doubt it is Europe), but I can truly say that I have never ever met anyone who expected me to sit through their complaints or listen to them venting their big egos - my clients want me to work a little harder for my money! I mean, top managers have good friends or spouses too, and some of them are probably good listeners. Sometimes this is all they need - and I would think they were intelligent enough to know when that's true! But when you decide to work with a coach on something, it is obvious that this is NOT all that you need. A coach does many other things that add value. These are things like listening for the dominant and the untold thread in a story; taking note of what a person is comfortable accepting and what they are not, what they reflect on and what they don't, what they are prepared to challenge, and how much feedback they're asking for.

A friend or spouse cannot do any of this listening very well because they almost always have a personal agenda; every wife has her idea of the better person whom her husband really should be! And that idea is sometimes very different from where the husband wants to be. A coach doesn't go there - coaches are more pragmatic, and they have to be. I think what I do is to listen for change energy, and then find intelligent ways to channel this energy into action that produces the desired outcomes. If this sounds simple, then that is because it IS simple - but that doesn't mean it's easy to implement!

I would say that top managers have a tendency to expect their environment to adapt to them. This is not helped by the obvious point that they are not only busier, but also brighter, quicker, and more focused thinkers than most of those around them. So they set the rules, and there is not much manoeuvring space for a middle manager who has a problem with his or her boss - either they learn to work with them, or they are out, one way or the other. Therefore, top managers often need to buy into the idea that THEY actually benefit from changing their approach. This "maybe it's me" revelation usually only happens if they are dissatisfied with quite a bit of the feedback they are getting or they are in a new position. Being very busy makes it difficult to slow down enough to be able to look at your beha-

viour. One prerequisite for receiving coaching is that you are willing to learn, and to give up current patterns for ones that helps you to reach your goals better.

Not everybody has the level of self-reflection that is required for this step; there is a small group of egocentric top managers who can't do it, but fortunately or unfortunately, they are usually immune to coaching so I don't meet them very often. And if I do, it takes us less than an hour to find out whether they're really interested in getting different results by doing something new themselves, or they're just trying to convince me of their right to expect others to change. This is not what middle managers do unless they still quite inexperienced and arrogant and haven't learned yet that they can't achieve results without winning others over to give their best ultimately for the benefit of everyone!

The middle managers I work with have very often just left the 'expert track' and don't much like the tiresome work of managing others. They're now watching other people doing the jobs they used to excel in, and of course, they think their replacements are doing everything wrong - because their approach is different. Because of role insecurity, these individuals can easily oscillate between being overly indulgent and understanding at one moment and then very directive and curt at the next. This causes tensions in the team, and doesn't exactly give these managers a lot of authority. This creates a vicious cycle for all concerned. These coaching assignments always have a certain training side in which I provide lots of 'how-to' tips that can work for them. Middle managers also come sometimes with a 'wish list' from their bosses, which I cannot encourage enough as it is very helpful. If nothing else, it fosters communication between the two individuals! So as well as learning how to be understood better by your colleagues and clients, there is a very concrete boss to please!

## ***Do you have typical assignments?***

Well, yes and no. Most people's initial requests fall into a few basic categories. In that respect, yes, there are 'typical' assignments at first glance. A lot of coaching circles around the issues of management and self-management, which are very closely linked. Key concerns include: wanting to lead better by delegating more work or delegating more effectively; or wanting to understand a crucial person better (their boss, a crucial stakeholder, or client). People also benefit enormously sometimes from more insights into the inner workings of the business world - This is especially true at more junior levels where people come from specialist positions, and in parts of the world where this hasn't been relevant for a long time.

But then once you start dissecting the issue a bit, you find that even though your client may be describing their actual behaviour and this sounds exactly like something you've heard many times before, they will probably do it for different reasons. These reasons are what I then listen for carefully. Therefore, you invariably need different solutions each time because you are dealing with a different individual. Sometimes it takes an entire first session for us to pinpoint the real problem. On the other hand, for my clients, most assignments are typical in that they usu-

ally see me once a month, and we work together for about six months, before increasing the intervals to two to three months between meetings. They always do a lot of work between sessions - for example, at the outset, they do some observation and monitoring tasks, and later on, they undertake some experiments.

## ***You work with managers from large corporations, and SMEs or entrepreneurs. Who do you prefer to work with?***

I probably don't have a marked preference - I tend to work with high-profile individuals who are strong personalities, and I can genuinely say that I think all my clients are very interesting and capable people. But I definitely appreciate entrepreneurial spirit. Working with people who are highly cost-conscious and want clear results - returns on their investment - suits me. Especially when I work with middle managers, I enjoy preparing the assignment with someone who really takes charge of the coaching process instead of expecting me to produce a miracle on one of their direct reports. Of course, I would never tell the manager of someone I work with what we've been discussing, but I can certainly advise that manager about what to look for, what to encourage, and what to reward when his direct reports start putting what we discussed into action. I have met many very entrepreneurial managers in large companies; it really only depends on how much the corporate culture encourages that attitude.

## ***How can you coach people from completely different cultural backgrounds?***

Believing that everyone comes from quite a unique cultural background helps...! I mean, we all have a specific family culture, and then school, friends, our parents' attitude to life, work ethics etc., all shape our ideas about what to expect in a situation. This is refined through university, maybe internships, and by the time we start work, we are pretty set in what we believe is and isn't appropriate in any situation. That is what we consider normal - and we like the idea that something that is normal for us is also normal for others. Inside a company, we become exposed to more cultures. To begin with, there is the culture of the specific firm we work for; but then there is also a generally accepted business code that provides a lot of useful hints for most situations in a given cultural context. All this is culture, but we barely reflect on it as long as we don't move out of that shared culture.

