"By becoming aware of how thoughts create feelings, and eventually states of being, clients begin to learn the value of checking interpretations in context. As interpretations become less automatic or rigid, the client can exercise greater variation in new thoughts and behaviors, growing a more flexible repertoire of response."

Cognitive Behavioral Executive Coaching

A Structure for Increasing Leader Flexibility

By Darren Good,
Bauback Yeganeh,
and Robin Yeganeh

Being flexible to a complex, fast-paced and ever changing environment is paramount to successful leadership. Leader flexibility is the capacity to interpret and practice a range of thoughts and behaviors according to the unique needs of a situation (Zaccaro, et. al., 1991). Many executives are turning to coaches to help them develop flexibility in the way they lead. This article shows how an adaptation of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) can be leveraged to effectively develop leader flexibility within an executive coaching context, by helping executives add thoughts and behaviors to their repertoires.

The Need for Leader Flexibility

Leader flexibility has been linked to effective leadership (Mumford & Connelly, 1991). Yet, people tend to develop rigid routines to manage complex environments. Executives in particular face more complexity than most, as their role-demands and information loads increase. It can be argued that leader flexibility is more difficult for high performing executives, partially because they attribute their success to existing interpretations and behaviors (Sztucinski, 2001). A common outcome goal in coaching is to increase one's flexibility (Kilburg, 1996). Yet we still have a limited understanding of how to develop flexibility in our leaders.

The Need for CBT

In order to develop leader flexibility, one should highlight interventions that aim to establish ongoing thought and behavior variability. One of the primary aims of CBT is to oppose rigid cognitions with the purpose of creating increased flexibility through conscious intention (Beck, 1975; Ellis, 1962). CBT is driven largely by real life experiments that provide structured opportunities to test new thoughts and behaviors (Hayes et al., 1999).

By becoming aware of how thoughts create feelings, and eventually states of being, clients begin to learn the value of checking interpretations in context. As interpretations become less automatic or rigid, the client can exercise greater variation in new thoughts and behaviors, growing a more flexible repertoire of response. Through a strong collaborative relationship between practitioner and client, CBT presents a suitable method to improve leader flexibility.

Though it is arguably the most efficacious form of psychotherapy for helping individuals change (Butler et al., 2006), CBT is seldom specifically written about in executive coaching literature.[1] While exceptions exist (see Ducharme, 2004), the relative absence of CBT is surprising given the unique overlaps shared by CBT and the needs of modern executives.

Leaders who are clients in coaching programs are interested in performance and substantive change. CBT has a long

1. In "Psych Info" and "Business Source Complete," the average number of journal articles listed for the term "executive coaching" was 717 (as of March 2010), while that number is reduced to an average of 9 when the term "cognitive" is included in the search parameter.

track record of creating an actionable framework that facilitates the practice of desired thoughts and behaviors. Additionally, CBT has allowed us to scientifically measure and track performance. When executives see this tracked return on investment, it often leads to an increase in motivation (positive spirals of action). In addition CBT tends to be shorter in duration, solution oriented, and focused on the here and now, which fits the action-focused context of executives. CBT takes a stance of collaborative empiricism, in that it is a shared data-driven process that empowers the client to understand and influence the phenomena of study with the helper. In CBT the client is educated in cognitive and behavioral models, so she can eventually become a leader in her own change initiatives. Given the empowered role of executives and demands for time, the structure of CBT is a fitting approach to foster leader flexibility.

Below we will illustrate how the strengths of this approach can be leveraged effectively in an executive coaching process. We have named this process cognitive behavioral executive coaching (CBEC) as it combines traditional cognitive behavioral techniques with those commonly found in existing executive coaching processes.[2] Other important factors in succeeding with this process include authenticity, active listening, empathy, and establishing trust. Regardless of the coaching process being used, the quality of relationship between client and coach is a vital factor for success.

Cognitive Behavioral Executive Coaching (CBEC)

While cognitive behavioral principals are applied in a variety of settings, this model is specifically designed for the benefit of organizational executives seeking develop-

2. Executive coaches can use the basic structure of CBT without doing therapy. Keeping in mind that as coaches we are not therapists, we neither diagnose nor treat psychological dysfunction, for a number of reasons. Instead, we are employed to support people toward increased work effectiveness. It is important to stay mindful of our contracted purpose in support of clients.