However, if we leave our own culture to go abroad, these assumptions are exposed. Suddenly we can see that they were 'just' culturally appointed short-cuts, and of course, NOT universally applicable ... I have certainly been through my personal valley of tears in the Czech Republic! When I first arrived in 1995 to set up a consultancy in a post-communist country, I knew next to nothing about this country. To make matters worse, I thought that I was quite culturally aware and flexible, and indeed had lived not just in Germany, but also in England and Spain where I studied and in Algeria where my father took me for a summer when he worked there. For some reason, however, I just couldn't understand people or get people to understand me no matter what I tried. I quickly learnt Czech, and realised that this wasn't a language issue, but more of a language-plus-culture issue.

### *So how do you work with this?*

Basically, what I now do is to help people speed up a process that took me a frustratingly long time: learning to make enough sense of situations so as to have an impact that matches your salary. Living and working in different environments made me very aware of a lot of my own assumptions. This may give me an advantage because for a coach, it's an absolute prerequisite. If you haven't learned to respect other people's ways of being themselves, how can you offer something that is valuable to them? To a lesser degree, this also applies to managers, who are also essentially working with people, be it co-workers or clients.

Sometimes I work with people who are exposed to a culture that is very difficult for them to accept. Sometimes relevant information helps – Another great tool is training in self-reflection so that they notice what triggers their reactions before they act.

A lot of it is actually about expectations. Once people see how culturally appointed their expectations actually are, it is much easier to understand that they may not be as clear to their people as they initially thought. Imagine you are learning how to elicit real information from your co-workers in response to the question: "Did you understand what I want from you?" - You may accept a blank "Yes" as their answer at first. But then when it becomes clear that in fact they don't understand, but have been culturally drilled into saying „Yes“ to any question from management, you adopt a different technique. You decide to ask for a full recap of what they think you now actually expect them to do. You learn to manage your expectations and emotions better, and that in turn gives you different, usually very motivating results that are well worth the effort.

Most people in international business accept that people don't have to be identical in order to be able to work together. However, sometimes there are frontiers you cannot cross – I remember I once was asked to work with a Macedonian man in the Czech Republic who told me how humiliating it was for him to have to work with a woman. In such a case, it makes no sense whatsoever to carry on. I have to say that was the only time.

### *What is the funniest question you've been asked?*

I have several favourites, but probably the funniest one I remember is: "Don't people who talk to you have friends?" Of course they do, but coaching is really far more skilled and intensive work than just lending an ear to a friend with a problem. When a situation's really serious, people often find that either they can't tell people everything for one reason or another, or they are swamped with 'good advice' which goes in completely different directions from what they want and need. I would say that having a coach gives you someone for these tricky situations that friends and mentors are often not equipped to deal with. Plus when you spend three hours with a friend discussing a solution to a problem, and then decide to go with something completely different, they may well snap at you ...

### *Are there any trends in what people consult you about?*

One trend is definitely that a lot of people in top positions are less than happy with their roles - the heavy tolls on their private lives and partnerships, and the constant stress of being torn between the fast-changing priorities of stakeholders. Many of them are thinking about exit strategies. This is, of course, no small step because most people in these top jobs require the adrenaline as much as they resent it. I am not a life coach in the strict sense of the term, and yet, sometimes this comes up in our work. Of course, where this leads also depends on who is actually paying. I can hardly work on the company's money to help the CEO get out. But I can offer some input that starts the CEO questioning the soundness of - and the reasons behind - this whole 'getting out' idea. People who have made it so far up cannot be happy as subsistence farmers in Tuscany. And some part of them knows this even in their moments of deepest frustration. That part I can always talk with!

One option is always to isolate the parts of the individual's job that are most stressful and renegotiate these. Only when absolutely no solution can be found within the organisation – for example, if there is no level up to provide alternatives – we need to make a decision about how to proceed with the assignment. These can be very sensitive issues, but that doesn't mean one cannot talk about them. Quite the contrary!

Actually, one other topic comes up - usually in the UK or Germany - that is not unrelated to this one: less senior managers, especially women, toy with the idea of becoming coaches themselves. My standard advice is: Think twice. And then think again. Talk to a few coaches you know about their hard training and current working hours and the relationship between billable and non-billable hours. My guess is that most of these people would not like the job or be good at it. Managers are not generally great listeners and nobody will pay you not to listen to them. People want to communicate in a way that makes THEM feel understood. Managers listen for their own understanding... that is very different! Also, it requires a very specific personality to be a 'happy coach' – you need to be truly ambitious for others. If you want success and recognition, forget it. It is always someone else's success, and the opportunities for recognition are few and far between. You need to thrive on your clients' results because that's all you get. Keeping in mind the years and years of professional training it takes to become a coach, most people might be a lot better off taking a closer look at where they already are. I have met one banker who has all it takes to become an excellent coach. She may still make that decision – but if she does, she could also find herself looking back longingly at the comfortable package she is making now and comparing this with the hard work of starting something from scratch...

**Annette Barbara Reissfelder**

**Moorreye 88, 22415 Hamburg**

**Hamburg Office +49 40/531 7506, Fax +49 40/533 9463**

**Prague Mobile +420 603 151 550**

**annette@an-edge-for-you.com**

**www.an-edge-for-you.com**

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**ANNETTE B. REISSFELDER**  
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TALKING SHOP

WITH ANNETTE REISSFELDER

*Sometimes I am interviewed by bright journalists. These interviews can evolve into very interesting dialogues, but then as the editing process takes place, the bits I liked best tend to get edited out as too detailed and too technical... Now that I have the privilege of choice, I'd like to share some of those parts that I most enjoyed answering!*