Figure 1: Cognitive Behavioral Executive Coaching Process

1. Orienting & Vision
PURPOSE: To determine ideal future

Action 1
Accomplished through dialogue & discovery

Action 2
Accomplished through use of assessments, e.g., Reflected Best Self (Quinn et al., 2003); selected Ideal Self Exercises (Boyatzis, et al., 2008)

2. Current Thoughts & Behaviors
PURPOSE: Determine the thoughts and behaviors that might be keeping client from reaching the vision

Action 1
Help clients become aware of the relationship between thoughts, behaviors, and outcomes

Action 2
Introduce Thought Record/Behavioral Monitoring Form

Action 3
Training in how to identify common cognitive distortions

3. Vision Oriented Thoughts & Behaviors
PURPOSE: To determine the thoughts and behaviors that client believes will accompany ideal future

Action
Brainstorm with client potential thoughts and behavioral strategies associated to vision

4. Experiment
PURPOSE: To collaboratively gather and test data in support of more flexible thinking and behavioral choice

Action 1
Choose technique(s) based on presenting issue such as those for changing thoughts (e.g. catching and changing thoughts and accepting thoughts as noise, mindfulness, mantras, counter-statements)

Action 2
Monitoring thoughts and behaviors on a thought/behavior record
(see _Figure 2_ for example)

Action 3
Training clients to use evidence to generate alternative thoughts or more adaptive behaviors

5. Transition
PURPOSE: To move toward client independence

Action 1
Measurement of change(s) in coaching through goal or symptom monitoring

Action 2
Create a self-check to maintain work gains

Action 3
Establish method or plans to revisit areas that may need extra support and establish a way for follow up intervention if needed

ment through a coaching process.[3] *Figure 1* summarizes the CBEC process, which is explained in detail below through five sub-processes.

1. Orientation and Vision

Coaching starts with an orientation to the CBEC model and an explanation of its collaborative and empowering structure. Next the coach helps the executive define an ideal future state as a leader. This can be accomplished through the use of visioning exercises, values assessments, and dialogue. Such assessments and the visioning exercise are standard practices among many well regarded executive coaching processes (i.e. the Goal portion of the GROW model, Whitmore, 2003; Ideal Self portion of Intentional Change Theory; Boyatzis, 2006). This is often done in order to articulate the larger context within which the client can ground the coaching work. We join Boyatzis's work on Coaching with Compassion to suggest that ideal visioning can also be used to generate positive emotion in order to induce greater cognitive flexibility (Isen, 2002). An example of this step in the process comes from our coaching experience working with a president of a manufacturing division within a publicly traded multinational corporation.

> **Case Example:** Mike entered into a coaching relationship hoping to move toward executive officer status within the larger holding company in the next 3–5 years. We began exploring this future vision through dialogic communication. He articulated how he imagines himself leading in this role in new flexible ways, and the type of impact he hopes to have on the organization and its members. This experience left Mike feeling excited and able to consider new ways of framing how he could move toward his vision.

3. The components presented below focus on a general framework that can be followed for executive development of flexibility. They do not delve into the details of timelines, the specific structure of conversation within each session, or the structure of the relationship over time.

2. Current Thoughts & Behaviors

The next step in the coaching process is to determine the client's current thoughts and behaviors. The coach and client work collaboratively to assess current belief systems, gain awareness of the connections between situations, feeling states, and automatic thoughts and behaviors. Automatic thoughts represent the discourse of unintentional self-talk we all have in response to ongoing life events. Automatic behaviors

> The coach and client work collaboratively to assess current belief systems, gain awareness of the connections between situations, feeling states, and automatic thoughts and behaviors. Automatic thoughts represent the discourse of unintentional self-talk we all have in response to ongoing life events. Automatic behaviors represent the unintentional corresponding actions. In other words an aim of this process is to increase the client's awareness of his inner narrator, and the resulting behaviors. The client and coach generate an improvement list that grounds the work and allows for data gathering as well as eventual outcome evaluation.

represent the unintentional corresponding actions. In other words an aim of this process is to increase the client's awareness of his inner narrator, and the resulting behaviors. The client and coach generate an improvement list that grounds the work and allows for data gathering as well as eventual outcome evaluation.

Specifically, coaches train clients to catch automatic thoughts and behaviors using various monitoring methods, such as a thought record form (*Figure 2*). The client can then begin assignments, which include periodically listing the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors accompanying specific leadership events. Additionally, clients are trained to classify unhelpful thoughts according to cognitive distortion types (*Table 1. Cognitive Distortion List*). Finally, clients try to assess the general outcomes that are associated by the use of their current thoughts and behaviors.

This understanding of current

thoughts and behaviors is ultimately compared to where the client stated he wanted to be in the vision. This is essentially a side-by-side comparison between the stated future ideal and current reality, again similar to other change models (e.g. Reality in the GROW model, Whitmore, 2003; Real Self in Intentional Change Theory, Boyatzis, 2006). Unlike other change models that focus on skills needed to bridge this gap however, CBEC is more directly focused on the client's understanding of current thoughts and behaviors.

> **Case Example Continued:** In his thought/behavior record form, Mike tracked as an outcome how little time he was spending on the strategy of the company. Instead he ended up supporting others too often and taking on the "finishing touches" of others' day-to-day assignments. He often stepped in to "save others." As a consequence most nights Mike did not even consider company strategy until after 10:00 pm. The automatic thought associated with these behaviors are, "If I don't do it myself, it won't get done well enough." In this case, these automatic thoughts are examples of cognitive distortions called "all or nothing thinking" and "fortune telling." (See *Table 1*.) Mike captured these thoughts and behaviors on his thought/behavior record, and with the

Figure 2: Thought/Behavior Record Form

Time/Situation	Emotions	Automatic Thoughts & Behaviors	Distortions	New Thoughts/Behaviors	Performance Outcome
Decision making meeting with subordinates	Frustration (Intensity) 50	I. Automatic Thoughts • "If I don't do it myself, it won't get done well enough" II. Matching Behaviors • Micromanaging • "Saving others"	1. All or Nothing Thinking 2. Fortune-telling	I. New Thoughts • "I have put projects in the hands of my team in the past, and there are many examples of positive results" • "Last week Paul and Susan completed a project with very positive results" • "As a leader I can't do everyone's work" • "Because of my outcome focus, I may not notice when good work is being done" II. New Behaviors Review alternative thoughts, develop and rehearse mantra, behavioral exercise for gaining patience, breathing or letting go of attachment, practicing new techniques for supporting/developing staff	Through catching all or nothing thinking/ fortune telling I realized I might be exaggerating a potential negative outcome. I was able to slow down and lower my frustration (reduced to 20 on 1–100 scale) Number of times I encouraged subordinates to remain in control of projects Increased time dedicated to strategic thinking
(The purpose of the situation is to provide client and coach with a brief description of the event/time)	*(In this column the client labels associative emotion experienced during the situation and level of intensity on a scale of 1–100)*	*(I. Automatic thoughts are the "sentences" that go through our minds—our internal discourse creating an automatic narrative)* *(II. Matching Behaviors are outward relevant behaviors corresponding with the thought process)*	*(The client is taught to identify mental distortions with the automatic thoughts)*	*(I. In this column client inserts more flexible thoughts to challenge automatic thoughts and distortions. Also gathers evidence to collaboratively examine case both for and against automatic thoughts)* *(II. Client and coach collaboratively create alternative behaviors to support adjustment efforts)*	*(In this column list obtained outcomes—this may include how your new thoughts impacted your behaviors and others)* *(Update the associative emotion experienced after the experiment and level of intensity on a scale of 1–100)*

support of his coach began to notice the connection between current thought, behavior, interpretation and outcome.

3. Vision Oriented Thoughts and Behaviors

This sub-process encourages executives to revisit the vision and collaboratively craft what they deem to be cognitions and behaviors that could accompany how they would think and act as if the ideal vision were achieved. From this, a set of vision oriented cognitions and behaviors are established to provide guidelines for a more flexible way of thinking and behaving.[4] Next, working hypotheses are collaboratively generated regarding the desired vision oriented behaviors.

_____

4. It is important to note that these future-oriented cognitions are anchored in the client's context. Therefore building awareness of situational context helps the client to construct more appropriate future-oriented cognitions and behaviors.

Once the future oriented cognitions and behaviors have been identified, the executive has built up enough of a forward-looking orientation to effectively begin experimenting in the present. The main purpose here is to identify and experiment with more flexible thoughts and behaviors. Such experiments and their outcomes may require the development of additional skills in order to further practice the methods of cognitive behavioral based change.

Case Example Continued: Mike was asked, "Now thinking about your ideal future state, take a minute to envision the complexities of the environment you will be working in. What are the sensitivities you need to be aware of? Based on the vision that you have developed for yourself, what are some of the accompanying thoughts and behaviors that you will be utilizing in that particular environment? Are there any other solutions to your approach other than either managing their work, or allowing them to struggle?" Mike came to the conclusion that he was using "all or nothing thinking." The coach helped Mike develop a mantra-like statement that could be used to anchor himself in his new vision. The mantra read: "When subordinates are not working up to my standards, it may mean that I have an opportunity to practice patient and systematic leadership development." Mike agreed to respond to negative self-talk with this more

Table 1: Cognitive Distortion List (Beck, 1975)

All or nothing thinking—viewing something in terms of either/or: "Either you like my proposal and we follow it or you don't."

Overgeneralization—forming a sweeping conclusion on the basis of limited data: "As I wasn't given the lead on this project, I'll never lead another one."

Mental filter—noticing only the negative aspects of circumstances: "So many things have failed at work this week."

Catastrophizing—magnifying the meaning of events: "They will notice the typo on my proposal and I will lose all credibility."

Mind reading—arbitrary inference that someone is judging in a particular way without attempting to check it out with them: "He totally wants to end this conversation right now."

Emotional reasoning—assuming that your current negative emotions undoubtedly demonstrate the way things really are: "I am scared to go in front of the board, so therefore it must be a scary situation."

Should/must statements—rigid rules imposed on yourself and others: "I must/ should never show any weaknesses to my colleagues."

Personalization—taking personal blame for the cause of a negative outcome, which in fact you were not directly responsible for: "It's my fault that the team could not close the deal."

Labeling and Mislabeling—This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Rather than describe your error, you attach a negative label to yourself: "I'm a failure."

Fortune Telling—thinking things will turn out badly without proper evidence: "If I don't get this promotion, I'll be stuck at this level forever."

---

positive statement, in order to be a more effective leader. The hypothesis Mike decided to test was that practicing patience in meetings provides an opportunity for staff to develop, with no loss of work quality.

4. Experiment

Once the future oriented cognitions and behaviors have been identified, the executive has built up enough of a forward-looking orientation to effectively begin experimenting in the present. The main purpose here is to identify and experiment with more flexible thoughts and behaviors. Such experiments and their outcomes may require the development of additional skills in order to further practice the methods of cognitive behavioral based change.

This phase extends the work that is started in the 2nd portion of the model (Current Thoughts and Behaviors). At

this point the client has become adept at catching automatic thoughts and labeling common cognitive distortions in a thought record form. The client now begins to challenge cognitive distortions with more flexible thoughts and behaviors.

Case Example Continued: Mike was sitting in on a morning decision-making meeting with his direct reports, and he felt the project lead was losing focus. Rather than jumping in impulsively, Mike held back and reminded himself of his ideal vision and the accompanying vision oriented thoughts and behaviors. By reminding himself of these, he was better able to choose a flexible response. Mike allowed the project lead to struggle through the meeting for a short time and then asked him some open-ended questions to guide the conversation without taking over. This led to a more productive meeting than usual.

The data Mike gathered supported his hypothesis. He tracked this and other events in the ongoing thought/behavior form.

5. Transition

During the transition stage, clients move to independence when it is determined that the coaching intervention has had an impact or the duration of the contract is over. Impact assessment is accomplished through examination of the data from the initial assessment, the data gathered throughout the working relationship, and the end assessment related to the initial goals. This phase of the intervention mirrors treatment termination in CBT. Goals include reviewing feelings about the relationship, learning that took place, review of skills/education, and defining a self check-in schedule in order to maintain work gains. Here it is important to establish any follow up plans in order to revisit areas that need continued work. An indicator that it is time for transition is when the client is leading the CBEC process.

Case Example Continued: At this point, after 7 weeks of coaching, Mike has noticed more flexible use of thoughts and resulting behaviors. The data collected reflects a significant shift regarding the number of times he encourages subordinates to remain in control of projects, the way he supports them, and the amount of time dedicated to strategic thinking. He has been focusing on a richer view of himself as a leader and continues to use CBEC techniques to develop his leadership flexibility.

Conclusion

CBEC is a way to create a structured and empowering approach to developing leader flexibility. We hope this will be helpful to others as it has been helpful to us in use with our clients. While this is in no way an exhaustive overview of how to integrate CBT with coaching, it provides some tools so that readers can begin to incorporate

aspects of this methodology into their coaching practices. We look forward to collaborating with others in order to learn together and further test the efficacy of this methodology.

Darren Good, PhD, is an assistant professor of management in the Luter School of Business at Christopher Newport University. His research focuses on leadership and managerial cognition with a particular focus on real-time adaptability and flexibility. He also serves as a leadership development consultant and advisor to organizations. He received his PhD in organizational behavior from the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University. He can be reached at *darren.good@cnu.edu*.

Bauback Yeganeh, PhD, is founder & principal of B.Y. Consulting, focusing on leadership development and strategy. He is an adjunct professor at the Love School of Business at Elon University and The School of Public Affairs at American University. He also serves as an advisor at Duke University's Sustainability Initiative in the Fuqua School of Business. He holds a PhD in organizational behavior from the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University. He can be reached at *by@byconsulting.com*.

Robin Yeganeh, PhD, is founder of the Cognitive Behavior Therapy & Mindfulness Center in San Ramon, CA. He is a licensed clinical psychologist and holds a PhD in clinical psychology from the University of Maryland at College Park. Through his center, he provides clinical interventions, executive consultation, and training in cognitive behavioral and mindfulness based therapies. He has researched the impact of anxiety on work behaviors and has designed CBT interventions for the reduction of work stress. He can be reached at *dr@cbthealth.com*.

References

Beck, A.T. (1972). *Depression: Causes and treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Beck, A.T. (1975). *Cognitive Therapy and the emotional disorders*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.

Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2006). Intentional change. *Journal of Organizational Excellence, 25,* 49–60.

Briscoe, J. P., & Hall, D. T. (1999, autumn). Grooming and picking leaders using competency frameworks: Do they work? *Organizational Dynamics,* 37–52.

Ducharme, M. J. (2004). The cognitive-behavioral approach to executive coaching. *Consulting Psychology Journal, 56,* 214–224.

Ellis, A. (1962). *Reason and emotion in psychotherapy*. New York: Lyle Stuart.

Hayes, S.C., Barlow, D.H., & Nelson-Gray, R. O. (1999). *The scientist practitioner research and accountability in the age of managed care* (2nd ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Kilburg, R. (1996). Executive coaching as an emerging competency in the practice of consulting. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 48,* 59–60.

Mumford, M.D., & Connelly, M.S. (1991). Leaders as creators: Leader performance and problem solving in ill-defined domains. *Leadership Quarterly, 2,* 289–315.

Sztucinski, K. (2001). The nature of executive coaching: An exploration of the executive's experience. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, George Washington University, Washington, DC.

Whitmore, J. (2003). *Coaching for performance*. London: Nicholas Brealey. 42.

Zaccaro, S. J., Foti, R. J., & Kenny, D. A. (1991). Self-monitoring and trait-based variance in leadership: An investigation of leader flexibility across multiple group situations. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 76,* 308–315.